

FINDING YOUR CAREER IN HUMAN SERVICES

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Finding Your Career in Human Services

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Preface

Finding Your Career in Human Services is intended as a starting point for students majoring, minoring, or with an interest in human services and related areas of study who are enrolled in certificate programs, community colleges, 4-year colleges, and universities. Much of the content is also applicable to human services graduates and those with similar majors who are engaged in a job search. It emphasizes opportunities and resources for career knowledge development and skills enhancement during your college education, and incorporates topics such as professional ethics, human diversity, frequent motivations for entering the human services field, and more.

This text covers approaches to your job search, resources, and potential areas of future growth. It is intended to be read in order, but you may find that some chapters apply more to your life and circumstances than others. It identifies important considerations for students who may not be aware of or engaged in career exploration and professional development, as well as those who are more advanced in these processes.

Chapter 1: Your Career in Human Services provides background and some basics on the human services professions, and introduces your career center resources, including some common career tests that can help you find jobs that are a good match for your interests.

Chapter 2: Know Yourself explores reasons people enter the field and provides both tools for self-evaluation and more career tests. It also discusses triggers and vulnerabilities that can decrease competence and job satisfaction, with suggested resources for addressing these issues.

Chapter 3: Be Strategic is best suited for current or future human services students. It describes typical features of academic human services programs that can serve as resources for your career exploration and job search. It also describes opportunities for your career development through your field site placements and professional organizations. It introduces some of the job search tools you will use and materials you will develop in Chapter 6.

Chapter 4: Career Areas and Roles in Human Services delves deeper into career development and interpersonal characteristics of human services occupations.

Chapter 5: Interviews with Human Services Professionals includes interviews with eight human services students and professionals, as well as activities to clarify your job preferences.

Chapter 6: Your Job Search presents resources for job hunting; tips for promoting yourself, making contacts, and developing your written materials; and interview advice. It also explores your decision-making about ideal, adequate, and survival jobs, and explains some options for enhancing your job qualifications.

Chapter 7: Preparing for the Future of Human Services points to growth in the human services field, as well as human services jobs that have only recently come into existence.

The appendices include information on several relevant professional organizations and their ethics codes. Also included is a list of the online career and self-knowledge tests and tools described in Chapters 1 and 2.

This book is based on 18 years as a faculty member in the Counseling Psychology and Human Services Department of University of Oregon and over 30 years of counseling, teaching, and advising community college and university undergraduates about their professional development. I hope it is useful for your career explorations. May your career in human services bring you as much pleasure as mine has.

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Kassie Graves, my Cognella editor, has been a steady and reassuring presence during the writing of this book.

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Chapter 1

Your Career in Human Services

What is Human Services?

Human services is the umbrella term covering a variety of professional and paraprofessional activities that provide helping services to people and communities. The National Organization for Human Services (NOHS), the largest professional organization for human services students, professionals, and faculty, defines the field as

meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations. The Human Services profession is one which promotes improved service delivery systems by addressing not only the quality of direct services, but also by seeking to improve accessibility, accountability, and coordination among professionals and agencies in service delivery. (NOHS, n.d.)

NOHS goes on to say that “the primary purpose of the human services professional is to assist individual and communities to function as effectively as possible in the major domains of living” (NOHS, n.d.). This broad definition encompasses jobs as diverse as nanny, case manager, addictions interventionist, coach, nursing home enrichment specialist, community organizer, human resources officer, parole officer, medical assistant, researcher, resident director, home care assistant, grant writer, special needs classroom assistant, EMT, and psychiatrist.

A Brief Historical Overview of Contemporary Human Services

Compared to specific human services fields, such as social work and counseling, the general field of human services has a shorter history with roots in cultural changes that fostered services intended to keep vulnerable people

in their communities rather than in residential institutions. This period of deinstitutionalization and community care led to a blossoming of the human services field. At that time, some of the roles that today are performed by human services graduates were held by paraprofessionals (volunteers or front-line employees who were skilled but not formally qualified through academic programs or professional credentialing). In 1956, the first associate's program in mental health was established (Quinsigamond Community College, 2018).

At the same time as large residential institutions decreased and community-based services increased, changes occurred that increased sources of funding for human services. For example, Medicare was created in 1965, and CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) became available in 1997 (Parsons, 2015). The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was signed by President Obama in 2010 (eHealth, 2018). Current discussions about the scope and rules of the ACA are a good example of why funding for human services fluctuates, and therefore the number and types of human services jobs available, as well as salary rates.

Human Services Occupations

Generalist human services degrees at the associate's and bachelor's level typically teach the skills and competencies needed in order to be effective in a wide variety of direct and indirect service occupations at the entry level and higher. Some jobs within human services, such as psychotherapist, require additional training, education, and credentialing or licensure.

Recognition of the generalist human services field continues to grow, and undergraduate human services professionals find work in ever more diverse areas of service provision. For example, it is increasingly common to find human services professionals providing skills training, behavioral support, and intakes in primary care medical settings.

The typical activities and roles of associate's- and bachelor's-level human services professionals are described later in this book. A human services degree prepares you for many kinds of work within the human services field as well as elsewhere.

Human services professionals work at social service agencies, resource centers, mental health facilities, schools, medical clinics, residential addictions treatment centers, hospitals, nonprofit agencies, large organizations and corporations, government offices and facilities, commissions, and many others. This book uses the term *agency* as shorthand for the varied job settings where human services graduates find work.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2011) provides a 12-page brochure that goes into some detail about the roles and job responsibilities of human services professionals, as well as typical human services settings and client populations served.

Human Services and Related Undergraduate Degrees

Associate's and bachelor's degree programs in human services are increasingly available. These may be generalist programs, or they may have a specific focus, such as chemical dependency. They may include opportunities to earn an academic certificate in an area

of practice, such as gerontology or HIV/AIDS. You may also have the option to minor in human services.

Some schools offer degrees in social work (BSW), psychology, human development, early childhood education, criminal justice, social welfare, or similar majors. These programs may be similar to and overlap with generalist human services programs, but they have their own histories and areas of emphasis. Depending on your course of study and number of supervised field or service-learning placements, these majors may qualify you for some jobs and certifications in the generalist human services arena. Even degrees like sociology or pre-nursing may meet some requirements and help you to be competitive in the field.

Training programs emphasize competencies, professional ethics and conduct, relevant theory, and supervised practice. They qualify you for professional roles that require applied skills and qualifications. Paraprofessional jobs are also available; these tend to require less education, have fewer and less sensitive responsibilities, and require ongoing supervision or management from a professional.

Even if you are early in your human services program or are in a different but related major, every human services-related class improves your qualifications for a satisfying job in the field.

Career Outlook

The broad human services field has been robust and continues to grow. The Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks overall U.S. employment trends (BLS, 2018a). At the time of this writing, the U.S. economy was doing well and workers were needed in many fields (Irwin, 2018). The BLS employment projections include many human services professions among the fastest growing occupations currently and projected through 2026 (BLS, 2018b).

Why Choose Human Services?

Students choose a human services career for many different reasons. Typically, students have previous paraprofessional experience in human services or related roles, enjoy working with people or in the systems that support direct services, and have received feedback that they are good at this work. Chapter 2 goes into more depth about personal motivations for entering the field, as well as providing activities that help you describe yourself and some preference tests and instruments that focus on your personality and interpersonal style in the world of work. The present chapter introduces some of the career tests and instruments that can help you find emphasis areas and specific jobs and determine whether they are a good fit for your interests, skills, and future abilities.

Some Practical Considerations

Before looking at career instruments and job-finding tools, it is important to mention some practical considerations associated with the choice of a human services career. The first consideration is your educational expenses. If you are not yet enrolled in a human

services program, or are early in your college experience, you may or may not have thought about the relative costs of a community college degree versus a 4-year college or university degree. You may want to look at some job listings using the resources in this chapter and Chapter 6 to see if jobs that interest you require a 4-year degree. If not, shorter community college programs may be more economical. You may also want to speak with a financial aid advisor, career counselor, or academic advisor to learn about scholarships or sources of funding for which you might qualify.

The second consideration is the importance the human services professions place on self-knowledge and, at times, self-disclosure to your supervisors or instructors. If you do not enjoy examining your motives or working to understand how your past history, beliefs, and attitudes influence the services you provide to vulnerable populations, you may find a human services program challenging. Your academic advisor may be able to

Side Box 1.1

Why Human Services for Me?

To begin your career exploration, ask yourself these questions. You may want to write down or discuss your answers with a classmate. You can also interview each other and expand on these questions for a deeper understanding of your motivations for entering this field. Return to your answers after reading Chapters 1 and 2 to see if you want to add additional thoughts.

- How do I define human services?
- How did I first learn about my major? About the field?
- What events and experiences in my own life help make the idea of working in human services attractive? What events in my family's and friends' lives and my community contribute to the idea of working in this field?
- Which of my skills are likely to contribute to my career in human services? Which of my personal characteristics?
- Which types of human services jobs and populations appeal to me?
- What excites me about the field?
- What are my other life passions and goals? How do they integrate with human services?
- What are my reservations about entering this field? About particular types of human services jobs?
- What are my resources for learning more or resolving these concerns?

point you toward related majors or program tracks that require less exploration of your own history and behavior.

Human Diversity and Multiculturalism

Another factor to consider is human diversity and culture. Everyone, including clients and human services professionals, has many identities. Your human services education will include learning to work effectively with people who are different from you, and with people you may share group memberships with but who may nonetheless have different identities and needs. Proficiency in interacting with and providing services to diverse populations is increasingly emphasized in human services programs.

Some students see themselves as not being diverse, as “being boring,” or as having no culture. It is sometimes difficult to see your own group identities and culture if you are in the majority or do not have very much exposure to people who are different from you. Chapter 2 provides some tools for noticing and understanding your own diversity and providing you and your trainers with some context for your work in human services.

You may want to start with the exercise Circles of My Multicultural Self (Gorski, 1995–2015) (Figure 1.1). This simple activity is a good starting point for exploring your identities. Write your name in the central circle in the diagram. In each of the four smaller circles, write one of your important identities. These can include descriptions such as ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or veteran’s status; and roles such as brother, crisis line worker, skier, or other identities that are important to you. You can add more circles if you want to. Gorski’s worksheet and the website listed in the references include activities and questions that you can explore on your own or talk over with a friend or classmate. For the purposes of this book, you may want to answer the question, “How do my identities relate to my future career in human services?”

Understanding your own group memberships, beliefs, and practices contributes to your multicultural and diversity competence and decreases your countertransference (see Chapter 2).

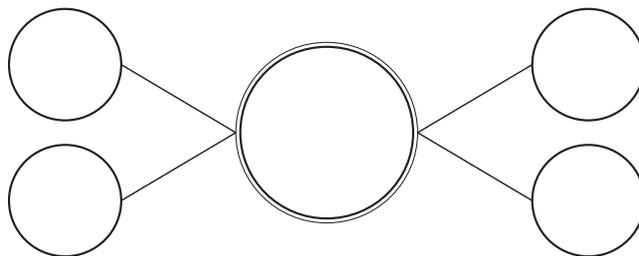


FIGURE 1.1 Circles of My Multicultural Self.

Ethics in Human Services

The Human Services Scope of Practice

Human services is a professional field with its own ethical standards, as well as laws that control what you are allowed to do (depending on your qualifications) and what the agency or organization you work for is allowed to do. This is called your *scope of practice*. For example, a person with a bachelor's degree in human services may be permitted to provide behavioral support services, but not counseling or psychotherapy. It is important to know the laws governing your professional activities, and this is not consistent across state lines. Ask your field site supervisor to review the relevant laws and explain the processes you are to follow as a student. Although many students initially think that ethics are clear cut and obvious, this frequently is not the case. If you make use of your ethics experts while you are a student, you will be much better prepared for complicated, messy situations you encounter as a professional.

The Relationship Between Laws and Ethics

Law and ethics are not the same thing, but they often refer to each other and sometimes overlap. Sometimes they do not, which can pose an ethical dilemma. For example, human services ethics codes normally discuss *confidentiality* (the technical term for certain aspects of client privacy), but may not explain the limits of confidentiality in much detail. However, your state law may require you to breach confidentiality under some conditions, such as when someone is harming a child or elder. Use your faculty and supervisors to help you anticipate areas where your state laws and your professional ethics are in conflict, and learn what steps you can take to decrease this discrepancy.

Advanced human services professions usually require a graduate degree, such as a master's of social work (MSW), and are likely to require that the professional be licensed in that state as well. (For more on licenses and certificates, see Chapter 6.) Sometimes, licensees are required to adhere to a specific code of ethics. For example, Oregon law requires licensed psychologists to follow the American Psychological Association's ethics code. However, sometimes licensees are not legally required to follow an ethics code, although they may need to follow similar guidelines, referred to as a *code of conduct*, that is embedded in the state licensing laws.

Ethical Requirements of Agencies, Academic Programs, and Professional Organizations

Some agencies and organizations require employees to follow a specific set of ethical standards. For example, a chemical dependency program may follow the NAADAC-NCC AP ethics code (see Appendix G and H). Ask whether the agencies where you are engaged in field placements require you to follow an ethics code.

Your academic program may require you to function under one or more ethics codes. This includes not just in your field site, but in the classroom and in the community. This is one reason that human services students are sometimes referred to as *professionals in training*—you are expected to act ethically even though you are not yet a qualified or credentialed professional.

In addition, joining a professional organization carries with it your agreement to follow that organization's ethical standards. This includes student memberships, even though the codes are written as if you are a qualified professional, so some parts may not be relevant to you until you graduate. Becoming a member or student member of a professional organization demonstrates that you are willing to hold yourself to a set of ethical standards.

The major professional organization for human services students and professionals is the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) (2018). You will find more information about NOHS in Appendix A and the NOHS ethical standards in Appendix B. Students earning a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) typically will be required to follow the ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2018a). Information about NASW is in Appendix A, and an overview of the NASW ethics code is in Appendix B. Psychology students may be in programs that follow the American Psychological Association's (APA) (2017) or the American Counseling Association's (ACA) (2014) ethical standards.

Human services professionals who receive the national Human Services-Board Certified Practitioner (HS-BCP) credential (Center for Credentialing and Education, 2016a) must follow the ethical standards for HS-BCPs (CCE, 2009). Information about the HS-BCP certification is in Appendix C and an overview of the ethics code is in Appendix D.

As you can imagine, behaving ethically and resolving conflicts between the law and your ethical standards, or between two ethics codes (such as being a NOHS member in an agency operating under NAADAC ethics) can be complex. Your ethics instructor and your field site supervisor can help you untangle these difficult situations.

Differences Between Professional Ethics Codes

While human services ethics codes may look similar and cover similar topics, they differ in ways that demonstrate important aspects of each profession's culture. For example, there are differences between the ways the ethics codes of NOHS, NASW, and APA set limits on certain kinds of multiple-role relationships (for example, having a professional relationship with a client, and also having an additional relationship with that client in the community). These differences reflect the different scopes of practice for human services professionals, social workers, and psychologists. They also convey each profession's understanding of the client role and client vulnerabilities. Social work, which has the most stringent standards for multiple-role relationships, sees any past or present client as a potential future client, so it limits certain kinds of relationships that are permitted in some of the other human services professional codes (Stephen Behnke, personal communication).

The Structure of Professional Ethics Codes

Most human services ethics codes include aspirational principles, which are not enforceable but describe more abstract goals for your professional conduct, such as advocacy, social justice, respect for all clients, diversity and multicultural competence, and others. Take

Side Box 1.2

The Most Important Ethical Standards, According to Site Supervisors

No matter which ethics code(s) you follow, some common ethical standards are likely to be emphasized early in your academic program. When I teach the human services ethics class at my university, I always ask several of the field site supervisors which ethical standards they want to be sure I discuss with our students in the very first week. They consistently give these answers:

- **Client welfare:** This is considered the most important ethical standard, because it encompasses all of the other standards and obligations associated with human services work. Human services students and professionals put client welfare first and remain highly aware of their responsibilities to the vulnerable people and communities they serve.
- **Confidentiality:** The kinds of privacy to which clients and student-clients are entitled, what to do if you meet your client outside the agency, ways to discuss client issues in order to receive supervision on site and in your campus supervision or practicum class.
- **Multiple-role relationships:** Recognizing possible multiple-role relationships, decreasing the likelihood of entering into problematic multiple-role relationships, safeguarding client confidentiality if a nonproblematic multiple-role relationship cannot be avoided, what to do if someone you know comes to your agency for services.
- **Competence:** Understanding that you are a trainee and that your supervisor is legally responsible for your actions (see below), asking for help, being able to articulate accurately what you know and don't know. Another aspect of competence is behaving professionally at the agency and in the community, and seeking help for personal issues that may affect your work with clients, such as a problem with substance use.

Look at the NOHS ethical standards in Appendix B to see how each of these topics is described and how each relates to other ethical considerations.

a look at one or more of the human services ethics codes and see how well your personal and professional values match its aspirational principles.

Ethics codes also include guidelines for the most common needs and issues encountered by practitioners of that profession. Notice that some of the human services ethics codes include standards for topics such as teaching, conducting research, or administering

psychological tests, while others do not. This can also give you insight into the activities of each profession.

The Importance of Professional Ethics

In summary, human services students and professionals are required to behave ethically, so ethics is an important part of your human services career. When you apply for jobs, it is very likely that you will be asked to respond to a case vignette that includes ethical considerations. You may also be asked how you responded to a professional ethical dilemma. Job applications, as well as applications for licensure, certification, credentialing renewals, professional liability insurance, and membership in professional organizations, typically ask about any legal or ethical violations you have been charged with or found to have committed. If you have any, you will need to explain them, and you may or may not have your application accepted.

Many people who would like to enter human services fields are unaware of the importance of professional ethics, not just for practicing professionals but also for students. Some academic programs and some field sites will not or cannot accept trainees who have engaged in serious legal or ethical violations. As described in Chapter 3, criminal background checks are often required by programs and sites. Under no circumstances should you misrepresent or omit information in answer to ethical and legal questions in background check, academic, field placement, job, liability insurance, professional membership, or credentialing applications or renewals. Doing so is at best dishonest, unethical, and illegal. At worst, it is a felony, or may entirely bar you from working in human services. If you are unsure how to describe previous legal and ethical violations you have committed, talk with an academic advisor in the major, or a campus student legal advisor, to learn about how to document them, potential restrictions on academic training program entry or community placements, and how to address these issues when you are asked about them.

Your Faculty and Trainers' Gatekeeping Role

Your faculty, staff, and supervisors, as well as your educational institution and field site, have legal and ethical responsibility for your actions. While you are in training, or when you are working under a supervisor in some job roles, you are functioning under their or the agency's license or certification. It may be helpful to think of the student role as if you are an extension—a hand or a set of computer subroutines—of your staff and supervisors. You have some autonomy, but your actions have consequences for the people above you. This is one of many good reasons to act as they direct you to, and to not act as they direct as well. If you don't understand or if you disagree with a directive, ask for clarification and raise your concerns. This is an important aspect of ethical behavior.

For all of these reasons, academic programs for applied human services fields have what is called a *gatekeeping* function. This means that while you are a student in the program, or are enrolled in service-learning or field study (practicum or internship) placements

Side Box 1.3

A Typical Job Interview Case Vignette That Includes Ethical Issues

As part of a job interview, you may be presented with and asked to respond to vignettes similar to this case, where some major ethics issues are clearly identified. Read the vignette and look at the NOHS ethics code in Appendix B. What ethical issues can you identify?

Bernard Gallo, AAS, is one of two case managers at Vinaville Social Services (VSS), the only human services agency in a rural town that is about 45 miles from the next community of any size. VSS keeps client records in an electronic database. All VSS employees have access to the client records. Except for VSS, there are only a few human services professionals in Vinaville—a master’s level counselor who has an addictions certificate, a social worker who is in semi-retirement, and a family therapist who only works with couples. Bernard oversees the work of three paraprofessionals with high school diplomas or GEDs. These paraprofessionals conduct intake interviews and basic screenings for issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality, as well as a computerized symptom checklist that generates a report that lists possible psychiatric diagnoses. The paraprofessionals review the results and assign new clients to the case manager who has the most expertise with those issues and possible diagnoses. The case manager develops a client service plan and meets with the client periodically to ensure that the client is satisfied and that the services are still necessary. When Bernard logged into the client database this morning, he reviewed the intake information for a new client in his caseload. Because Vinaville is small, Bernard recognizes the client and knows that she is the sister of the paraprofessional who conducted her intake and screening.

If you were Bernard, what ethical issues would you identify in this situation? What steps could you have taken to decrease ethical issues before this situation arose? What steps can you take now to minimize or resolve the ethical issues?

Even if you are given a case vignette that doesn’t appear to have ethical issues or an ethics focus, it will help you sort out the other issues if you identify the ethical underpinnings of the situation, or places where the professionals are acting ethically. This will make your answer more comprehensive and demonstrate your awareness of ethical standards (which is attractive to employers).

even before entering the major, or as part of the admissions process for programs with this requirement, faculty and staff are responsible for evaluating you in many ways. This includes not only whether you are a good academic fit for the program, but also if you

are, and continue to be, a good ethical fit. Input from your field site supervisors provides important feedback on your ethics while you are at your site, which is the training component most similar to the work you will perform as a graduated human services professional. Your site behaviors include the standard of competent practice. Examples may be actions like dressing at the site's professional standard (which could mean jeans and a tee shirt at some sites, but never a tee shirt with a beer bottle or obscenities on it), arriving on time, giving timely notice when you are ill or cannot make it to your placement, responding to your supervisor and other staff, receiving feedback appropriately, presenting yourself in a way that does not make clients distrust the profession or agency, and similar aspects of your comportment as a trainee. In other words, even from your program application or first encounter with the academic program or your field placement sites, the human services professionals responsible for your training and actions are evaluating your goodness of fit for the profession (Lichtenstein, Lindstrom, & Kerewsky, 2005; Kerewsky, 2016).

On the bright side, most students act in accordance with their program's and school's conduct and other standards (and handbook, if available), ask for clarification when they need it, think and act like professionals in training, adhere to their jurisdiction's legal requirements, and follow their ethical standards. If you do, too, you will minimize the risk of not being admitted or not obtaining a field site, being put on a remediation plan, or even being removed from your program. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that your attention and scrupulousness result in a higher quality of care for your clients, and demonstrate that you belong in this field!

Supervision

Supervision is an important aspect of training and managing ethical, competent human services professionals. The term can refer to a number of different relationships. Several that are most common in human services include the following:

- ✦ **Campus supervisor:** Associated with your academic program, this person may teach your practicum or field study class or coordinate with your field site supervisor. Typically, the person on campus who is above you in a hierarchy and has legal and ethical responsibility for your actions. This person may also be responsible for your welfare as a student, although this is generally shared by all faculty and staff in your program.
- ✦ **Field site supervisor:** Similar to your campus supervisor, the person at your site who has legal and ethical responsibility for your actions. You probably have a regular supervision meeting with this person, either individually or in a group, to receive feedback, support, and training. You may also be trained by or meet with staff members who are not your supervisor (but still have legal and ethical responsibilities related to your training). You may have more than one supervisor. Your field site supervisor typically provides feedback on your performance to you and your academic program.

- **Job supervisor:** Someone who has managerial responsibility for you and oversees your work, but who is not necessarily legally responsible for your actions if you are not a trainee.

If you are not sure who your supervisors are on campus and at your field site, don't hesitate to ask.

Human Services Knowledge and Skills

Everything you learn in your human services education and training is useful for your career exploration and job search. At a very basic and practical level, every course and every placement you complete successfully is a job qualification that demonstrates your acquisition and use of professional knowledge and skills. In addition, some of your new learning may help you directly with your job search.

Example: The Basic Listening Sequence (BLS)

As just one example, a student who takes a class on interpersonal or interviewing skills may receive training in using the Basic Listening Sequence portion of the Microskills Pyramid (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2018).

The BLS is a versatile tool for reminding yourself to use active listening and specific forms of interpersonal engagement when you are being interviewed, just as you would use these skills in a clinical setting. Your use of the BLS also demonstrates your interpersonal skillfulness to the person evaluating you for a job.

Side Box 1.4

The Basic Listening Sequence (BLS)

Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett's Basic Listening Sequence (BLS) is a hierarchy of interpersonal skills built on a base of "ethics, multicultural competence, neuroscience, and positive psychology/resilience" (p. 12). In order of increasing complexity and incorporating the previous components, the elements of the BLS are:

- Attending and Empathy Skills
- Observation Skills
- Questions
- Encouraging, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing
- Reflecting Feelings

How could you utilize the BLS when you are an applicant for a job?

Niki: From Nontraditional Student to Varied Human Services and Educational Practice

Like many people who find fulfilling careers in human services, Niki had a broad sense of what she wanted to do but was not sure where her specific interests and talents lay. Initially unsuccessful in her academic program, she found one of her many passions during a real-life community disaster:

When I graduated from high school in 1993, I immediately enrolled at the University of North Dakota in my hometown of Grand Forks. I wasn't sure what I wanted to be, but my parents insisted that I go straight to college and so that's what I did. I thought I might want to be a high school teacher or maybe a speech pathologist. But what I really wanted—what I really needed—was some freedom and autonomy in my life. It was a luxury I wasn't afforded in high school, having been raised in a pretty strict and sheltered household. So as a young adult with her first real taste of independence, I manifested it by “choosing” not to go to class if I didn't feel like it. And at that point in my

life, it turns out that I didn't feel like going to class a lot. I was coming to the realization that I didn't want to teach high school and I didn't want to be a speech pathologist and, honestly, I didn't have any idea what I wanted to do. I was just taking random classes that met some general education requirements. After a couple of years of lackluster performance and being suspended and reinstated twice for poor academics, I ended up dropping out of UND with a cumulative GPA of less than 1.5.

Then in 1997, the town I had lived in my whole life experienced a catastrophic 500-year flood. The hotel I was working in at the time became the command center for the entire city. We housed FEMA, the American Red Cross, the Humane Society's rescue team, and all of the local city government offices. For the 6 weeks after that flood, I worked in conjunction with the emergency response teams. That was my first taste of crisis-related work and I loved it. I was good in crisis mode. I was finally beginning to incubate some tangible ideas about what I wanted to do with my life. In June of that year, I relocated to Oregon.

In Oregon, Niki found work that she both loved and struggled with. As a secretary in a substance abuse treatment agency, she liked the nonprofit environment, her colleagues, and the clients, some of whom were mandated to receive services. However, she found the agency's abstinence-focused, all-or-nothing approach to substance abuse treatment problematic and lacking in harm reduction education. She comments, "Although we were meeting the state requirements for the DUII program, we were doing our clients a disservice by not giving them skills that they could use once they completed our program."

She experienced a "career/educational epiphany" at 25 years old and reenrolled in school.

Side Box 5.5

Niki's Career Epiphany

"I decided I didn't want to spend my life doing clerical work and that if I wanted to change it, I needed to go back to school. With a lot of help and support and encouragement, I enrolled in a community college transfer degree program. This time, I was going to college because I wanted to—not because my parents were forcing me. This time, as I signed the FAFSA application as an independent adult, I realized that I was now financially responsible for my success or failure. Both of those factors were great motivators. I still wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do, but it didn't really matter yet because I had a lot of clean up I had to do on my general requirements before I was going to be making any declarations of majors. But this time I had a plan."

Instead of enrolling in large lecture classes “where I was one of hundreds of faces,” Niki chose small classes, where she made sure she interacted with her instructors so that if she was not in class, they would notice. She graduated with a very high GPA, including her difficult math classes, in about two years. When she applied to the state university, she received distressing news but persevered:

When you graduate with a transfer degree, the premise is that you can then transfer directly to any of the state universities. I applied to one and was surprised when I received a letter from the admissions office informing me that despite my excellent community college grades, my cumulative GPA from both schools was still not high enough to meet their admissions standards. I had to write a letter petitioning for acceptance, acknowledging my awful grades and lack of effort, and promising that I was a different student now. It worked; they admitted me, but conditionally. I had to maintain a high enough GPA, and if I let it slide, I would be kicked out. But realizing that my poor choices were still haunting me 8 years after being kicked out of my first attempt at college was another motivator.

At the university, Niki met someone who had graduated from the human services program in its early years. Niki learned all about the program, including its use of a cohort model, emphasis on skills competencies, site placements, and job opportunities. She remembers, “It felt like I might have finally found the way to do all the things that I was good at—and get paid for it!” Niki was strategic about this program as well. Realizing that she would improve her chance of admission by doing so, she worked on meeting the program’s prerequisites and the university’s general education requirements.

I made a point to get to know the instructors and to make sure they knew who I was. I was vocal during classes. I utilized office hours. I asked hard questions with the intention of stimulating rigorous debates. I took the information and education to heart.

I also developed a core group of friends who became my regular study group companions as well as my regular group project/presentation people. I chose that group very intentionally. We were all from different backgrounds—ethnically and racially, ages, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientations, marital statuses, parenting choices, religions, languages spoken, and career history. This brought a tremendously varied breadth of voices and experiences to our conversations. We also all had very different skills sets with varying strengths and weaknesses. We supported each other, reassured each other, challenged each other, created self-care opportunities with each other, pushed each other, kept each other accountable, complemented each other, contrasted with each other, consoled each other, and congratulated each other.

Equally intentional about her choice of site placements, Niki explains her goals and steps toward achieving them:

When I was in high school, I had somewhat inadvertently become a sex educator—mostly because growing up in North Dakota, very few people were willing to talk about sex in a comprehensive manner and there was a massive need, and because there wasn't much I was ever scared to talk about. I also had finally figured out the concept of harm reduction as it related to both risky sexual behaviors and drug and alcohol use. I knew I wanted to work in an agency that was focused on harm reduction and sex-positive education, and I found that exact agency. For another placement, I knew I wanted to work with queer-identified youth, but none of the established internship options available really fit the bill. Working with the program's site placement coordinator, I created my own internship working with a camp that served kids of LGBTQ parents one week and LGBTQIA2S [an umbrella term] youth the second week. With my final junior year placement, I again was able to create an internship where I could develop a campaign geared toward reducing intimate partner/sexual violence. I then jumped at the chance to take part in an international educational opportunity with a group of human services students and staff in Mexico.

After graduating with honors, Niki was hired as a program coordinator at one of her placement sites, engaged in the sexual education and harm reduction work that had inspired her student choices.

At the end of that job, I went to work for one of the local school districts as a family development specialist—a title they created to better describe the gamut of duties I had there. I was teaching toddler classes and parenting classes, offering a summer camp for high risk middle schoolers, and providing an after-school program for homeless, queer, and other disenfranchised teenagers. I had the opportunity to work with the Diversity and Equity Cadre on a district-wide level. After several years there, I was recruited to the high school by a principal who decided she wanted a visible, out, queer staff member centrally located in her school. I worked with youth at high risk of not graduating to help them meet their educational goals as well as help them develop employable work skills. While I was working for the school district, I took another part-time job with an agency that I had been volunteering with for years as a crisis counselor. I was also offered the opportunity to start teaching in the substance abuse prevention training program at the university. Eventually, I left the school district and started doing the crisis work full time and teaching part time. I had the opportunity to teach classes on bullying, teen suicide, and cultural identity development for 9 years. I also started a radio talk show about sex and served as a consultant to local agencies.

Niki's work with many people in distress has taught her a lot about her own vulnerabilities and triggers. She has learned that in order to be available to her clients and students, she needs to take care of herself. After a serious injury, Niki has taken care of herself by letting go of some of her many responsibilities, although she continues to volunteer as a crisis counselor and communications liaison. She hopes to increase her crisis work over time and to explore other human services roles. Asked whether she has considered additional education, she muses:

I'm not sure if another degree is in my future, but I've never felt that I "settled" for just having my bachelor's. I have always said that the human services program I attended is one of the best platforms I could have gotten underneath me to qualify me to do all the things I wanted to do at the time. I feel just as well-equipped as many of my fellow students who went on to get their master's in social work or other related fields. I also completely believe in the old adage that you get out of the program what you put into it. There's no part of me that feels I didn't give my all to my program.