Overview

The Field Education Team is working hard to make sure that all students feel prepared and well-supported before and throughout the practicum process. It is understandable that students have questions about what at times can feel like an overwhelming experience. This section provides an overview of the most common questions students have about the field education process and answers from the Field Education Program (FEP). Please pay attention to differences in BSW versus MSW practicum requirements.

What is the process of obtaining a field placement?

BSW and MSW students are responsible to identify, reach out to, and interview with potential practicum agencies. Extensive support is provided throughout the process and attending practicum events and carefully reviewing any communication about practicum is critical to understanding the process and having all of the information needed.

- Both BSW and first year MSW students, must submit an application to the UMSSW FEP via their personal SONIA account (SONIA is the practicum software program we utilize for all practicum paperwork); students receive log on information after admission into the program and attendance of a field orientation event/meeting.
- Once the FEP receives, reviews, and approves your practicum application, you will receive a follow up email with more information about next steps, including support services as you reach out to agencies and pursue placement options, and next steps once you have finalized a potential placement.

What kind of placements do Social Work students do?

Since professional social workers wear many hats, students have the opportunity to do a variety of placements with a wide range of learning
opportunities. Social work practicum placements occur in settings that allow for direct service with individuals, families, and groups; for example:

- child welfare programs,
- behavioral health agencies,
- domestic/sexual violence programs,
- homelessness programs,
- substance abuse programs,
- correctional settings etc.

As well as in community organizing and policy focused contexts; for example:

- city or county government and social service programs,
- legislative offices,
- voter mobilization programs,
- civic engagement agencies, etc.

Some placements are more clinically focused while others are more macro-level/ advocacy focused. As long as students are able to engage in the CSWE Competencies they are likely able to get a rich learning experience.

**How many hours are spent in field placements?**

BSW students complete a total of 450 hours over one academic year (fall and spring) at one placement. MSW students complete a total of 900 hours over the course of two academic years (fall and spring). MSW students are in one placement for the whole 450 hours of their foundation year and a second placement for the whole 450 hours of their concentration year. All practicums are approximately 15 hours a week between end of August and the beginning of May.

**Does the practicum have to be completed with one organization for all 450 hours?**

Students are in one placement for the whole 450 hours of their BSW or their MSW foundation year and, in the case of MSW students, a second placement for the whole 450 hours of their concentration year. Your practicum is approximately 15 hours a week, and like with any new role, it takes time to settle into a placement, get to know agency services and dynamics, and follow the overall learning curve of a practicum. So, with that in mind, 450 hours at
one placement is just enough time to move from observing into more autonomous and independent work.

**What is the difference between my MSW foundation year and my MSW concentration year practicum?**

Your foundation/ first year practicum is more generalist in nature and may be done at a wide range of agencies. They are intended to support the development and integration of foundational social work skills, competencies, and practice behaviors.

Your concentration/ second year practicum is intended to build on the foundational experience of year one. Consequently, it is focused on deepening specific knowledge and skills, e.g. development and practice of clinical skills.

**Can I do my MSW concentration year practicum at the same agency as my foundation year practicum?**

Generally speaking, no, as students are encouraged to get diverse learning and practice experiences over the two practicum placements. However, sometimes students have the opportunity to stay with the same agency but take on a completely different role that allows for diverse and new learning. In that case, staying at the same agency might be an option, although students have to submit a proposal to the FEP.

**How many agencies should I reach out to and interview with?**

BSW and MSW students are encouraged to contact a minimum of 3-5 organizations they are interested in and interview with at least 2-3 of them. This allows for more than one option as practicum placements are never a guarantee and are becoming more competitive. You are encouraged to view the outreach and interview process as a professional development and practice opportunity - please treat it as a dry run for your future social work career and jobs you will apply to post-graduation.

**What if I want to do my practicum at an agency that has never had a UM student?**

Agencies that have not had one of our social work students will go through a brief agency application and review process led by the FEP. This process ensures that the agency understands all practicum requirements and is a good
fit for our students. Once you’ve identified a new agency as a potential placement site, you should contact the FEP and share more information. From there, the FEP will contact the agency to review practicum guidelines and requirements, answer any questions the agency might have, and then share our affiliation agreement.

**How do I know that my practicum agency is a good fit?**

In short - there is never a 100% guarantee that your agency checks all the boxes BUT...you get out of your practicum experience what you put into it and are very much in the driver's seat of your learning! One early way of figuring out if the agency is a good fit is to research potential sites. This includes reviewing the agency website, talking to other social service professionals about the agency and practicum opportunities, and if possible, reaching out to past practicum students who might be able to share insight into their experience with the agency. The interview at the agency also serves the purpose of identifying if the site and learning experiences offered meet your learning needs and hopes. Make sure to ask questions about day to day life of a practicum student at the agency, initial onboarding and training at the placement, and ongoing supervision and professional development opportunities.

**Can the placement be paid?**

Although the majority of practicums are unpaid, some agencies do offer paid practicums (either hourly or via an educational stipend), and some students are able to apply for a practicum with their existing employment agency. That said, there are pros and cons to consider about paid placements, highlighted in [THIS ARTICLE](#). Practicum is intended for students to be learners, make mistakes and wear different hats, and at times, paid placements limit the freedom of being a learner. Paid placements or being in an employment-based practicum also affect how students can set boundaries. It is a lot easier to say "no, I cannot work this shift because I have met my practicum hour limit etc." in the student role versus being a paid staff member who is an employee first and student second.

**Can I do my placement where I work?**

Employment based practicums (EBP) can possibly be an option but there are additional requirements to be aware of. In short - a practicum at your place of employment needs to ensure that your practicum role and tasks provide you with new and distinct learning opportunities and meet the CSWE
competencies. In addition, your employer needs to agree to the practicum program requirements, including providing weekly MSW supervision. If you are interested in an EBP please contact the Director (for MSW students) or Assistant Director of Field Education (for BSW students) to discuss your situation in more detail.

**Can I do my placement during evening and weekend hours?**

The majority of practicum agencies do NOT offer placements that allow for evening and weekend hours - such placements are rare if not nonexistent! Services to and engagement with clients is often times limited during evening and weekend hours thus it is hard to ensure for a rich learning experience. **Students need to plan to do their practicum hours during regular business hours when other agency staff are available to provide support.**

**Can I work full-time while doing my practicum?**

Students need to plan to do their practicum hours during regular business hours when other agency staff are available to provide support. Being present during normal business hours will allow students to be fully involved in the day to day processes of agency life, including attending staff or clinical meetings, supporting walk-in clients, shadowing other social workers, or jumping into other activities and opportunities available to them.

Students working full-time in addition to completing 15-hours of practicum each week, are strongly encouraged to proactively discuss need for flexibility with their place of employment as field placement hours tend to primarily occur Monday - Friday 8am - 5pm.

Many students find a part-time job that offers evening and weekend hours. This arrangement allows them to focus on their practicum, managing school workload, and ensuring ongoing income.

**Can I do a placement at a private practice (i.e. with a therapist/counselor who operates out of a private practice)?**

No. Private practice placements are generally too narrowly focused and do not allow for student exposure to all practice levels. Students who seek hands on clinical experience should focus their outreach efforts on agencies and programs offering integrated behavioral health services, such as mental health organizations, clinics and hospitals, domestic and sexual violence programs offering crisis intervention and support services, schools etc.
**Do I need a criminal background check and/or a drug test?**

This might be a requirement for your placement and is dependent upon individual agency policies.

Please be advised that certain types of criminal convictions may lead to an agency's inability to bring on a practicum student. It is critical that this information is proactively communicated to the FEP and any potential agency to discuss placement options and additional support needs.

Note: As a UM student you have access to legal support via [ASUM legal services](#). You are encouraged to utilize this support service with legal questions.

**How many credits do I get for practicum?**

BSW students receive 10 credits total for their practicum (5 cr. in the fall, 5 cr. in the spring).

MSW students receive 4 credits total for foundation year practicum (2 cr. in the fall, 2 cr. in the spring) and 6 credits total for concentration year practicum (3 cr. in the fall, 3 cr. in the spring).

**When does practicum start and end?**

Practicum runs from the beginning of the fall semester (generally end of August) to the end of the spring semester (generally beginning of May). Practicum hours must occur over the course of this timeframe and students are not able to be done with their required hours early. Hours per se are not the final determination of the student’s fulfillment of practicum requirements. Not only do you make a commitment to an agency and to clients, it takes time and a learning curve to adjust to an organization, understand your role, and develop the skills for more autonomous practice. You must have the time to engage in different types of practice interventions and to see these through to completion.

**What are the deadlines for securing a field placement?**

BSW and MSW students need to have a practicum placement secured no later than week 3 of the fall semester. Students not in a placement by this time will be required to withdraw from practicum and practicum related courses (MSW...
seminar or 487/488) and will have the opportunity to enter practicum again the following academic year.

**How is practicum graded?**

Practicum is a credit/ no credit experience and the student's AFI (Agency Field Instructor), in addition to ongoing feedback during supervision and a mid-year qualitative evaluation that both the student and the supervisor complete, assigns the final grade. We use a competency scale rating system (1-5 with = no competency to 5 = demonstrating competency).

**What is the MSW practicum seminar course?**

The 1-credit seminar course (2 credits total over fall and spring) runs parallel to a student's field education experience and provides a space to discuss practicum experiences and challenges, integrate theory into practice, and engage in a mutually-supportive teaching-learning model with other peers in practicum settings. Students take 2cr. of foundation year seminar and 2 cr. of concentration year seminar.

**What is the BSW 487/488 Advanced Practice course?**

The 2-credit 487 (taken in the fall) and 2-credit 488 courses (taken in the spring) run parallel to a student’s BSW field experience and provide a space to discuss practicum experiences and challenges, integrate theory into practice, and engage in a mutually-supportive teaching-learning model with other peers in practicum settings.

**What are the social work competencies and why are they important to practicum?**

As social workers, we wear many different hats, engage in practice on various levels, and utilize a diverse set of skills. Consequently, we have to be competent in an array of skills and practice behaviors. These practice behaviors and competencies are set by our accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and offer a critical framework to your learning in both the classroom and your practicum experiences. Each competency describes the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that comprise the competency at the generalist level of practice, followed by a set of behaviors that integrate these components. These behaviors represent
observable components of the competencies, while the preceding statements represent the underlying content and processes that inform the behaviors.

During the field education experience, students must demonstrate learning goals and activities that allow them to work towards these competencies. This is done in a highly structured manner via the development of a detailed learning agreement which is part of the practicum course.

If an organization provides virtual services, would students be able to complete a practicum in a virtual environment, or does the practicum require in-person interaction?

Considering how service delivery and workplace culture has changed in the past two years during the COVID pandemic, this is an excellent question. Although it is still quite rare, we are seeing more students in fully remote and virtual practicum placements. As long as the agency/program meets all practicum requirements and the student can engage in and develop the
various social work competencies, a placement can indeed be remote. Regular and supportive supervision is a critical component of a remote placement to ensure success and growth in a placement.

Here are potential cons to consider: Limited to no actual engagement in an agency setting and thus limited learning about agency workplace culture and dynamics. What students will miss with fully remote placements is the casual office chatter and the experience of getting to know colleagues in the hallway. And, keep in mind that you are already engaging in school fully remote, and that it might be a lot to add 15 hours of a remote practicum to that each week. Lastly, client interactions are different, of course, and especially if you want to build a clinical foundation, we do not recommend starting out with remote/telework.

**Who will be my Agency Field Instructor (supervisor)?**

The practicum agency needs to agree to assign a committed Agency Field Instructor (AFI) to the student who oversees the practicum throughout the academic year. That often times happens naturally as the program manager or director or maybe the lead clinician/therapist is already in a supervisor role for the program and takes on student supervision. This is a great question to ask during an interview with potential practicum agencies.

**What are the requirements for a placement supervisor?**

For BSW students, the AFI needs to have at least two years of relevant experience in a social service setting. A BSW degree is preferred but a degree in a related field (sociology, psychology, early childhood development) is acceptable.

For MSW students, the AFI needs to have an MSW degree with at least 2 years of post-degree experience. If your direct practicum supervisor does not meet this requirement, they can still serve as your AFI but you will need additional supervision by an MSW supervisor at the agency.

**Will I need professional malpractice insurance?**

UM Students are covered by the School’s professional liability insurance (a copy is available to students on their SONIA account) and are required to carry health insurance.

**What if I experience challenges at my placement?**
Settling into a new agency with a new role naturally comes with a learning curve and at times challenges might arise. Should you run into concerns during your practicum experience, please be proactive in communicating with your AFI and your field liaison (the seminar or 487/488 instructor). Should initial dialogue and problem-solving not lead to a solution, you should reach out to the Assistant Director and/or Director of Field Education as soon as possible. Please refer to the BSW or MSW student handbooks for exact policy details.

**Have other questions? Reach out to the Field Education Team:**
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