FIELD PLACEMENT INTERVIEWING TIPS

- Check out the agency description and website, if available.
- Be prepared to discuss what you hope to learn in your field placement.
- Inquire about the nature of the work for students, projects in which students will be expected to participate, skills and competencies you will develop over the course of your field placement.
- Ask about supervision style, whether there is a preceptor and if so, what will that person’s role be?
- Be prepared to describe how you learn best.
- Ask about the preferred days for students and if they have any required days and meetings to attend.
- Are there early start dates for specialized training or orientation?
- Are there prerequisites that you need to take care of before beginning your placement? (e.g. domestic violence training, background check, TB tests, etc.) It is important that you follow up with the field instructor once you have confirmed a field placement to ensure that those prerequisites can be taken care of prior to the start of your field placement.
- Plan to arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. It is always better to be early than to be late for your appointment.

How Do I Prepare for a Field Practicum Interview?

Anticipation of the initial interview with a prospective agency can produce anxiety. Although there is no way to guarantee that your first interview with a potential agency supervisor will be a good experience, a few steps can be taken to increase the likelihood of a positive experience. Many people find it overwhelming when asked about their strengths, weaknesses, qualifications, career goals, skills and abilities. For example, here are some of the questions you might be asked:

~What led you to social work?
~How would you describe yourself?
~What do you view as your strengths? Gaps in knowledge?
~What kind of experiences did you have in a previous field placement? What did you learn from the social services profession from that experience?
~What do you plan on doing 5 to 10 years from now?
~What would you like to learn in this setting?
~Why should you be considered as an Intern for the particular setting?

It helps to think about these questions in advance. You should be able to describe traits and skills that contribute to your uniqueness (e.g. ambitious, trustworthy, reliable, compassionate, etc.) using examples to illustrate particular attributes (e.g. you mention you volunteer at a homeless shelter on weekends and you also serve meals at the shelter on holidays as a way of describing you being “committed” to help others.) Once you have specific attributes and examples in mind, it is fairly easy to respond to the request, “Describe yourself.”

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Trace skills (e.g. the ability to work in stressful situations) to concrete, specific experiences. Describe a particular experience to show how you have used the skill. You should be deliberate in describing strength relative to the position sought (e.g., knowledge of medical terminology when seeking an internship within a health care setting). Try to provide specific examples of the traits and skills you possess.

What can I do to De-emphasize Little or No Experience?

Students worry that they will be asked about their lack of experience. To avoid overlooking relevant experiences, consider your significant past activities before the interview. Don’t overlook the types and ranges of activities to which you were exposed and don’t minimize them. Also, perhaps you did volunteer work or were employed prior to coming to school. Make a list of the skills you needed to complete assignments in those settings. You are now ready to link your past with what the current agency offers, coupled with what you would like to develop in an internship.

Is It Wise to Admit My Weaknesses?

In an interview, agency field instructors may ask you to describe your “weaknesses.” Questions like: “what weaknesses do you have?” or “what aspect of the placement do you think might be most difficult?” may be raised. Therefore, consider any potential vulnerabilities, gaps in knowledge, skill, etc. you may have and think about how you will present them.

One approach is to accentuate the positive. For example, you can mention the issue but focus on how you have managed or hope to manage it. A second approach is to state a “weakness” and then reframe it into a trait that is positive. For example, someone might say that you push yourself too hard, but you may like to think of yourself as someone who strives for excellence.

Occasionally students have questions about whether or not medical diagnoses or personal problems should be mentioned during the interview. The use of medications that may have side effects, or medical conditions that could limit your activities, should be discussed with your faculty field liaison. Likewise, it is not generally advised, for instance, for victims of incest or sexual abuse to begin counseling others with the same problem until progress has been made in their own treatment. Similarly, students from alcoholic families should be pretty far into their own recovery before seeking to work with alcoholic clients. Sharing this type of information with the school does not indicate any weakness on your part, but does show maturity and good judgment in dealing with a sometimes painful reality.

In general, you should advise your faculty field liaison and the Coordinator of Field Education of medical conditions or other situations that could affect your agency work or have repercussions for the agency. Then, you and the faculty can jointly decide on next steps (e.g. registering with the University Disabled Student Services Center). There are no simple rules on this matter; the advantages and disadvantages of revealing personally sensitive information must be weighed in each individual situation, but is usually handled successfully with adequate advance planning.

How Should I Respond to Questions About My Educational Preparation?

In a field placement interview, you may be asked to explain how classroom learning and/or your experience will apply to the particular agency setting. Although you can’t foresee every specific question that might be asked, you can prepare anticipating related questions and mentally

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reviewing your educational experiences. Field instructors ask questions about educational backgrounds in order to assess intellectual abilities, breadth and depth of knowledge, areas for growth, special interests or training experiences/needs.

You should give prior thought to the courses you have had and your experiences in the field and think about two or three courses and experiences that were valuable preparation for the specific placement. Also, think of theories or concepts discussed in class and note why you think they were of interest; or how they were helpful in your practice.

If you are asked a general question like: “What do you think of your program at CSULB”? think about some aspects of the program that have given you good preparation. Be positive in describing the learning required from your educational experience. If you describe any experiences chiefly in negative terms, you may be seen by some field instructors as being negative or defensive, as most field instructors feel there is something to learn from every experience. This does not mean that you cannot share areas that were frustrating and or disappointing. Just try to present a balance.

**How Should I Dress for the Field Interview?**

Avoid extremes. Generally speaking, dress professionally, neither too formally or informally. Do not wear jeans on the first interview. Once accepted as an intern, you will observe how staff dress and you dress accordingly. When in doubt, dress up a little more than you normally would for going to class.

**What Should I Ask the Field Instructor?**

Interviews may last from 30 minutes to over one hour. Some settings may have you meet with a team of staff and some settings conduct group interviews with all interested students. You may be asked to come for one interview or you might need to go to several interviews within the agency. Sometimes larger agencies have group or multiple interviews due to substantial number of students, field instructors, and/or personnel with whom a prospective student will interact.

It is helpful to show enthusiasm and interest by asking questions about the agency, the staff, and the clientele, how long the supervisor has been with the agency, the supervisor’s teaching style, etc. You can ask what, if any, formal training is given to students, how soon and what assignments are given, how performance is appraised, and what is expected of a student. Furthermore, you can inquire about the staff you will be working with and the expected working hours. You can usually generate discussion based on your observations, interests and what you have read about the agency prior to the interview.

It is desirable, and assumed that you will meet with the person who will be your field instructor. However, in some settings, students may be matched with field instructors after the interviews, based on the student’s interest, background, and learning objectives and the field instructor’s area of expertise, interest, and time availability. If these decisions are made later, students are usually notified of the assignment and are invited to meet with their actual field instructor. You can also request to meet directly with the person with whom you will ultimately work; however, you can not demand it, nor should you use this as a means of determining how to rank the placement, as changes often occur even when you do meet the proposed Field Instructor.