

# Practicum FAQs for Students

Initially prepared by the class of 2006-07

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## I. General Questions

- **What exactly *is* the practicum?**

The practicum is separated into two parts. The first part is the class, which meets once a week on campus. The second part (and the bulk of the experience) is the supervised field work in which students will apply the skills and knowledge gained as part of the Community Social Psychology program. All students in the CSP Master's Degree program are required to complete the practicum in order to graduate.

- **How many hours do we have to fulfill?**

You will be asked to fulfill a minimum of 300 hours during the course of the school year at a community organization of your choosing. This can be accomplished by working 10-12 hours each week during the course of the academic year. While students are not obligated to work over university vacations or holidays, they are certainly not prohibited from doing so.

- **What is the timeline for the practicum?**

The class, and consequently your practicum, must begin in the Fall semester and finish at the end of the Spring semester. Your first week of field work officially begins the very first week of classes, so you need to be looking for a site during the prior summer months. Staying in touch with the instructor prior to Fall semester is very helpful.

There will be various assignments to be completed over the course of the year, including a Learning Contract, evaluations, and mid- and end of year portfolio reports. The specific deadlines for these assignments will be summarized in the class syllabus.

- **Can we begin our practicum field work before the Fall semester begins or stay after the Spring semester is over?**

You are welcome to do either - *however*, be aware that those hours will not count toward your total of 300. If you plan on getting a head start, contact your practicum instructor to get the official green light. But even with that go-ahead, you cannot begin counting hours until the semester starts.

- **What if we complete all our hours before the end of the academic year?**

Even if you work around the clock and manage to complete all 300 hours before December, you must still continue to work at your practicum site until the end of the Spring semester, as per your Learning Contract.

- **Will we get paid?**

Students cannot accept any form of payment for their work at their practicum sites.

- **Can I do my practicum at my workplace?**

You cannot fulfill your practicum hours by doing the same activities that you are getting paid for. You may ask your employer about placement ideas, but for a practicum that is in any way connected to your employer, you will need to find a new role at the workplace that can provide new opportunities for learning and building

skills. You will also need to identify an entirely different supervisor, preferably in a completely different unit and/or at a different site.

- **Who is the supervisor?**

The supervisor is a member of the organization who will host you as their practicum student. This person will be the one to whom you will report and who will devote at least one hour a week to your direct supervision. The supervisor does not have to be the director of the organization and does not need to have any predetermined licensing or credentials. S/he does, however, need to have a depth of experience in the skills that the student hopes to learn.

## II. Finding a Site

- **When should we start looking for a site?**

It never hurts to start early! You must have come to an agreement with a site before the start of the Fall semester, so it is important to start building these networks and having meetings with potential sites over the summer. If you already know of some organizations that may be of interest to you, start talking to them about the possibility of hosting you as a practicum student as soon as you can. If you don't know where to turn, here are some useful resources:

- [clearinghouse.uml.edu](http://clearinghouse.uml.edu)
- [MVHub.com](http://MVHub.com)
- [Idealist.org](http://Idealist.org)
- List of previous practicum placements (available on the website)

- **How do I explain the practicum to a potential supervisor who may not understand what is involved?**

Generally, most organizations would not turn down the chance to have someone work at their site for free. It is important, then, to stress that the practicum is not a one-way street; they will essentially be "paying" you by giving you one hour of direct supervision a week and ongoing coaching. Supervisors are also asked to commit to one meeting per semester at UMass Lowell, time to work with you to develop a Learning Contract, a mid-year and end-of-year evaluation, and, most importantly, support for your professional development. Don't be afraid to tell them what is expected of them, because if they realize that they cannot or would rather not commit, then it is important to know sooner rather than later.

In addition, you can share the many forms on the CSP website that describe the practicum competencies and requirements. Feel free to ask your practicum course instructor for tips and/or talk with former practicum students to hear how they were able to explain the practicum to potential supervisors.

- **How do we make sure that the practicum site is a good match for us?**

Choose an organization with a mission and purpose that coincide with your own interests and career goals. For instance, you should probably not work at an organization whose focus is on providing affordable housing if your interest is in sexual violence prevention, even if you think that affordable housing is a good cause or a community issue that needs to be addressed. You will probably need to talk with multiple organizations before you find a good match.

It is also important to ensure that the organization itself will provide a working

environment that would suit you. When you plan a site visit, observe (or ask about) certain factors that may concern you, such as the size of the organization or site, the environment of the specific department you would be working in, whether you will have your own working space, any obvious tensions or dynamics going on between staff or volunteers, and so on. Don't be afraid to ask a potential supervisor any questions that may arise. After all, you may be working in this environment for nine months. Before you settle on a site, you should feel confident that the working environment is one that you will feel comfortable in. If possible, ask for contact information for other members of the organization (particularly interns, if any) so you can speak to them "off-the-record" about what the environment or organization in general is like.

Finally, look for any "red flags" or warning signs. Does your potential supervisor seem annoyed when you ask her or him questions? Does it take a long time before she or he returns your phone calls or emails? Is the organization so small that it would be difficult for your potential supervisor to donate one hour a week to your supervision? Does it seem as though the site just wants an extra pair of hands, rather than to commit to your learning and professional development? If you have any doubts as to whether this organization will suit your needs, this may be a sign that the site will not work for you.

- **I have multiple interests or interests that are constantly changing. How do I pick a site that will meet my needs?**

You are certainly not alone! Most people have a number of interests, and it may not be necessary to narrow them down to just one when looking for a practicum site. Try looking for a multi-service organization, or an organization that will allow you to do different types of work. Since you will be developing a number of skills during your time at the organization, you may end up doing a number of different jobs anyway. Another option is simply to compile a list of potential sites that focus on your various interests, visit them all, and choose among those. It may be necessary to do a little introspection and choose one or two issues that you feel most strongly about.

- **Are we restricted to Lowell?**

Not exactly. Previous students have done field work throughout the Greater Lowell area, and some have worked in the Lawrence community. You are encouraged to select a site within 15-20 minutes of Lowell. Also important to consider is whether you can easily get to your site and/or are comfortable with the commute. If you lack transportation, you may be restricted to sites that offer their own transportation, are within walking distance of your home/dorm, or are along bus or train routes.

- **Can a practicum site become a potential employer?**

It's not unheard of for a practicum site to wish to hire the practicum student once the practicum is over. Whether you accept their offer is up to you! Do not be afraid to ask your supervisor if there are any opportunities, but you will need to wait until after your Learning Contract expires.

### III. Troubleshooting

- **What if my supervisor and I need to fulfill a requirement for the practicum class, and my supervisor does not come through?**

There will be a few assignments that will require your supervisor's input, such as the mid-year evaluation and the year-end evaluation. Before even agreeing to host you,

your supervisor should be made aware that the practicum is not simply having a student volunteer her or his time to the organization; the supervisor is committing to you, as well. By signing your Learning Contract, they have agreed to fulfill whatever requirements may be asked of them. It may be best to gently remind your supervisor of this, but if it remains a problem, speak to your practicum instructor for advice.

- **How should we handle matters if a practicum site isn't working out?**

It is always best to resolve difficulties as soon as they arise. If you realize that things aren't going smoothly at your practicum site, discuss your concerns with your supervisor. Maybe your supervisor doesn't realize that your needs are not being met. Inform your practicum instructor to let her or him know that there is an issue, and see if you can collectively come up with a plan of action to get everyone back on the same page. If, after this stage, you feel as though little can/will be done to rectify the situation, you have two options. If this problem has happened early enough in the Fall semester, you may still have time to find an alternate practicum site. Consult with your practicum instructor about this possibility.

However, if problems develop well into the academic year, it may not be feasible to switch practicum sites. In this case, try to negotiate with your supervisor; your practicum instructor may feel it necessary to intervene on your behalf.

#### IV. Questions about Practicum Class

- **What is the practicum class like?**

The class meets once a week to discuss various topics and concerns related to your practicum experience. It's not unlike other graduate courses in the sense that you will discuss the application of community psychology frameworks and theories, but it also includes discussions of personal and professional issues that emerge in your practicum placements.

- **What kind of work is done during/for the class meeting?**

Every week, students are expected to fill out and turn in a weekly reflection form that asks three questions about the previous week's field work. Additionally, there are a few major written assignments, e.g., Learning Contract, a mid-year portfolio, and the year-end portfolio. In addition, you are expected to do at least one in-class presentation each semester.

- **Does the professor regularly visit the practicum site? If so, what are the visits like?**

The professor does at least one site visit towards the middle of the year. The visit is mainly a time to reflect on how things have been going. To prepare, you need to think about what is going well and what might be improved. It is certainly no cause for concern! The instructor will ask to meet with you and your supervisor to ask a few questions and get a tour of the site. This meeting lasts about an hour.

- **Will we need a text book for the course?**

Yes. Many readings will be site-specific, so there are few specific weekly readings that are required of all students at the same time. The text, however, will also be very useful in your practicum work as well as in helping you to prepare for your presentations and papers.