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Distance Field Education: A Model for Development, Delivery, and Evaluation

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Abstract

This article provides a model for the development, delivery, and evaluation of distance field education programs. Distance field education poses benefits and challenges due to the contextual realities of students, agencies, communities, and university social work programs. The framework identifies systematic guidelines for graduating competent professionals utilizing seven components for effective implementation and administration. Model components are centered on: field policy and standards; partnerships with human service agencies; distance field supervisor orientation and ongoing training; hybrid method integrative seminar; documentation of learning contract, time and agency supervision; utilization-focused evaluation; and systematic program reflection.

Keywords: distance field education, community partnerships, delivery model, evaluation

Introduction

Recent technological advancements have increased opportunities for learning social work and obtaining a professional degree from a distance. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) encourages programs to use traditional and emerging models of curriculum design that balance field education standards to promote consistency of program outcomes, with a level of flexibility that empowers programs to use practices that fit their learning environment. As the signature pedagogy of social work education, field education is systematically designed, supervised, coordinated, and evaluated based on criteria by which students demonstrate the achievement of specific competencies and practice behaviors (CSWE, 2015). Emerging technology, in the form of Interactive Video Conference (IVC) and online learning management systems such as Canvas and Blackboard, has shaped the way that distance field programs approach field education. The conceptualization of field pedagogy in regards to distance design and delivery has shifted (Dennis, 2015).

While social work students and their communities profit from localized career preparation opportunities, the tasks associated with distance delivery of field instructor training, student monitoring and documenting, and integrating social work or other types of curriculum with the field experience are complicated by the geographic distance. These complications necessitate added time, attention, and the creative use of technology. We believe these challenges have significant implications for social work field education directors and coordinators as they develop effective practices to support students and engage community mentors and service providers in an effort to cultivate and maintain quality practicum experiences “from a distance.” We also agree with East, LaMendola, and Alter (2014) that visionary leadership from key administrators is a crucial part of the infrastructure of distance education delivery—including field education.

This article explores the contextual realities of distance field education, including rural settings. We provide information surrounding related benefits, challenges, and strategies in distance field education and present a model that maps out a smooth flow for the development, delivery, and evaluation of the field education process. The article addresses standards and practices that contribute to effective management of distance education programs that creatively incorporate the use of multiple delivery formats in a variety of community contexts. Our model—applicable across community contexts—is founded on seven components for effective field education practice at any distance. These components include field policy and standards; strategies for developing and maintaining partnerships with human service agencies; instructions for training field supervisors; the use of both in-person and technology based methods; internet-based formats for documentation; utilization-focused evaluation; and systematic self-reflection protocols focused on successes, lessons learned, and need for improvement.

Model for Development, Delivery, and Evaluation

Field education presents both benefits and challenges related to the contextual realities of students, agencies, communities, and social work programs. McFall and Freddolino (2000a) found several factors contributing to the quality of distance field education, including: (a) development of adequate local resources that meet the standards of the program, (b) sensitivity to agency structure and culture, and (c)

adequate resources for support and ongoing sustainment of field education opportunities. These factors help assess and identify areas of inherent concerns and advantages when planning and implementing quality field instruction.

The obvious advantages of field education include the impact for increased professionalism, new knowledge, and collaborative networks in agencies and communities (McFall & Freddolino, 2000b). Challenges have also been recognized in developing distance field education models that meet accreditation expectations, identify student needs and address problems that arise, maintain supervisory requirements, engage faculty, preserve agency-university relationships, and obtain and utilize quality student outcomes (Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008).

Additional benefits and challenges related to field education emerge in the realm of instructional practices and teaching strategies. Numerous studies report findings related to student experience and outcomes of distance learning with important implications for creating effective teaching models for field education (Frey, Faul, & Yankelov, 2003; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009). The advent of what Kreuger and Stretch (2000) call hyper-technology (e.g., interactive television, video conferencing, and the internet) significantly influenced thinking around the possibility of a wide array of distance teaching methodologies and enrichment activities that enhance student learning and the development of social work competencies.

The literature suggests that blended multi-technology strategies are an approach to social work education that allows flexibility, accessibility, and depth of learning in distance settings (Ayala, 2009). Constant consideration of how to promote quality student experiences and outcomes, while maintaining the centrality of the teacher/student relationship, is critical (Frey et al., 2003; Owens et al., 2009; Smith & Wingerson, 2006). The need for intentional strategies for sustaining social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence in technology-based course design and delivery has also been emphasized (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015). Social presence relates to interpersonal connection and interaction. Teaching presence is the creation of a plan for distance learning. Cognitive presence refers to strategies that help students explore new knowledge and think critically. Attention to these elements promotes field educators' focus on quality of learner outcomes, socialization, and professional growth.

Contextual Considerations

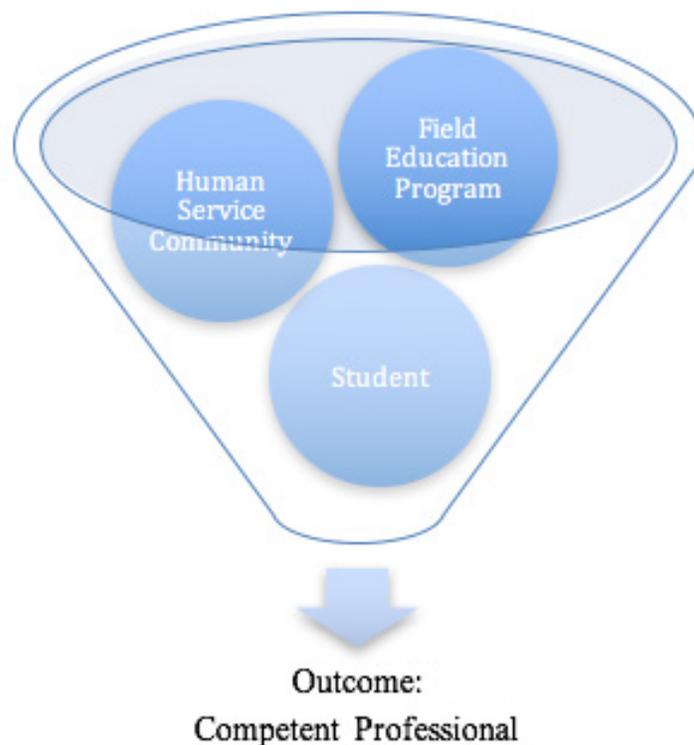
The historical and geographical contexts of our program are important considerations related to our distance field education model. Our main campus/traditional delivery social work program is located at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. It first graduated students in 1937, received CSWE BSW accreditation in 1974, and has a solidly established social, teaching, and cognitive presence. In 2008, the MSW program began and both the undergraduate and graduate programs were extended to seven regional campus/distance learning sites in harmony with the university's land-grant mission. The Morrill Act of 1862 designated one land-grant university per state to serve a "broad segment of the population" with a "practical education" that has "direct relevance to their daily lives" (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities,

2012).

Seven additional social work education sites were established in communities stretching from 26 to 391 mountainous miles away from the main campus and ranging from 3,500 to 28,000 in population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). Since the inception of the distance program, our students have commuted to their IVC instruction sites from numerous outlying locations, many more rural and some more urban than their site-based classroom communities. The variance in our students' backgrounds and contexts creates a rich advanced generalist social work learning environment. It also necessitates creativity and structure in our approach to the design and delivery of field education as we strive to place students in field practicum—and build their careers—in their “hometown” human service communities.

We believe that facilitating interpersonal connections and developing a social presence in field education requires establishing mutually beneficial three-way partnerships among *students, the human service community, and the field education program* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Partnerships in field education.



The ongoing maintenance of these positive relationships contributes to the desired teaching and cognitive presence outcomes of training competent social work professionals who can think critically and are well prepared to contribute to the field and their communities. Our delivery model for field education incorporates an integrated understanding of the issues and dynamics related to all members of this partnership, and delineates specific practices for developing, delivering, and evaluating a distance field education program.

Distance Student Dynamics

The purpose of field education is to prepare students for practice in their future profession. Our community-based model, informed by an understanding of distance dynamics, helps students complete this learning process through:

- Applying knowledge, values and skills from the classroom to their agency and community settings. This is accomplished through reflective assignments that integrate their individually contextualized field experience with the theoretical premise of social work practice as taught in the classroom.
- Identifying their range of interests in the field of social work, such as medical, corrections, child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, school social work, community practice, etc.
- Developing specific competencies, knowledge, and skills for operating as a professional in the field by: demonstrating ethical and professional behavior; engaging diversity and difference; advancing human rights, social, economic and environmental justice; engaging in practice-informed research and research-informed practice; engaging in policy practice; engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (CSWE, 2015).
- Being socialized into the field through role modeling and mentoring from agency field instructors and university field faculty that includes experiential learning opportunities and guidance for students as they face critical decision-making incidents encountered in their community based practice.

Unique challenges emerge for our distance students, the majority of whom are nontraditional—older than the typical student and with multiple priorities and commitments including work and family (Pelletier, 2010). Being a part-time evening student, for example, impacts scheduling field practicum hours because most prime learning opportunities in human service agencies occur during the daytime. Another complicating dynamic may exist in the incongruence between traditional university level academic standards and some students' educational experience. This may contribute to a cultural divide of expectations between distance students and faculty, a reality that must be managed by the proactive use of teaching presence strategies that enhance learning in a distance environment.

Students in any context often view their education as the means to an end. They may be more focused on the outcome of a degree and increased career opportunities than on learning for enlightenment. The distance environment may create different relationship dynamics than a traditional campus setting, including inherent faculty-student engagement challenges. The reality of considerably less opportunity for face-to-face interaction limits opportunities for students to be socialized to the field—formally and informally—in person by university faculty. In addition, viewed through a cultural lens, rural interpersonal relationships can be less formal than those in more urban areas and boundaries between the personal and the professional more blurred (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2006). Awareness of this potential blurring is an essential consideration for both students and faculty. Therefore, field educators must prioritize professionally socializing students; and teaching skills on engagement, assessment and intervention based on an objective view of client situations to mitigate potential conflict embedded in long term community relationships.

Human Service Community Dynamics.

The influence of our main campus is significant in its town of 30,000 people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). As a pillar of the community since 1888, it is easy to understand the strong foundation USU's social presence and public status provides for our traditional delivery social work education program. Our distance model is built upon the university's rich history, as well as on eight decades of learned social work program understanding of human service community dynamics. We divide this set of dynamics into community context and agency context—two critical elements to consider in distance field education development and delivery.

Community context. Field education benefits communities by training a competent workforce of professional service providers and establishing a social work presence on a local level. As interns, our distance students often provide critical services that are otherwise scarce or completely unavailable in their communities. As they graduate and assume their professional roles, their field placement opportunities often lead to further contributions in filling critical service gaps.

An innovative model of agency-university shared supervision may be needed to provide students with the support and structure they need to develop competencies while working in the context of their communities. There is power in the university partnership model when building relationships with human service agencies to provide opportunities that encourage the aspirations of our students. In all contexts, we find it essential that our relationships with community partners attend to the following activities:

- Consulting—training community partners and being available for continuing assistance and support.
- Monitoring—providing ongoing assessment of how educational expectations and standards are being met.
- Mediating—resolving problems as they arise.

Maintaining focus on these activities contributes to ongoing cohesive community relationships. Our distance field education program faces more challenges in building community partnerships and maintaining a teaching presence than our traditional program. These struggles arise due to the reality of there being fewer numbers of agencies in many of the smaller communities where our program is delivered and where our students want to build their professional lives. This can limit the field placement process and the latitude to facilitate goodness of fit between students and agencies in reference to learning style, development, and readiness. Our distance field coordinators are all licensed social workers, and they may partner with our agencies to provide additional cognitive presence in the form of theoretical knowledge, as well as supervisory support when needed.

Agency context. In the context of community, it is within individual human service agencies that student training takes place. Agencies provide the forum for meaningful learning experiences and supervision for practicum students through mentoring and monitoring. The field experience is a component of the social work curriculum that is experiential in nature. Three of the traditional “pillars of learning” defined by the

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2016) are especially applicable to sustaining teaching and cognitive presence in the delivery of distance field education:

1. *Learning to know.* In a distance education environment, students must have access to practice knowledge, as well as opportunities to learn the skills they need to participate in the agency and acquire professional knowledge.
2. *Learning to understand.* Distance students must have access to local mentors as they directly confront the reality of working in an agency and develop their professional use of self.
3. *Learning to do.* Distance students require agency and university support to guide their professional growth in practice engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation. “Learning through doing” is the essence of field education in any educational delivery context.

Gaps between the ideal field experience and the reality of limited opportunities are created by the lack of professional mentoring available in some distance communities where our distance program is delivered. Agency field instructors with the credentials and practice experience necessary to supervise may not be available in every community. As a result, the program must be creative in order to ensure opportunities for students to gain and demonstrate required social work competencies.

Because of the relationship dynamics cited earlier regarding delivering the program in smaller communities, it may be difficult to guarantee that the role of student as a learner is clearly distinguished from the role of an employee in an agency. Students may have existing professional roles in the community and this presents challenges when they are treated more like workers than like students who need to be mentored. Our field coordinators overtly address this dynamic during agency site visits with students and field supervisors, and problem-solve any related issues that arise.

University Field Education Program Dynamics

Social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence are especially relevant from a program dynamics perspective. The university’s responsibility in field education is that of coordination and orchestration of the social and teaching partnership among the social work program, community human service agencies, and students. Accountability for this oversight rests with our *field director*, who is based on our main campus. The field director oversees field education for all program contexts and supervises university *field coordinators*. Field directors are faced with a variety of competing demands (Buck, Bradley, Robb, & Kirzner, 2012), including:

- Keeping the program in compliance with accreditation standards.
- Conceptualizing how classroom learning is connected to the field.
- Designing curriculum for integrative field seminars.
- Providing supervision for liaison visits by field coordinators.
- Developing and implementing field instructor education.
- Creating policies and procedures by which field settings are selected and evaluated in relation to

standards and program outcomes.

- Developing and disseminating policy and procedures as set forth in the field manual, including: field hours, admission criteria for student readiness to enter the field, placement, evaluation of students, and gatekeeping.
- Collaborating with program faculty in creating an assessment plan for evaluation of student attainment of program competencies and practice behaviors.
- Ensuring the centrality of field education as the signature pedagogy of the curriculum.

As the leading administrator of field education statewide, the director trains, supports, and mentors field coordinators at the distance education sites. Distance field coordinators have tremendous autonomy and must function independently. They must be committed to understanding and clearly communicating and implementing university field education programming and policy. Therefore, effective leadership and training from the field director is crucial. In their leadership roles, field directors may be called upon to interpret program policy, mediate, and intervene when student or agency concerns arise. This essential administrative function is known as *gatekeeping*.

According to Moore and Urwin (1991), gatekeeping involves professional social work educators fulfilling their obligation to screen out students who lack competency and have the potential to cause harm to clients. Sowbel (2012) explained that “Screening out a student entails rejecting a candidate at the door or actively interrupting a student’s advancement forward at any point along the training continuum if standards are not met” (p. 27).

Gatekeeping is an inherently ambivalent process and is acknowledged as the most difficult and challenging task in field education. Gatekeeping practices have implications for admissions decisions, protecting the profession, and ensuring that graduating students are competent professionals (Hartman & Wills, 1991; Sowbel, 2012; Tam & Coleman, 2011).

We have found gatekeeping to be another component of field education that is complicated by distance delivery. Geography and a lack of proximity complicate the roles of field director and field coordinators in distance education settings. Distance field coordinators are often isolated from the director and their other university colleagues. They may also be interpersonally isolated from their remote students. This distance makes it more challenging to collaborate with community agencies and to provide the immediate on-the-spot support, mentoring, and monitoring that USU’s main campus program is reputed for.

A clear understanding of field policy on the part of field coordinators and effective communication and consultation between coordinators, the field director, and agency-based field instructors are all absolutely critical to responding effectively when gatekeeping issues emerge.

Model for Distance Field Education Delivery

Our model incorporates an intentional blend of seven components, detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Model for Effective Distance Field Education Delivery

Component	Strategy
1. Field policy and standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Base on formal accreditation guidelines provided by CSWE. B. Incorporate into a practicum manual that is distributed electronically to all field education partners. C. Post online for constant accessibility and reference.
2. Partnerships with human service agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Search the community for quality partnerships with potential for training social work students. B. Develop and formalize partnerships based on program standards for selection of agencies and field supervisors. C. Maintain affiliations by “driving the miles” needed to facilitate on-site face-to-face visits, relationship building, monitoring, and evaluation.
3. Distance field supervisor orientation and ongoing trainings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Clarify roles and program expectations. B. Train field supervisors on how to effectively mentor students. C. Conduct trainings via live video conferencing. D. Provide online access to pre-recorded trainings.
4. Hybrid method integrative seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Integrate classroom learning with the field experience. B. Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and professional socialization through an in-person and internet-based hybrid educational process. C. Foster self-reflection through online assignments, learning journals, and group discussion.
5. Documentation of learning contract, time, and agency supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Formalize a competency-based learning contract. B. Account for required time in the field. C. Provide structure and guidance for supervisory meetings between students and field supervisors. D. Consult with students about their progress toward competencies and development of practice behaviors.
6. Utilization-focused evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Obtain student feedback on various aspects of the field experience and their progress toward competency attainment. B. Assess the impact of technology on distance delivery. C. Acquire feedback from field supervisors regarding competency-based student performance.
7. Systematic program reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Celebrate success. B. Contemplate lessons learned. C. Address concerns candidly. D. Formulate strategies that build on the program strengths.

Our specific strategies for effective delivery and administration practice of distance field education address the following:

1. Clearly written and easily accessible field policy and standards. This component is based on CSWE accreditation guidelines and program developed materials and manuals that are available online. Communicating and enforcing policy and standards is important in all social work program contexts and, as demonstrated in our previous discussion on the complexity of gatekeeping, this effort warrants serious attention based on its relevance in distance field education delivery.
2. Developing and maintaining strong partnerships with human service agencies. This process includes the search for, the expansion of, and the preservation of quality relationships in distance communities. We find that while the main campus traditional program enjoys many established relationships in a variety of practice areas, the same is not always true in our smaller distance education communities. The miles between, geography involved, and other student contextual issues create a constant need for the development of new community-centered placements.
3. Distance relevant field instructor trainings. The preparation of agency-based supervisors includes clearly communicating roles and program expectations and teaching principles for the effective mentoring of students. We maintain a social presence and deliver our training through the IVC system and provide online access to prerecorded trainings for field instructors who are unable to travel to a regional campus site.
4. Hybrid method in-person and internet-based integrative seminar. The purpose of the seminar is to connect theory to practice through peer-to-peer, faculty-to-student, and student-to-content interaction. These activities incorporate self-reflection through online assignments, journaling, and group discussions. Our field director (Calloway-Graham, 2012), described integrative seminar objectives as:
 - Influencing student socialization and inculcating a sense of self as a professional
 - Providing an opportunity for faculty to keep in touch with students' developmental experiences
 - Offering an opportunity for peer learning
 - Communicating support
 - Promoting the development of reflective practice
 - Making the connection between academic learning and practice and development in the field.We deliver our integrative seminar using the same teaching and cognitive presence-focused format in all of our program contexts.
5. Internet-based documentation of learning contract, time, and agency supervision. Student accountability and record keeping is addressed through competency-based learning contracts, timesheets, supervisory conference forms, and face-to-face consultation with regard to student progress on competency development. Online submission is especially beneficial in our distance delivery format.
6. Ongoing utilization focused evaluation. We collect data from students and field supervisors with regard to competency attainment and the impact of technology on learning. Quantitative data is collected online and qualitative data is collected via focus groups. (See Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Assessment below.)

7. Systematic reflection on the program's successes and needs for improvement. We believe in celebrating successes, reflecting on lessons learned, identifying concerns, and formulating strategies for building on program strengths. While our main campus program has 80 years of experience to draw on, our distance field education delivery model is relatively young. It functions best with adequate supervision, self-reflection, and direct feedback as it learns and grows. Field coordinators, students, agency-based field instructors, the field director, and other program administrators reflect collaboratively with the aim of constant improvement.

This seven-part model has contributed to the effective development and delivery of a successful distance field education program that serves communities ranging from rural to more urban settings. It provides a practical guide that can be followed regardless of geographic distance and contextual variables. It specifies a clear accountability-promoting framework that field directors can use to train, mentor, and manage the efforts of field coordinators. We consider these strategies to be markers of excellence for how field directors and field coordinators implement field education. When we follow this delivery model, we experience quality outcomes and we formally assess these outcomes via utilization-focused evaluation and assessment.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Assessment

Assessment is an integral component of competency-based education. To evaluate the extent to which the competencies have been met, a system of assessment is central to this model of education. Data from assessment continuously inform and promote change in the explicit and implicit curriculum to enhance attainment of program competencies (CSWE, 2008, p. 16).

A critical aspect of maintaining a successful field education program is the effective implementation of utilization-focused evaluation (Freddolino et al., 2014; Patton, 2008). When field education is implemented using distance modalities, it also becomes necessary to evaluate how technology impacts program delivery.

Harrington and Reasons (2005) asserted that the delivery of distance courses requires a "team of professionals, including instructional designers, producer/directors, and technical specialists, working alongside faculty" (p. 7). Harrington and Reasons (2005) also emphasized the critical connection between the technology and a distance educator's teaching effectiveness and the need for ongoing assessment of both of these elements. The success of a course delivered via distance-education technology clearly depends not only on the instructor's competence but also on the effectiveness of the technology and the technology support staff. Distance field educators must attend closely to their own competence and to the performance of the technology, in order to design and deliver quality programs.

Dennis (2015) stated, "Information and communication technology (ICT) continues to evolve in ways that allow for more efficient and more robust administrative strategies to compile, store, manage and retrieve student data" (p. 263). In all of our program contexts, we rely heavily on ICT as we collect quantitative and qualitative data from students and field instructors each semester. The majority of our data are collected

via online questionnaires. Focus groups with graduating students are also an important component of our ongoing assessment practices. Since most of our students are scattered across the state, focus groups are conducted via IVC, usually during or following a scheduled course session. A face-to-face focus group format is used with students at the main campus. We ask students a number of questions designed to prompt discussion about program and field education objectives, the degree to which they were achieved, and how program delivery (including the ICT component) might be improved.

Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the data collection and evaluation activities we utilize for ongoing field education assessment and improvement on our main campus at distance sites.

Table 2
Evaluation Strategies for Distance Field Education Assessment and Improvement

Assessment method	Information obtained	How utilized
Online Traditional Course Evaluations (IDEA System)	Quantitative rating of course and instructor. Qualitative comments and suggestions.	Feedback for ongoing improvement of field and integrative seminar instruction.
Online <i>Supplemental Evaluation Instrument</i> (SCIE-DE)	Evaluates the impact that different (e.g. face-to-face, interactive video conferencing, online, hybrid) delivery methods might have on course evaluations and objectives with consideration not only of the instructor's competence but the effectiveness of the technology and support staff.	Assessment of comparability and consistency across course delivery methods for enhancement in the effective use of technology by instructor and support staff.
Online <i>Practicum Instructor Evaluation of Student Instrument</i> (PIESI)	Competency-based assessment of student performance in the agency setting.	Outcome measure of field education program and feedback for ongoing development of student competency-based performance.
Online <i>Student Evaluation of Practicum Agency and Faculty</i> (SEPAF)	Assesses student perceptions of factors believed to facilitate student competency attainment: -Practicum agency and field supervisor evaluated on training experience, professional atmosphere, supervision, student work space, and social work opportunities. -Faculty field coordinators evaluated on support, providing appropriate feedback, availability, role modeling, and overall quality of field experience.	Informs the field faculty concerning improvements with field supervisor training, integrative seminar curriculum development, and constructive feedback during individual agency site visits.
Online <i>Student Competency Self-Efficacy Survey</i> (SSEA)	Measures students' self-perceptions with regards to critical social work competencies tied to the field.	Outcome measures that provide feedback about the accomplishment of program objectives.
Graduating student focus groups (In-person or IVC)	Qualitative group interviews eliciting self-reported perceptions of field experience, career preparation, attainment of competencies, and distance related issues (e.g. comparability, technology, etc.).	Guidance for the university field education program modification and improvement process.

The data gathered through these activities provide critical feedback about our students and their progress toward competency attainment, as well as how ICT may be facilitating or impeding the learning process. Findings from continuous and periodic assessment are systematically used to determine if field education outcomes are consistent with the program's mission, goals and objectives, and standards of competency. More specifically, our assessment plan allows the program to ensure that field education in every context is:

- Being dispensed in accordance with CSWE accreditation standards
- Meeting its mission, goals and objectives
- Making necessary and ongoing improvements
- Promoting students' development of competencies and practice behaviors
- Satisfying the needs of community and agency stakeholders
- Being delivered as a coherent and integrated whole
- Maintaining its relevance in a changing environment.

Field education coordinators review assessment findings related to student, agency, and social work program performance each semester and a statewide field faculty retreat is held annually where results are examined and discussed in-depth. These discussions culminate in informed data-driven decisions regarding what adjustments need to be made to the field education program.

An example from a recent iteration of the assessment process illustrates how this happens. As the field faculty met recently during a retreat to explore the year's assessment data, we learned from analyzing student self-assessment responses that they needed more time to process their practicum experiences in ways that help them develop program competencies pertaining to policy and research. We responded by adjusting the integrative practicum seminar format to include more time for processing experiences with an emphasis on identifying connections between practice in the agency context and policy and research.

When focus group data was reviewed during another retreat, it was clear that students needed more faculty support around issues of self-care (coping with stress, avoiding vicarious traumatization, and preventing burnout). We responded immediately by increasing the amount of time we focus on this issue during seminar throughout the year and by incorporating the development of, and reflection on, individualized self-care plans as a seminar assignment. As field faculty, we continue to examine assessment data during ongoing retreats and to look for evidence that the adjustments we make have the desired effects.

In summary, our university field education program has established a means for faculty field coordinators and the field director to obtain feedback about student performance and competency development in the practicum setting. In addition, our students evaluate their own competence, their field placements—both the agency site and supervisor—and the university field education program, via online data collection instruments. These evaluative data help determine how well the program's objectives have been attained. Data from the field assessments are especially useful in enabling examination of two key dimensions of learning: students' acquisition of curriculum content and the application of that content in their field placements (e.g. competencies and practice skills). Results from all of these data collection efforts are routinely reviewed by social work program administration and discussed with university field coordinators and agency based field supervisors in ongoing trainings. Since field supervisors play a key role in the field experience, sharing and dialoguing with them about evaluation and assessment findings is essential for the maintenance and ongoing improvement of the program.

Extra effort is often needed, and therefore made, to engage our distance field instructors in this process.

Systematic Reflection: Applying Lessons Learned

With multiple-source evaluation data as a catalyst, our model for distance field education integrates intentional and systematic reflection on the program's successes and needs for improvement. In addition to explicit attention to formal evaluation data, the program undertakes ongoing self-reflective inquiry. This includes celebrating successes, contemplating lessons learned, candidly addressing concerns, and formulating strategies to build on strengths in all delivery model components.

The model provides a practical and useful framework for addressing accreditation guidelines, standards and policy; incorporating the use of cutting edge technology in creative ways; and developing strategies for effective program management of field education experiences at distance sites. It is especially useful for illuminating specific practices that reflect an understanding of the benefits and inherent challenges associated with the student, faculty, and community relationship dynamics involved in the delivery of quality distance programs.

As a program, we have come to understand that when our practices attend to all aspects of the three-way student-community-program field education partnership, we are able to sustain our social, teaching, and cognitive presence and deliver a quality educational product anywhere. Using best practice helps us achieve the goal of our students becoming competent professionals and leaders in their "hometown" social work communities. Ongoing self-reflection allows us to continually assess ourselves as a program and maintain our focus on what we hope for in the future.

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