



The Indispensable Faculty Liaison Within the Signature Pedagogy: The Integrated Field/Classroom Model (IFCM) as an Example

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An examination of the social work literature on the topic of the liaison role in field education reveals some discussion with regard to role, function and impact (Bennett & Coe, 1992; Ligon & Ward, 2005; Liley, 2006; Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) first designated the term 'liaison' in their documents (CSWE, 1967), indicating that programs should assign particular faculty members with explicit field responsibilities to "provide liaison between agency supervisors and faculty and have ultimate responsibility for evaluating and grading the students' learning experiences" (p. 15).

According to Globerman and Bogo (2003), the incorporation of competency-based instruction in field settings has been affected significantly by the:

decreased funding for welfare and human services, downsizing and restructuring in health services, increased privatization, and the proliferation of managed care. Social workers are expected to increase productivity and accountability in their practices while handling their own anxieties about their professional careers. (p. 66)

This article intends to encourage a needed dialogue about the critical component of the liaison role serving as the bridge between agency field placements and classroom instruction even in the face of limited resources and funding challenges.

In a time when schools of social work are struggling with funding issues and allocation of resources, some programs have relegated the liaison role to persons other than faculty, which became permissible following the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of 2001 (CSWE, 2001). Although field education was proclaimed the signature pedagogy of social work education by CSWE (2008) EPAS, most schools have not reallocated resources to add increased funds to this arena (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Over the past several years, some schools have responded to the economic challenges by decreasing the expectations of the liaison role, no longer expecting multiple on-site visits with students during each semester or exploring the use of technology to replace traditional methods of liaising (Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013). Others have responded by hiring adjunct, part-time, contract, and/or semi-retired social workers to provide liaison services to students in placements, and these professionals may or may not have additional involvement with the university such as committee assignments, etc. A review of the websites of the 2014 top ten schools of social work (U.S. News & World Report, 2012) indicates a diverse spectrum of field education models. Some schools such as Columbia University School of Social Work (n.d.), Case Western Reserve University (n.d.), and Boston College School of Social Work (2015), refer to personnel providing field liaison services as advisors. Other schools, such as The University of Chicago (2015), have staff members, labeled as consultants, fulfilling various liaison responsibilities and partnering with particular faculty members. Within these programs, the frequency and occurrence of field liaison visits varies significantly from program to program. The liaison function appears to be assigned sometimes to a faculty member, sometimes to a staff member, and sometimes to adjunct or contract social workers. There is increasing evidence that the traditional role of the faculty field liaison has changed at many schools.

As the traditional liaison model continues to shift, and in some cases diminish, this changing landscape for students' field education creates concern. Although limited research exists regarding the liaison role, what is available clearly states that field instructors are most satisfied when liaisons are readily accessible and when there are frequent contacts between the field instructor and the liaison (Bennett & Coe, 1998). More recently, in an article comparing face-to-face (F2F) liaison visits with electronic liaison contacts, Danis et al. (2013) reported that field instructors and faculty liaisons believe "F2F contacts provided students with more support, conveyed better the importance of field work and evaluation, and allowed for more comprehensive discussion. Additionally, F2F had a more personal feel to the visit and was perceived as a better public relations strategy for the agency and the school" (Findings section, para. 2). Finally, Danis et al. (2013) noted "the disadvantages of electronic liaison were that it seemed impersonal to students, conveyed the impression that the school and faculty liaison were not invested in the student or agency, and felt as if the liaison could only get a limited understanding of the student's experience at the agency" (Findings section, para. 4). If field education truly is the signature pedagogy of social work education, does it not seem relevant and valuable to sustain, if not expand, the role of the liaison in order to ensure that students are getting what they need in the field? The model presented here goes beyond the specific roles and tasks typically incorporated within the liaison role and articulates some of the aspects and outcomes of an

Integrated Field/Classroom Model (IFCM) developed by the University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work field program.

As Wayne et al. (2010) indicated, some schools in research universities have created "non-tenure track faculty positions that permit faculty to direct energies to education for practice without being penalized for reduced scholarly activity" (p. 336). At the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, the field education team consists of nine non-tenured and full-time seasoned social work practitioners at the university designations of clinical assistant, clinical associate and clinical full professor levels. These clinical faculty members have a minimum of ten years practice experience, and the majority has provided excellent field instruction during their practice careers. They are often recruited to teach when a clinical faculty position becomes available, and they then enter the academy as a non-tenure track clinical assistant professor. The academic assignment of these professionals includes classroom instruction of concurrent foundation practice and field courses, curriculum committee membership, along with the multifaceted role of field liaison for all of the field courses (BSW, Foundation Field, and Advanced Field).

The value of the field liaison role remains of utmost importance within the IFCM for all program levels. The IFCM integrates the academic practice curriculum with the field curriculum by having the clinical faculty member assigned to a cohort of students at either the BSW or foundation MSSW levels. This same clinical professor also performs the functions and roles of clinical faculty liaison for all of the students in that cohort of students for BSW and foundation MSSW field.

Highlighting the foundation MSSW field model for purposes of this article, each weekly foundation practice class is a three-credit hour academic course with a fourth hour of Integrative Field Seminar attached. The clinical professor, who is also the students' clinical faculty liaison, is therefore able to integrate the foundation year practice content with the field experiences in the classroom. This content becomes a palette for connections with the field internship experiences. The practice course curriculum covers essential social work practice knowledge, values, and skills on: ethical decision-making, professional values, professional use of self, communication and relational skills, practice methods and interventions, theoretical perspectives, micro/mezzo/macro applications, leadership, social justice, and cultural humility.

Classroom assignments are aligned developmentally and sequentially with the field experiences. The clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison is able to work closely with the student and the field instructor to facilitate and support the integration and application of the skills and knowledge from class with the direct applications in the field.

Earls Larrison and Korr (2013) highlight the importance of the teaching and learning in classrooms in social work education in addition to what occurs in field placements. Beyond the integration of the academic and field courses, the IFCM has become a framework for growing awareness around the relational process that is developed and fostered through ongoing and consistent contact with students in both the internship and the classroom. Relational teaching develops the relational skills needed in the new millennium: mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment (Edwards & Richards, 2002). The clinical faculty team responsible for the IFCM brings a wealth of skills and experiences as classroom instructors, seasoned practitioners, and field educators to this work. The model provides the designated clinical professors/clinical faculty liaisons the opportunity to demonstrate the skills in the classroom, which are also being taught academically. To develop practice skills, knowledge, and professional self-awareness, the students are taught practice skills didactically and experientially utilizing a broad spectrum of teaching strategies such as: case-based learning, peer review process, skill demonstration, self-critiques, process recordings, journaling with feedback provision, multidimensional case assessments, and role plays.

Earls Larrison and Korr (2013) specified the importance of what is offered “in our implicit and explicit curricula, and particularly through the relational teaching-learning encounters and interactions between and among social work students and educators” (p. 197).

The assigned clinical professors/clinical faculty liaisons place their cohorts of foundation MSSW students into agencies that meet the students’ interests and also offer strong foundation-year learning experiences. The clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison meets with the student and field instructor at least four times over the course of two semesters. The number of liaison visits made to each field placement is determined by multiple factors, such as field instructor’s level of experience, amount of time placement has existed as a field learning option, the integrity of the field placement as a learning opportunity, crisis situations occurring in the placement, and student or field instructor stated need. These liaison visits serve multiple purposes and contain structure based on the student’s developmental progress and sequence of learning in the placement. Liaison visits are not simply check-ins; these visits provide relevant teaching moments and opportunities to facilitate dialogue with the educational triad – clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison, field instructor, and student.

The educational triad sets and reviews goals; shares challenges and problem-solves; identifies strengths; connects classroom learning, research, and field experiences; reveals educational barriers; and provides feedback. Well-recognized expert in field education Marion Bogo indicated in a published interview with Field Educator that “I think there could be some ways of using faculty field liaisons to better support student learning in field. It’s not a course, it’s not supervision in the field, but it’s something in between those two” (Sankar, 2013). In the same interview, she articulated as a best practice “having somebody who can not only give feedback but can really link to conceptual framework or empirical findings” (Sankar, 2013). In the IFCM, this best practice option exists and is

facilitated by the clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison providing the classroom relational experience, the teaching and scholarly activities for both foundation practice courses, and the liaising for the same students in the field.

Through weekly practice classroom experiences and academic assignments, weekly field journals and feedback, weekly integrative field seminars, increased relational experiences are created which generally enhance the student's openness to learning. The IFCM provides students a genuine option to develop a secure relationship with their clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison, one that offers the students a strong base from which to explore social work learning and a haven of safety in retreat when field experiences bring up concerns or go awry. Because the clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison is not only a teacher but also an experienced field instructor and skilled practitioner, a unique skillset is available to navigate the sometimes delicate and complex dynamics that occur when students are in the field. Overlapping needs, blurred boundaries, personal struggles, and competing demands between field and classroom are often inherent in the student's learning process. And yet, as with any complex and multilayered case, an effective practitioner can draw upon a wide array of approaches and skills to support effective outcomes. In addition, the liaison role within the IFCM's approach provides the field instructor with support, consultation, professional development and mentoring. On the mezzo level, the work completed to develop the field placement and the collaboration with agency employees and field instructors deepens partnerships between the university and agencies.

This article suggests an approach to field education that fully integrates the practice curriculum and the field placement experience via the role of the clinical professor/clinical faculty liaison at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work. This approach, the Integrated Field/Classroom Model (IFCM), extends the discussion of field as the signature pedagogy by incorporating classroom and relational teaching experiences with the learning in field. The authors believe that this model is an effective way to provide field education and are hopeful that further dialogue as well as research will emerge on this topic in the future.

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