

Step-by-Step: Finding My Way to An MSW

Contributed by Mary Hannity

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by Mary Hannity, MSW

{mosgoogle right}Statistics and research. APA style papers. Ten-page papers. Multiple books for each class. Presentations to my classmates. Role-playing. Raising my hand in class. Finding an internship. Meeting with clients. Commuting. Meeting new people. Going to class with people younger than myself. Going to class with people older than myself.

When I entered my MSW program, I didn't know how I would face the challenges ahead. I hoped I would make it. I knew I wanted to become a social worker. But I also knew desire alone would not carry me through my course work. I questioned my ability to do the academic work. I questioned whether or not I should even return to school. I had not been a full-time student for over twenty years. In fact, I questioned just about everything related to school.

Between my undergraduate and graduate years, I had the luxury of choosing books to read of any and all kinds. I could read unhurriedly and mull over timeless prose. That approach to reading changed after my first class on the first day of graduate school. The luxury of reading for pleasure was suddenly gone. As a graduate student, I had to be self-disciplined and follow a strict reading schedule. Over the course of a term, I had to read lots of books and become conversant on what I had read. I made daily, weekly, and monthly reading lists. My house started to look like a miniature library. Books were strategically placed so as to remind me of my reading requirements. Adhering to a tight and full reading schedule was one of several responsibilities I had to attend to in order to succeed in graduate school.

For me, graduate school meant a lot of hard work and balancing priorities. I had to coordinate reading, research, class work, writing papers, preparing for class presentations, and so on. Then about the time I became moderately comfortable with managing class work, I had to find a practicum and add practicum hours to my weekly schedule. This all occurred in my first quarter. I was concerned that entering a master's in social work program might not be a good idea for me.

Then things began to click. Writing research papers, for example, was not new to me. As an undergraduate student in American history, I had been trained in research. Writing in APA style was new to me. Writing a ten-plus page research paper in APA style was a daunting task. Perusing through the APA Publication Manual made me anxious. How would I master the precise writing expected of graduate level work? How would I even think of a suitable topic?

Writing a graduate-level research paper was one of my first challenges and one of my first significant successes. I had to think carefully about it and immerse myself into the assignment. I don't recall exactly how I navigated each step. But I do know that components of my success included hard work and focus and lots of time in the library and at my computer. I was also very fortunate to have professors who were available and involved in helping. Having a research professor who would make time for me to have lengthy conversations about my research and the attendant questions played an important role.

Other challenges piled on. I had no idea whether I could stand up and make a presentation to my class, for example. I had spent over 14 years teaching in a high school classroom, but that meant nothing compared to addressing my peers. Presentations were just as much a part of the program as writing papers. My response, again, was hard work, focus and tap into my professional resources. I researched and practiced my assigned topic. I went to the library, searched the Internet, interviewed people in person, and talked to people on the phone. I wrote and re-wrote my presentations. My strategy was to overlearn the subject matter. After several presentations, each one a little more successful than the last, I became more confident in my ability to present to my classmates. I spoke with more authority and less apprehension.

Getting through research and statistics class presented another challenge. Unlike writing papers and giving presentations, I had little faith that my simply working hard would be enough to get me through stats class. The fact that none of my classmates was any more comfortable with statistics than I was did little to placate my uneasiness. I knew beyond any doubt that stats class would be dreadful.

Because I had a gifted professor, however, my first day in research and statistics class wasn't that bad. With her informal and reassuring style, my professor disquieted my fears and instilled in me hope that I could succeed in her class. As the term progressed, I began to see the many applications research and statistics have in the field of social work. The class was actually intriguing. With lots of weekend hours spent on homework, I successfully surmounted the class. In the end, statistics and research became one of my favorite classes.

Obtaining a practicum placement was yet another hurdle. Although I knew from the outset that I was expected to secure an internship, I did not fully appreciate how competitive the market was. There were few placements, and many students scrambled for internships. Securing a placement would take determination and resourcefulness. I started out by meeting with the college director of field placement. She was supportive and encouraging, but it was clear that finding a placement would be my undertaking, not hers.

I began by copying down phone numbers and addresses from the telephone book of all the agencies that might have potential placements. I called and explained who I was and what I was calling about. I hoped to make a connection to move to the next step, which was to meet for an interview. I crossed names off my list much faster than I entered interview dates on my calendar. Sometimes a phone call would lead to another agency that wasn't on my list. For several weeks, if I wasn't writing a paper, studying for an exam, or reading class material, I was focused on finding a placement. I was able to secure a few interviews. During the process of calling and interviewing, I gained confidence and was able to refine more closely the idea of what I wanted to do.

After updating my résumé, phoning many people, and interviewing, I was able to find a placement. I was relieved. My focus immediately shifted to preparing for the placement and making sure I did a good job. It seemed a pattern was emerging in my program. As soon as I felt in control of a project or assignment, the next challenge was awaiting me. But that was okay. By now, I was really starting to feel like a social worker. And I liked that feeling.

The course work, the interaction with classmates and professors, and then, the interaction with clients in my practicum brought my work together. I came to value my practicum experience. It was the best of both worlds. I gained experience with clients while still in the safety of my academic program. Once again, I could use my professors' expertise for insight and skill development while gaining confidence in working independently with clients.

My master's in social work program has been an awakening experience for me. A professor told my incoming class at orientation that we would change over the course of our program. At the time, I wondered what he meant. Now, after going through the program, I couldn't agree more. I have learned the value of hard work and active participation. When I gave to my program, my program gave back to me. And now, grateful to have received the training to do social work, I expect more positive growth to come.

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