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Enhancing Partnerships with Field Instructors: Identifying Effective Retention Strategies

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Abstract

Fostering long-term partnerships with field instructors is a priority for all social work field education programs. Therefore, schools of social work implement numerous strategies to enhance field instructor loyalty. This article presents results from a university survey of social work field instructors intended to identify instructors' most-valued incentives and the most influential factors and strategies that promote field instructor retention.

Keywords: field education program, field instructor retention, incentives

All schools of social work face the ongoing challenge of recruiting, supporting, and retaining quality field instructors. This challenge is greater than ever given economic constraints, individual agency funding cuts contributing to increased workloads, and changing models of social work practice (Bogo & Power, 1992; Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Maynard, Mertz, & Fortune, 2015). In addition, many field education programs are confronted with high rates of field instructor burnout and frequent turnover because the role of field instructor is a volunteer position that must be balanced with multiple competing work demands (Rosenfeld, 1989; Shapiro, 1989). To address these challenges, it is essential that field education programs use innovative and effective strategies to support and retain existing field instructors (Massaro & Stebbins, 2015).

Although our School of Social Work maintains a cohort of experienced field instructors, some of whom have served in this role for more than 20 years, we expend precious field education resources recruiting new agencies and field instructors. On average, each year we recruit and train 100 new field instructors and task supervisors. Our goal is to create long-term relationships with agencies and field instructors who are working successfully with the School and our students, which ultimately benefits the students' experience.

Incentives

One of the ways we secure and retain high-quality field instructors is to offer meaningful incentives that provide support and contribute to our field instructors' professional development. More than just a "thank you," these incentives serve to increase the knowledge and skill base of the field instructors, thereby ultimately improving the quality of the field instruction our students receive. Well-placed incentives have the capacity to not only directly benefit the field instructors, but also to indirectly benefit the students they supervise, the agencies in which they work, and the university programs seeking to build long-term relationships with community agencies.

Our School provides a number of incentives to field instructors to demonstrate our appreciation for their supervision of our students and to motivate the instructors and their agencies to continue hosting our Master of Social Work (MSW) students. The following are current examples of the incentives we offer:

- Free or reduced cost admission to the School's monthly Clinical Lecture Series, which offers continuing education in evidence-based practices across numerous direct practice arenas. Participants receive contact hours.
- Multi-day trainings specifically for field instructors on topics such as motivational interviewing and culturally competent counseling with clients who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI). Participants receive contact hours.
- Access to the University's digital library and the Area Health Education Center library, enabling field instructors to access research articles.
- Free auditing of social work courses at our institution.
- An annual day-long Field Instructors' Conference and Recognition Luncheon, for which participants receive contact hours.

We acknowledge that as a public university, the types of incentives we are able to offer are limited by funding and resource allocation. Notably, some more resource-rich university programs may offer stipends to field instructors or provide continuing education credits for serving as a field instructor. Other universities may be able to offer longstanding field instructors adjunct faculty status, which provides both prestige and access to university resources. Although these higher levels of benefits likely provide greater incentive to serve as field instructors—and therefore, should be considered by field education programs with the funds to provide this level of support—we chose to focus our research on the level of incentives feasible within the current budgetary constraints of our School's field education program.

Field Education Model

Our field education model is designed to enable field faculty to develop long-term relationships with agencies and field instructors. Full-time field faculty specialize in practice areas such as mental health; child welfare, health care and integrated health care models; school social work; and community, management, and policy practice. Field faculty teach social work courses in their practice areas and serve as liaisons with agencies that provide services within their areas. This multifaceted role enables field faculty not only to develop expertise in the theory and practice within their specialty, but also to integrate an understanding of service delivery into their classroom and field work. Because field faculty often have long-term relationships with agencies and field instructors, the field faculty are well positioned to match students with field placements by considering how each student's learning style and personality will fit with the demands and opportunities of a field placement at a particular agency.

Literature Review

Social work field education programs must continually address three questions relevant to field instruction: (a) What motivates social workers to become field instructors? (b) What factors encourage field instructors to remain in this role? and (c) What factors influence a field instructor's decision to stop serving in that role? Our attempts to answer these questions prompted a review of motivations and retention factors, which in turn, provided a broader context for our understanding of incentives and meaningful partnerships with field instructors.

Research has indicated a social worker's initial decision to step into the role of field instructor is often driven by several motivating factors. Primarily, field instructors reported they were inspired by the intrinsic value of teaching and training a new workforce of social workers (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Reardon, 2012; Rosenfeld, 1989). Field instructors participating in these studies reported that they felt personally motivated to give back to the profession by mentoring a new generation of social workers. Field instructors have also noted they were interested in their own professional development, and stepping into the field instructor role allowed them to gain supervisory experience and stay current on emerging issues relevant to research and practice. Finally, agencies employing social workers who serve as field instructors were motivated to make accommodations for field education to educate students and to reap the rewards of student involvement in their agency, including access to university resources, fresh perspectives, and free labor (Globerman & Bogo,

2003).

After making the decision to become a field instructor, receive training, and supervise students in the field, social workers reported that their decision to continue serving as a field instructor was influenced by factors both internal and external to their agency. Most social workers who continued in the role of field instructor reported receiving support from their employing organization that allowed them to have the time and space to work with students (Rosenfeld, 1989; Showers & Cuzzi, 1992). Field instructors also cited enjoying many aspects of teaching and mentoring students, and appreciated the opportunities this role presented, including the opportunity to sharpen their practice skills and learn from students, opportunities to reflect on social work theory and practice, and the opportunity to work outside of the scope of their typical job responsibilities (Globerman & Bogo, 2003).

Research has noted the primary factor influencing a social worker's decision to stop serving as a field instructor was a lack of agency support, most notably employers who would not make workload adjustments to give field instructors the time to supervise students (Rosenfeld, 1989). Organizational cultures based on productivity and billing were cited as a significant obstacle to supporting this additional supervisory time for the field instructor (Shapiro, 1989). Other field instructors who chose to step away from the role reported their decision was influenced by student-specific factors, including the challenge of working with students with limited availability and inflexible schedules, the paperwork demands inherent to supervision and evaluation of students' field performance, and negative experiences with a student or university (Rosenfeld, 1989).

Overall, the existing research has underscored that those who choose to be field instructors do so because they are intrinsically motivated to give back to the profession and these social workers typically enjoy the experience of mentoring and guiding students new to the field. Nevertheless, agency support is essential for field instructor longevity because accommodations to workloads are required to give field instructors the time and space to adequately supervise students. These findings emphasize the need for university programs to offer incentives that are meaningful to both field instructors and the agencies in which they work. Our field education program expends significant resources implementing incentives to enhance field instructor retention. The current study explored which incentives and factors were most valued by our program's field instructors.

Method

Participants

To identify and evaluate the specific factors and incentives that field instructors perceived as having the most influence on retention (i.e., their decision to continue serving as field instructors for our program), our Field Education Program surveyed all field instructors working with our MSW students during the 2015-16 academic year. In May 2016, all field instructors received an e-mail invitation to participate in an anonymous Web-based survey, which contained a link to the survey site. Of the 235 field instructors invited to participate, 156 responded to the invitation. Of these respondents, two opted not to participate in the research project,

yielding a final analytic sample of 154 respondents and a response rate of 65.5%. See Table 1 for respondents' characteristics.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Study Sample (N = 154)

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
First-year field instructor		
Yes	60	39.0
No	91	59.1
# Years as field instructor with this school of social work		
1	34	22.1
2–4	47	30.5
5–7	22	14.3
≥ 8	22	14.3
Type of student typically hosted		
Foundation students	85	55.2
Concentration – direct practice	81	52.6
Concentration – community, management, policy	29	18.8

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% due to nonresponse missingness and option to select more than one response for type of student hosted.

Instrument

The Field Education Program staff developed a survey to gather feedback from field instructors regarding their overall experiences within this role and their satisfaction with the institutional incentives offered to field instructors. The survey queried field instructors about numerous specific incentives intended to promote field instructor retention and asked about factors that influenced respondents' decisions to continue in the field instructor role. A portion of the survey consisted of five items that asked respondents to rate the extent to which the specific incentive influenced their decision to continue providing field instruction. Responses were captured with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *highly*, 2 = *a lot*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *a little*, 5 = *not at all*). A second portion of the survey consisted of six items that asked respondents to rate the importance of factors that influenced their decision to remain a field instructor. Responses to these items used a different 5-point Likert scale (1 = *extremely important*, 2 = *very important*, 3 = *slightly important*, 4 = *low importance*, 5 = *not at all important*). Last, the survey presented two open-ended questions that asked field instructors to suggest additional incentives that might be offered to field instructors, and to describe other factors that contributed to their decision to continue as field instructors with our Field Education Program. It is worth noting that our survey did not ask field instructors to rank incentives based on how they thought their employer valued the incentives. We chose to exclude questions regarding the employer's perspective on incentives because such questions ask for information to which the field instructors were not privy to given that most did not serve in administrative positions within their agencies. See Appendix A to review the survey.

Data Analysis

Completed surveys were analyzed to determine the incentives that field instructors identified as most influential in promoting retention. Descriptive and bivariate statistics were conducted in Stata 14. For open-end-

ed responses, one author completed initial coding, and the other two authors reviewed those results. Final codes were arrived at by consensus among the three authors. Open coding of sentences or phrases allowed for emergent themes. In addition, constant comparative analysis supported the development of emerging codes through multiple iterations of data review (Padgett, 1998). Initial codes were narrow (e.g., supervision opportunities, institutional opportunities for field instructors); however, with secondary review of these data and codes, themes were collapsed into broader codes (e.g., teaching and mentoring opportunities) to more accurately capture overarching themes of field instructor feedback.

Results

Incentives Affecting Retention

Nearly 60% of respondents had been a field supervisor with our School of Social Work for 2 years or more (see Table 1). Overall, field instructors reported that the most meaningful incentive for retention was access to *additional trainings for field instructors at no cost*, followed by *clinical lectures at no or reduced cost* and the *field instructor recognition lunch and conference*. However, when these ratings were examined by length of service, we found some variation between first-year and non-first year field instructors' ratings. First-year field instructors had the same first and second incentive rankings as the overall group, but their third-ranked incentive was *digital library system access*. Non-first year field instructors ranked *clinical lectures at no or reduced cost* as the most meaningful incentive, followed by *additional trainings for field instructors at no cost*, and the third-ranked incentive was consistent with the overall group (i.e., *field instructor recognition lunch and conference*). Pearson chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between incentives and length of service. Relationships between these variables were not statistically significant. Full details of the ratings of incentives are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Field Instructors' Rankings of Incentives

	All Field Inst.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	First-Year Field Instr.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Non-First Year Field Inst.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Additional trainings for field instructors at no cost	1	2.92 (1.37)	1	2.66 (1.34)	2	3.08 (1.38)
Clinical lectures at no or reduced cost	2	2.99 (1.36)	2	2.88 (1.38)	1	3.04 (1.37)
Field instructor appreciation conference	3	3.32 (1.38)	5	3.38 (1.44)	3	3.26 (1.36)
Access to library system	4	3.43 (1.39)	3	3.19 (1.44)	4	3.60 (1.33)
Auditing courses	5	3.51 (1.29)	4	3.26 (1.40)	5	3.68 (1.22)

Note. *M* = mean. *SD* = standard deviation. Field Inst. = field instructors.

Factors Affecting Retention

Overall, field instructors indicated the most influential factor affecting their decision to continue in this role was the quality of the students, followed by the relationship with the field faculty, and then the relationship with the School of Social Work. When these rankings were examined by level of service, we found only one variation between first-year and non-first year field instructors. Whereas first-year field instructors provided the same first- and second-ranked factors as the overall group, they ranked the relationship with the Field Education Program as the third most influential factor affecting their retention. Complete ratings of factors affecting retention of field instructors are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Field Instructors' Rankings of Factors That Influence Decision to Continue in Field Instructor Role

	All Field Inst.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	First-Year Field Instr.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Non-First Year Field Inst.	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Quality of students	1	1.36 (0.65)	1	1.36 (0.55)	1	1.35 (0.69)
Relationship with field faculty	2	1.91 (0.84)	2	1.98 (0.78)	2	1.88 (0.88)
Relationship with School of Social Work	3	2.08 (0.91)	4	2.24 (0.98)	3	2.00 (0.86)
Relationship with Field Education Program	4	2.13 (0.97)	3	2.21 (1.04)	4	2.11 (0.92)
Access to social work faculty and expertise	5	2.45 (0.98)	5	2.45 (0.98)	5	2.46 (0.99)
Having same field faculty over time	6	2.74 (1.05)	6	2.64 (0.95)	6	2.79 (1.09)

Note. *M* = mean. *SD* = standard deviation. Field Inst. = field instructors

Qualitative Findings

Two open-ended survey items were relevant to the aims of the current study. The first item (i.e., *Do you have any suggestions for additional incentives that we might offer field instructors?*) received responses from 53 study participants (response rate of 34.4%). The second item (i.e., *Are there other factors that contribute to your decision to serve as a field instructor with the University School of Social Work?*) received responses from 45 study participants (response rate of 29.2%). Combined responses from these two items produced five main themes, ranging from opportunities to be guest speakers for social work classes, to tangible items, to providing alternate ways for field instructors to take advantage of the current incentives. Each theme is discussed in the next section.

First, respondents indicated that *teaching and mentoring opportunities* would be appreciated. One respondent suggested “opportunities to speak with classes as is seen fit” would be valued, and another respondent made a similar suggestion, asking for the “opportunity to speak as a guest lecturer or teach adjunctively.” A

second theme focused on the ways in which field instruction *contributed to the workplace*, thereby positively influencing decisions to continue in the field instructor role. The following comments from respondents were typical of the responses represented by this theme: “They [the students] greatly contribute to our ability to deliver quality services,” and “I value the supervision experience and maintain that this practice positively influences my clinical practice.” Third, respondents noted that *tangible items* would serve as incentives for some field instructors. One respondent suggested that the Field Education Program could offer “drawings for gift cards,” whereas other individuals might value “basketball or sports tickets” or a “small stipend for folks not employed by the agencies they serve.” A fourth theme that emerged from the qualitative data was the *general appreciation for existing incentives*, which was expressed by multiple respondents. One field instructor stated, “While I don’t take advantage of many of the incentives due to time restrictions, knowing that they are offered makes me feel valued.” Another respondent commented on a specific training offered, stating “The motivational interviewing training offered for FIs [field instructors] was excellent! Thank you!” The last theme focused on field instructors being able to reap the benefit of incentives by *offering additional times/locations of trainings, including online options* in addition to current offerings. One field instructor stated, “Trainings are great, but in the middle of the day it is difficult for those not in town to utilize them,” and another respondent suggested the addition of “webinar[s] or online access to CEU[s] or teleconference[s] in a few regional sites” would benefit non-local field instructors.

Discussion

Our social work field education program has found success in recruiting and retaining quality field instructors using a collaborative model that provides meaningful incentives and recognizes the valuable and critical contribution field instructors make to the education of our students. This collaborative model not only strengthens our School’s relationships with agencies and field instructors, but also creates a mutually beneficial relationship between the University and community agencies. The present study on field instructor retention gleaned several important lessons that we believe will continue to strengthen our collaborations with field instructors. First, we found it very useful to reach out to our own field instructors and learn their perspectives on what incentives offered by the School and University are most meaningful to these busy professionals. This information likely varies across universities and settings, and it was invaluable for us to learn the perspectives of the partners we work with in our own backyard.

We also gained insight into the specific incentives that our field instructors found most valuable to their work. We learned that the free social work trainings, particularly those geared specifically at field instructors, were highly valued by our current field instructors. This knowledge allows us to target resources into maintaining current offerings and expanding opportunities for continuing education and trainings. The survey results also helped us to better understand the value of incentives for different groups of our field instructors, especially among first-year field instructors and more experienced supervisors. Going forward in our field education program, we plan to prioritize offering incentives that field instructors most value and may discontinue incentives that were not seen as useful to field instructors.

Finally, the literature on retention highlighted the need to not only strengthen ties with field instructors but also strengthen relationships with the agencies where our students are placed. By understanding the field instructors' perceptions of the value of hosting social work students, as well as developing a better understanding of the time and effort needed to provide quality supervision, we can work more effectively with agencies to increase the level of support that agencies are willing to provide to social workers who serve as field instructors. To achieve this positive working relationship with social work agencies, we will use our research findings as we communicate with administrators within our school about the importance of cultivating relationships with both field instructors and the agencies in which they are employed. Because we know that these agency administrators are a key aspect of field instructor retention, our hope is that our School's resources can be better allocated to reflect the time needed to build and maintain strong relationships with social work agencies in our community.

Study Limitations

Study findings should be considered along with several limitations. First, the current study was conducted using field instructors affiliated with a large research-intensive university in the Southeastern United States, and thus, our results may not be generalizable to other institutions. Additionally, the study was targeted to a relatively small sample, and the size of our final sample was hampered by a relatively low response rate among our field instructors. Although participants received three invitations to participate in the survey, offering an incentive for survey completion might have increased the response rate. Further, sample size and diversity was further limited because the field instructors were affiliated with only one school of social work.

Another significant limitation of our study was that our survey did not explore field instructors' perspectives on the level of support received from their employing agency that either encourages or discourages their role as field instructors. Both the literature and our own experience has clearly established agency support as a central factor to longevity in the field instructor role; therefore, we acknowledge that our findings would have been strengthened had our survey gathered these perspectives. Specifically, valuable insight might have been gained by asking field instructors about their perceptions of agency supports for the work they do with students, and their impression of the value their agency places on hosting social work students. Moreover, it would strengthen our research findings to survey agency administrators directly to gain a better understanding of their experience in hosting students, the value agency administrators place on specific incentives, and actions the field education program can take to strengthen the collaborative relationship between the University and the community agency.

Despite these limitations, this study has certain strengths such as the low cost of the research project and relative ease of data analysis. The qualitative items provided further insight into incentives and factors that might promote field instructor retention at our institution, which will continue to guide the development of our field education program. Additionally, the documentation of our study may lend itself to replication by other universities seeking to better understand factors that might strengthen their collaborations with field instructors.

Need for Further Research

Findings from the present study emphasize the need for additional research to understand the effectiveness of field instructor retention strategies and factors that motivate individuals to continue in the field instructor role. As the extant literature identifies various reasons field instructors decide to discontinue their role, it would be beneficial to know why field instructors associated social work field education programs make this choice. Additional research might survey field instructors who discontinue serving in this capacity and explore strategies to address identified issues. Further research to be considered includes follow-up studies on incentives, the number of field instructors who take advantage of existing incentives, the cost-effectiveness of existing incentives, and the cost of expanding incentives (i.e., clinical lectures, trainings) via online formats. Further, engaging with agency administrators directly to conduct further research on their perception of the importance of hosting student interns and their valuing of university incentives can help us to better understand how to work collaboratively with community agencies.

Conclusion

We know that positive and enduring partnerships between field instructors and schools of social work contribute to positive educational outcomes for students, and ultimately, advance the social work profession. Given the multiple challenges present in the current landscape of field education, it is more critical than ever to foster collaborative relationships between field instructors, the agencies in which they work, and universities that recognize quality field instruction as an essential part of social work education.

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Appendix A

Annual Field Instructor & Task Supervisor Feedback Survey

Academic Year 2015-2016

1. Was 2015-2016 your first year as a field instructor for the University School of Social Work?

2. How many years have you served as a Field Instructor or Task Supervisor with the University School of Social Work?

3. To what degree do the following incentives impact your decision to continue as a Field Instructor or Task Supervisor for the University School of Social Work?
 - a. Accessing clinical lectures at no or reduced cost (examples include the Clinical Lecture Series, Focus on the Family and Disability Series, Clinical Institutes)

5	4	3	2	1
Highly	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
 - b. Accessing additional trainings presented to Field Instructors at no cost (examples include Advanced Field Instructor Training, Motivational Interviewing, Creating Inclusive Spaces for LGBTIQ Communities)

5	4	3	2	1
Highly	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
 - c. Attending the Field Instructor Appreciation Conference

5	4	3	2	1
Highly	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
 - d. Accessing the AHEC Library System

5	4	3	2	1
Highly	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
 - e. Auditing courses at the University

5	4	3	2	1
Highly	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
4. Do you have any suggestions for additional incentives that we might offer field instructors and task

supervisors?

5. How important would you rate the following factors to you as it impacts your decision to continue as a field instructor or task supervisor for the University School of Social Work?

a. The quality of the students

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

b. Relationship with the University Field Faculty

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

c. Having the same field faculty over time

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

d. Relationship with the University School of Social Work

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

e. Relationship with the University Field Education Program

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

f. Access to University School of Social Work faculty and expertise

5	4	3	2	1
Extremely important	Very important	Slightly important	Low importance	Not at all important

6. Are there any other factors that contribute to your decision to serve as a Field Instructor with the University School of Social Work?