



Developing a Faculty-Led Field Practicum: Factors to Consider

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In 2012, the state of Delaware experienced an unprecedented number of suicide deaths among youth and young adults (aged 13-21). A CDC epidemiologic investigation found mental health problems as a major determinant of the suicide deaths. Faculty members in the Department of Social Work at Delaware State University (DSU) collaborated with the Office of Field Instruction to develop a faculty-led field practicum to address the problem. This article addresses the factors that were considered, including adhering to the philosophy of field instruction at DSU, assessing students' understanding and mastery of core competencies, and supporting the department's mission and key underpinnings.

During the first quarter of 2012, eight adolescents and young adults (aged 13-21) died by suicide in the two most rural counties in the state of Delaware, Kent and Sussex. The number of deaths in just one quarter far exceeded the number of suicide deaths reported for the two county area and age group for the previous year (Fowler, Crosby, Parks, Ivey, & Silverman, 2013). State officials reached out to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for assistance with the epidemiologic investigation of the deaths. The CDC researchers found mental health problems as a major determinant of the fatal suicide attempts (Fowler et al., 2013). Between 2009-2013, approximately 6,000 or 9.7% of all adolescents in the state of Delaware had at least one major depressive episode. The majority, 54.9% or approximately 3,000 youth, did not receive treatment for depression (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2015). Often mental health disorders are a manifestation of experiencing adversity, stress, or trauma. Additionally, there is a significant link between mental health problems and suicidality (Freedenthal, 2007).

Resilience is the ability of individuals to maneuver their way to personal, external, and cultural resources that allow them to maintain a sense of well-being, as well as their ability to negotiate for those resources (Ungar, 2008). Resilient youths are better prepared to respond to adversity in healthy ways because they are able to tap into their inner strengths, as well as familial and community resources during times of adversity, stress

or trauma. Moreover, community-based, resilience interventions can help prepare youth to make healthy responses to adversity. (Burns et al., 2015).

Concerned with the alarming rate of fatal suicide attempts among youth and young adults in the state of Delaware in 2012, faculty in the Department of Social Work at Delaware State University wanted to offer community-based resilience programming for youth and young adults who reside in the two-county area that experienced the unprecedented number of fatal suicide attempts. Equally important, the faculty wanted to meaningfully engage social work students in this endeavor through a faculty-led field practicum. Faculty members consulted with the Office of Field Instruction to develop a faculty-led field practicum for the 2014-2015 school year. This paper discusses factors that were considered during the development of this innovative field practicum.

Background

Delaware State University (DSU) was founded in 1891 as the State College for Colored Students. As one of America's first Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), DSU has a long proud history of working with the community. HBCUs have traditionally championed community-university partnerships to address community needs. DSU is located in Kent County Delaware, one of the communities impacted by the fatal suicide attempts. In keeping with DSU's tradition of partnering with the community to address community needs, Project Resilience was conceived. Project Resilience was generously supported by the Delaware Community Trust and its New Gen South initiative.

Project Resilience is a community-based initiative designed to help youth and young adults (ages 7-21) utilize their strengths and mobilize familial and community resources to have healthy responses to adversity, stressful or traumatic events. The Department of Social Work at DSU partnered with youth-serving agencies to deliver the program in the community. A BSW and a MSW student had integral roles in developing, delivering, and evaluating the Project Resilience program as part of their faculty-led field practicum.

Field Practicum Considerations

Major considerations for developing Project Resilience as a faculty-led field practicum were (1) to ensure that the experience satisfied the purpose of field instruction at Delaware State University, (2) to demonstrate how students' mastery of social work core competencies was assessed, and (3) to show how the experience was undergirded by the department's mission and key underpinnings. The purpose of field instruction at Delaware State University is to help students develop and fine-tune their understanding and application of social work practice skills at both the entry level (for BSW students) and the advanced level (for MSW students). In addition, field instruction provides opportunities for students to take risks and to evaluate their own supervised practice within a structured and supportive environment (Dottin, 2015). Also, field instruction must prepare students to master the set of core competencies outlined in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). After a consultation with the Office of Field Instruction, faculty in the Department of Social Work developed a field practicum that was

consistent with the philosophy of field instruction at DSU.

The mission of the Department of Social Work at DSU is to *prepare ethical and culturally competent generalist and advanced generalist social work professionals who provide practical leadership in implementing prevention and intervention services to diverse client systems and who advocate for social and economic justice in practice, policy and research in a global society* (Dottin, 2015). The department has adopted five key underpinnings that support the mission:

1. *Strengths Perspective* – Internal or external features and assets that, if identified, mobilized or enhanced, may be used by a client system to achieve positive change.
2. *Empowerment Perspective* – The process the social worker applies in order to help individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities obtain power so that they gain greater control over their well-being presently and in the future.
3. *Rural Perspective* – The understanding that people who are nurtured and live in rural communities have unique folkways and mores that shape some of their expectations and behaviors differently than people from other milieus.
4. *Global Perspective* – An approach to helping that embraces the commonalities and differences that exist personally, communally, culturally, and religiously that all citizens in the world share regardless of their place of birth or citizenship.
5. *A Black Perspective for Social Work Practice* – A prototype for understanding the unique experiences and world views associated with being of African genetic origin in the United States that can be used in practice with other oppressed client systems (Dottin, 2015).

In keeping with the philosophy and requirements of field instruction at DSU, the faculty-led field practicum, *Project Resilience*, provided the students with opportunities to develop their understanding of social work practice skills and perform those skills for and with diverse client systems. For social work, engagement is a process through which a client begins to actively participate in their treatment. According to Cohen (1989), engagement includes strategies that make a clear offer of services and provide for voluntary services that meet the perceived needs of the clients. An essential component of *Project Resilience* is engagement through community outreach. The students were responsible for developing and nurturing partnerships with staff and volunteers at youth-serving agencies, community leaders, and families in order to create opportunities to deliver the *Project Resilience* program. They established partnerships with the local Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, and after school programs. The students also had to engage the youth who participated in the program. One strategy used to engage the participants was joining. For *Project Resilience*, the intention of *joining* is to establish a healthy rapport between facilitators and participants and to jumpstart an open exchange among participants (Hill, 2016). A *joining* might include asking the participants to identify individuals whom they consider to be roles model in the community, and then to ask them to discuss the qualities or characteristics that make those individuals good role models.

The students also had opportunities to fine-tune their assessment skills as part of the faculty-led field practicum. Assessment can be defined as the process of gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing salient data into a multidimensional formulation that provides the basis for action decisions (Hodge, 2001). Students had to assess the needs of the community partners, as well as the needs of the program participants. The common denominator among the community partners was that they were all youth-serving agencies. However, they were diverse in terms of mission, resources, hours of operations, and other organizational characteristics. In some instances, after consulting with their field instructor, the students modified the program in order to meet partner needs. For example, *Project Resilience* was developed as a six one-hour session program. However, many of the community partners had drop-in hours and competing programming. In some instances, the students truncated and modified the *Project Resilience* curriculum in order to satisfy partner needs. Additionally, *Project Resilience* is designed for youth aged 7-21 years of age. However, younger youth often participated. Consequently, the students modified the program to meet the needs of the younger participants.

Intervention is a broad term used to describe diverse strategies that social workers use to address the needs of client systems. The students committed considerable time learning to deliver the *Project Resilience* program through role-playing and critique from the field instructor. As an intervention, *Project Resilience* is a strengths-based model which is grounded in an ecological perspective and influenced by Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) techniques. It is undergirded by four principles: *community*, *self-righting*, *creativity*, and *vision*. For *Project Resilience*, the *community* is defined as a broad base of strength to lean on when challenges arise. The unique way in which individuals apply their personal strengths to overcome challenge and loss is *self-righting*. Creativity describes the ability to consider positive alternatives to challenges in order to make things work. The fourth element of *Project Resilience* is *vision*, that is, the particular worldview an individual holds (Hill, 2016). During each session, participants engaged in activities designed to bolster understanding of their own strengths. They also examined the familial, community, and cultural resources that could be tapped during times of adversity.

By having responsibility for evaluating *Project Resilience* programming, including process and outcomes evaluations, students gained an understanding of the importance of program evaluation as a social work practice skill. For example, the funder and community partners were interested in process data (e.g., the number of sessions held, the number of program participants, etc.) The students collected and maintained this data. Also, the field instructor and social work faculty were interested in outcome data about the effectiveness of *Project Resilience*. To assess the effectiveness of *Project Resilience* as a resilience intervention, the project team used the Child Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28). The students were trained to administer the instrument. The CYRM-28 is an empirically validated twenty-eight item instrument designed to explore the understanding of the resources (individual, relational, communal and cultural) available to youth (Daigneault, Dion, Hébert, McDuff, & Collin-Vézina (2013).

In addition to providing opportunities for the students to understand and apply social work practice skills, as required by the Office of Field Instruction at DSU, another consideration for developing the faculty-led field practicum was student assessment. The field instructor had to assess the students' understanding and mastery of the CSWE core competencies. The field instructor reviewed and provided feedback on process recordings, provided weekly supervision, and observed and critiqued sessions that the students facilitated. Neuman & Friedman (1997) define a process recording as a method by which students record their interaction with a client; involves a written record of all communication, both verbal and nonverbal, spoken and observed; and involves the student's feelings and reflection throughout the interaction. Additionally, the process recording allows the field instructor to examine the dynamics of client-student interactions. The students were challenged with completing a process recording for each client system that they interacted with. For example, they had to create a process recording detailing their interaction with community partner, an agency staff member or volunteer, describing how they described *Project Resilience* to the community partner and how they linked the program to the needs of the agency. Additionally, they had to complete a process recording describing their interactions with a participant of a *Project Resilience* group. They were also tasked with completing a process recording describing their interaction with a *Project Resilience* group as the client system. Reviewing the process recordings provided opportunities for the field instructor to assess the students' understanding and mastery of the core competencies.

Supervision is an integral component of field education. For social work, supervision considers to all activities designed to guide the social work student in assessment, intervention, and evaluation of client interventions (Shulman, 2008). Supervision helps students to develop the skills needed to be competent and ethical social work practitioners. For *Project Resilience*, the field instructor utilized group supervision. Supervision focused on the students' understanding of utilizing a broad range of assessment, planning, and intervention skills with different client systems. Because one of the students was a MSW student, the instructor also had to address understanding and mastery of advanced generalist practice skills. Advanced generalist social work practice encompasses an application of a higher level of social work knowledge, skills, values, and ethics (Vecchiolla et al., 2008). The advanced generalist practitioner utilizes a higher level of methodological and theoretical knowledge to work with all systems. Inherent to advanced generalist social work practice is the utilization of ecological assessments to guide intervention processes (Derezotes, 2012). The field instructor used supervision to help the MSW student understand that the advanced generalist practitioner is not only concerned with the client's level of functioning and well-being, but also the environmental factors in which the client interacts, including family, peers, and the larger community. During weekly supervision sessions, the field instructor reinforced feedback from the review of the process recordings and further engaged the students in dialogue in order to assess their understanding and mastery of the core competencies. In addition to the process recordings and supervision sessions, the field instructor observed the students while they presented the *Project Resilience* program in community settings. This provided another opportunity to assess the students' mastery of the core competencies.

A third consideration for developing *Project Resilience* as a faculty-led field practicum was how to incorporate the department's mission and key underpinnings. The five underpinnings that support the Department of Social Work at DSU are woven throughout the BSW and MSW curricula, including field instruction. The departmental underpinnings were incorporated into the overall *Project Resilience* program and individual program modules. For example, the strengths-perspective permeates throughout the *Project Resilience* program. The program underscores the notion that every individual has talents, strengths, and abilities and that all communities are rich with resources that can be mobilized during times of adversity, stress or trauma. Empowerment is also a global theme which is presented throughout the *Project Resilience* program. The intent of Project Resilience is to empower participants to realize that they have inner strengths, as well as familial, community, and cultural resources, and that those resources can be tapped into during times of adversity, stress or trauma. Other departmental underpinnings are represented in individual modules. For example, Delaware is a rural state. The *Community* module of *Project Resilience* addresses the uniqueness and strengths of rural communities as elucidated by the department's rural perspective underpinning.

Conclusion

In summary, a faculty-led field practicum can provide valuable opportunities for social work students to develop and practice the skills needed for ethical and competent social work practice. It is essential to ensure that the students who participate in faculty-led field practicums have rich and rewarding experiences. Collaboration and consultation with the Office of Field Instruction are essential for developing successfully faculty-led field practicums. Of paramount importance is that the experience is true to the purpose of field instruction (e.g., students are given the opportunity to develop and perform social work practice skills). The experience must also provide ample opportunity to assess students' mastery of social work practice core competencies as defined by CSWE. It is also necessary that faculty-led field practicums remain true to the department's mission and key underpinnings.

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