The USA placement program is well-established and comprehensive as it provides both student exchange experiences at University of Michigan (UM) and a full-time placement opportunity at a local agency. As an exchange student, I could enjoy the resources and opportunities available at the university such as food pantry, free bus rides, libraries, gym rooms etc. Besides, Ann Arbor is renowned for being the best college town to live in which provides us a haven to relax and get inspired during summer.

Beautiful campus with greenery and park

About placement at Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw

Holistic services for families and children in need
Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw (CSSW) is a faith-based agency providing holistic social services for children and families. I worked for 4 different units including Pregnancy Counseling, Adoption, Foster Care and Nurturing Families Program. Around 20 case work interviews, 11 home visits, 2 support groups, 1 court hearing and
countless discussions with supervisors were arranged for me to gain insights from the family and child protection work in Michigan.

In the Pregnancy Counselling and Adoption Programs, I had to observe client intakes and assessments, build rapport with clients, assist in providing parenting education, and research relevant resources for pregnant women and mothers of infants. Out of the amazing works, the “Prison Adoption” program was the most impressive one. CSSW is the pioneer in Michigan introducing the adoption program to incarcerated mothers. According to the state law, an infant who is born to a prisoner has to be separated from his or her mother within 24 hours to a few days. CSSW’s work is to discuss the possible adoption plan before the delivery so that the women can be prepared for such losses and choose a healthy and stable family for their babies through matching with suitable adoptive parents. The emotional support provided also fostered the recovery of incarcerated mothers from loss regardless of the background of the mothers.

In the Foster Care Program, I attended court hearings and weekly supervisory visitations for parents who had their children removed due to abuse and neglect and were working to be reunified with their children. I found it difficult for the foster care social workers to work to protect the children from harm while at the same time trying to support their mothers as the clients especially when it involves child abuse. After self-reflection and discussion with supervisors, I arrived at the conclusion that although the agency has to protect the best Interest of the Child as directed by the court, we can still work to build rapport and gain trust from the birth parent upon the common goal-achieving reunification with their children. This is also for the sake of children in long term. By shadowing my co-workers’ daily work, I had a lot of exposures and fruitful discussions about the service delivery to the traumatised clients.

Open-minded and friendly working environment
The cultural exchange with my mentors and co-workers in different teams was very enjoyable and interesting. We always exchanged ideas about the welfare and legal system relating to the child welfare system in the US and Hong Kong. For example, the difference between adoption operation. As open adoption is the mainstream practice in the US now while closed adoption is still compulsory in Hong Kong. It might be
because of the cultural perception of family unit as more in-group in Hong Kong so open adoption might not be easily accepted by the public. The strengths and weaknesses of both systems and possible ways social work in both systems could make realistic steps for both Hong Kong and the US social workers to improve.

I was amazed by the inclusive and inspiring working environment as all my co-workers were very passionate, experienced, knowledgeable and approachable. It was also great to get to know the social work students from UM so we could learn about the difference in our education system. We all became great friends and our supervisor even invited us to her house for a farewell party before the end!

The heartfelt relationships with my co-workers and children clients

Tips:
1) Be psychologically prepared and mindful of your emotions as some cases involved children sexual abuse or complicated family backgrounds
2) Study the differences of the adoption practices in the US and HK
3) Be familiar with PTSD intervention and relaxation exercises for women
4) Take the initiative to offer help no matter how tedious the task is
5) Be confident to present your ideas as the cultural exchange is greatly appreciated at CSSW
About the student Life at UM

Mini-courses offered by the School of Social Work provided me with insights from the US social work perspective. For example, through classes of social justice of immigration issues, I talked to some teenagers whose parents were deported from the US as they were undocumented. From that, I understood better about the cause and impact of “Zero Tolerance policy” on the well-being of children with separated parents.

I especially enjoyed the openness of the students and teachers as well as the liberal discussion atmosphere. My classmates were in general more confident to voice their opinions and raise relevant questions in class which made the lectures more interactive and thought-stimulating. I found myself becoming more willing and confident to present my ideas with organised data and contents as my classmates and co-workers valued my opinions from the Hong Kong perspective. The intellectual discussions and fulfilling cultural exchange made me reflect on my learning attitude and identity as a Hongkonger which greatly boosted my personal growth and confidence.

Animal-assisted therapy volunteer training in local farm
Tips:
1) Be financially prepared as the living cost is very high in Ann Arbor as well as the monthly health insurance fee and visa fee
2) Do leverage the free resources at school to save up the cost:)
   e.g. food pantry, museums, gym room and libraries etc
3) Cheapest supermarket ranking: Meijer->Kroger->Walmart->Target
4) Be proactive to engage with local communities through volunteer work, churches and classmates as you never know whom you will learn from!

I truly thank God for this thought-provoking, meaning-making and heart-fulfilling journey. It won’t be as unforgettable without the supports from Eltha, School of Social Work at UM, roommate Crystal, church friends in Ann Arbor, supervisors at CSSW (Julie, Elly, Melissa, April) and most importantly my resilient clients especially the kids. All the best for those of you who wish to join the program! This will be one of the best decisions you can ever make.