

Traveling Toward a Social Work Degree: 10 Road-Tested Trip-Tips

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Getting a social work degree is like a "road trip." You explore new vistas and have life-changing adventures. You may also wander in the desert and get "car crazy." As a travel-seasoned social work educator, I offer ten "trip-tips" for both reaching your degree-destination and enjoying the journey. These travel tips stem from sharing students' road trips, seeing successes and struggles, and learning with students. I relate road-tested student stories to illustrate these tips. I use pseudonyms and alter personal details of stories or interweave several situations to preserve confidentiality. Use the following "trip-tips" to be a "Road-Scholar!" {mosgoogle right}

Trip-Tip 1—You are the driver. You are—ultimately—in charge of your own success. So, set realistic standards and goals. Don't try to follow someone else's itinerary. Oftentimes, students set unrealistic expectations. For example, "I have to do this assignment perfectly." Or, "I have to make all 'A's'."

"Camille" is a wonderful example of someone learning to drive her own course. Camille was a single mother, commuted three hours to attend our weekend MSW classes, and worked a demanding social service job. Camille struggled academically. School was never "easy" for her. But, she had internalized her parents' message that "only 'A's' were good enough"—and held herself to these standards. In advisement, I offered Camille my "bumper sticker": "If at first you don't succeed...redefine success." Camille needed to define her own success, rather than trying to live up to others' expectations. Through insights and changes, Camille redefined success and declared herself, "Camille, Queen of 'B's'!"

Don't misunderstand. Camille responsibly completed assignments, seriously engaged in learning, and did solid work. Did she do "B" work frequently? Yes. And, when she did "B" work, she accepted the consequences. She allowed "perfect imperfection." Actually, giving up "perfection" opened up avenues for insight and joy in learning for Camille. She redefined success as learning—not grades. Camille succeeded.

In addition to setting your own standards of success, pursue your own learning. Here's another road-story. Circumstances resulted in "Sholanda" having a field placement that was not what she wanted. However, instead of succumbing to discontent, Sholanda took responsibility for her learning. She negotiated with her field supervisor and faculty liaison to tailor her learning objectives to include some activities not typical in that placement setting. Sholanda dove into her placement, determined to learn. Follow Camille and Sholanda's examples: "B" yourself. Set your own standards for success, and pursue your own path.

Trip-Tip 2—Do not travel alone. The journey can get arduous and lonely. The workload can be overwhelming. Share the load. Get to know people in your classes. Use study groups. Divide readings. Consult on projects. Edit each others' papers. Collaborate! As a group, clarify assignments with professors, and even advocate changes.

For example, a class of my students asked that an individual assignment be changed to a group assignment. They all agreed and had a clear rationale for this request. Also, they requested different due dates, noting that another major project was due the same day in another class. They committed to maintaining high quality learning. I gladly negotiated because they demonstrated initiative, cohesion, and courtesy—and had excellent projects! So, although you are driving, don't travel alone.

Trip-Tip 3—Don't take on too many passengers or baggage. While Trip-Tip #2 emphasizes sharing your journey, it is equally important to avoid overloading your car. Most folks in the social work profession are very involved—because we want to contribute to society and invest in relationships. But, you cannot add a professional degree program onto a "full plate"—or "full car." Thus, when I interview prospective students, I ask, "What will you change while working on this degree?" The more specific the plan, the more likely the student will manage the stress of this road trip. Here's a helpful packing tip: Lay out everything you plan to pack. Then, take away half of those items—leave them. Likewise, look at all your activities and commitments and decide what you can leave, delay, or scale down while on this school-trip.

Similarly, the timing of your road trip is important. If you have started a new job with a rigid work schedule, have young children, and are dealing with a major illness, it may not be the best time to pursue a degree. Caution: No time is perfect, however. As you consider the timing for this important commitment, talk with your support system and workplace about adjustments.

Set healthy boundaries. Learn to say "No" to some things, so you can say an unequivocal "Yes" to important things—and this degree is an "important thing!" "Teresa" struggled with saying "No." Her supportive (and witty) partner advised her to answer the phone, "Hell No!" That response may not work for everyone, but I advise having stock responses to avoid overload. For instance, say, "That's really important; however, I have another commitment."

This other commitment can be to read a novel or take a walk. You do not have to divulge this information or give excuses. YOU are a commitment--which leads to the next trip-tip!

Trip-Tip 4-- Have an itinerary that includes rest stops, scenic routes, refueling, and maintenance, and that anticipates road construction and traffic hazards. Developing a self-care plan that encompasses spiritual, emotional, social, and physical health is crucial. Make the plan specific and realistic. Write the plan down and put it in a prominent place. Put self-care commitments on your calendar. For example, if your self-care plan includes walking five times weekly, schedule walks. Enlist a support person to hold you accountable.

An alumna, "Shelby," admits that, at first, she ignored self-care, and "probably shaved ten years off my life by stressing out..." Shelby insightfully observes that we sometimes "busy ourselves to avoid facing deeper personal issues." Happily, Shelby now uses Buddhist practice, yoga, journaling, and "vegging out" for self-care.

Self-care is not an add-on luxury in successfully navigating toward a degree. Self-care is like keeping fuel in your vehicle! You may run on fumes or even push the car for a while, but eventually, you will have to refuel, replug--or break down. Self-care is a priority! If you have trouble engaging in self-care, seek advice.

Trip-Tip 5-- Be prepared for "car trouble." Use mechanics and other professional resources. You will be traveling many miles and exploring new terrains. This trip puts pressure on you, your vehicle, and those on your journey. True education is more than sitting in class, doing sterile assignments and cerebral exercises. Real education--like travel--is mind-expanding and life-changing. Social work education is particularly life-changing, because it examines your own life situations. Professional use of self--a core aspect of social work practice--requires critical self-knowledge. This process can evoke stressful and even painful reactions. Oftentimes, this growth process involves discovering and claiming dimensions of self. For example, a student learning about "isms" may better articulate her/his own identities and experiences, which can evoke both painful reactions and power in claiming voice.

Individual growth inevitably changes personal relationships. Oftentimes, this process enriches relationships; however, it can challenge personal relationships, and even propel dissolution of relationships. These situations can sometimes best be navigated through professional counseling. Most campuses have free (or low cost) counseling services. Access this resource.

Life happens--especially on road trips. Sometimes roadblocks appear, which can signal caution in continuing on the current path. You may need to detour and return to school later. "Tamika" began school just a few weeks after her mother died, yet she pressed on. Later, Tamika's father became ill, and Tamika was the primary caregiver. Then, Tamika became pregnant and had medical difficulties. As her faculty advisor, I "rode with" Tamika through these stressful times, providing support and resources to keep her on track. But, as her academic performance declined precipitously, I advised Tamika to "stop out." She made the mature decision to do so. This journey has no failures--only setbacks, roadblocks, and sometimes revised routes. Later, with counseling and more stabilized circumstances, Tamika completed her degree.

In addition to these personal stressors, you may experience academic struggles. Use campus resources, such as the writing center, services for learning differences, and so forth. Your best "mechanic"-resource for this journey is your faculty advisor. Get to know her or him. If you do not "click" with your faculty advisor, ask to be reassigned. Most faculty members want to travel with you.

Trip-Tip 6-- Ask for directions. Do you know someone (not us, of course!) who drives aimlessly for hours rather than asking for directions? On this journey, seek directions! Ask for help--and be willing to accept it. Here are two road-tested examples.

"Kammie" was married and had two children; she commuted several hours to classes and had a very stressful job. Her first semester, Kammie "stressed out"! She and her partner wisely sought counseling, and they made two brilliant lifestyle changes.

First, Kammie listed all the household tasks she performed. With a somewhat traditional marriage, Kammie had primary responsibilities for housework and childcare. Kammie said that she was a "clean freak" and found it hard to do anything else if the house was "dirty." In a counseling session, Kammie offered her partner two options: either take on half of these responsibilities or they budget for a cleaning service. He opted for plan B--and it worked for both of them.

Second, Kammie had prudently arranged with her employer to flex her hours, giving her one week day off work for studying. However, Kammie had "mommy guilt." She felt guilty when at home while her preschooler was in daycare. So, Kammie kept her son home on her day off. Distracted from studies, Kammie's stress increased. Through processing, Kammie realized that her son enjoyed daycare and his routine. He would not "suffer" if she allowed herself a day at home alone. By implementing these strategies, Kammie became less stressed, more successful in school, and the family benefited.

"Margarita" fell into the trap described in Trip-Tip #1--unrealistic standards of success. Margarita devised an ambitious plan for her culminating project (the capstone MSW assignment). However, her agency wouldn't allow the research she proposed. Margarita was stymied! She thought she had to complete the proposed

project or fail! Fortunately, Margarita talked with me. I wasn't her advisor, but we had a collegial relationship. I reminded her that the purpose of this assignment was to demonstrate learning—not a perfect project. Also, I encouraged her to initiate more contact with her project advisor. Ask for directions and use your resources!

Trip-Tip 7—Keep your "eye" on the "Prize." This journey can be long. The Civil Rights mantra, "Keep your eyes on the prize," applies when traveling toward a destination that can seem unattainable sometimes. I recommend three "eye" to help realize your "prize" degree: Prioritize, Organize, and Partialize. POP!

Prioritize: You can't see/do everything—especially not all at once! Prioritize! Determine which assignments are due first, which ones will require the most investment, which readings need close attention and which can be skimmed.

Organize: Plan your itinerary and prepare for your journey. Work smarter, not harder. Use an organizing system. Develop a timeline and calendar for completing assignments. (Include self-care as an "assignment.") Work on school assignments on a regular basis—not just when due! Structure study during your freshest time. Don't waste hours trying to read an article when you are sleepy; read at your peak time. As Trip-Tip #2 advises, collaborate with colleagues. Detail assignments. For example, tailor your field activities to fit with class assignments. Consult with faculty and others about organizing strategies.

Partialize: Break the journey into segments. That is, divide major assignments into mini-parts, and set mini-deadlines. A 20-page paper can be overwhelming. Instead of working on it, you may just take a nap! But you can break projects into mini-tasks, such as 1) do an outline, 2) do literature search, 3) write section A by (deadline), and so forth. Partializing assignments breaks them into manageable tasks. Reward yourself for completing tasks: Self-care!

Lauryn offers this important advice: "Do not get behind. It's hard to catch up!" Getting behind on car payments is stressful and can result in losing your vehicle. Likewise, stay on track with completing assignments. POP! You'll make payments, enjoy the journey, and realize the "prize";

Trip-Tip 8—Follow the road rules. Practice safe and courteous driving. Shhhh...here's a well-kept secret: Professors are people! (Well, most of us!) Here's another secret: You are not "special" in that the rules apply to you, too. On this road trip, we are all adult learners. Adult choices have consequences.

So, know the "rules" and expectations in courses. For example, adhere to due dates. Typically, due dates are not merely suggestions—they are expectations. Late assignments result in consequences. If turning in an assignment late, communicate with the professor. As with any human interchange, civility and courtesy go a long way.

Here is a lovely example of a student "driving" courteously. "John" e-mailed me (before the due date) that his paper would be late. He asked if he could e-mail the paper two days later. I commiserated with John about the circumstances contributing to this delay and said he could e-mail the paper. John did not get the paper to me within two days, but he both e-mailed and phoned to communicate about the delay. Two days later, John e-mailed an attachment that I could not open. When I communicated this problem, John promptly said he would mail the paper that day. He did. I received the paper. A few days later, when John came to class, he brought another copy. He apologized for any inconvenience and graciously accepted the points deducted, per the syllabus policy. John's courtesy and responsibility demonstrated professional competence.

You are responsible for reading syllabi and handbooks, listening in class, and asking for clarification, if needed, about policies and expectations. These policies and expectations are not academic fad; they represent professional standards of conduct—such as competent work, timeliness, and professional courtesy. Notably, faculty have mutual professional accountability to students, including providing constructive feedback and returning assignments in a timely fashion. So, let's follow the road rules and practice courteous driving. The road will be happier for all.

Trip-Tip 9—Enjoy the journey. Please, do not get so focused on the end destination that you miss the journey. You invest much in this degree. If your education is meaningful and worthwhile, money is the least investment. The most regrettable situations are those students who just want that "piece of paper." The bumper sticker: "You get out of an experience what you put into it" applies to the social work program. So, put yourself into this journey.

Go for a vibrant education—not just a degree. Incorporate fun, joy, and discovery. Be open to possibilities. My teaching motto is, "It's all about the learning!" Pursue learning! Celebrate learning! Enjoy the learning-journey!

Trip-Tip 10—Travel On! When you reach the milestone of a degree, celebrate! Then, remember that life is a journey, not a degree/destination. Adapt these trip-tips to continue on your social work practice path. As astute road-trip advisor, Dr. Seuss, exclaims, "Oh, the places you'll go!"

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