Work has been called the “master role.” It is a critical part of the lives of individuals and families. It structures our lives, shapes our self-concept, and is the primary source of income for most people. Inability to function effectively in the job market (because of poor preparation, discrimination, or other labor market factors) can mean long-term poverty. Even for those in better-paying jobs, personal/social difficulties can arise which conflict with effective performance on the job. For human service practitioners generally, the realities of work and work-related problems are a key consideration in understanding clients and the problems they face. Problems at work can often alert the practitioner outside of the workplace of the need for intervention.

In this course, two complementary sets of issues are explored:

1. employment as the principal source of income distribution and the implications of differential success/failure in employment -- essentially, the problems of employment which people face, particularly those associated with race, sex, and age; and

2. the workplace as a setting for professional practice, with an emphasis on the interplay between the goals of the employer and those of the employee.

This course explores the changing nature of work and the implications for the wellbeing of individuals and families. We shall also explore the ways in which an understanding of work and employment relate to the full range of social work services and to professional roles in the field. To do this, we shall use a combination of lectures, discussion, guest speakers and research projects.

Course Objectives

This course is intended for students interested in issues of employment and social welfare of individuals and groups. The objectives of this course are to prepare students:

1. to understand the employment context, including: basic concepts of employment/unemployment, the roles and perspectives of employers and unions; the processes of hiring, promotion, and termination; the nature of employee benefits; and the implications for social work practice within the context of the work environment;
2. to understand the employment situation of individuals and the differing employment experiences and opportunities of various groups;

3. to analyze and assess the extent to which disadvantaged groups experience employment difficulties and how policies and programs can address these problems through preventative and remedial initiatives;

4. to understand the motivation and operation of private sector policies and programs designed to provide services to employees;

Course Requirements

The required texts for this course are:


4. Additional readings, listed in Italics in the “Readings,” below

5. Wall Street Journal -- for daily readings and for “policy briefs.” (Other major newspapers may be substituted, but the Wall Street Journal is strongly recommended because of their feature writing on issues and to provide exposure to a "business“ perspective.)

The requirements for the course are:

1. Weekly class preparation and participation, including

   a. reading assignments for the individual class sessions (it is expected that students will regularly attend and participate in class), including daily reading of Wall Street Journal

   b. participation (at least weekly) in the Internet webpage discussions (https://my.ummu.umich.edu/)

   c. completion of the field exercise (see syllabus);

(Class participation will constitute 10 percent of the final grade.)
2. Three (3) “policy briefs” -- each is a short (two-page max.) paper and class presentation--including:

   a. A summary of an issue relevant to employment and social work or social welfare based on a newspaper article from the Wall Street Journal

   b. Identification of the implications for social work/social welfare policy or practice. [Attach a copy of the article]

   (20 percent of final grade)

3. Concept-check quizzes (30 percent of final grade); and

4. A paper proposing an intervention related to employment issues (or an alternative topic, subject to approval by the instructor)

   (40 percent of final grade)
Course Outline

Jan 10  1.  Introduction and overview of the course

This session introduces the class, its structure, requirements, and rationale. A flow analysis is used as an organizing feature understanding the employment process and connections with policy and practice. During the course of the semester, we shall address the connections between employment and social work in several areas:

1. work in our lives and the lives of clients
2. problems/services on the job
3. welfare, poverty, and work
4. work-community connections

Jan. 17  2  The view from 20,000 feet

In this session, we examine employment from a high altitude figuratively in order to understand the broad terrain of employment. We look at key job concepts, such as occupation and industry, with attention to changes over time, geographic distribution of jobs, and the impacts of globalization. We then turn to the other half of the employment relationship—the labor supply. We consider issues such as labor force participation, unemployment, and discouraged workers.

Readings:

Newman, No Shame in My Game, chapters 1-2

American Bar Association, Guide to Workplace Law
Chapter 1: How Law Affects the Workplace
-definition of “employee,” relationship of federal/state laws

Root, “Unemployment and Underemployment: A Policy and Program-Development Perspective,” Ch. 18, in Kurzman and Akabas, Work and Well-Being:
Jan 24 and Jan 31  

3. and 4.  

The view from 5,000 feet

This session will get closer to the interface of jobs and labor. We will discuss issues such as the types of unemployment and the legal/organizational structures that govern the workplace. We shall address key areas which have particular impact on employment and social welfare, such as the role of unions, their history, wage structures, new business models and production techniques, and fringe benefit structure.

Readings:

American Bar Association, Guide to Workplace Law

Chapter 3: Terms and Conditions of Employment
- min. wage, overtime, equal pay, employee benefits, leaves
Chapter 6: Unions in the Workplace
- protected organizing activities, bargaining unit, collective bargaining, grievance procedures
Chapter 8: Enforcing Workplace Rights
- enforcement of rights, mediation, arbitration, legal action


Feb. 7 5. Ground-level: the dynamics of workplace processes

In this session, we look at the processes of education/training, hiring, and advancement, with particular attention to the ways in which they impact disadvantaged minorities and women. We look at low-wage employment and problems of poverty, with particular emphasis on the differential impacts on minorities and women. The dynamics of “primary” and “secondary” effects of racism or sexism provide one means of understanding the employment impacts on minorities and women.

Readings:

American Bar Association, Guide to Workplace Law

Chapter 2: The Hiring Process
-discrimination, drug testing, disabilities, BFOQs, lie detectors

Newman, No Shame in My Game, chapters 3-5

Assignment -- Field Exercise: due Feb 7

1. Select an advertised job opening and inquire about the hours, wages, and benefits of the job. DO NOT ACTUALLY APPLY FOR IT (unless you are interested in taking the job). This would be an unfair burden on an employer and might hurt the chances of other applicants.

2. Prepare (to be handed in):

   a. A summary of (1) the nature of the job and its pay, hours, and employee benefits and (2) a description/speculation of how you think that your race or sex (or other personal characteristic) may influence whether you would get the job and succeed in the job.

   b. A one-page budget which indicates the monthly income of the job (assuming a 40-hour week) and compare it with your estimated monthly expenses.
Feb. 14  6.  Low-wage work and policy options

In this session, we turn to a discussion of policy/practice interventions with attention to both human resource initiatives and work-to-welfare programs.

Readings:


Feb. 21 & March 7  7 and 8. Programs in the workplace—The EAP example

In these two sessions, we introduce the background of programs in the workplace, looking at the origin of EAPs as a key example of such a program. We consider the organizational context and underlying values associated with the development and implementation of such programs.

We will examine the relationship between EAPs and the provision of services, with specific attention to the implications of cost control efforts. This will include the use of short-term interventions and the role of EAPs in “managed care.”

Quiz—Feb 21

Readings:


*[Spring Break -- no class on Feb. 28]*
March 7  9.  Work-family issues and dependent care

With changes in the structure of families and increasing numbers of parents in the workforce, many employers are instituting personnel policies and programs to accommodate the need to balance responsibilities of home and work. In this session, we examine these efforts, with a focus on dependent care programs.

Readings:

Hochschild, The Time Bind (continued)


March 14  10.  Discrimination in the workplace

In this session, we shall examine issues of discrimination faced by specific groups within the workplace. These include issues associated with hiring, advancement on the job, and termination.

Readings:


**The remainder of the semester is currently structured as follows. Depending upon the preferences of the class, we may want to include other topics by either substituting or shortening some of these sessions**

March 21  11  Disabilities and age discrimination in the workforce

Disabilities present challenges for workers and employers. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other legislation create a structure for addressing these issues.

Readings:


March 28 12. Sexual harassment in the workplace

In this session we will discuss the issues of sexual harassment and program interventions to address such problems.

Readings:


Quiz—March 28

April 13. Violence in the workplace and critical incident debriefing

In this session, we will discuss violence in the workplace and the application of “critical incident debriefing” to addressing psychological traumas in the workplace. Expertise in handling “critical incidents” is becoming an expected part of the support system of an employer when traumatic events are experienced (e.g., sudden death of a colleague, incidents of violence, and extreme emotional experiences arising from rescue attempts).

Readings:

To be assigned.

Final papers due (one-page summaries to be provided to each class member)

April 11 14. Student paper discussions or open session