PRACTICUM HANDBOOK 2014-15

Designed to help you plan and complete a supervised practicum.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICUM

Finding a practicum is not necessarily an easy task and can seem even more complicated when you are unsure of the exact path that you would like to take in your career. This manual is intended to help you as you work to put together your practicum. No two students take the same path in higher education, and you want to make an informed decision about all of the different options and choices available. Whether you are looking to try a different field or gain breadth of experience in your current field, a practicum can be a valuable experience.

In part, this manual is designed to be a starting point to finding a practicum. It contains resources, contacts, organizations, and other information that might be useful to you at different stages of the practicum experience. We hope that you find it informative.

The practicum experience includes the practicum itself, along with the associated course offered in the fall semester. More details of the course will be available in the fall via the course syllabus. The course will be taught by Kelly Gray, Assistant Dean of Students, UMass Amherst, gray@umass.edu. It is scheduled to meet most Thursdays, 7-9 p.m. during the fall semester. Beginning in Fall 2014 the Practicum course will be graded rather than pass/fail.

Purpose of the Practicum
The practicum provides an opportunity for you to obtain more experiential-based learning related to higher education/student affairs. Most students choose to do their practicum during the summer months although for some it is more convenient to do it at a different time. Although you are responsible for identifying your own practicum site, you will have the opportunity to discuss the practicum during the Master’s Seminar courses, and you should work with your academic adviser regarding the setting and the requirements for completion. You also should take advantage of opportunities to discuss practicum possibilities with faculty members and students who have already served practica. After the practicum has been completed, there is a class in the fall that provides an opportunity to reflect upon your experiences with your classmates and an instructor.

Goals
• To reinforce the value and importance of the linkage between academic and experiential learning in higher education administration.
• To help students develop skills in applying classroom learning to higher education practice.

Texts – best bet is to order these online. Other readings will be distributed electronically during the fall semester.
Practicum Handbook. (The document that you are reading.)
Course Syllabus. Includes details of the fall course.
What is a Practicum?
Since you are thinking about a career in student affairs or higher education, it helps to have experiences in multiple areas, including those outside of your assistantship. An intensive, 120 hour experience, similar to an internship, is an excellent way to become a generalist and gain valuable experience that will help to prepare you for any career direction you choose to take.

You will need to complete a minimum of 120 hours at your practicum site. You will also need to complete:

Practicum Contract
The contract must be signed by you, your academic adviser, and your practicum supervisor BEFORE starting your practicum. The contract specifies your goals and objectives for the practicum, the minimum hours that the practicum will encompass, and the timeline in which the work will be completed. An example of a contract can be found in the assigned text (*Learning through supervised practice in student affairs*).

The contract should also include clearly specified beginning and ending dates. Although the Practicum course is taken during the fall semester, most students choose to do their practica during the summer). Spread over 10 to 15 weeks during the semester or the summer, a practicum only requires 8 to 12 hours a week, although some students exceed the minimum requirements.

Professional Portfolio
Your professional portfolio will include papers, a weekly journal, a post-practicum self-assessment, and other assignments completed as part of the Practicum Course (e.g., a resume, cover letter and professional development plan.)

• **Description of Practicum Site**
  This paper should be completed prior to beginning your practicum, and if focuses on the your practicum site. It should include a description of the institution as well as more specific details about the office or program where you will work. You should discuss the mission of the office or program, provide a brief history, and cover current directions or challenges. This paper should be approximately 5 pages of text and use APA style. Submit to the instructor (Kelly Gray) via the Moodle course Web site.

• **Description of the Functional Area**
  This paper should also be completed prior to beginning your practicum. The paper should describe the functional area (e.g., financial aid, summer conferences, or orientation) in which you will work. This paper should focus on the field as a whole, rather than what happens at your specific practicum site. Approximately 5 pages of text and use APA style. Submit to the instructor (Kelly Gray) via the Moodle course Web site.

• **Weekly Journal**
  Written while you are working at your practicum site. The requirements for the journal are described in greater detail later in this Handbook. You will post your journal to your Moodle blog site each week during your practicum. You will be assigned to a small group and will be responsible for reading your colleagues' journals and commenting on them throughout the summer.

• **Post-Practicum Self-assessment**
  The self-assessment is described later in this handbook.
WHY HAVE PRACTICA AS PART OF THE MASTER’S PROGRAM?

There are several reasons why internships or practica have become commonplace among undergraduate and graduate preparation programs, including the opportunity to gain more experience in a desired field, be exposed to new systems of organization, experience the link between theory and practice, and begin networking and establishing professional relationships. The CAS (Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education) standards for graduate preparation programs in student affairs recommend two distinct experiential learning situations, with the assistantships or full-time jobs counting as one such experience and a practicum counting as the other.

Your graduate assistantship or full-time work experience provides you valuable experience, however it is necessarily a limited view of higher education careers. You may retain the same assistantship or job throughout your entire graduate career, or you may remain in one field or one institutional setting. As a result, there are many other positions, schools, and organizational systems, which remain unexplored. One goal of the UMass higher education master’s program is to help develop well-rounded practitioners who can draw from a variety of experiences when they enter the professional world. Practica can help you see how other departments, schools, and systems operate differently from your own experiences thus providing you with more information on which to base potential career decisions.

Another goal of the program is to create knowledgeable and intentional practitioners in higher education. As a result, the opportunity to further link the theory that you have gained in the classroom to tangible experience in the field is a large component of a practicum. Without the opportunity to apply the knowledge that you have gained through coursework, the program only fulfills half of its mission. Practica are designed to help foster the link between theory and practice so that you are better able to see the connection between the classroom and the practical experiences of working in higher education.

The ability to draw from interactions with other professionals in different departments or institutions may provide you with valuable knowledge on how you want to approach working in the field. Through a practicum, you may find an incredible mentor who helps to guide you through your experiences and define your professional development goals. Much of the practicum experience is designed around mentoring and fostering learning from contact with other professionals in the field. Exposure to different working styles within higher education and the opportunity to create professional relationships with future colleagues are important components of the practicum experience.
HOW CAN I MAKE THE MOST OUT OF MY PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE?

Deciding on the position and institution you want to pursue for your practicum can be difficult, especially with so many choices available. The first thing you will probably want to figure out is the area in which you want to gain more experience.

Do you want to gain more experience within your area of specialization?
Perhaps you would like to explore a more specific area within your specialization. For example, if you work in Residence Life, you may want to gain more experience in planning and implementing programs.

Do you want to gain experience outside of your current area of specialization?
What other areas of higher education are you interested in? Consider researching areas of higher education that interest you and then look for a practicum that is geared towards that area.

Do you want experience in a different type of institution or in a different geographic area?
Additionally, consider your own higher education background in terms of where you have worked or been educated. Public or private? Size? Student population? Geographic region?

If you have lots of experience with large, public institutions, why not look for a practicum in a small, private institution? The depth and quality of experiences that you can gain now will only help you to further define your philosophy of higher education, as well as the type of institution in which you wish to work in the future.

No matter which general direction you choose for a practicum, you will gain valuable experience working in an area different from your current assistantship or job and be exposed to new ideas, new styles of supervision, and new ways of working with students.

Paid or Unpaid?
You should also consider whether or not the position is paid or unpaid. If you already have a source of income from your full-time job or other assistantship, you could consider taking an unpaid practicum. Often better opportunities arise if you volunteer. This decision is clearly a personal decision.

SHOULD I CONSIDER WAIVING THE PRACTICUM?

If you already have had at least five years of professional work experience in higher education, you might want to waive the 120-hour practicum experience (but you cannot waive the practicum course). However, before requesting a waiver, think about the opportunities that a practicum has to offer regarding work experience in a area that is new for you.

You should discuss the decision to request a waiver with your advisor. To formally request a waiver you will need to write a one-page statement describing your professional experience – usually you will also want to include a resume. Submit your request for a waiver to your adviser who will then present the request to the faculty who will vote on whether to approve your request or not.
WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR SETTING UP A PRACTICUM?

Although the higher education faculty and your academic adviser certainly will advise you in your search for a practicum, finding a practicum is your responsibility. The process generally begins with a discussion of practica opportunities in Prosem I during the first fall semester. Students who are interested in participating in one of the national practicum programs (such as ACHUO-I) must begin the process toward the end of the fall semester.

Some organizations begin their application process as early as December with placement decisions in February, and some do not begin accepting applications until late January. Because the exact dates and timeline changes from year to year for each organization, it is best to search their websites for updated information. Mid-November is a good time to start inquiring about this process. Students must contact these organizations directly.

In the spring during Master’s Seminar II, students will continue to discuss practicum opportunities. Students must purchase and read the required text in the spring. When you find a practicum site you will need to write the contract and have it signed by your adviser and the site supervisor. Before you begin your practicum you should complete the two papers.

You will register for the fall practicum course during the spring registration period. Registration will be handled through the higher education program faculty because the course requires permission (meaning you cannot register yourself through SPIRE.)

During the spring semester, students should meet with their advisers to discuss their options for choosing practicum sites. A partial list of organizations is provided below.

National Organizations with Practicum Options
ACUHO-I: Association of College and University Housing Officers – International
http://www.acuho-i.org/EventsPrograms/HousingInternshipProgram/tabid/620/Default.aspx

This organization sponsors housing and residence life internships both in the U.S. and abroad. The experiences range from planning residence life training and programming to working with summer conferences. Its timeline is one of the earliest, with applications due near the beginning of January.

ACPA: Association of College Personnel Administrators
http://www2.myacpa.org/career-development/graduate-preparation/

This organization sponsors internships in its national office in Washington, DC. The internships involve working with the national office to plan a variety of conferences, as well as manage the day-to-day aspects of a national organization for student affairs.

NODA: National Orientation Directors Association
http://noda.orgsync.com/about_internships

This organization sponsors internships nationally with schools that have programs for new students. Practica involve working with orientation programs during the summer and planning for new student orientation in the fall.

Other organizations might offer opportunities for practica, without having an organized system. Some potential websites to check out include the following:
Previous Practica Sites
Over the years, students have had many practicum experiences at a variety of different institutions and in several different functional areas. Here is just a sampling...

Assumption College - Career Services
Bard College – Dean of Students, Student Activities
Boston University - Tanglewood Institute
Bowling Green State University - Residence Life
Brown University - Programs Marketing Manager
Colgate University - Development/Institutional Advancement
Dean College - Orientation Office
General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church
Hampshire College - Dean of Students
Lehigh University - Orientation Office
Marquette University - Residence Life
MIT/Wellesley - Upward Bound
Mount Holyoke College - Career Services, Res Life
New Hampshire College - Student Activities
Northeastern University - Career Services
Northern Arizona University - Orientation, Transition, and Retention Services
Otterbein College - Center for Community Engagement
Sam Houston University - Residence Life
Smith College - Leadership Development
Springfield Tech. Community College - Women in Transition Advising
UC San Diego - Office of Student Research and Information

UMass Amherst
- Advising, College of Humanities and Fine Arts
- Center for Teaching
- Dean of Students Office
- Donor Relations/Development
- International Programs Office
WHAT SUPERVISORS WANT FROM YOU

Here are things that supervisors are looking for from students doing practica in their organizations. These standards can be used as a basis for evaluating the performance of practicum students.

Primary Standards

• Basic understanding of department, including: operations, function, philosophy, issues, programs, and relationships
• Degree of involvement and participation
• Open and regular communication and dialogue with supervisor
• Satisfactory completion of activities outlined in objectives, including practicum requirements
• Professional commitment and seriousness of purpose
• Professional judgment
• Sensitive and effective interpersonal relationships

Secondary Standards

• Ability to take initiative and assume responsibility, including leading or co-leading projects
• Ability to objectively evaluate experiences
• Organizational ability
• Knowledge and understanding of higher educational and organizational behavior
• Sensitivity to ethical considerations
• Dependability
• Ability to work independently
• Ability to express ideas verbally and in writing

WHAT PRACTICUM STUDENTS WANT FROM THEIR SUPERVISORS

Practicum students have identified what they would ideally like to see from their supervisors.

• Demonstrate perceptiveness, concern, and support for personal and professional development of practicum student
• Set aside sufficient time for discussion, clarification, information, and advising
• Maintain professional trust, sharing of real and significant information, regular, open, honest, and direct communication
• Assist in identifying worthy, relevant, and reasonable objectives
• Provide ongoing encouragement and evaluation of performance in terms of objectives, process, and outcomes
• Discuss underlying philosophical and organizational relationships of the internship and office/institution, including exposure to relevant literature and resource material
• Provide guided freedom and give direction when necessary
• Involve the practicum student actively in as many areas of the organization as possible
• Provide exposure to and explanation of administrative options
• Establish, clarify, and relate expectations for performance
• Serve as a role model
• Provide opportunities for feedback to the supervisor
• Commit to the educational goal of the practicum
• Understand the limitations of the practicum and of the student

Managing Your Supervisor
Taken from Managing Up!, by Michael and Deborah Singer Dobson, these qualities and actions can help you to better manage the ongoing relationship that you develop with your supervisor at your practicum site, as well as your colleagues.

Do Good Work
• Review your job description and try to exceed your performance standards
• Set aside time each day for long-term efforts and projects
• Ask for feedback and use it to experiment with different approaches
• Set and work out a plan to achieve personal and professional development

Be Supportive, Not Competitive
• Be a team player, not a team competitor
• Get involved in the office/institution, in order to network and find support among institutional constituents

Choose Your Battles
• Make sure you are attuned to your boss’ goals and expectations in order to avoid unnecessary conflict
• Learn how to negotiate like a pro by listening carefully and researching the issue
• Keep your word, so as to avoid conflict with those depending on you
• Accept responsibility when you have made a mistake. Find a way to rectify the mistake (if a solution can be found), or a way to avoid repeating it in the future

Develop Strong Communication Skills
• Take your job seriously but yourself lightly
• Learn how to provide clarity in confusing situations, ask open-ended questions, and remain neutral in conflicts
• Prepare and provide constructive feedback for both those you supervise and those who supervise you
• Learn how to say “no”

Buyer Beware!
• Know the politics of the department and the limits of your own position’s power
• Contain your own discriminatory beliefs and attitudes, including: racism, sexism, misanthropy, classism, homophobia and xenophobia
• Recognize cultural and other differences in attitudes, behaviors and communication styles

COMMON PRACTICUM PROBLEMS

It often is difficult to navigate working with one or more supervisors, as well as others in the department. Not every experience is ideal and you may run into several issues during the course of your practicum. Here are some common problems:

• Unclear expectations
• Too many assigned responsibilities
• Too few assigned responsibilities
• Little knowledge of departmental or campus culture and/or politics
• Misstep or mistake that seems irreparable
• Multiple supervisors with different styles
• Assigned tasks in which you don’t feel confident or comfortable

All of these problems can be fixed with only one solution – better communication between you and your supervisor. Be assertive, polite, and willing to talk about the issue in a professional way. If a problem does develop, go straight to the person with whom the problem is most directly relevant. If the problem is not with your supervisor, you might want to talk with him/her first about some potential strategies around confrontation and resolution before you proceed. Always, always, be diplomatic in any situation or approach. If a problem persists and you cannot seem to resolve it on your own, contact your faculty adviser.

A QUICK WORD ABOUT ETHICS

The issue of ethics is a tricky subject when talking about practica. Every institution, department, and individual has different ideas about what is professional and what is ethical. It is important to be clear with your supervisor about his/her expectations of you at the very beginning of your experience. There have been unfortunate incidents of individuals being asked to leave their practica as a result of unclear expectations and/or poorly made decisions.

If you are going to be in a practicum situation in which you work closely with students, get clarity about your boundary lines from the very beginning. This is one of the best ways to familiarize yourself with the culture of the institution and department, as well as the approach to professionalism that your supervisor takes. It is always better to err on the side of caution than to have to defend yourself and your decisions or actions to someone else. Use your best judgment in all situations.
THE JOURNAL

At least once a week during your internship (or after every 20 hours or so of internship work), use your journal entries to reflect on the following set of general questions. These journal entries will be helpful when you write your self-assessment at the end of your practicum experience. Journal entries should be in the neighborhood of two pages per week.

Some suggestions of topics to focus on in writing your journal entries:

1. What happened during the past week at your practicum? Meetings, tasks accomplished, conversations, services you delivered, etc. Describe the experiences as fully as possible, without bias, including relevant details.

2. Learning objectives. How do your experiences thus far relate to the learning objectives you outlined before the practicum began? What additional opportunities have arisen? What strategies might you use to achieve your learning objectives?

3. Supervision. What are your expectations for your relationship with your supervisor? What are the strengths and challenges around your relationship with your supervisor? How well am I communicating with my supervisor? Does my supervisor communicate her/his expectations clearly? Do you get useful feedback (either positive or corrective)?

4. What are you learning about yourself? What have you observed about the people you are working with? How do your values, previous professional experiences, and preferences affect how you interpret your practicum experience?

5. Organizational structure. What is the organizational structure of your practicum site? It may be helpful to get a copy of the organizational chart for your internship site and for the larger unit in which your site is housed. Do the reporting relationships seem to be a good fit for the organization?

6. Organizational culture. What have you observed about the culture of the organization in which you are working?

7. Leadership. What do you observe about leadership in the organization? Is it effective? Are their leaders other than the head of the department? What would you do differently if you were in a leadership position?

8. Management. Does the office seem to be well run? What managerial challenges have you observed? Are their processes that should be changed or adapted?

9. Physical environment. What have you observed about the physical environment where you are working? How does the layout and structure of the environment affect how the office functions? What challenges do you see?
SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

This paper should explore your practicum experiences, both positive and challenging, particularly focusing on what you learned that you will be able to take to future professional experiences. Provide specific examples of how your practicum experience relates to your current and future professional goals. This is due after the beginning of the fall semester. More details are available in the course syllabus.

Some questions you may wish to address include:

• Review your objectives and comment on the extent to which you achieved your goals. Were there any unanticipated activities or events that enhanced your experience or presented challenges?
• What were you hoping to get out of your practicum experience? What experiences contributed to realizing your goals for your practicum? What was missing? What professional skills did you gain or refine as a result of your practicum experience?
• What professional skills do you feel you still need to develop or enhance?
• What specific experiences from your practicum would you highlight if you were in a job interview?
• How would you describe your performance at your practicum site? What were your strengths as a member of the organization? What were your challenges? Are there personal behaviors that you think hindered your ability to contribute to the organization in which you were working? What would you do differently next time?
• What advice would you offer to future students about their practicum? How could the practicum experience be improved?