

Faculty Showcase '06

Sponsored by Academic Technology at Simmons College



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Goals

- Improved access to field placement information
- A convenient system for identifying field placement opportunities according to individual student's needs and interests
- Improve students' field placement experience: both the selection process and the internship
- Encourage students to be more reflective about field placement selection

Project Overview

To understand the “work” of social work, students need to have firsthand experiences in field placement settings. Up until recently, SSW students and field faculty used a paper process to identify individualized placement prospects, poring through large notebooks. Ellen Goodman decided to improve the process by offering placement materials online.

Development Phase: With funding from Academic Technology and matching funds from SSW, Goodman worked with Web Services to develop an online searchable field placement database. But getting the database up and running was only the first step – usability testing would be needed to refine and improve both the tool and the way it is used.

Usability Testing Phase: Three strategies were used to assess the database's usability. First, instructional designers evaluated the tool, looking for things that might cause user confusion. Second, Goodman administered an online survey in WebCT to gather user input. Third, Goodman and instructional designer Deborah Cotler convened a focus group. Students used the database as Cotler observed and took notes. Afterwards Cotler interviewed students about their experience.

Production Phase: Based on usability test findings, the database form was modified and the directions were revised. In addition, SSW realized that students needed to be encouraged to reflect more on their needs and goals before clicking on database options, so a preliminary assignment was added to the process.

The result is a functional system for field placement that provides:

- **Comprehensive Content:** A list of all SSW placement agencies and agency information.
- **Convenience:** The ability to search anytime, anywhere a student has Internet access.
- **Tailored Results:** A list of agencies that match students' specific criteria and learning needs.
- **Ease of Use:** Students can change search criteria to generate a new list of agencies.
- **New Ideas:** Unforeseen options come to students' attention, including many that may be new to them.

<http://www.simmons.edu/ssw/field/search/>

“I rely on public transportation and commute from a far distance to campus, thus I am only on campus twice a week for classes. Being able to access this information online is much more convenient for me than taking time out of the little that I have while on campus.”

“I find it easier to look online at my leisure, at home, rather than while I am at school, when I feel pretty busy ... I found one placement I wouldn't likely have considered had I just scanned through a notebook.”

– Simmons Students

Question: In the past, field placement information has been made available though a paper copy notebook available at the SSW main office. Which would you prefer, the online system or the notebook?

- Online
- Notebook
- No Preference

Answer	Frequency	Frequency Distribution
Online	19	<div style="width: 80%;"></div>
Notebook	1	<div style="width: 5%;"></div>
No Preference	1	<div style="width: 5%;"></div>

Applications Beyond

Online searchable databases are useful for any discipline that includes field placements or service learning. Usability testing is a valuable strategy for assessing and improving any online resources, including online courses.