

## **Factors Influencing Master of Social Work Field Education**

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### **Abstract**

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*Field education has been identified as the signature pedagogy of social work education. Field education provides students the opportunity to apply the knowledge, skills, and values that they have learned in the classroom. Field education is the place to determine if students are prepared to enter the world as professional social workers. The growing number of social work programs, the special needs of students, the precarious status of field directors, and higher agency caseloads have made it more challenging to carry out the mission. In order to make field education more effective, Field directors should receive higher priority and more job security. The development of more macro focused placements, vigorous community engagement by programs of social work, incentives for field instructors and task supervisors, and an intentional focus on student self-care would make field education more effective and meaningful.*

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**Keywords:** signature pedagogy, field directors, challenges

### **1. Introduction**

The field of social work is a growing profession. The overall employment of social workers is expected to increase 11% from 2018 to 2028 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Social work is a more diverse field than widely perceived. Social workers assist clients in adjusting to life transitions, assess client needs, respond to child abuse/neglect and suicidal ideation, locate community resources, maintain case notes, and provide counseling to individuals, families, and groups. Social workers are also involved in foster care and adoption. Social workers are employed in hospitals, prisons, public schools, human service and child welfare agencies, mental health clinics, and non-profit organizations. Some social workers hold political office at the local, state, and national level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). An increasing number of social workers are obtaining licenses in clinical social work (LCSW) and going into private practice. Licensed clinical social workers develop treatment plans for clients as well. The popularity of social work has increased the enrollment of students in graduate schools of social work to obtain masters degrees (MSW).

### **2. The Signature Pedagogy**

Every graduate school of social work requires students to complete an internship. This internship is known as field education. In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), designated field education as the signature pedagogy of the social work curriculum. Field education is designed to help students apply the ethics and content of the profession. Field education allows students an opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to a wide variety of social work practice and research (Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

Field educators serve as gatekeepers for the profession of social work by assessing students' competence for practice upon graduation (Sowbel, 2012). In the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) developed by CSWE, the importance of field education was highlighted. This declaration may have been designed to raise the status and emphasis of field among social work educators and community agencies. Field education determines the competence and readiness of students to graduate (Sowbel, 2012). The 2015 EPAS articulated several competencies for field education. These competencies include ethical behavior, diversity, human rights, policy, and micro/mezzo/ macro practice (CSWE, 2015). Other broad competencies of field education are to heighten self-awareness, promote students' ability to work effectively with at-risk populations, increase students' ability to assess agency effectiveness in the delivery of services, and to provide knowledge in the use of professional supervision.

After completion of the foundation field education internship, students should be able: a. critically evaluate implementation of agency policies and procedures. b. demonstrate ability to coordinate services between the practicum agency and other social service agencies in various settings to enhance client functioning. c. exhibit the ability to apply, integrate and synthesize classroom theories and knowledge in the agency and within the context of community human service networks. d. demonstrate competence in working with client systems in relation to client engagement, planning, developing, assessments, intervention, and evaluation and the delivery of services to at-risk populations. f. exhibit understanding of the forms and mechanisms of poverty, oppression, and discrimination in a multicultural society, and can apply strategies of advocacy and social change. g. demonstrate proficient use of oral, written, technological skills that are consistent with the agency and the social work profession (Fayetteville State University Field Education Manual, 2017).

After completion of the advanced year field education year, students should be able to: a. demonstrate an understanding of how social welfare policies impact children and families and how these policies affect the field placement agency. b. exhibit purposeful and consistent application of research and single system designs in practice with children and families/or mental health and substance abuse in rural and urban settings with particular attention to ethical dilemmas, oppression, and social and economic injustice. c. continue to demonstrate proficient use of oral, written, and technological skills that are consistent with the practicum agency to which the student is assigned. d. continue to demonstrate efficient self-awareness in the process of providing intervention, including examining commitment to social work values, ethics, social and economic justice, and the delivery of services to vulnerable populations. e. exhibit the ability to critically, purposefully, and consistently use theoretical frameworks that support client engagement, assessments and practice interventions, evaluation and termination in relation to children and families/or mental health and substance abuse. f. demonstrate ability to work collaboratively with colleagues and other professionals. g. exhibit knowledge, skills, values, and leadership to practice and advocate for clients to promote equity and access to resources in various settings. h. demonstrate purposeful, consistent, and proficient use of oral, written, technological skills that are consistent with the agency and the social work profession. i. exhibit commitment to establishing career goals. j. demonstrate commitment to lifelong learning with plans to continue professional development, and involvement in professional and community organizations (Fayetteville State University Field Education Manual, 2017). There are high expectations for students in field education. Field education must be adequately structured to encourage student success.

### **3. Challenges**

High expectations of field education have also created challenges for field directors. Field directors have many responsibilities such as: a. recruiting, assessing, and approving field education agencies and field instructors. b. finalizing and filing memorandums of agreement between field agencies, community organizations, programs and the University. c. assigning students to field education agencies. d. monitoring and evaluating student's progress in field education. e. maintaining field education records. f. resolving problems and concerns related to field education. g. identifying training needs of field instructors. h. planning and implementing field instructor orientations and training sessions. i. planning and implementing student orientations. j. administering and updating the field education manual as needed and making students, faculty, faculty liaisons, and field instructors aware of any changes. k. serving as a conduit between the MSW Program and the field education agencies by transmitting significant information pertaining to the operation of field education and the overall operation of the MSW Program.

l ensuring the overall administration of field education is in compliance with CSWE Accreditation Standards. m. assigning students to faculty liaisons. n. being available as consultant to faculty liaisons. o. overseeing the overall evaluation of the field education program.

Field directors must constantly seek new placements and ensure that students have MSW supervision and that field liaisons keep in contact with community agencies. Some students may request change of placement or be terminated from their sites for lack of performance. Field directors must always be prepared to respond to unexpected developments. Changes in higher education have impacted the operation of field.

The commercialization of higher education has created pressure to increase student enrollment and there has been a focus on student satisfaction over academic integrity (Brownlee, 2015). For example, the high expectations of millennial students can inhibit receiving constructive feedback from field instructors and task supervisors. Students who aspire to enter into private practice may be eager to accelerate their learning process in their desire to become clinical practitioners. Student concern for work life balance can weaken commitment to adhering to the requirements of field placement. Students may also have special needs, criminal background records, or multiple commitments such as employment and child care (Homonoff, 2008). More students are requesting evening /weekend placements, employment-based placements, and are resisting internships that require long distance driving. The increasing number of social work programs has led to greater competition between schools for quality placements. (Frumkin, 1980). The advent of managed care has decreased the availability of field placements and supervisors (Donner 1996; Raskin and Blome 1998) and decreased government funding to agencies has contributed to higher caseloads. Consequently, fewer social workers are able to serve as on-site field supervisors (Bocage, Homonoff, & Riley, 1995). More programs are utilizing off-site MSW supervisors to expand placements (Bogo, 2006). Students who have an on-site task supervisor who is not a social worker may have a substandard learning experience at the agency. Task supervisors may be non-MSWs who work with the off-site field instructor and the faculty liaison. Field instructors are essential for a positive internship experience.

The changing nature of social services has also affected internships. Community agencies who have traditionally welcomed students as interns are under significant pressure to manage higher caseloads in spite of financial pressures. The changing nature of social services has affected field education. Agencies must maximize their staff resources to remain relevant in the social services arena.

Managed care in social service agencies and hospitals has led to fewer social workers on staff, heavier caseloads, and fewer resources for student training (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Aronson & Smith, 2010; Baines, 2004). Field directors today must manage significant and often conflicting demands from students, universities, agencies, and communities. Schools of social work face local, regional, and national online competition for placements. Full-time, tenure track faculty often provide little assistance with field (Peebles-Wilkins & Shank, 2003).

#### **4. Recommendations and Discussion**

Field directors are often classified as non-tenure track administrators who must have their contracts renewed on an annual basis. In a recent CSWE online survey of field coordinators and directors (Fisher, McFall, Kagehiro, & Homes, 2015), over half of the field directors (64%) were not tenure track faculty and (40.6%) received a yearly contract for their positions. There are very limited opportunities for career advancement for field directors. Unlike tenure-track professors, field directors cannot be promoted to an Associate or Full Field Director with the concomitant salary increases and the comfort of job security.

I believe the salaries of field directors should be raised to match other academic administrators or tenured faculty (CSWE, 2008, p15). Field directors could become Clinical Assistant Professors who receive 3-5 year contracts. But even this change may not be sufficient.

For example, the American Association of University Professors has been critical of full-time, non-tenure track appointments. Clinical Assistant Professors are expected to be high performers while simultaneously, being dependent on tenured faculty, department chairs, associate deans, and provosts for reappointment. Clinical Assistant Professors must be cautious in expressing their opinions because of their tenuous position. In order to correct this inequity, Schools of Social Work could make the position of field director a tenure track position. Field directors should then be required to have a doctorate and/or a social work license.

Field education would also benefit from the development of more macro level placements. A 2014 survey of MSW programs indicated that only 6% of 37,699 MSW students were in macro-oriented placements that focused on social policy, advocacy, or community development (CSWE, 2014). Research by the National Association of Social Workers' Center for Workforce Studies found that "only 1 in 7 social workers identify macro as their practice focus" (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008, pp. 7–8). There is a significant deficit of macro social workers in lower socioeconomic communities where the needs are greatest (Mott, 2008).

Field directors and field education advisory boards must be proactive in developing positive relationships with agency and community leaders to expand placement opportunities for their students. When field directors initiate memorandums of agreement with local agencies, they can advocate for their programs to receive priority from these agencies. It is also essential to involve full time faculty as field instructors or field liaisons. This initiative would reduce the pressure to find external MSW supervisors. Many on-site supervisors work long hours and manage significant caseloads. These supervisors would greatly appreciate on campus privileges such as parking on campus, free admission to athletic events, free admissions to lectures and concerts. Additionally, departments and schools of social work should strongly consider raising admissions standards for students in terms of higher grade point averages. High quality students will improve field education. The admissions process could consist of interviewing students before admitting and requiring students to submit a writing sample based on a case scenario.

Another area of field education that must be addressed is student self-care. A self-care plan should be part of student professional development. The practice of self-care is an integral part of social work education (Courtois, 2002). Self-care consists of utilizing skills to attend to their own needs while focusing on the demands of their clients (Figley, 2002). The practice of self-care may minimize disruption of field placements. Inadequate self-care can contribute to student dissatisfaction and impatience with internship challenges. Many graduating social work students are unable to identify the symptoms of professional burnout and emotional exhaustion or how to use self-care as a preventative measure (Moore, 2011).

Professional burnout results from chronic exposure or involvement in human services. Emotional exhaustion can also be a part of burnout. Emotional exhaustion occurs when emotional resources become depleted by chronic needs of their clients, supervisors, and organizations. Burnout can cause student interns to have negative responses to clients, coworkers, and supervisors as well as experience a reduced sense of accomplishment at the agency. In order to prevent burnout, students should be required to keep a journal and complete exercises throughout their internship experience. Another meaningful assignment would be to have students review the literature regarding self-care for methods of prevention and intervention with burnout and exhaustion. Also, students could explore the roles of agency directors and supervisors in forming organizational culture (Pines & Aronson, 1988).

## 5. Conclusion

I believe that the development of these strategies that have been explored in this article could make field education more effective and meaningful. The time has come to make field education the signature pedagogy of training for social work students. In order to achieve this objective, field education must be examined in a comprehensive way. The job status, requirements, and salaries of field directors must be explored. Tenure track faculty must become more involved and more incentives should be given to field instructors and task supervisors. Programs and schools of social work must engage in more community outreach. Students must be exposed to the value and virtue of self-care to prevent professional burnout. These reforms will allow field education to realize its potential as the pinnacle of social work education.

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