



Evaluation: The Professional Measuring Stick

By Elizabeth Voshel



Evaluation is usually seen as a necessary evil that provokes anxiety for all the parties' involved but particularly so for students and field instructors. Lots of people feel anxious at evaluation time depending on their past experiences with the process. In field instruction, the written evaluation is the "road map" for the field experience. However, evaluation in reality should be an on-going process that starts the first day and culminates at the end of the field placement. Evaluation's primary purpose is growth and professional development.

What is an evaluation? What does it look like? What are the goals? What is its purpose? These are all areas that will be discussed. First of all, evaluation is a summarization of the student's performance which has been examined through various methods of direct and indirect observation. Evaluation is an assessment and summary of the student's progress and/or difficulties experienced in achieving agreed upon goals and objectives. The assignments are the "deliverables" that help illustrate proficiency with the stated competencies and practice behaviors. Evaluation rates the current skill level and identifies areas where growth has occurred and where improvement is needed. The end of term evaluation is based on the previously agreed upon student's Educational Agreement and highlights what and how the Agreement has or has not been accomplished.

Evaluation should hold not surprises and should be a fluid process throughout the beginning, middle and end stages of learning. Constructive feedback is the hallmark of a successful evaluation process. In order to be effective, both parties should concentrate on sharing formally and informally throughout the academic year. This on-going practice allows the student to quickly identify and improve areas for growth but also allows the student to identify and strengthen positive attributes.

Evaluation involves and is based upon a mixture of factors that include the student's abilities, the fieldwork site's expectations, the School's curricular expectations and the expectations of the social work profession as exhibited by the development of the professional social work identity. Some suggested indicators in assessing readiness for professional work include the following:

Beginning Focus

1. Establishes self in fieldwork site environment, functions professionally, communicates openly and effectively, and seeks feedback routinely.
2. Demonstrates initiative in learning policies/procedures of the fieldwork site and establishes appropriate professional boundaries.
3. Exhibits a strong work ethic, is dependable, responsible and practices good time management.
4. Takes initiative with staff and client groups, is self-directed, and engages in the learning process.
5. Demonstrates flexibility, adaptability and accountability.
6. Demonstrates relationship building skills with clients, constituents and staff, and easily engages with diverse groups of people including those with differing values.
7. Takes appropriate risks and seeks out and prepares for supervision.
8. Demonstrates understanding of and compliance with the NASW Code of Ethics.

Subsequent Terms

1. Exhibits creativity, initiative, and motivation.
2. Exhibits less self-conscious behavior and is more client/



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constituent focused.

3. Effectively addresses client/constituent/fieldwork site needs.
4. Maintains equilibrium in crisis situations.
5. Is articulate, identifies and addresses personal and professional challenges, and seeks appropriate supervision/consultation.
6. Increasingly works more independently with more complex issues and requires less “on the spot” supervision and guidance.

Students sometimes harbor unrealistic fears about evaluation based on the “student grapevine”. Hand-in-hand with this is the field instructor who may, for whatever reason, feel inadequate in the role of evaluator. This could result in the field instructor resisting being critical of the student or it could result in the opposite where the evaluation becomes hypercritical. Maintaining a strong professional working relationship while simultaneously offering a warm, supportive, caring student training environment is the key.

It is important for the students to reflect on their learning during the evaluation process as well. How would they rate themselves? Do their self-perceptions of their knowledge, skills and abilities match those of their field instructor? Do they match up with the perceptions of others at the fieldwork site? Using a Supervision Agenda in an ongoing manner leaves little room for disagreement later. Tracking work, meeting deadlines, identifying areas for growth and development, recording observations and highlighting accomplishments should be an agreed upon work plan that can be reflected on the Supervision Agenda so that it becomes a useful tool.

All students have room for continued growth and development but adult learners may find themselves in a situation where they are being evaluated constructively and/or critically for the first time. Some of these students may fail to realize that the same quality of performance that earned them outstanding

ratings in their jobs, won't necessarily earn them the same ratings in their role as a student. We need to stress with these students the expectations that accompany the role of being a student. Some students for example, who have previous professional experience, may view having an annual review/evaluation as a necessary step (or necessary evil?) towards obtaining a reward for their performance. The goal of a student-focused evaluation is to provide a candid assessment of performance where open communication is practiced with a focus on providing specific, constructive feedback.

When sharing areas for growth or improvement, it is important to use behaviorally specific examples to illustrate what is problematic or where growth has not been realized. Check out the student's perceptions as to why something happened or was viewed as problematic or ineffective. Explore all elements of the concerns and create opportunities where solutions can be identified. Be acutely aware of the role that power plays in the evaluation relationship to ensure that the student doesn't just agree with everything and find ways to strategize how to address concerns. Think about how the field instructor should handle the evaluation conversation, set aside enough time to ensure this is a thoughtful and deliberate process, and carefully consider how the student might respond. Remember to enlist the help of the assigned Field Faculty thus keeping them in the loop and informed about the student's strengths and areas for improvement. Finally, remember, it should be a mutual expectation that the evaluation process will uncover the areas for growth needed both personally and professionally---some anticipated, some not. If not, the student wouldn't need a field placement or a field instructor! Being open to learning is the key as this will reduce the anxiety attached to the evaluation process and set the stage for growth and professional development.

