**PULSE Supervisor**

**Manual**



**PULSE Program**

**for Service Learning**

**Boston College**

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**Foreword**

This booklet has been prepared as a distillation of many years of experience working with students and supervisors in the PULSE program. The intent is to provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the program: its history and goals, its students, the role of the PULSE Council, the use of Learning Work Agreements, and the importance of the evaluation process. It is a brief course in the essentials of supervision within PULSE.

I hope that you'll take the time to work through it, paying particular attention to the section on the Learning Work Agreements. Supervisors who have taken the time to negotiate the agreements carefully with the students report that student contributions to agency work become more concentrated and effective. In addition, the Learning Work Agreements, provide a firm basis for the end of the semester evaluations.

We welcome your comments on the utility of this booklet. Please know that the staff is willing to meet or speak with you directly for further consultation on any of the topics included here.

Welcome to PULSE. We look forward to a long and mutually beneficial relationship, and we thank you for taking an interest in our program.

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# **Introduction**

## 1. A Brief History of PULSE

PULSE had its beginnings in a 1969 commission by the President of the Undergraduate Government of Boston College to develop a program which would give Boston College undergraduates the opportunity to gain academic credit for participation in the work of community agencies and institutions. The first PULSE director, Patrick Byrne, refined that concept in a number of ways. He decided that the program should concentrate, although not exclusively, on an urban setting. He sought to strike a balance between different types of community work (e.g. staffing a youth center, community organizing, research). Most importantly, he designed the program to respond to the needs of the community groups as expressed by their leadership. During its history, PULSE has remained faithful to these principles.

In some ways, however, the program has undergone significant change. An early assumption that the provision of large numbers of college students would result in rapid and marked social change has been modified. Now the emphasis falls on providing the students with a well-supervised placement in which they can make a genuine contribution to the community while coming to a deeper personal understanding of the nature and extent of the problems of modern social life. Another change involved incorporating supervisor evaluations into students’ final grades, as a means of measuring achievement and ensuring that the student would take his/her commitment seriously. From the academic side, faculty members teaching PULSE courses meet regularly to discuss their objectives and share insights.

The program's history has been characterized by the attempt to (1) serve people of the greater Boston area, (2) provide enlightening experiences for students, and (3) establish a thoughtful and challenging curriculum. At present, the program blends the energies of almost four hundred students, more than fifty supervisors, and fourteen faculty members each semester.

## 2. The PULSE Curriculum: Intent

The aspect of the PULSE Program that invariably provokes the most questions is its location within the Philosophy and Theology Departments at Boston College. It would seem that such a program should be based in one of the social science departments or affiliated with the School of Social Work. This question has been posed by students and supervisors alike: Why philosophy and theology?

One assumption that prompts the question is that PULSE courses are tailored to equip students with skills in social service and social change. This, however, is not generally the case. The PULSE faculty does not pretend to know how to deliver services or strategize for community change. Those areas of expertise belong to you, our placement supervisors.

The intent and abilities of the faculty lie in another direction. In general, the faculty members are interested in engaging students in a process which, while drawing upon the insights of philosophical and religious traditions, involves students in critical analysis of themselves and society. A description of the fundamental PULSE course may help make the point more concrete:

**PHIL/THEO 1088 - 1089 Person and Social Responsibility**

This is a two-semester, twelve-credit course that fulfills all Boston College core requirements in philosophy and theology. The course requirements include ongoing involvement in one of the field placements available through PULSE, as well as participation in the correlated PULSE class. The field placements will put students directly in contact with people experiencing the consequences of one or another form of social injustice. Drawing on both traditional and contemporary philosophical and theological work, the PULSE class will engage students in the challenge of self-discovery and growth as they ask the question of what it really means to assume responsibility for overcoming these injustices.

The intent of the course is also to help students discover the orientation with which they approach a problem. What are the assumptions, convictions, and values that inform a student's judgment about, for example, the causes and solutions of the problem of housing discrimination? How can a student be aided in critically inspecting his or her perspective and in considering an alternative orientation? If the course can help students recognize these tensions within themselves, then the process of critical reflection has begun.

More than forty years of experience has indicated that these are difficult goals to achieve. Their realization is complicated not only by natural resistance to new and potentially threatening ideas but also by the uncertainties and fears that the students bring to their field placements.

## 3. Field Placements

To parallel the question that opened the preceding section, one could ask: Why field placements? Can't the critical reflection stimulated in PULSE classes promote students’ development without any out-of-class experience?

The assumption that reflection of this sort can develop without practical involvement has shaped much thinking about higher education. Our experience indicates, however, that for certain students, such involvement offers the best access to reflection. There are several reasons for this.

1. The field placement requires the student to be accountable for his or her time, work, and performance. The college experience does not necessarily challenge the student to assume very much personal responsibility for anything beyond course requirements. The field placement provides an occasion, perhaps for the first time, for students to see their own responsibilities within a larger and more complex world.

2. The field placement often involves contact with people, institutions, and values different from the typical environments of the students. Often the students will experience a "culture-shock" reaction. After the initial shock subsides, the differences in the field placement serve to highlight the contrasting aspects of the students' lives. The growing appreciation of this contrast, assisted by discussion with peers and in class, opens another route to reflection.

3. The placement offers the students a chance to "be of use," to contribute to the lives of other people. Many students lack the chance to donate themselves generously to a project outside of their academic affairs. Involvement in PULSE meets that deficiency and many students realize for the first time their talents and capabilities for serving others.

Insofar as the placements challenge the students to be responsible, clarify their values and assumptions, and channel their good will and energy to the service of others, they offer an important beginning for critical reflection.

## 4. A Profile of PULSE Students

One can venture a profile of a group only at the risk of great distortion: it's the nature of a profile to downplay distinctive individual features in the interest of producing a composite picture. Given the understanding that none of the PULSE students conforms exactly to the type, still, there are some recurring characteristics.

### *a. Geographical Background*

Boston College attracts students from all 50 states and many foreign countries. Although a significant number of students come from large cities like New York or Chicago, many also come from suburban or small town environments. Thus, for some (but not all) students, PULSE offers the first sustained contact with an urban setting.

### *b. Age & Sex*

For the past several years, first and second year students have accounted for seventy percent of the program's enrollment. In addition, women represent approximately sixty-five percent of the program's enrollment.

The under-representation of third and fourth year students might be attributed to two or three factors: the need to fulfill course requirements for specific majors; seniors are not allowed to take PULSE; there are a limited number of PULSE elective courses; many juniors go abroad. The under-representation of men corresponds to national figures that show a lack of male interest in community involvement. In recent years, however, we have witnessed an encouraging rise in the number of male students involved.

### *c. Career Interests*

Although many of the students are headed toward further professional education, the ways they articulate their career interests show a healthy concern for their communities and society as well as for their personal development. Perhaps half are seeking to prepare for a career in human services - counseling, casework, city planning and the like. Another twenty percent are interested in teaching, and the remainders are interested in pursuing careers in law, medicine, business or related fields.

The program attracts, then, students who are looking for an opportunity to do some "vocational testing." This interest, of course, contributes to their perspectives on their field placements.

# **PULSE Personnel**

## 1. PULSE Administrative Staff

The administrative staff of the PULSE Program consists of two professional staff members, the Director and the Assistant Director. The program also employs a graduate assistant who is in the office for 20 hours a week and six to eight students as van drivers.

The Director of PULSE oversees the entire range of PULSE activities. The Director’s duties include: the development and maintenance of quality field placements; consultation on curriculum development with members of the Philosophy and Theology faculty; provision of ongoing training and supplementary programs for students and supervisors; counseling of individual students; selection, initial training, and continuing development of the PULSE Council.

The Assistant Director aids the Director in the general coordination and administration of PULSE and is responsible for the functioning of the office. The Assistant Director’s duties include: ongoing supervision and guidance of the PULSE Council; coordination of transportation and safety for nearly 400 PULSE students; student advisement, including mediating disputes between students, Council members, supervisors, and faculty members; communication between the PULSE office and off-campus agencies; office management, including supervision of the work-study students; handling of office finances; and organization of special functions.

## 2. PULSE Council

### *a. Origin & Goals*

During the first year and a half of the program's existence, administrative duties were the responsibilities of the Director and a part-time work-study student. Concretely, this meant that the tasks of finding and overseeing placements for over 200 students, developing curricula, and fashioning long-range plans were the main components of a job description for a staff of "one and a half" persons!

Due to the capacities of both persons, the program prospered. However, the need for more immediate and ongoing contact with the field placements occasioned a rethinking of the program's administrative structure. The notion of a group of students, working in conjunction with the Director, suggested itself as a mechanism at once practical and consonant with the program's concerns for student development.

The practical advantages were several. One person, with responsibility for particular placements and their students, could offer more time and assistance to the supervisors of those placements and the students working there.

But there were other motives at work, too. The PULSE Council was envisioned as a unique opportunity for developing student potential. It would require a set of leadership skills and regular and serious contact with the practitioners in the social service fields at the administrative level, thus providing role models and ways to think about social problems. It would allow a student a wider view of the processes of service and change.

To realize these goals, the need for supplementary training and a special curriculum was recognized. And from its inception, the Council has participated in regular and extensive training focused on administrative skills and benefited from the special seminar course, co-taught until recently by Father Joseph Flanagan, the former Chairman of the Philosophy Department, and the PULSE Director. The course is now taught exclusively by the PULSE Director.

### *b. The PULSE Council Role*

The PULSE Council consists of eighteen undergraduate students. Each Council member coordinates two to three of the approximately fifty placements in the program, which involves responsibility for approximately twenty to thirty PULSE students. Each of the Council members has served at least one year in a PULSE placement and has made a one year commitment to the Council with the opportunity to return for a second year. The PULSE Council works closely with the Director and Assistant Director in the general administration and coordination of the program.

The responsibilities of the PULSE Council during the placement process in September include holding advisement sessions with students, as well as coordinating and conducting placement tours and interviews in conjunction with you, our placement supervisors. During the rest of the school year, Council members continue their role as mediator and troubleshooter by maintaining monthly contact with both supervisors and students, periodically visiting the placements sites, and holding group meetings with their student groups.

The PULSE Council member is the first resource for placement supervisors, as well as for the students involved in those placements. Placement supervisors are encouraged to maintain contact with their PULSE Council members not only for problem solving but for consistent updates on student and placement progress. Supervisors are first contacted by their Council members towards the end of the summer, at which time they will arrange a first meeting. Each council member has three office hours per week held in the PULSE office.

# **Agreements for Learning**

## 1. A General Note

Sometimes teachers are seen as transmitters of uniform content to an undifferentiated group of students. In practice, of course, the best teachers operate in such a way as to individualize their instruction, tailoring to the capabilities of the particular student. Learning Work Agreements present the opportunity for student and placement supervisor to set objectives, identify expectations and resources, establish meeting times, and provide a framework for evaluation of progress. The applicability of such features to the field of PULSE placements can be readily appreciated.

## 2. Learning Work Agreements in a Field Setting

Learning Work Agreements can serve a number of functions from outlining expectations to providing a framework for evaluation. The student and supervisor sections are interdependent. Written responses to both sections should be provided after students and placement supervisors have had a verbal discussion about these questions and are mutually satisfied with the goals. Hence, the Learning Work Agreement is the result of consultation and conversation. It cannot be seen as a quick form to be filled out in generic fashion. Thoughtful, detailed LWAs are crucial to a good working relationship. Thus, students and supervisors are advised to wait until the second or third week of placement work so as to leave sufficient time to think about the questions and learn about the placement before negotiating the agreement.

The brief Learning Work Agreement used by PULSE should help in three different areas, namely: outlining expectations, defining tasks, and arranging for supervision. It may be helpful to refer to the sample Learning Work Agreement while you read this to note the questions being referenced.

### *a. Outlining Expectations*

The most frequent source of dissatisfaction among both PULSE students and supervisors is a lack of clear mutual expectations at the beginning of the working relationship. Your placement description might be very clear, and a student's declared intentions might also be very clear. Still, failing to state goals clearly and in detail can cripple the working relationship of student and supervisor and set the stage for a difficult evaluation at the end of the semester.

The Learning Work Agreement provides an opportunity to explore these issues. In the first section, the student is asked to specify his/her learning goals: What does he/she hope to learn from the placement? Next, the student makes an accounting of the resources he/she brings to the project. What skills does he/she already possess? Finally, the student has the chance to indicate where he/she anticipates the need for guidance, help, and support.

In the second part of the agreement, the supervisor responds in kind. First, what do you hope the student *learns* at your placement? ***Please be as specific and detailed as possible***. For example, what social issues can they learn about at your placement? What population(s) can they come to know? What challenges, needs, and concerns can they become sensitized to? The second question addresses the specific tasks the students will perform. ***(Please see section b. below for details on tasks.)*** The third question addresses the student’s personal development through this experience. What qualities can the student gain from working at this placement? What qualities do you need them to have in order to do the job? These might be professional skills, such as maintaining client confidentiality, or more personal growth, such as moving past stereotypes. This is the place where it is good to clarify for the student what you expect from them now and the ways you hope they will grow personally from this experience, pushing beyond their comfort zones.

### *b.)* *Defining Tasks & Duties*

Another frequent cause of grief in the supervisor-student relationship is when tasks and duties are not carefully detailed. Too often a vaguely articulated goal is taken as equivalent to a clearly drawn task. A student who indicates that he/she wants to "work with kids eight hours a week" will soon be bumping up against the problem of what that means. From the other side, the supervisor will either spend unnecessary time structuring that work or let the student drift about until he/she creates a structure. The second question of the supervisor portion of the agreement should help concretize the tasks which the student will perform. The key to a successful use of this section is specificity of time, of place, and of duties. The student eager to "work with kids eight hours a week" should be forced to account for these hours. For example: "Three hours on Monday will be spent at the gym for physical education instruction and four hours a week will be spent in the drop-in-session on Monday evening." In this way, a student can begin to feel at home, know the boundaries of his/her involvement, and start to contribute his/her own talents more readily. Without this sort of attention to detail, the odds are high that the student's initial and, perhaps, continuing involvement will be marked by uncertainty, frustration, and floundering. It will also create problems during the end-of-semester evaluation if supervisors and students are not in agreement on what tasks the student was supposed to have completed.

### *c. Arranging for Supervision*

Our experience indicates that it is very important to meet regularly for satisfactory communication. Whether the supervision occurs with an individual or in a group is ultimately up to the supervisor and can depend upon a variety of factors such as preference of those involved and the schedules of the various participants. What is the most important is the opportunity for the student to have regular access to the supervisor for guidance, critique, and support.

The fourth question of the supervisor section requires an outline of supervision. The supervisor indicates what kind of resources he/she can furnish the student as well as the manner in which supervision is carried out and how frequent it will be. For example, the supervisor might outline that he/she will have bi-weekly check-ins with the student to discuss progress, answer questions, and encourage growth. The supervisor will also be available to discuss what the student is learning, offer guidance and share wisdom about the agency, the people it serves or the neighborhood in which it serves. In this way, the supervisor will serve as a teacher to the PULSE student.

### *d. Schedule & Accountability*

Questions 5 and 6 allow the supervisor to outline the hours the student is scheduled to be on site and the policy on tardiness, absences, etc. The schedule is important because it ensures that the PULSE student is fulfilling the number of hours required. When students submit the LWA, the PULSE staff review each form to make sure the students are meeting the service hour requirement. Please be sure to note every hour the student is on site, including all the various programs in which he/she participates. The total hour requirement for PULSE students is 12 hours, including travel time. For most placements this works out to be 8 hours on site but we make adjustments for those with shorter or longer travel times.

The PULSE Program recognizes the need to have flexibility with policies on attendance and punctuality due to the varying needs of the placements. We ask each supervisor to outline fair requirements that meet the need of the agency and hold the student accountable for his/her service hour requirement. From our experience, the more clearly these policies are outlined, the better the working relationship between the student and supervisor because the expectations are known by everyone.

### *e. Summary*

It is hoped that this description of the Learning Work Agreement suggests the value of consultations between student and supervisor as they consider their joint work in the placement. As both parties flesh out the skeleton of their agreement, the basis for solid working relationships should be established and the fears which accompany any new venture will be reduced.

# **Meetings and Evaluation**

## 1. A General View

It might seem that it would be more appropriate to treat meetings and evaluations as separate items. However, such a separation might imply that evaluation is a one-time semester- or year-ending thing and meetings are incidental, unfocused gatherings of students and supervisors. While formal semester evaluations are required in PULSE, we suggest that evaluations be seen as the culmination of an ongoing series of meetings.

## 2. Types of Meetings

### *a. Orientation*

Orientation sessions are the entrance to a new world. The student embarking upon work in a field placement must acquire a set of skills appropriate to this new world. The language and vocabulary of its people, the networks of communication, the hierarchies of authority, and the rules of operation all need to be learned.

Such learning could be acquired on a trial-and-error basis. While this method demands that the student becomes deeply and quickly immersed in the activities of a placement, it also suffers from being unsystematic and hence discouraging to many students.

Orientation sessions serve to acquaint the student with the features of the placement. Typical components include a tour of the facility and, where appropriate, the surrounding neighborhood, an introduction to staff, an overview of the facility's operation and clientele, an accounting of rules and procedures, opportunities to observe functions, and a time for questions and answers. Since it may be impossible to fit all of these components into a single session, it is generally advisable to construct a few orientation-focused sessions. This gives the student sufficient time to digest a large amount of information. It can also encourage him/her to ask more informed and searching questions. This, in turn, facilitates the student's smooth entrance into the life and work of the placement.

### *b. Regular Supervisory Meetings*

Orientation sessions should be followed by the regular supervisory meetings focused on helping the student situate themselves in the work of the placement. The agenda for these meetings will vary according to the needs of the student and supervisor.

The first meeting, after completion of orientation, should be devoted to drawing out the student's first experiences "on the job." There are many questions which will stimulate this process. Was he/she adequately prepared for the work? What proved surprising, threatening, reassuring? What resources should the student know about?

After two or three weeks of involvement, the student should be ready to specify some learning goals. Now is the time for the student and the supervisor to complete a Learning Work Agreement (as described in the previous section). The routine of the placement should be familiar enough to the student that he/she can articulate what he/she hopes to achieve and then the supervisor can respond candidly to these objectives and help the student toward a realistic assessment.

After the agreement has been completed, the regular supervisory sessions continue with a good part of the agenda now set. Both student and supervisor can organize their meeting, in part, around evaluating the progress which has been made toward achieving the stated objectives. Of course, much of the meeting will focus on the particular recent events with an eye toward considering the student's responses, alternative courses of action, and prospects for the remainder of the student's involvement.

### *c. Evaluation Meetings*

As suggested earlier, evaluation is an ongoing process. Indeed, the previous comments on the nature and function of supervisory meetings have demonstrated how evaluation should be seen as an ongoing process. Successful meetings with students will always raise questions, in one form or another, related to performance and accomplishment.

Nevertheless, we think it is essential to design one meeting at the end of the semester devoted solely to evaluation. If the regular supervisory meetings offer a chance for continuing, short-term evaluation, the semester ending session provides a great opportunity for retrospective examination of the preceding term and its accomplishments.

This retrospective examination can help detect strengths and weaknesses in a student’s performance, learning goals which were or were not achieved, dimensions of the experience which were unanticipated, and the suitability of the supervisory process. On the one hand, such a meeting may result in the "fine tuning" of an arrangement which has worked very satisfactorily over the semester. On the other hand, it can also be the occasion for significant alterations.

### *d. Summary*

We have tried to indicate the importance of and relationship between consistent meetings and student evaluation for effective supervision. It is impossible to summarize all aspects of good supervision in the abstract, since it is always relative to particular situations at particular placements. Our hope has been to sketch the outlines of meetings and evaluations in the interest of clarifying and defining the student-supervisor relationship.

# **The Grading Process**

Placement supervisors submit individual evaluations of each student at the end of each semester. Copies of the evaluation form (see attached example) are forwarded to each supervisor at least three weeks before the close of each semester.

PULSE regards the end-of-semester evaluation as a tool for learning, not a reward-or-punishment mechanism. Evaluation should take into account the learning goals articulated in the Learning Work Agreement and the expectations stated by the supervisor. Of course, there is also a need to account for the basics: attendance, punctuality, ability to meet deadlines, communication, responsibility, commitment, etc. The evaluation form addresses both of these. An honest completion of the evaluation will necessarily involve a conference with the student to assess the semester in the light of previously stated goals and expectations. The recommended way to do this is for the supervisor and student to each complete their portion and then come together to discuss it. Careful attention to creating the LWA, referring to it throughout the year and providing feedback during regular supervision, provide a framework for the student to be engaged in his/her learning throughout the year and better able to self-assess. Ultimately this makes the evaluation process go smoothly and eliminates “surprise endings” when the grade is assigned.

When the process is complete, the supervisor renders a summary interpretation of the student's work which is then translated into a grade equivalent and counts for one third of the student's final grade in their PULSE class. Keep in mind that PULSE is a 6 credit course (3 in philosophy and 3 in theology) and the student’s placement grade counts for one third in both of these courses. Therefore, the placement grade is highly important to the student, although they may not have realized this at the beginning of the semester. Supervisors are encouraged to be firm but fair in the grading, recognizing achievement as well as deficiencies and areas for further growth.