Field educators are increasingly looking to programs of prefield preparation as a means to help students bridge the gap between academic campus-based learning and field experience education.

Prefield Preparation: What, Why, How

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The Need for Prefield Preparation

In establishing field experience learning as a legitimate component of liberal arts education, field educators have necessarily focused their efforts on the design and content of students' experiences off-campus. Now, however, that such programs are ongoing, many practitioners are reexamining these experiences and discovering students' need for prefield preparation.

At the New York State College of Human Ecology at Cornell University, field faculty began placing a select number of undergraduate students in full-time, fifteen-credit internships in the New York City metropolitan area in 1972. The placements were carefully chosen to ensure students a structured work experience under expert supervision. A concurrent weekly field seminar was designed and taught in New York to help students synthesize their experience, link it to their previous academic study, and solve the routine and special problems that arise in field settings.

Nevertheless, despite this careful screening of students and placements and the support participants received through the field seminar, we observed our students quickly becoming overwhelmed by the conflicting demands
learning and working beyond the protective confines of the campus. Lacking the direction that comes from syllabi, assignments, and examinations, these students found themselves incapable of deciding what to do and how to learn on their own. After a lifetime of individualized, competitive, academic achievement, they experienced stress adapting to the more complex interpersonal and interdepartmental dynamics of an office or department. They seemed to miss the continued feedback that comes through academic evaluation and grading, and they became mired in self-doubt, wondering if they were doing a good job or the right job.

Was this problem a result of deficiencies in our students or placement supervisors? We doubted it. Even our brightest and most mature students, working under our most sensitive and competent supervisors, experienced this anxiety and failed to gain as much from their experience as they wanted and we expected. The pattern persisted even when we redesigned the field seminar to deal more explicitly with the students' problems in getting used to the field. Clearly we had failed to fully anticipate the difficulty our students would experience when they attempted to make the transition from the traditional, passive orientation of the classroom to the more independent, action-oriented style of fieldwork. In effect, by placing students in field settings with little or no regard for the complex pedagogical issues that help to determine the educational value of a field placement, we were institutionalizing a kind of "accidental learning."

Nor were we alone with our problem. The need for prefield preparation has been observed and responded to in a variety of ways by a variety of field experience programs. In order to understand the content and focus of the prefield program we have been working to develop, it is helpful to set our attempt in the context of the different forms of preparation that currently exist.

Prefield Preparation Programs

Most field experience programs offer their participants a general orientation shortly before they are to begin work at their placements. These orientations take place either on campus or on location and touch upon such diverse topics as the transition from campus to community, the identification of learning objectives for the field experience, and an introduction to the physical environment of the field sites (such as the geography, transportation, cultural attractions, and available community resources). These forms of preparation are marked by their brevity and specificity. The orientation given to interns by the Washington Center for Learning Alternatives (WCLA), Washington, D.C., is an example of this approach.

However, apart from general orientation we have found no single model of more extensive prefield preparation. Instead, the most common element in these larger efforts at preparation is the direct link between their content and procedure and the content and procedure of the field programs for which they prepare the students. With this connection in mind, the larger efforts at preparation can be loosely categorized as follows.

Job Skills. Field experience and internship programs emphasizing on-the-job training and employment experiences often include certain specific "self-management," "functional," and "work-content" skills (Bolles, 1978) as prerequisites for placement. Orientation to job roles; training in the language, research, methodology, and specific technical and manual skills necessary for adequate job performance; and an introduction to appropriate employee comportment all exemplify this type of skill training. Such programs run the gamut from single workshops to semester-long courses. Cooperative education programs found at large universities and community colleges utilize this form of prefield preparation.

Preprofessional Training. Certain professional schools, such as those preparing students for careers in teaching, medicine, clinical psychology, social work, and engineering, have traditionally employed structured internships or practica as a means of training students for the profession and testing students' aptitude at applying the skills and knowledge they have acquired in the classroom. Though these internships and practica rarely require prefield orientation per se, the prolonged academic curriculum that a student must successfully complete before undertaking fieldwork constitutes the necessary preparation.

Training in Cross-Cultural Awareness. Preparation for programs emphasizing students' exposure to and participation in unfamiliar community or cultural settings may include orienting them to the culture of the workplace, neighborhood, city, or country in which they are to be placed and sensitizing them to their own values and assumptions that may tend to limit their effectiveness and distort their understanding of the experience. Such training can take a few days or up to several months. Programs as diverse as the Peace Corps, the Experiment in International Living, and "urban semesters" employ this version of preparation (Batchelder and Warner, 1977; Harrison and Hopkins, 1967).

Learning Skills. Certainly among the most comprehensively designed curricula and one that incorporates preparation for and placement of students in the field into an integrated four-year program of developmental education is the Alverno College Program (Doherty, Mentkowski, and Conrad, 1978). At Alverno each step in a student's education (whether it is taken on- or off-campus) prepares for the next, with responsible action in the field serving as the final stage in the process. Thus there is no single identifiable preparation component, since field experience is seen as an integral part of the overall effort to move students toward integrated effectiveness and self-directed learning.

Nevertheless, Alverno's "competency-based" curriculum, although more complex and more highly developed than most others of its kind, typifies
the approach to preparation that certain basic skills must be acquired in order for students to learn from, grow in, and shape their field experience. John Duley (1978, pp. 3-5), for example, cites observation and recording, reflection, oral information gathering, and value clarification as being among the basic skills students need "to make the most of experiential learning." This approach presumes that students must be cognitively, morally, and socially ready; and that they must have reached an appropriate developmental stage, if they are to learn from the complexities of an experience in the real world.

Clearly the most important aspect of all these approaches to prefield preparation is the linking of their objectives and content with those of the overall field programs of which they are a part. In developing prefield preparation at Cornell, it was equally important for us to examine what we were trying to achieve in our total program of field study.

Prefield Preparation at the College of Human Ecology

The New York State College of Human Ecology is one of several colleges, both statutory and endowed, that make up Cornell University. The stated purpose of the college is to prepare students for "careers in human problem solving," and this applied social science focus is reflected in its five academic departments: consumer economics and housing, design and environmental analysis, human development and family studies, human service studies, and nutritional sciences.

The college's field experience education programs, which are subsumed under the rubric of "field study," take two distinctly different forms. In the first group are the traditional practica and internships. These programs are based in the academic departments and are designed to provide preprofessional training for students who have focused in their undergraduate major on developing specific disciplinary or professionally oriented skills. Placement in a community agency is seen as the culmination of the undergraduate curriculum, a precertification opportunity for students to test theories and demonstrate competencies gained in the classroom. Students are ready for these field study courses when they have successfully acquired the requisite knowledge and skills attributed to the discipline of their major. The social work practicum of the human service studies department, which offers an undergraduate degree in social work, typifies this approach.

The second form of field experience available to students in the college of human ecology is labeled "interdepartmental field study" and is open to all students in the university, generally in their junior year. Unlike the practicum, interdepartmental field study has as its purpose the broadening of the students' experience, challenging them to gain an in-depth, multidisciplinary understanding of modern urban society through active participation in urban organizations and careful reflection on their experience.

Each semester twenty students move from the Ithaca campus to New York City, where they spend three and one half days per week as staff memb-
previously, individually interviewed by professional staff to discuss the placement, then taken to New York City to visit their chosen placement, interview their supervisor-to-be, and participate in an on-location orientation meeting. Following this trip, which is used as a “confirming” moment in the placement process, students are encouraged to do library research on campus on their placement organization and correspond with their supervisors. This process takes place during the second half of the semester before the students leave campus.

Finally, the most important and most intensive component of our pre-field preparation program is the three-credit Preparation for Fieldwork course. Better known as ID 200, this course, which is a prerequisite for all students intending to participate in the field program, meets twice weekly for two hours each session throughout the semester before the students leave for New York City. Its pedagogical assumption is that the students will be more able to cope with, learn from, and contribute to their field experience if they are given the prior opportunity to practice critical, analytical, and problem-solving skills in a controlled and supportive environment on campus. Its purpose is to stimulate the movement from passive to active learning; to enable students to adapt more readily to a learning style that depends on digesting and analyzing the content of textbook, lecture, and library resources to a style of independent reflection on the consequences of action observed and undertaken. In this way ID 200’s objectives and teaching methodology are directly linked to those practiced in New York City. The course instructs students in the six specific skill areas that in our experience best correlate with successful fulfillment of the educational and work objectives of the total field program.

Data Gathering Skills. At its heart, ID 200 is a methodology course designed to teach students very specific ways of gathering information from nonacademic sources. In workshop settings students learn and practice investigatory interviewing, participant and nonparticipant observation, the use and interpretation of nonverbal communication, and the identification and use of such written resources as agency manuals, interoffice memos, annual reports, budgets, and legislative materials. This skills training is based on our observation that, unless students develop the ability to learn from the people and events around them and to “read between the lines” of the voluminous primary materials generated in modern work settings, the opportunities for learning available in the field will pass them by unnoticed. Though such data gathering skills do not in themselves enable students to become sensitive and responsive to opportunities for learning in the field, they do provide them with the tools they need to gather the raw information without which insights into the organizational world will not emerge.

Communication Skills. An important corollary of data-gathering skills is the ability to interpret accurately the information one receives. In an attempt to sensitize students to the myriad environmental clues that may help them analyze what people say to them, ID 200 incorporates training in nonverbal communication, particularly in understanding gestures.

In a related vein, the course places equal emphasis on providing students with repeated opportunities to practice and improve their own communication skills, both oral and gestural, by instructing them in discussion leading and public speaking. Through the use of videotapes of presentations and class discussions, students learn to see themselves as others see them. This practice helps them understand how their communication style affects others’ comprehension of and receptivity to their messages. In this way, ID 200 provides students with an opportunity to improve their skills as both senders and receivers of information, intuition, and feelings.

Facility in Role Taking. A third skill that ID 200 attempts to foster in students is the ability to take on and understand the effects of the diverse roles called for in work situations. The most obvious value of this skill to our students is in helping them adjust to their arrival at their New York field placements, where they must behave in ways never required of them as students. Almost immediately they will be expected to become independent decision makers, responsible for the consequences of their actions on other people. They will also find the adults around them acting out role definitions different from those they observed at the university. In responding to the students’ need to understand this role transition, we introduce them in ID 200 to role theory as it relates to organizations and structure situations in the classroom that require them to act as independent contributors to a collective task.

Equally important to experiencing themselves as actors—shapers of their learning environment rather than passive receivers and responders—ID 200 asks students to research, take on, and act out the roles and attitudes of people (professionals, policy makers, clients, advocates, and the like) involved in a current complicated social issue. Having to take on someone else’s point of view forces students to identify their own assumptions and cultural biases and to experience the way in which their perceptual frameworks subtly narrow their vision and lessen their ability to truly see and hear the world as others do. Until they become sensitized to their own values and assumptions, students will never be fully effective as workers or learners in organizations.

Thus a major objective of this aspect of ID 200 is to help students remove their perceptual blinders, to show them their tendency to make snap judgments about realities different from their own, and to heighten their awareness of the cultural complexity and diversity that exists away from the Ithaca campus.

Decision-Making Skills. Learning to gather information in the field and interpret it with a sensitivity to and profound respect for the experience of others is a major task. It is a quite different skill, in the face of this wealth of data, to know how to utilize this information in competent and responsible action on the job. Thus, through workshop simulations and participation in case study task groups, ID 200 students are given the total responsibility for making critical decisions about how to undertake class assignments, both on the interpersonal and conceptual levels.
Skills for Working in Groups. Having been reared in the competitive, individualistic world of the university, our students enter prefield preparation with little or no experience in cooperative, task-oriented behavior. Since the ability to work collectively with coworkers is fundamental to successful action in organizational placements, ID 200 enables students to experiment with and practice working in groups, learning from their own and other students' observations how they perform as individuals in a group context and how a successful group generally constitutes itself, addresses its problems, and carries out its tasks.

Exercising the Praxis Between Reflection and Action. Finally, and most crucially, ID 200 is a participation course that attempts to provide students with the experience of learning from their own actions. It provides them with a structure that requires them to make responsible decisions, critically reflect on the outcomes of those decisions, act again, reflect, and so on. This, to us, is the most crucial of all field learning skills and the outcome that we most prize for our students. Yet it is this capacity for “active thinking” (Dewey, 1933), for action that informs thought, thereby empowering the individual to act again, that is most foreign to our students after their years of content-oriented classroom instruction. ID 200 must become for them, therefore, the classroom equivalent of their New York City experience, their first confrontation with our expectation of them as active thinkers, capable of both full participation and the ability to step back from, analyze, and change their mode of thought and approach to action based on the outcomes of that initial participation.

Basic Modules of Preparation for Fieldwork

In order to accomplish these skills training objectives, ID 200 is structured around three basic modules, each of which is designed to build successively on the previous unit. The first six weeks of the course consist of workshop instruction in the main elements of data gathering and communication skills. Each workshop is succeeded by an assignment to practice the skill under consideration in a community setting, followed by a review session during which the students work together to reformulate their understanding of that skill based on their practice experience. Finally, they are given some reading as another tool to help them synthesize their knowledge of the skill. Each skill is subsequently incorporated into the teaching of the next.

For example, the students participate in an observation workshop, which includes instruction in participant observation, nonverbal communication theory, and role theory, and are then assigned to spend a day in the local community observing and trying to understand the dynamics of what they see. Their new-found awareness of the subtleties of interpersonal interactions is then utilized in the subsequent interviewing workshop, and so on.

Following this introductory unit, ID 200 turns to the investigation of two case studies (each of which is undertaken over a four-week period) in order to provide students with the opportunity to further practice and internalize their data-gathering and communication skills and to create a context in which they can begin to learn the arts of role taking, decision making, and effective group functioning. All cases are based on studying and making recommendations about a current issue that has reached the policy formation stage and is relevant to the kinds of experiences that students will encounter on their arrival in New York. This case study method is best understood by describing one case in detail.

In the fall semester of the current academic year, the students in ID 200 were asked to investigate the implications of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 for Cornell University in general and the College of Human Ecology in particular. They began the case by reading the legislation itself, the documents that Cornell has produced describing its plan for compliance, and several short articles presenting conflicting points of view on the legislation. Following a classroom discussion of this introductory material, during which the group formulated questions about the case and attempted to enumerate and clarify the several conflicting points of view on accessibility for the handicapped incorporated in the readings, each student was assigned to a task group whose job was to research one particular position on the question in order to accurately role play that perspective in a public presentation before a panel of individuals with a personal and professional investment in the issue. These roles (Cornell University Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Civil Rights, handicapped students, able-bodied students, and campus clergy) were chosen for their range of diversity, their openness on the issue they represented, and their alieness to the students.

The ground rules under which these groups operated constituted the central learning experience of ID 200 for the course participants. The students were instructed to research their role by interviewing primary sources and then investigate documentary materials in office files and libraries. In preparing their presentation, they were instructed to concentrate on understanding their role and told that they would be evaluated on the basis of the accuracy of their role playing, the comprehensiveness of their understanding of the case in all its numerous dimensions, and the effectiveness of their public speaking style. Finally, the students were to submit, at the conclusion of the case study, both documentation for the position taken and a detailed analysis of the workings of their task group itself. Most critically, they were advised at the outset that the group would receive a single grade, that each group member would be credited individually with that collective grade, and that the grade would reflect both the quality of the role playing and the group's evidence that they had struggled with developing a group process to allow them to effectively tackle the task at hand. In requiring them to report on their group process, it was stressed that we were not looking for a group that was trouble free, but were interested in how well they were learning to apply the action-reflection dynamic to the task of coming to grips with their group process. "It doesn't matter how bad it is," we told them, "as long as we can see you struggling to
modify your behavior based on the lessons of the process as it unfolds." Finally the students were told that the course instructors would act as sounding boards for them as they struggled with the assignment but would provide absolutely no direction or suggestions for problem solving while the process was unfolding.

By participating in the two case studies, students are thus given the opportunity to consolidate the lessons that come from exercise in role taking and effective group participation. Traditionally, the second round of presentations and reports is done more capably than the first. At the completion of the entire undertaking, the students submitted an individual evaluation of the group process and product and engaged in a review session during which the groups shared insights and information with each other.

To conclude, the essence of ID 200 and its major intent is to develop in students both an ability to gain intellectual insight from personal experience and a sense of confidence that in utilizing these insights they will be better able to cope with and learn from the complex demands of learning in the field. It assumes that students, trained in the traditional information schooling mode, need to develop both cognitively and interpersonally before field placement. This cognitive development takes the form of instruction and practice in the skills of the action-reflection learning mode, the development of "a critical consciousness." Interpersonal growth is fostered through reflection on the experience of working in groups. Thus, in a very real way, ID 200 is our students' first field experience education experience, "a manageable confrontation with novel responsibility" (Graham, 1975, p. 190) that takes place within the controlled confines of the classroom. It is an attempt to provide our students with the skills, experiences, and attitudes they will need in order to make the transition from information-based to experience-based education.

There is no question that we have achieved some measure of success with this prefield preparation program. Student evaluations are very positive. Placement supervisors comment favorably on our students' unique ability to go right to work immediately on their arrival in New York City and simultaneously engage in and analyze the work environment. Nevertheless, we continue to have problems.

One is that many of the students participating in the field program are not only entering a totally new kind of learning environment but also a totally new geographical and social environment. Few places in the world compare with New York City, and even with the orientation trip behind them, just being in New York creates considerable stress and anxiety for students that can negatively affect their first few weeks in the field. While understanding the positive function of stress in a program aimed at growth and development, we must find a way to better link ID 200 with urban settings, people, and issues in an attempt to bridge the considerable geographical and cultural distance between Ithaca and New York City.

Second, because of our pedagogical desire and budgetary need to prepare students for field learning in groups, we have yet to develop an effective means of identifying each individual student's level of ability in the prepara-
tion skill areas and to measure their individual progress in skill development. Thus, by orienting the preparation course toward moving students along one general developmental path, those at the lower and upper ends of the spectrum represented in the class as a whole may not get enough support or encouragement to progress at the same pace as those in the middle.

Implications of Prefield Preparation for Liberal Arts Education

Other than at institutions like Alverno there is still little recognition by educators of the link between students' psychosocial development and their ability to learn. The emphasis continues to be on the content of learning with little regard for how one learns. It is our contention that this neglect lies at the root of the malaise of America postsecondary education and that prefield preparation highlights not just students' need to prepare, with its emphasis on self-responsible action and reflection, but also students' perhaps more serious need to develop a more independent, active stance toward education and educational institutions in general.

In addition, the pedagogical methodology of prefield preparation offers an example for educators of invigorating and "de-Ivy Towering" liberal arts education, at least in the social science disciplines. Applying the talents and energies of faculty and students toward public service could become a primary educational role of educational institutions, rather than the more secondary role it is given now. Not only could the cognitive outcomes for students involved in this form of education become equivalent to or even greater than those achieved in the traditional educational mode, but the ethic of service and collective responsibility for human problem solving, which is at the core of much of the humanities, could be further examined through practice and experimentation.

We do not offer our efforts at prefield preparation as a model for all attempts at bridging the gap that exists between campus- and community-based education. Rather, in our opinion, if there is anything exemplary about our approach it is our effort to link the content and methodology of our prefield preparation with the content, methodology, and objectives of our total field experience education program. The diversity of experiential education programs is an integral part of the strength of this new field. Our hope and expectation is that emerging programs of prefield preparation will be equally diverse and effective. Commonality in process and content should exist between preparation and the field program for which it is prerequisite; not between campuses and programs.

References
