



Laying the Foundation for a Competency Based Remediation Process: Lessons Learned

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Introduction

In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) identified field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. As social work educators, we are charged with providing students the opportunity to learn and to be successful in the field, while also acting as gatekeepers of the social work profession. Curren (2009) suggests that it is critical to find a balance between "allegiance to individual learners" and protecting the profession of social work and its future clients. However, current literature provides little guidance as how to best assist students who are not successfully demonstrating the competencies in their field placements. This paper will discuss how the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) School of Social Work Field Education Office developed a remediation process for addressing (and preventing) placement issues and assists students in connecting the competencies with their performance in field.

Field education provides the opportunity to apply and integrate classroom theoretical concepts into practice and is an integral component of the MSW program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the late 1960's, the School of Social Work adopted a modified block placement model. This model is a unique feature of our program wherein students become totally immersed in the field placement experience. The UIUC School of Social Work programs offer both BSW and MSW field education. However, for the purpose of this article, we will only discuss MSW field education.

The MSW field education program graduates on average 150 students per academic year. In analyzing student issues that have occurred in our MSW field education

program, over the course of the last seven years, twenty-one (21) students required mediation due to problematic behaviors that resulted in either remediation planning, termination of internship, or postponement of entry into internship. Problematic behaviors varied, although in nearly every instance the competency of professionalism was a definitive area of concern. These behaviors included attendance issues, failing to seek supervision, failing to document services, and difficulties with interpersonal communication. Other concerns included ethical issues involving client self-determination, boundary issues, and honesty.

Developing remediation plans aligned with the CSWE competencies allows for continuity of learning across all facets of the field experience, including evaluations and the learning plan. When issues or performance concerns do arise with a student in our field education program, a remediation plan is put into place. Hylton, Manit, and Messick-Svare (2017) define remediation as a process that identifies specific behavioral concerns, along with the specific actions to address these concerns. Remediation plans are written agreements among the student, the field instructor, and the field liaison. They accomplish two things: 1) the students have a clear definition and understanding of field performance expectations and the areas in which they are not performing at the expected level, and 2) field instructors are provided with support and guidelines on how to best teach and evaluate the students, given the identified areas of deficiency. By engaging students in the process of developing the remediation plan, one is able to begin a process of supporting the student, encourage critical thinking about expected behaviors of professional social workers, and increase the likelihood of success in the field placement.

Development of Relationships

We cannot stress enough the importance of thinking through the structure of the field education program, as well as policies and procedures that encourage the development of relationships with both students and field instructors. Social work literature emphasizes the necessity of social work programs making a commitment to ensuring that both students and placement sites feel supported through field liaison involvement at all stages of the internship placement (McFall & Freddolino, 2000).

For the UIUC field education program, this has been a work in progress. One way we support students and placement sites is by having faculty liaisons, who are licensed clinical social workers, assigned to specific geographic areas throughout Illinois. This allows for the development and ongoing nurturing of these relationships with internship sites across the state. These well-established relationships have proven to play a critical role in the success of the program and have resulted in the development of nearly 300 sites in which we have established affiliation agreements.

Attention to Language and Process

We have found that the language we use when interacting with field instructors influences how they view their role. We replaced the term *supervisor* with that of *teacher* or *mentor* when describing their responsibilities as a field instructor. This denotes a much greater responsibility in this relationship, one that communicates the importance and impact field instructors have on students' education.

Frequent contact with students and field instructors throughout the internship is essential. At the onset of the internship, we provide students and field instructors with a timeline of when these contacts will occur. The scheduled contacts help field instructors and students assess the need for reaching out to their field liaisons sooner, should issues arise.

We continue to make improvements to processes and procedures. One example of this is moving the initial site visit from the midterm phase to within the first eight weeks of the internship. This change has proven to be very effective in preventing small issues from escalating into larger issues. Early intervention (the initial site visit) may provide timely clarification on procedures and developmental phases of the internship. We have found when smaller performance issues are not addressed early on, often because the field faculty was not made aware, the issues may reach the point of hurting the relationship between student and field instructor and be difficult to resolve.

Responding to Student Performance Concerns

Although it is difficult, every field instructor must be willing and ready to respond to student problems when they occur. This can be the most challenging aspect of being a field instructor. The student or field instructor, in most instances, alert the faculty liaison about areas of concern. This contact initiates the information-gathering process. The field liaison assesses the situation and seeks the perspectives of all involved parties. This is an important step and, as we have encountered on more than one occasion, there may be very different viewpoints and expectations. Gaining this clarity assists in knowing how to proceed and to determine the appropriate level of intervention. A good question to pose to the field instructor might be "if the student were an employee, how would this be handled?" While the policy for handling employee situations may differ from that of a student situation, it helps everyone to gain a perspective on the situation and can be used as a teachable moment for the student and field instructor alike.

Once adequate information is gathered and it is determined that a remediation plan is necessary, the faculty liaison takes the lead in developing this document with input from the student and field instructor. Because the process of developing the remediation plan is individualized, it may be appropriate to seek consultation from other campus resources such as student affairs, disability resource services, or

university legal counsel. For example, we have found that seeking guidance from campus disability resource services is invaluable when working with students who have documented disabilities. In one such situation, a student with significant physical disabilities was struggling with demonstrating the performance expected of MSW students. In consulting with disability resources, the Field Office was able to determine appropriate expectations for a student when identified accommodations are in place at the internship site.

In drafting a remediation plan, the goal is to tie problematic behaviors to the CSWE competencies, identify behaviors needing improvement, and identify measures and time frames for assessing improvement using a strengths-based approach.

Utilizing a Strengths-Based Approach

Prior to the CSWE (2008) EPAS, we, like most social work programs, had created a pathway for students who were struggling with performance in their field practicum to ameliorate performance issues. In a review of a sample of remediation plans developed prior to the introduction of competency-based learning in the CSWE (2008) EPAS, the remediation process typically focused on the performance deficits and the steps the student would have to take to maintain their field placement. However, most of the remediation plans did not include critical factors such as: input from the student, strengths the student exhibited, connection to the evaluated behaviors, and an opportunity for the student to engage in self-reflection. Hence, the remediation plan process was more often problem-focused rather than strengths-focused. With the advent of competency-based learning, the stage for redefining the remediation plan process was set.

In adherence with National Association of Social Workers' (2017) *Code of Ethics*, it is important that the remediation planning process maintain the dignity and self-worth of the student. This poses its own set of challenges. Receiving critical feedback regarding behaviors that require improvement may come across as negative feedback to the student. Similar to using a strengths-based approach with a client, resilient characteristics and positive actions displayed by the student in the internship should be included in the plan. Examples of strengths-based behaviors have included: responds well to specific directives; insightful about the need to challenge him/herself, despite not always feeling confident; strong (writing, advocacy, research) skills; responds well to crisis; demonstrates the ability to be empathic towards clients; and organized in his/her work.

Remediation Plan Components

Hylton et al. (2017) note that the passage of the CSWE (2015) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) provides the groundwork for assessing student performance through the demonstration of the nine competencies, rather than through

arbitrary measures. These standards provide a more concrete and consistent means for social work educators to employ their role as gatekeepers. When concerns are raised about a student's behavior, social work educators may examine these behaviors in relation to the competencies. The authors note that using these national behavioral standards reduces the potential for subjective bias in the gatekeeping process, as the focus is not on individual students and their personal characteristics but rather on student behaviors.

As remediation plans are developed, the relevant competencies upon which the student needs to improve are identified. Once competencies are identified, it is important for the student, field instructor, and faculty liaison to agree upon the behaviors that warrant improvement. In addition to making remediation plan behaviors measurable, they also must be legally and ethically appropriate, and should fall within the university's code of conduct standards and sanctioning guidelines. For example, if a student has violated the university's academic integrity code of conduct, then referring to legal counsel for guidance on how to draft the remediation plan could be needed. Through this process, it is important to continue to be mindful of the student's due process rights and applicable federal or state mandates.

Assessing student progress requires participation from the student, field instructor, and faculty liaison. Though the remediation plan is geared towards student skill development, it is vital the student feels supported in this process. Field instructors and faculty liaisons can start the discussion by inquiring how they can support the student. Examples have included regularly scheduled phone calls with the student and faculty liaison, review of student journaling, providing relevant journal articles and reading materials to supplement the student's learning, and acting as a coach to support the student throughout the implementation of the plan. When considering time frames of the remediation plan, it is important to consider and clearly communicate how the student's performance will be reported. For example, it should be clear if communications are to occur via email, phone call, or face-to-face meetings. We have found that clear communication with all parties involved is key to the success of the remediation plan.

Lessons Learned

As we have navigated the realm of remediation planning and implementation, many lessons have been learned along the way:

- Document all contacts. Phone calls or visits should be followed up with a summary email to those involved.
- Review both university and departmental policies and procedures related to internship termination and university dismissal.

- If your school does not have remediation procedures in place, it is highly advised that these are established. If already in place, training to understand the procedures is important quality control.
- It is vital that the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA) is followed with respect to student confidentiality of records and information sharing.
- Having the field instructor share student strengths early in the process can be a helpful intervention in what may be a strained relationship.
- For students who are overly reliant on field instructors for guidance, we have found that adding the term “with increased independence” to behaviors is of value.
- It is important to make note on the plan that if it is determined, at any point, that the student is not making sufficient progress, the internship will be terminated.

We have no doubt that as we move forward there will be more lessons to add to this list.

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