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Bridging the Divide Between Practice and Academia: An Integrated Model of Field Education

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Introduction

Field education is often seen as the vehicle by which theory is integrated with practice. Through field education, students are able to link the traditional classroom curriculum with real-life practice. If field is the place where curriculum meets practice, why do the worlds of practice and academia seem so far apart? Why do field instructors feel disconnected from social work faculty? In this brief article, we will argue that field departments have a unique and exciting opportunity to bridge the worlds of practice and academia and make unique and meaningful connections between these two worlds. Specifically, we will look at the role of field in facilitating student, agency, and faculty participation in field placements with an enhanced curricular focus (ECF).

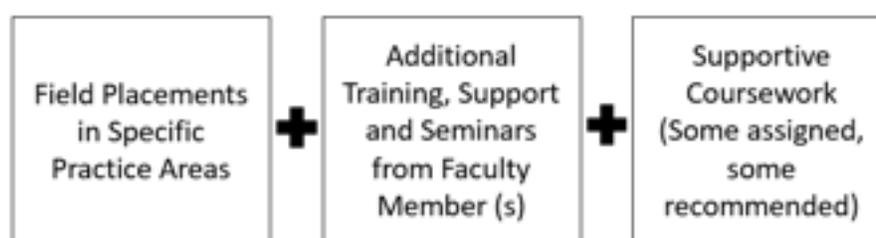
Field placements with an ECF pair a group of students placed in similar practice settings with a faculty member who is an expert in that particular area of practice. These projects are all focused on a particular area of practice, including: aging, behavioral health, and evidence-based mental health. In addition to a field component, students participate in a series of seminars where they are able to reflect on their learning and the faculty member can facilitate a dialogue that helps link theory to practice. In several of these projects, students are also required to complete specific coursework relating to the area of practice. This model is also open to participation

from field instructors and seminars are often held in the community. Further, it provides a vital link between the larger school and the practice community.

The University at Buffalo School of Social Work (UBSSW) offers students a master's level social work education. Students customize their advanced year courses and have input into their field placement based on their areas of practice interest. The UBSSW does not, however, have concentrations for particular areas of practice. Students in field are generally linked with a faculty liaison to oversee their placement. These liaisons are adjunct faculty, often experienced community practitioners. Full-time faculty rarely serve as field liaisons, which can create a further disconnect between academia and practice.

Several faculty at the UBSSW have developed specific training opportunities for students interested in particular areas of practice. These enhanced curricular focus opportunities allow students to engage in a deeper understanding and commitment to a particular area of practice. Below we will give a brief overview of each of the ECFs. All of these projects require some combination of coursework, field work, and additional training (a monthly seminar or colloquia held a few times a semester); however, the students do not receive credits for their participation. All emphasize a cohort experience – learning, sharing, and growing with other students who have similar interests. All of the initiatives are headed by faculty from the UBSSW whose research and/or practice interests correspond with the project's focus. Several of the projects began as grants awarded to faculty members (the Hartford partnership, Office of Mental Health grant, and HRSA). Most of the projects, however, have continued well beyond the years of available funding as students and faculty have found them to be very valuable. Worth noting as well, is that some of the projects offer students stipends (or did when they were initially funded). The majority, however, do *not* offer stipends. Students are drawn to the projects because of the depth of learning possible via connection to experts in academia as well as expert practitioners. Each ECF has its own application process consisting of the submission of written materials indicating interest in the particular practice area; some ECFs also require an interview.

Components of an Enhanced Curricular Placement



Enhanced Curricular Placement Opportunities at the UBSSW

The Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education (HPPAE): This project allows students exposure to direct practice and leadership skills in gerontology. Students are required to complete a field placement working with older adults where they have exposure to at least 3 rotations/departments within the agency. Monthly 90-minute seminars are required, as well as 2 recommended courses in aging. The project also collaborates with the Greater Rochester Collaborative MSW Program for the seminars.

Behavioral Health Workforce and Education Training Fellowship: This interdisciplinary project through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) is aimed at increasing the capacity of social work and other professions to provide team-based and integrated addictions and behavioral health services to underserved populations in Western New York primary care settings. Students are required to complete a field placement within a behavioral health agency and participate in a number of trainings focused on interprofessional practice.

NY State Office of Mental Health and Deans' Consortium Evidence-Based Practice Project: This enhanced curricular focus opportunity exposes students to social work in mental health settings that are using evidence-based practices. Students are required to take an evidence-based mental health course, obtain a relevant field placement, and participate in colloquia throughout the year.

Joining Forces-UB Veteran and Military Family Focus: This project provides an opportunity for social work students to receive education and training to better serve veterans and military family members. Students are required to take an elective course (Introduction to Issues in Veteran and Military Family Care), secure an advanced year placement working with veterans, participate in an interprofessional seminar (2 per semester), and compile a portfolio of assignments from 3 or more courses with veterans and/or military families as the target population.

The Core Concepts of Child & Adolescent Trauma: This project focuses on training students in evidence-based trauma treatment for children. Students receive training and support through a field placement, Core Concepts in Child and Adolescent Trauma course, and training in an evidence-based treatment intervention.

Child Welfare Leaders Initiative: Focusing on students interested in issues relating to child welfare practice, this project also emphasizes leadership development and

promoting social work's role within the child welfare system. Students are required to secure a field placement in a child welfare setting and participate in 2 seminars per month (one of which is open to field educators).

Each of these ECF projects accommodates between 2 and 10 students per year. Some of the projects require students to take specific courses that align with the practice area, others require additional trainings for students that further develop their knowledge and skills. Each ECF is unique in its design and requirements, yet all of the projects require a field placement that is specific to the area of practice of the ECF.

Benefits of Projects with an Enhanced Curricular Focus

Complementing and Enhancing Field Education for Students

Socialcultural learning theory emphasizes the social and relational aspects of learning rather than just stressing the individual nature of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) extended this theory to create the concept of Communities of Practice, which can be defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Through participation in Communities of Practice, people are able to observe the actions, behaviors, values, and attitudes of other members, which will likely influence their own actions, behaviors, values, and attitudes. Communities of Practice are also important in the building of a self-identity; each individual's Community of Practice is central in terms of how that person most likely sees their identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Field placements with an enhanced curricular focus deepen student learning by harnessing the power of: group learning, shared experience, and creating a Community of Practice. The Community of Practice (which consists of the students, the field instructors, and the faculty member) creates a unit of people with a common concern or passion. Through these interactions, students are able to learn through discussion with other students, observation of their field instructors, and integration of research and theory with the faculty member.

By participating in these enhanced field opportunities, students are also putting themselves in an advantageous position upon graduation. Students are able to receive additional training and support directly from a faculty member who is a "thought leader" in that particular practice area. Students are also more marketable upon graduation. Most of the enhanced curricular opportunities provide students with a certificate of completion, highlighting their field experience(s), as well as the additional

training they received through the project. Cohort models of learning also encourage networking among students and agencies. “Pasterns” (past participants in ECFs) often report remaining in contact with their former classmates and field instructors and utilizing them as contacts in the job market.

Deepening Connection Between Practice and Academia

Placements with an enhanced curricular focus offer students many benefits, but they also deepen the connection between faculty and practitioners. Some of the ECF projects at the UBSSW have direct integration of field educators through trainings and/or seminars. In other cases, faculty assist in the development of field placements in their practice area and meet and deepen their connection with field educators.

These placements also can have a positive effect on social work practice by allowing field educators exposure to current research and interventions within their particular area of practice. Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, and Howard (2006) point out that there is often a disconnect between academia and practitioners when it comes to understanding and implementing evidence-based practice. Faculty become experts in particular subject areas, in supporting research and interventions; while practitioners develop practice wisdom and social work intuition. Practitioners often feel like there are many barriers in terms of implementing evidence-based practices: too little time, too few resources, and lack of available material and evidence (Edmond et al., 2006; Mullen, Shlonsky, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2005). Through integrating research and practice, students are able to bridge the worlds of academia and practice and integrate evidence-based practices with their field experiences. In the ideal setting, students are bringing and sharing knowledge about current evidence-based practices to field placement and more deeply integrating them into their field settings.

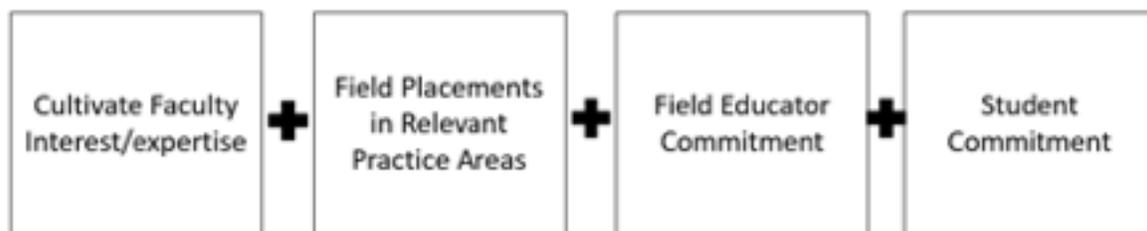
These enhanced curricular opportunities offer students the chance to understand the research as well as the current practice environment and challenges. Further, these projects offer the opportunity for faculty to better understand and connect with the issues facing practitioners and for field educators to be more aware of research and evidence-based models of intervention. These projects allow faculty to hear from students (and sometimes field educators themselves) about the current climate of practice. Field educators have the benefit of working with and training students who are deeply invested in a particular area of practice and bring academic knowledge and training in evidence-based interventions. This direct connection between faculty and agency practitioners also fosters opportunities for future collaboration by way of grants and community-based research projects.

Opportunities for Field Coordinators

As field faculty and staff, we are uniquely positioned to engage students, practitioners, and faculty in these meaningful opportunities. Holosko and Skinner (2015) discuss the importance of field coordinators demonstrating leadership as we implement and facilitate social work education's signature pedagogy. Field coordinators and field departments are "primed and in an ideal leadership position to lead the school proactively toward the next phase in realizing their own signature pedagogy" (Holosko & Skinner, 2015, p. 281). Through connecting students, engaging field educators, and encouraging faculty engagement in these enhanced curricular efforts, field has an opportunity to nurture and amplify the status of field education in the academic and practice settings.

The role of field coordinators in the creation and sustaining of enhanced curricular field opportunities is critical. Field coordinators often describe their role as having one foot in the practice realm and one foot in the academic realm. This duality of experience and expertise allows the field coordinator to speak the language and see the perspectives, goals, and motivations of practitioners, students, and faculty. This unique skill set makes our input in the planning of enhanced curricular initiatives essential; we are able to help connect students, faculty, and agency partners around a common set of goals and interests.

Field Coordinator's Role in Creating Enhanced Curricular Placement



Field coordinators have the opportunity to highlight field placements in areas of practice that are not traditionally sought out by students. Many of these practice areas also work with populations that have historically been underserved. By creating enhanced opportunities that focus on interventions with underserved populations, field departments are enhancing the appeal of these practice areas to students.

Conclusion

Traditionally, field departments connect the social work curriculum to community practice through a somewhat passive process of coordinating agency placements. Field departments are uniquely positioned to enhance this connection through the creation and promotion of integrated field placements. These placements create Communities of Practice that connect students, practitioners, and agencies through a common social work practice area. By fostering this connection, field departments accomplish a series of goals that benefit students, the community, and faculty members. Students are able to receive a more robust field experience that better prepares them for the practice world. Community partners are able to feel a connection to the larger school of social work and they are also able to learn new trends in evidence-based practices and research. Faculty members are able to connect more directly to like-minded students and practitioners to get a better idea of current practice issues and concerns, which can better inform their research. Field coordinators are well positioned to bridge the words of practice and academia and to help students deepen their field experiences through these integrated field opportunities.

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