

## ABOUT EVALUATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

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The goal of the social work practicum is to prepare the student for competent and responsible practice. A successful practicum is one that achieves that goal. Ongoing monitoring and frequent evaluations of the student's performance are necessary to determine if the student is making progress, to document learning, to identify strengths, and to identify areas of performance that may need special attention and remediation. It is of critical importance that you become familiar with the procedure and instruments that will be used to evaluate your performance in the practicum.

This document will provide basic information on the process of student evaluation and encourages you to examine and evaluate your own performance so you can make the best possible use of the practicum as a learning opportunity.

### BACKGROUND

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Of central importance in a social work practicum is the ongoing evaluation of the student's performance. The term *evaluation* means to examine, judge, appraise, and assign value or worth. The word *performance* refers to the actions of carrying out or completing some function, role, or obligation. Thus, the social work practicum evaluation focuses on the student's behaviors and actions related to the role and obligations of a professional social worker. The primary question addressed is whether the students' performance is meeting the specified standards expected of the social work practitioner at their level of practice (BSW, MSW Generalist or MSW Clinical)

Every program of social work education uses some type of rating scale or evaluation tool to monitor and evaluate student progress. The evaluation process compares the student's performance to established standards and criteria and also to the learning objectives, and strategies outlined in the student's learning contract.

Evaluations of student performance are of two types: formal and informal. An *informal evaluation* consists of the ongoing feedback and suggestions offered by the practicum instructor. This type of evaluation takes place on a weekly or even a daily basis. A formal evaluation is a detailed review and comparison of the student's performance with evaluation criteria, standards, and learning objectives for the practicum. It occurs at the end of each academic term or more often, depending on school policy or special circumstances.

The findings or the results of the formal evaluation are placed in a written report. This report typically consists of the ratings assigned to the various items on the school's evaluation tool and a few paragraphs of narrative that describe special strengths and abilities and/or special problems and deficiencies in performance. The report may also describe how needed learning experiences will be secured or deficiencies corrected prior to the next formal evaluation.

The areas addressed in the practicum evaluation are similar to those addressed in the performance evaluation of the social workers employed by an agency. In order to ensure high-quality performance and reduce their exposure to lawsuits and employee grievances, agencies strive to make their expectations of employees as clear as possible and to use personnel evaluation tools (i.e., rating scales) that are as objective as possible. These same forces have prompted programs of social work education to develop evaluation tools that are as valid and reliable as possible.

However, it must be recognized that it is difficult to develop an evaluation tool that is both clear and specific in its descriptions of standards and criteria, and also flexible enough to accurately and fairly evaluate the practice of social work, which is complex and difficult to observe directly. An evaluation should be objective to the degree possible, but even a well-designed procedure will require judgments by the practicum instructor, and some of these may be open to charges of subjectivity. For example, ratings of

a student's level of cooperation, motivation, adaptability, and use of supervision are difficult to assess except when in an extreme form (i.e., very high motivation or very low motivation). Consequently, there will be times when the practicum instructor and practicum student disagree.

An evaluation can be considered fair and relevant when:

- It addresses the areas of performance or competency that are truly important to professional social work and carrying out the agency's mission and goals. The criteria used to evaluate the student are clear and objective to the degree possible.
- The evaluation criteria, standards, and the agency's preferred practices and outcomes are made known to the student at the beginning of the practicum or at the beginning of the time period to be evaluated.
- The student's performance is compared to written standards and criteria, rather than to some unstated or implied standards.
- The student has been given ongoing feedback and warnings of poor performance prior to the formal evaluation.
- The performance criteria and standards are realistic given the student's level (e.g., first semester versus second semester and BSW versus MSW).
- The evaluation can cite and describe examples of performance that form the basis of the ratings.
- The evaluation gives consideration to extenuating circumstances that may influence the evaluation (e.g., the student had limited opportunity to learn or demonstrate certain skills and the supervisor had limited time to observe student's performance).
- The evaluation process identifies and records differences in level of performance among students who are different in terms of their motivation, competency, knowledge, and specific skills.
- The evaluation takes into consideration the nature and complexity of the assignments given to the student.
- The evaluation recognizes student growth and performance as well as student problems or need for continued learning.

An unfair or inaccurate evaluation exists when:

- The student did not understand what was expected of him or her, or did not understand the criteria to be used for evaluation.
- The rules, standards, and criteria used to evaluate the student are changed without the student's knowledge.
- The student receives low ratings without being given a description and explanation of the poor performance that resulted in the low ratings.
- The criteria or standards are unrealistically high or not relevant to the student's performance as a social worker.
- Several students receive essentially the same ratings when there were clear differences in their performances.
- The student was not given ongoing feedback, guidance, and suggestions prior to the evaluation.

The practicum instructor and the student must be alert to certain pitfalls that exist whenever one person attempts to rate another person's performance. These are:

- The halo effect-tendency to rate a person the same on all items based on the observed performance in only a few areas.
- The attraction of the average-the tendency to evaluate every student or employee about the same or about average regardless of real differences in their performance.
- The leniency bias-a tendency to evaluate all students or employees as outstanding or to assign inflated ratings so as to avoid arguments or conflict or to avoid hurting their feelings.
- The strictness bias-tendency to evaluate and rate all students or employees on the low side because the evaluator has unrealistically high expectations or holds the belief that low ratings will motivate them toward even higher levels of performance.

In some instances the practicum instructor or the practicum coordinator may conclude that the practicum arrangement is unworkable and unsatisfactory for either the student, the practicum instructor, or both. This may happen when it becomes apparent that the setting cannot meet the student's learning needs or because the student's performance is irresponsible or falls far short of expectations. See the your Handbook for specific information related to this issue. Examples of student behaviors or performance problems that may prompt the practicum instructor or the school to consider terminating the practicum may include:

- The student's behavior is harmful to clients, agency staff, or the agency's reputation.
- The student's behavior is irresponsible and unprofessional (e.g., late for work, missing scheduled appointments, and unable to spend the required hours in the practicum setting).
- The student is unable to communicate adequately, either verbally or in writing. • The student is hostile toward supervision and resistant to learning.
- The student displays symptoms of an emotional disturbance that interfere with work (e.g., bizarre behavior, inability to concentrate, aggressiveness, and withdrawal).
- The student inappropriately shares personal views, experiences, and problems with clients after being made aware of this unacceptable behavior.
- The student enters into dual relationships with clients (e.g., dates a client or sells a product to client).

Some behaviors by the student are considered so serious that they may result in the student's immediate dismissal from the practicum. These might include:

- Clear and serious violations of the Code of Ethics (e.g., sexual relations with a client)
- Clear and repeated insubordination
- Theft or the clear misuse of agency money, equipment, or property Concealing, consuming, or selling drugs on agency premises
- Being intoxicated or under the influence of drugs or alcohol when at work Reckless or threatening actions that place clients and staff at risk of serious harm Deliberately withholding information from a supervisor or from agency personnel that they need to know in order to properly serve clients and maintain the integrity and reputation of the agency and its programs
- Falsifying agency records and reports
- Soliciting or accepting gifts or favors from clients in exchange for preferential treatment

### **Food for Thought**

For the mature, adult professional, the idea of being evaluated often is viewed as insulting. It may reawaken all kinds of humiliating feelings associated with the powerlessness of childhood and of student roles. We tend to think that people should arrive at a point in life where their competence is assumed by all. They should no longer need to be evaluated or to demonstrate their achievements to others. However, if we think about it, we all continue to be evaluated by someone, no matter at what level one is employed. Evaluations provide needed feedback. Consumers of services provide an

evaluation of our work when they return or don't return for additional assistance or when they discuss our services in the community. Why, then, should staff be resentful of having to be evaluated by a professional peer who is most likely to be an experienced professional who occupies a higher level in the administrative hierarchy?

We evaluate clients and their situations in our role as practitioner. We evaluate political climates or community strengths and resources. But when it comes to evaluating the work of a colleague with whom we must work, we tend to react with great distaste. (Weinback, 1994, 149-150)

Your field instructor acts as one of the gatekeepers for the social work program. In this capacity, she is responsible for upholding social work standards and ensuring that students who are not yet competent do not pass the practicum until they have achieved the minimum standards (stated as learning goals) required by your social work program. (Collins, Thomlison, & Grinnell 1992, p. 179)

It is essential for interns to understand that the internship experience is fundamentally different from the rest of their academic work. In a typical class, lacking knowledge or skill may mean one's grade is lowered, but otherwise little of any real consequence happens. By comparison, at internships, an intern's lack of knowledge or skill has real consequences and those consequences apply not only to the intern but to the clients, supervisor, and agency with whom the intern works. Thus, it is important for interns to go beyond the grade mentality and focus instead on learning... When evaluation [of student performance] is accepted as an essential part of learning, mistakes, successes, and feedback can be understood for what they really should be-learning opportunities-rather than points added or subtracted from an ultimately meaningless grade book. (Baird 1996, 71-72)

### **GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION**

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Throughout your practicum, you will be observed, guided, encouraged, assigned tasks, given feedback, and evaluated. Your practicum instructor should provide an informal and ongoing critique so that you know how you are doing from week to week. In addition, you will be evaluated in a more formal and systematic manner at the end of each academic term.

When conducting the formal evaluation, your practicum instructor will most likely use an evaluation tool provided by your school. This tool will rate you on the specific values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills your school defines as important to your professional development. Obtain a copy of this evaluation tool early in your practicum and construct your plan for practicum learning so that you will have opportunities to learn and grow in each of the areas of performance to be evaluated.

You may also be evaluated on the completion of the tasks, projects, and activities you planned at the beginning of your practicum. Review your learning goals for the practicum regularly to determine if you are making satisfactory progress.

Your practicum instructor and your liaison will want to know how you think the practicum is proceeding, as well as hear any suggestions or questions you might have. He or she may ask you the following:

- What aspects of your practicum do you consider to be of highest priority? Lowest priority?
- Are there tasks and activities that you have to perform that are different from what you were expecting?
- Are the demands on your time reasonable?
- Have there been aspects of your practicum that you have had to neglect for lack of time?
- Have you been able to strike a workable balance between the demands of the practicum, your other academic work, and your personal life and responsibilities?
- How well do you get along with agency staff?
- What suggestions do you have to improve your practicum? • Do you get enough supervision or too much?
- Is this the right type of social work practice and practicum setting for you?
- What aspects of social work practice in this agency are most appealing, and which are least appealing?
- Which practicum tasks and assignments have you completed most successfully and which have you completed least successfully?
- What do you hope to accomplish in the next month? By the time you complete your practicum?
- What new or additional experiences do you want or need?
- Do you have other comments, complaints, observations, or questions?

When reviewing and thinking about your performance in the practicum, your practicum instructor may ask himself or herself questions such as:

- Has this student demonstrated dependability and professionally responsible behavior?
- Can this individual be counted on in a stressful and demanding situation? • Would I hire this person for a social work job?
- Would I want this person to be a social worker for my mother? My child? For a good friend of mine?

Behaviors and personal qualities that favorably impress a practicum instructor include the following: initiative, dependability, honesty, punctuality, capacity to meet deadlines, perseverance, ability to handle conflict in interpersonal relations, sensitivity to others, ability to achieve goals and objectives, ability to plan and organize work, clear writing, motivation and willingness to work hard, receptivity to new learning, self-awareness and openness to examining personal values and attitudes, capacity to work under pressure, personal maturity, emotional stability, respect for clients and other students, fairness in decision making, and professionalism.

Behaviors and qualities that cause a practicum instructor to doubt a student's ability to perform as a social worker include the opposite of the above listed behaviors, especially dishonesty, missing deadlines, disrespect for others, manipulation and efforts to "bend" rules and requirements, attempts to secure special concessions or privileges, and the inability to keep personal problems from interfering with professional tasks and activities.

Prepare for a formal evaluation by reviewing your learning agreement and its stated goals and activities, and also the practicum evaluation tool used by your school. Give careful thought to the question of how well you have managed to carry your various responsibilities and completed assigned tasks. Prepare a list of your assigned tasks and responsibilities and assemble documentation of your work and accomplishments so it can easily be reviewed by your practicum

instructor. Prior to meeting with your practicum instructor for the formal evaluation, you may be asked to do a self-evaluation using your school's evaluation tool.

Prepare yourself emotionally for the formal evaluation session so that you will be open to hearing feedback about your performance. When receiving feedback on your performance, strive to maintain an openness toward what you are hearing. Although it may be difficult to hear a frank appraisal of your work, avoid being defensive. Consider this feedback carefully and work to improve in the areas noted.

In addition to constructive criticism, you will receive positive feedback related to areas in which you are doing well. Take note of what your practicum instructor sees as your skills and gifts. Determine if your strengths have been demonstrated in your performance. Build on your strengths-they will form the basis of your professional knowledge and abilities.

Strive to understand what your practicum instructor observed in your performance that led him or her to draw a particular conclusion concerning your performance. Seek descriptions and examples of your poor performance and ask for specific suggestions on how it can be improved. Request descriptions of performances that were rated higher than most others. Reflect on these descriptions and determine why you perform some tasks and activities better than others.

If you and your practicum instructor disagree on the adequacy of your performance, prepare factual documentation supporting your point of view. However, if you agree that your performance is deficient, it is best to acknowledge the problem rather than entering into a pointless argument that can only leave you looking dishonest or lacking in self-awareness.

A common problem experienced by social work practicum students in direct services agencies is for the student to have an unusually strong or unexpected emotional reaction to specific client problems or situations. This is usually rooted in the student's own history of personal or family problems. The student should discuss these reactions with his or her practicum instructor. In some cases it will be necessary for the student to undergo psychotherapy as a way of better understanding these reactions and finding ways to keep them from interfering with social work performance.

It is possible that during your practicum you will discover that you are not well suited to be a social worker, or perhaps you will discover that what you had assumed to be your area of special interest and skill has lost its appeal. While somewhat painful and upsetting, these are very important discoveries. They may open new doors to exploration and opportunity while closing some that need to be closed. To be happy and content in life you need to make career decisions on the basis of accurate information about your particular strengths and gifts and your particular limitations. You need to understand what you can and cannot do.

## References

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