



# Comprehensive Training for Field Liaisons: A Necessity for Evaluating Student Performance

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## Introduction

Field education provides students the opportunity to learn at their own pace and to focus on practitioner skill development, with the liaison being the lynchpin in the student's learning (Patrick & Sturgis, 2011). The *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) does not explicitly provide expectations for training field liaisons. EPAS 2.2.7 should be expanded to provide guidance on the minimum level of training that should be provided to field liaisons to "evaluat[e] student learning and field setting effectiveness congruent with the social work competencies" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 13). A standard level of training establishes collective expectations for achievement and addresses equity in preparedness for social work practice.

With the decline in available resources for field education and the increase in expectations for faculty productivity, programs hire adjunct field liaisons. New hires may lack familiarity in social work field education, thus requiring a standard level of training to effectively teach and assess student learning (Bogo, 2005). Standard training also ensures that regardless of contact modality, students are receiving the same quality learning experience. Field liaison visits are a contact point for assessing the student's ability to articulate their mastery of the core competencies. "Competency-based education is an outcomes-oriented approach [...] ensuring that students are able to demonstrate the integration and applications of the competencies in practice" (Larkin, 2019, p. 6). Standardized training provides field liaisons baseline expectations for how to assess competency proficiency that are equitable across all field courses.

## **ITP Loop Model for Field Liaisons**

Bogo and Vayda (1998) introduced the integration of theory and practice (ITP) loop model for explaining how field instructors may pass the professional knowledge they have to their students. Additionally, Bogo and Vayda (1998) explain that “professional behaviour is based on implicit ideas and beliefs that social workers have developed through their own educational and practice experiences” (p. 3). This is important to note, because we are validating the field instructor’s knowledge, practice experience, and educational preparation when allowing them to supervise budding practitioners. For field liaisons, use of the ITP loop model can be effective training to enhance their professional development.

For field liaisons to support field instructors in the ITP loop model there is an assumption that field liaisons have been properly trained; but what does properly trained mean? CSWE EPAS 2.2.10 state that “The program describes how its field education program provides orientation, field instruction training, and continuing dialog with field education settings and field instructors” (p. 13). The exclusion of training field liaisons is interesting. Again, an additional assumption is that, through degree attainment, social work field liaisons are prepared to assess student learning. Without an effective training program for field liaisons, how can knowledge, skills, values, and competence be assessed equitably for all students?

## **Constructivist Theory for Training Field Liaisons**

Field education experiences are experiential and allow students to apply classroom knowledge in real-world scenarios. “Experiential learning emphasizes the importance of experience in constructing knowledge” (Mattar, 2018, p. 207). Putting the field liaison in a learner’s role, we can use constructivist frameworks to provide an avenue for developing real-world training modules. In constructing knowledge, constructivist frameworks focus on the individual. This framework also provides an avenue for assessing mastery of competence. Being a competent field liaison means that not only does the liaison have the required educational attainment, but they have also been trained to evaluate student learning.

## **Comprehensive Training Framework**

Field departments within social work programs heavily rely on the field liaison to assume many roles in an effort to keep high standards of learning and vast field opportunities for students. These specific roles and responsibilities include being an advisor to the field instructors regarding learning opportunities at a specific agency, ensuring integration of classroom, field work, and CSWE competencies and practice behaviors into the student’s learning, as well as building and maintaining

the relationship between the field department and community agencies that serve as placement sites (Tully, 2015). Many individuals who are hired into the liaison role have little to no higher education teaching experience and may not recognize the extent to which the program is relying on the liaison to perform in each of these roles. As a result, the following that is discussed is a model for a baseline training framework to onboard new liaisons. Creating a standardized training for field liaisons that addresses each of these specific areas is a crucial piece in the success of a field education program.

The central role for the liaison as the instructor of the field course is ensuring that students are bridging the connections between the community-based field practical experience and the practice and theoretical course work, to include concepts at micro, mezzo, and macro areas of practice (Tully, 2015). This one point has large implications for the student learning outcomes of a social work program because of the heavy emphasis that social work curriculums place on ensuring that students have the opportunity to make these connections between classroom and field learning. As a result of this, it places heavy reliability on the field liaison to be well versed in theoretical concepts at all levels (micros, mezzo, and macro) of practice.

The field liaison's ability to do this would mostly be evaluated by the way that the liaison challenges students in site visits and in the expectations and feedback provided on the learning documents, to include process recordings, learning plans, and reflection assignments. However, outside of simply relying on field liaisons' social work degree attainment, how are social work programs truly ensuring that liaisons are familiar with and secure enough in all of these theoretical foundations to the extent that they can provide this level of feedback and knowledge accountability to students, especially in the theory and practice areas that are outside of the liaison's primary professional practice areas? A standardized training needs to provide a module focused on theory review, with content specific for how the field program wants to assess the student's ability to integrate theory with practice based on student level and area of specialization.

Building out from the theoretical knowledge base, the training should have a heavy focus on preparing the liaison to be an instructor in line with the program's standards of learning. The areas in this module of the training would include course and syllabus formulation, with a focus on assignment creation and methods of assessment in line with EPAS competencies and behaviors. Due to the lack of teaching experience among most newly hired field liaisons, components related to assessment and rubric creation will be imperative in the training.

Many field education programs structure the field course in ways that make it almost a fully online course, which has large implications for the student experience in the course. As a result, training content focused on sound teaching practices related

to online learning is needed, including a student-centered communication model that has a variety of touchpoints with the student throughout the semester. There is heavy emphasis placed on how well a student does in the liaison site visit in terms of assessing a student's learning at the field placement, making the structure and content of the liaison site visit a key training area for new liaisons. This includes training information on the purpose of and preparation for the visit, standardized content areas to focus on during the visit, how to enhance the student's learning through modeling, and methods for conducting the visit to ensure a quality assessment of the student's learning.

The final content area is focused in a crisis management module. This content will provide the field liaison with the appropriate tools to respond to concerns that arise during a field placement, as these often have the most lasting impact on the student's academic trajectory. Training liaisons to understand how to take a holistic, student-centered approach to teaching in field is critical, as personal student issues have a tendency to show up during a student's field education experience. Furthermore, a liaison's ability to manage situations of conflict at a field placement contributes to the role of the liaison maintaining the relationship between the school and the field agency. How these situations are handled can have lasting impacts on the agency's desire to continue to work with the school, which has implications for the placement experiences for students and the relationship between the school and larger community, making sound training in this area even more necessary.

### **Evaluating Field Liaisons**

Evaluation is a critical aspect of social work practice and should be modeled in the field liaison training and field liaison performance. Use of the *Open SUNY Course Quality Review* (OSCQR) rubric provides a framework to assess the training modules that are available online. This rubric encourages the "use [of] research-based effective practices and standards to improve the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of ... online course design" (<https://oscqr.org>). This provides an avenue to capture areas of the training that enhanced the liaison's preparedness for teaching and identify opportunities to improve in onboarding and professional development skills. The rubric also allows for incorporation of field liaison feedback for future revisions. Additionally, this evaluation provides a standardization by which students are aware of the training provided to their field liaisons, validating the feedback and assessment they receive in their field courses.

### **Conclusion**

Field education, the signature pedagogy of social work curriculum, heavily relies on the work and commitment of numerous individuals to provide an effective educational

experience for budding professional social workers. While much attention in the field education literature has been directed toward effective ways to prepare students and field instructors for field education, there is a gap in the training that should be provided for field liaisons. The integral role that liaisons play, that impacts both the students and field instructors involved with the program, exemplifies the need for a comprehensive, holistic training for the field liaison role, to include professional development seminars throughout the year. Training that is anchored in the areas described above, to include sound teaching and assessment practices, theory overview, and crisis management techniques, would ensure that field education programs are preparing their liaisons to be effective evaluators of student performance and readiness for professional practice, one of the primary goals of social work education. Without a standardized training, can programs truly account for how students are receiving an equitable field education experience?

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