THE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS’ GUIDE TO THE
GERIATRIC SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION CONSORTIUM (GSWEC)

AM I UP TO THE CHALLENGE?

This Student Guide is designed for second-year social work graduate students who are prepared to accept the challenge of specializing in the field of gerontology, and who want to improve the care and well being of older adults and their families.

Here you will learn about GSWEC’s focus on competency-driven education and aging-focused field placement opportunities, GSWEC’s unique university/community agency collaboration, the GSWEC application process and other topics helpful for students considering specialization in the field of aging.

WHAT IS GSWEC?

The Southern California *Geriatric Social Work Education Consortium* (GSWEC) is the nation’s first major regional consortium that provides enriched field training for social work students in geriatrics and integrates graduate geriatric social work academic and field education. This inter-organizational collaboration involves:

- The five Southern California graduate schools of social work.
- Eight Centers of Excellence in geriatric social work field education.
- An array of prominent health and social services providers for the aging to provide additional diverse opportunities in the student’s field education program.

GSWEC was one of the original six sites funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation in a nationwide effort to strengthen geriatric social work education and increase social workers’ competency in the field of aging. Hartford Foundation’s three years of funding ended in 2002, but the member agencies and the schools of social work have maintained their commitment to the GSWEC collaboration, and they continue to provide stipends and field instruction for students placed at their sites.

For additional information, please visit the GSWEC website:

www.geriatricsocialwork.org

WHAT IS COMPETENCY-DRIVEN EDUCATION?

The GSWEC model is a competency-driven program in which field experiences are based on social work practice competencies that emphasize geriatric and social work values and knowledge. These competencies are used as a guide for students’ learning experiences in field placement sites. The competencies encompass both micro- and macro-level practice in four general areas:
The competencies play a critical role in designing the students’ learning experience in field placement. Using the competencies, the field instructor and student identify and tailor learning goals, which provide the basis for structuring learning assignments and facilitating assessment of the student’s progress.

**HOW DOES THE GSWEC FIELD EDUCATION MODEL DIFFER FROM THE TRADITIONAL FIELD EDUCATION MODEL?**

In the traditional model of field education, students are assigned to one agency and one field instructor, and sometimes a preceptor, for the academic year. Usually, students will work only with the client population served by that agency and only in the type of services provided by that agency. This limits students’ exposure to a variety of older person and service delivery models, which would also limit the understanding of, and familiarity with the many ways in which social workers can be helpful to older adults.

In the GSWEC model, students are assigned to one agency and one field instructor, and sometimes a preceptor, for the academic year. However, through an individualized plan of learning developed with the field instructor, the students have the optional opportunity to spend time at two or more programs or agencies serving older adults. These additional assignments allow students the opportunity to experience variations in the:

- Range of community senior programs
- Services provided
- Populations served
- Intervention methods used
- Professional disciplines which provide care.

**WILL MY GSWEC FIELD EDUCATION CONCENTRATE ON A MACRO, MICRO OR MEZZO APPROACH?**

In the GSWEC application process, students will have the opportunity to identify their preference for a primarily macro or primarily micro experience. Our effectiveness as a profession is dependent upon our ability to effectively assess both the individual and society’s ability to function meaningfully and effectively. While each of the GSWEC field education sites may also be identified as having a "mezzo" learning opportunity, the emphasis will be primarily “macro” or “micro.” It is expected that each GSWEC student will have the opportunity in the field placement to experience the three approaches.

The *macro approach* in social work education concentrates on development of knowledge and skills for practice in communities, organizations and other social systems. Students learn
how to identify community-based social problems, organize and build relationships in communities, and develop programs. Macro work includes functions such as:

- Program planning and development
- Community networking
- Organizational development (agency, administration or committee)
- Advocacy
- Research
- Marketing

The *micro (or clinical) approach* focuses on major contributions from the biological, behavioral and social sciences that are essential for understanding the person-in-environment. The primary goal is to enable the student to utilize a variety of theoretical approaches to understand human behavior and various environmental and institutional forces that influence it.

Between the macro and micro levels is *mezzo-level* (mid-level) practice. Social work practice at this level is concerned with interpersonal relations that are somewhat less intimate than those associated with family life, but more personally meaningful than those that occur among organizational and institutional representatives. Included in this focus would be relationships among individuals in a self-help or therapy group, among peers at school or work, and among neighbors.

As part of the student’s field education in the field of aging, all GSWEC students will be expected to complete a *macro project*. The project may be done individually or as part of a group effort. It may be directed entirely by the student(s), or in conjunction with agency staff. Students and field instructors mutually negotiate the project to be completed by the student. GSWEC students create a poster presentation of their macro project and present it at the GSWEC end-of-year celebration. Training is provided in how to create and present the poster display.

**WHAT WILL THE GSWEC INTERNSHIP PROVIDE ME?**

In addition to outstanding geriatric field placement experiences and opportunity for rotation into additional field experiences, GSWEC students attend a series of seminars and training arranged by GSWEC member agencies at no cost to the student. These include presentations by academic and professional experts, field instructors and agency representatives, and sometimes some GSWEC graduates. Topics are selected that augment rather than duplicate content of academic coursework. Examples of topics that may be presented during the seminars include:

- Impacts of physical aging
- Bio-psychosocial model & competencies
- Normal and abnormal cognitive changes in aging
- Differential diagnosis: depression vs. dementia
- Micro and macro issues of caregiving
- Palliative care and caregiver loss

In summary, participation in the GSWEC program will provide each student with the following:
- Competency-based training with a certificate bestowed upon the student at the completion of the field placement and academic program.
- Integrated academic and field education experience in geriatric social work.
- Orientation to and experience with the aging network and resources across the continuum of care.
- Networking with other graduate student interns from five universities and leaders of premier aging organizations.

GSWEC students receive a stipend of $4,000 from their field education agency. Some agencies withhold taxes, others do not. If this is important to a student, the student should check with the field education agency to determine how the stipend will be paid.

DO FIELD EDUCATION SITES HAVE REQUIREMENTS THAT I MUST MEET BEFORE STARTING MY INTERNSHIP?

Field education sites (GSWEC or traditional) may have requirements that apply to all applicants. For example, a field education site may require fingerprinting, a physical examination, TB skin test, drug screening, an all-day orientation or U.S. citizenship or legal status. **WEDNESDAYS ARE A MANDATORY FIELD DAY AT ALL FIELD EDUCATION SITES.** During the student’s initial contact with a field education agency, there should be discussion regarding the agency’s internship requirements. Check with the agency to see if these requirements must be completed prior to the start date of field placement. Also check the agency descriptions in the Appendix.

HOW DO I APPLY FOR THE GSWEC PROGRAM?

The GSWEC application process involves the following:

A. THE GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK:

In January, the field faculty liaison at each school of social work (UCLA, CSULB, USC, CSULA and CSUN) participating in GSWEC will announce when and where the GSWEC information meeting will be held on campus.

Students should:
1. Attend the GSWEC information meeting.
2. Pick up and complete the GSWEC Application Form.
3. Return it to the field faculty liaison by the designated due date.
4. Sign up for the GSWEC interview, which will be held later in the year at each school.
B. GSWEC ACTIVITIES:

During the spring season, GSWEC will conduct an orientation meeting for students interested in GSWEC. The date, time and location will be provided to you in sufficient time for you to attend.

Students should:

1. Review the GSWEC field education sites (see APP) prior to the orientation.
   - Make notes regarding any questions you have, areas needing further clarification, etc.
   - Bring the attachments and your notes when you attend the orientation.
   - Prepare a student summary to bring with you to the orientation.

2. Attend the GSWEC orientation meeting.
   - Because there are a limited number of GSWEC field placement sites available, there is no guarantee that students will get their field placement of choice. For that reason, it is best if students identify three agencies of interest.
   - At the orientation meeting, identify and visit the GSWEC field placements that are your top preferences.
   - Representatives of the field placement agencies will be available to answer general questions you may have regarding their agencies. However, this is not an interview, and if you have many specific questions you may need to make an appointment with the agency.
   - For those agencies you are considering for your field placement, sign up at the table for a visit and interview at the agency, or leave a contact telephone number.
   - Leave a copy of your student summary with the agency representative.

3. Sign up for, and participate in, the on-campus GSWEC interviews at your school.

4. After all of the interviews have been completed, the GSWEC representatives who conducted the school interviews will collaborate in selecting the GSWEC students for the coming academic year. Your field faculty liaison will communicate his/her decision to you.

5. Either before or after the on-campus interviews, make arrangements to visit and/or interview at those GSWEC sites in which you are interested.

6. Submit your field placement choices to your field faculty liaison.
APPENDIX

GSWEC FIELD EDUCATION SITES

Alzheimer’s Association

Huntington Senior Care Network

Jewish Family Services of Los Angeles

Motion Picture & Television Fund

Pacific Clinics

Partners In Care Foundation

SCAN Health Plan

Veterans Affairs-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

EPILOGUE

The national shortage of professional social workers, especially social workers that possess an expertise in the field of aging has been established for some time. Several studies have documented the need for gerontological expertise, for improvements to social work degree programs in training social workers for careers in aging, and for engaging the interest of social work students to specialize in working with older adults. Consider the following findings from various national and local studies:

- 62% of professional social workers report that knowledge of aging is required in their professional work (Peterson and Wendt, 1990), yet only 10.5% identified aging as their primary or secondary field of practice (Gibelman and Schervish, 1994).

- Only 39% of graduate social work programs offered specialized concentrations in aging or gerontological social work (California Geriatric Education Center, 1994).

- Nearly 25% of all graduate social work programs do not offer any courses in aging (Damron-Rodriquez, Villa, Tseng, and Luben, 1997).

- Only 8% of graduate social work students reported an interest in the field of aging (Work Force Data on Social Workers, 2001).

- Only 3% of graduate social work students (1,071) in 1996 specialized in aging or gerontological social work (Scharlach et al, 2000).
These data suggest that the majority of professional social workers are involved in working with the older population in some way, yet few professional social workers have demonstrated expertise in aging as a field of practice. Thus far, schools of social work have been ill equipped to prepare students for careers in aging, and few social work students have expressed an interest in, or understood the importance of being prepared to work with the older population.

The National Institute of Aging estimates that 60,000-70,000 professionally trained social workers will be needed by 2020 to work with the older population. This is a 50% increase over the current workforce, which is estimated to be at 49,000 (Merck, 2000). In light of these projections and the current data on the workforce, there will not be an adequate number of professional social workers with expertise in aging to meet the needs of the population.