

## Making the Most of Field Seminar

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When you are a social work student in a field placement, you will be offered the opportunity to integrate your internship experiences and academic work through a seminar course or practice class. There are several options available that social work schools use to provide an integrative experience. The Department of Social Work and Gerontology at Shippensburg University (PA) includes a block field placement with seminar once a week during the students' final semester. Regardless of which model a school uses, the opportunity to integrate field and classroom work will be an important component of your learning. {mosgoogle right}

S.U.'s senior seminar is broken into three small groups led by three faculty members who also serve as liaisons. Seminar is considered the capstone course in which students enhance their understanding of the relationship among social work theory, practice, and research. The small groups provide an opportunity for students to clarify and refine their understanding of concepts and issues through discussion with peers and the faculty liaison. At times, the small groups come together to meet as a large group so all seniors are meeting together to share their experiences. For example, the small groups come together mid-semester for a discussion about the progress of field supervision.

There are two assignments for the seminar course. First, students complete several 2-page mini-papers that provide opportunities to integrate their coursework and field experiences. Examples of topics include discussing the generalist opportunities in the agency and how the NASW Code of Ethics applies to field experiences. The second major assignment is an agency-based research project, which requires students to carry out a research study from start to finish.

Senior seminar is most meaningful when students are actively involved. However, this may be the first time you will experience a seminar setting in the classroom. It is quite different from a traditional college class and may take some adjustment. To help other students, several S.U. seniors polled their classmates in the spring of 2007 to find out how they make the most of their seminar experiences. This article describes the four main themes from this poll and provides some quotes directly from senior social work students. The four themes can be thought of as "tips for success" in making the most of seminar courses: (1) be prepared, (2) support your peers, (3) apply what you learn, and (4) continue to grow.

### Be Prepared

Preparing for seminar includes taking time to complete assignments and mentally preparing to share what you have experienced in the field. The assignments given throughout the semester are hardly busy work. Each assignment should reflect your learning experiences in the field and the concepts you learned throughout previous academic semesters. Analyzing your field experiences in writing is valuable and will help you better understand your strengths and weaknesses as a new social worker. One senior says, "When writing papers, reach inside--draw on what you have learned. It is amazing how it all connects together." Another student adds, "Reflect on the education that brought you to this point--it really does prepare you."

The attitude and outlook you bring into seminar is as important as the quality of the written assignments. Nearly every social work class addresses the importance of tuning in to yourself and clients (Shulman, 2005), and seminar is a great place to practice using this skill. Take time before class to mentally prepare for the session and think about what you are bringing to the group, whether it is an experience that you had at placement or a supportive response to an ongoing problem a classmate may be experiencing. If you are sharing sensitive information, it is important to think about how you will do so in a confidential way.

Do not put too much thought into developing the most interesting client problem or most shocking experience. Many common issues can be explored in the seminar setting. For example, one senior had spent some time thinking about how to handle gossiping among co-workers. He took the concern to seminar, and a lively discussion followed in which classmates provided suggestions and shared similar experiences. The student recognized that his concern about gossip was also an issue for other students.

Many of the S.U. students who were polled about how to make the most of seminar talked about the importance of preparation. "Always come in with something to talk about at seminar, if you rely on your classmates to do all the talking, you are going to become bored. At least come in with one situation to talk about with your classmates every week." Another student offered that the best suggestion is to "be prepared to share, talk, and learn from other people. Being an intern at an agency is hard, and it's really great to be able to connect with others and share common experiences, despite the fact that everyone is at a different agency."

### Support Your Peers

The group setting of seminar allows students to learn from each other and take advantage of peer support. Problems from the field and with assignments, such as the research project, can be addressed. For students to freely share and evaluate their learning experience, the students need to feel group cohesion and ownership of the group. Although the instructor is initially responsible for establishing group culture, students can maintain it by being prepared to share, listen to classmates, provide honest feedback, and respect confidentiality. Sharing your own experiences encourages your classmates to share theirs. Some students will find this uncomfortable and risky, but it is well worth it. One of the most important ways to support your peers is to keep group discussions within the group and respect confidentiality.

A particularly helpful discussion in seminar revolved around feelings of needing to know everything as an intern. One student shared that she was feeling as if she should know how to do everything, because she had finished her social

work courses. Her classmates were able to help her by saying they had felt similarly, but recognized that they were still learning. Some students suggested she talk to her field supervisor during weekly supervision, because this had been a valuable experience for them.

Students have also been able to solve problems with research projects through discussions. It is often tough to choose the final topic of a research project, but sharing your ideas with classmates can help you narrow it down. The research project is often the toughest part of being a senior social work student, and it helps to share this "pain" with others who are in the same situation. Somehow, it makes it more manageable. You may just need some encouragement that "you can do it!" in order to keep moving forward.

Talking to each other also allows you to learn more about the generalist perspective and the professional options available to you upon graduation. Seniors' advice includes, "you need to fully participate" and "group members who respond to each others' situations and problems can accomplish more as a whole." Another student wrote, "sometimes the best advice comes from your peers" and "don't hesitate to bring things up" and "enjoy yourself and talk a lot about what you are experiencing. Most likely, your peers are going through very similar things."

### Apply What You Learn

The field placement provides an opportunity to try out new experiences, so it is to your advantage to apply what you learn through seminar discussions. Your classmates will be interested in hearing about what happens after seminar, so be prepared to follow up on your discussions. One student recently shared that she felt stereotyped during a conversation with a co-worker in the field. Students discussed how she could have handled it differently and what she might be able to do in the future. In seminar the following week, a classmate asked her whether she decided to confront the co-worker. She shared that she had decided to address the stereotyping if it came up again and appreciated that she had more ideas to deal with future issues. Students report that you can "get the most out of seminar by giving and getting advice" and taking what they said and applying them to whatever problem you have at your agency. Similarly, "you need to be willing to relate other classmates' experiences to your internship" and "as it would be beneficial to know how to handle similar situations."

### Continue To Grow

Your field experience represents a time of personal, professional, and academic growth. Being in a new situation will require you to assess yourself and be open to new experiences. The seminar experience is yours to take advantage of, and processing feelings about your values and norms versus those of an agency may help. For example, one student did not feel comfortable praying with co-workers before they began work, so students in seminar, both religious and non-religious, gave advice on how to handle the situation without being disrespectful or feeling out of place at the agency. Because the student was able to identify her comfort zone, she was able to identify her boundaries and better understand what kind of agency setting is the best fit in the future.

One student said this about self reflection, "You need to be aware that you are going to learn A LOT about yourself during your internship process and try to prepare yourself for that. Even though you "do lots of self assessments [in past social work classes], there is something about actually being thrown into the helping profession that teaches you things about who you really are" and "you'll just have to experience it for yourselves!"

You should often think back to what your initial learning needs were to ensure that they are being met. If you find that you are not getting the experience you hoped for, it is important to process these uncertainties within the comforts of the small group setting, as it will allow you to prepare for addressing issues with your field supervisor. "sometimes it can be hard to talk directly with your supervisor, and seminar is a great place to talk things through beforehand and clarify." Working on assertiveness techniques is a common function of the seminar experience.

Students grow immensely in their critical thinking and analytic skills through the senior research project. The seminar presents an important opportunity for processing the struggles with this project and sharing ideas. Tell your classmates what your research project is about, ask them how they have conducted literature searches, and how they deal with issues such as getting access to data. Many problems with research projects can be solved within the seminar setting when students share. Another valuable piece of advice from students is to choose a topic that you are interested in. One student wrote, "You need to do research on something you have interest in. You will be spending a lot of time on this topic, so make sure it's something you want to know about. It is important that your agency can gain from your research as well, but your sanity must come first."

### Conclusion

Senior field placements are exciting and rewarding, but they can also be stressful and difficult to navigate if you feel alone. The senior seminar will offer you an opportunity to handle some of the challenges in your internship. You will also have the chance to help your peers address their challenges. As a senior, you may feel ready to graduate and be finished with the coursework, but seminar provides a link between the classroom and beginning your professional practice. The seniors at S.U. have reflected on ways they made the most of their seminar. By preparing for seminar, supporting your peers, applying what you learn, and continuing to grow, you may find that seminar was more than you expected in demands and rewards.

### Reference

Shulman, L. (2005). *The skills of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities*. Belmont, CA:Wadsworth.

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