



The Summer Summit Model: Maximizing Community Partnerships to Cultivate Policy Practice Field Placements

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Introduction

While competence in policy practice is a necessary element of generalist social work (Council on Social Work Education, 2015), developing field placements in which students have the opportunity to engage in applied policy practice can be challenging. Nonprofit and public agencies, frequently the sites for student field practicums, are limited in the types of political activities in which they may engage (U.S. Office of Special Counsel, 2005). Furthermore, many of these agencies are not informed as to the nonpartisan policy practice activities in which they can be engaged. Additionally, social work education programs may find it difficult to find qualified field instructors at organizations that do engage in policy practice activities. Therefore, students completing social work practicums frequently miss out on opportunities to engage in policy practice as part of their applied social work education.

In order to ensure social work's continued involvement in policy, social work education programs must provide students opportunities to engage in applied policy practice. In a thorough review of the literature, Weiss-Gal (2017) found that the feeble connection between policy and direct community practice is a dominant trend in social work education. Many students do not engage in policy practice due to a lack of self-efficacy. Weiss-Gal (2017) reported that experiential or applied learning opportunities increased confidence and competence, which subsequently increased student engagement. Just as field education is pivotal to the development of generalist and clinical skills, field education must also provide students opportunities to practice policy-oriented skills. Recruiting and developing policy practice field placements is an important first step in providing these opportunities for students. This case study

details the University of Nevada, Reno's (UNR) implementation of a Summer Summit Model for recruiting and developing innovative policy practice opportunities for field students. Beyond merely inviting agencies to be field instructors, the Summer Summit Model uses the expertise of a range of professionals to identify knowledge, skills, and values required for effective policy practice as well as potential learning opportunities for students.

Context

The State of Nevada provides an interesting and highly demanding context for social work policy practice. While the Nevada context provides challenges for students, it also holds unique opportunities. Nevada has one of the smallest state budgets and the lowest per capita expenditures of nearly all Western states. The legacy of being a frontier state coupled with strong libertarian ideological underpinnings, results in a "live and let live" ethos and strong sense of individualism. As a result, Nevada has historically been unwilling to invest much in the well-being of its citizens. The social contract in Nevada is thin and the safety net for vulnerable populations even thinner. The disparities in education, health, and well-being outcomes in Nevada are tremendous, with those in the lowest socioeconomic brackets suffering the greatest from the state's failure to develop a strong social contract/safety net. Nevada is ranked 49th in education (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017), 48th in health insurance coverage (United Health Foundation, 2015) and, according to the Children's Defense Fund (2015), 22% of Nevada's children live in poverty. When these rankings are broken down, it is evident that certain groups suffer more than others. For example, 51% of African American, 55% of Indigenous, and 38% of Latino students do not graduate from high school on time in Nevada (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Similarly, over 32% of African American, 31% of Latino, and 46% of Pacific Islander or Hawaiian children live in poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2015).

Just as Nevada's frontier history and "live and let live" ethos fuels small government, it also makes government accessible. Nevada's legislature is considered a part-time, citizen legislature. The legislators receive a per diem stipend during the legislative session, but are not paid otherwise. Nevada residents who get involved in either campaigning on behalf of these legislators or in influencing policy development/policy passage, find it easy to connect with legislators. Legislators, by necessity, become familiar with active constituents and with policy advocates. Additionally, Nevada has a uniquely small amount of law in statute, administrative code, and case. Yet the State Legislature is productive when in session. During the 2017 session, the legislature had a passage rate of approximately 56% for all bills (LegiScan, 2017). These factors combine to create a context in which it is possible to have ideas heard and acted upon.

In summary, the State of Nevada provides a unique context for policy practice. The need is great for policy that creates a more expansive safety net for the most vulnerable residents and improves the health and well-being of all of Nevada's residents. The potential to have an immediate and profound impact on policy is as great as the need. Missing from this dynamic are trained social work policy practitioners. Unfortunately, the dearth of social workers engaged in policy practice has resulted historically in few opportunities for students to intern in policy-focused placements. For example, prior to the implementation of the Summer Summit, the UNR School of Social Work only had two true policy practice placements; both of which were located in advocacy organizations. As the only school of social work in northern Nevada, the authors believed it to be of paramount importance to prepare social work policy practitioners to fill this gap.

Summer Summit Overview

In May of 2016, the authors received funding through the Council on Social Work Education, the Fund for Social Policy Education and Practice (FSPEP), and Casey Family Programs to create a plan for developing new policy practice field placements. An integral component of this plan, the Summer Summit brought together policy practitioners from a variety of agency and non-agency settings to outline the benefits, expectations, and potential roles of policy practice interns. Given the paucity of social workers in policy practice within northern Nevada, policy practice expertise was sought from social workers as well as non-social workers. A modified snowball sampling approach was adopted to extend invitations to the Summit to policy professionals within the community. Specifically, the authors used their existing relationships with policy practice social workers to identify other policy experts. In addition, students who expressed an interest in policy practice on their field applications were invited. In total, thirty-four people attended the Summer Summit, including four social work faculty members, seven students, and twenty-three community members.

The Summer Summit had several goals. The first goal was to educate non-social workers as to the pivotal role of field within social work education and the structure of field practicums. In doing so, the authors hoped to dispel some of the uncertainty about accepting interns into traditionally non-social work settings. The second goal of the Summit was to identify knowledge, skills and values pertinent to policy practice within Nevada. These knowledge, skills, and values then informed the development of policy practice intern job descriptions as well as supplemental trainings for students completing policy practice placements. The final goal of the Summit was to recruit new

agencies as policy practice sites for field students.

The Summer Summit was held over a half day on the UNR campus. To encourage participation, the authors provided breakfast and free parking for attendees. In addition, lunch was provided for agency representatives and students who elected to stay for the pre-placement interview session. The Summit began with a welcome from State Assemblywoman and hospice social worker Teresa Benitez-Thompson. The authors then presented on policy practice in social work and field education as the signature pedagogy. The remainder of the half-day event was dedicated to three working sessions: 1) identification of knowledge, values, and skills pertinent to policy practice within Nevada; 2) development of sample policy practice intern “job descriptions”; and 3) identification of specific learning opportunities for policy practice interns. The working sessions were meant to scaffold so that the knowledge, skills, and values generated in the first working session were used to develop the intern job descriptions and then to identify potential projects and opportunities that fit these job descriptions. Attendees were divided into small groups of five or six for the working sessions. Each group was provided a computer with preloaded worksheets to assist in facilitating their work. The groups were able to project their worksheets onto the wall so all members could view the work being completed. Groups were asked to save their work after each working session, ensuring the authors had access to the information upon conclusion of the Summit.

Attendees were also invited to participate in on-site pre-placement interviews with students upon the conclusion of the Summit’s working sessions. Prior to the event only two organizations expressed interest in the interviews. However, throughout the morning, other agency representatives added their names to the list of organizations interested in interviewing. In total, six potential field placement representatives participated in the on-site pre-placement interviews. Small group study rooms were reserved adjacent to the Summit meeting room. Each placement representative was assigned to a room. Representatives were provided sample interview questions developed by the Field Coordinator as well as a standard field intern rating sheet. Each interview lasted for 15 minutes and students rotated through the rooms. By the end of two hours, every student who attended the event was interviewed by all six representatives.

Summer Summit Outcomes

As stated previously, the central goal of the Summer Summit was to recruit and develop new policy practice field placements. As a result of the Summit, eleven new placements sites were confirmed. Additionally, while declining to take a student

intern full-time, several other representatives offered to provide project-based rotation opportunities. Subsequently, several non-policy practice students were able to engage in policy practice projects as part of their internships. These project-based rotations were some of the most significant and unplanned outcomes of the Summit. Finally, the information generated in the working sessions led to the identification of twelve training topics and the development of a policy practice intern job description that has subsequently been used as an exemplar for other agencies considering a policy practice intern.

Participants of the Summer Summit were asked to complete a brief evaluation of the event. Findings from these anonymous evaluations are evidence of the usefulness of the Summer Summit. All but two of the Summit attendees completed evaluation forms. Nearly all respondents (86.7%) reported that the exchange of ideas that occurred at the Summer Summit was of “high-value” and 93.3% of respondents believed there was a “high-value” in the quality of the discussions. As a result of the Summer Summit, 73% of respondents said that they connected with other local organizations and may share ideas and resources. Over half (60%) of respondents said that due to this event they were interested in working more closely with the UNR School of Social Work. Finally, 93.3% of respondents reported that there was a “high-benefit” to including policy practice in social work field education.

Conclusion

The Summer Summit model consisted of recruitment of key stakeholders using a snowball method, orientation to policy practice in social work education, orientation to field education, working sessions, and student interviews. This model was successful in recruiting field placement sites through just one event as opposed to individual meetings and phone calls over time. The Summer Summit also resulted in more focused policy practice learning opportunities through the development of requisite knowledge, values, and skills; intern job descriptions; and identification of specialized policy practice training. Finally, the active participation in working sessions during the event created a sense of collective ownership over the need to develop policy practice placements. At this time, agency representatives continue to refer other prospective policy partners to the authors and frequently “check in” with their colleagues to see how the field placements are going. The Summer Summit Model can be easily replicated by other social work education programs that would like to develop and recruit policy practice placements. It can also be adapted to be used to develop and recruit other specialized field placements.

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