



The Graduate Field Program and Capstone Evaluation Project

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Abstract:

This paper describes collaboration between advanced-year MSW students and field agencies of the North Carolina State University Department of Social Work. In an evaluation research course, students work with field instructors to design an evaluation research proposal. During a second course, the students conduct the evaluation and present a final report. This article describes the project, including guidelines for design and implementation of the proposal, protection of client rights through the Institutional Review Board, and facing challenges.

Supporting Agencies through Research and Evaluation

The North Carolina State University Department of Social Work MSW Field Program works collaboratively with the graduate program's research faculty to provide advanced-year students with a quality capstone experience. While the MSW program does not require a thesis, it does require MSW students to take two sequential evaluation research courses. During the first of these courses, students work with their field instructors and faculty to identify and design an evaluative research proposal that can benefit their field agency. Students then implement this proposal, conducting an evaluation at their field site during the second of the two-credit courses. This evaluation includes collecting and analyzing data, as well as compiling and submitting a final report on the project. To date, approximately 100 students have completed individual capstone projects.

Evaluation Opportunities and Field Education

The Field Program educates and collaborates with field instructors to identify year-long projects that will evaluate some selected aspect of their agency and organizational work. Graduate students and field instructors all attend the mandatory field orientation scheduled prior to the start of fall semester each year. Members of the graduate research faculty are included on the orientation program to present on the evaluation course sequence and answer questions agencies may have about this opportunity. The fit with field placements and the potential for a meaningful evaluation project within the field agency is emphasized. Faculty members coordinate a "Q & A" following their presentation,

with the field director and field liaisons also present to answer questions.

The result of this collaboration between field and graduate research faculty is that students have assisted with grant-funded, statewide projects in some instances and have provided agencies with useful program and evaluative data. In instances involving grant-funded and/or statewide projects, field instructors have chosen to directly supervise student work. Students have also conducted evaluations of group work at field placement sites and/or outcome evaluations focused on specific aspects of treatment programming. In these situations, field instructors often have chosen to support students' work on the projects by expediting access to data, allocating time during the placement for data collection, providing financial support, allowing student to present research to agency staff, etc.

Clarifying Opportunities and Expectations with Field Instructors and Students

New field agencies are sometimes unclear about the scope of evaluation projects. The general expectation is that field instructors will give students on-site support in the data collection for their evaluation projects. But the identification of the evaluation's scope is left up to the individual student in consultation with both the field instructor and research course professor, who must also approve the project. A number of tools have been created by the research faculty to assist agencies in understanding and identifying possible projects. After orientation, a reminder email is sent to agencies about the project, which includes a "[Frequently Asked Questions](#)" document on the evaluation project. The document explains the expectations of the project: a focused, time-limited evaluation project (from fall semester to May) related to social work programs or interventions, using existing data or data that students collect. The project can be used to:

- Articulate outcome goals: What are you trying to learn, change or accomplish with the program/initiative?
- Identify indicators: What kinds of information might reveal progress or challenges within a program/initiative?
- Inventory what is known: Does your experience suggest certain factors would be worthwhile to investigate to increase program capacity/services?
- Secure additional information (surveys, interviews, tests) that might be helpful to understand the current service/problem and to secure future grant funding.

Students are responsible in the fall to work with the field instructor to identify a research need, define the larger issue through a literature review, define research methods, and receive agency approval and complete the NCSU IRB process.

Students are given a worksheet during the first class to help them talk with their agency about possible evaluation projects and needs: How is the program going? What are we doing very well, and what could we do better? What are our hopes and aspirations, and how can we get there? They are provided with specific questions to ask about evaluation:

- How does evaluation work now within this organization? What are some of the reasons it has or has not been conducted in the past?
- How has evaluation been used in the past to build the capacity of the agency or specific programs?
- Are there specific examples of previous evaluation efforts that you can share with me?
- Who has been responsible for evaluation efforts in the past?
- How have community members/clients/other stakeholders been part of the evaluation process in the past?
- What training or expertise already exists in the organization to conduct evaluation?
- What does the organization have in place to sustain evaluation work?

Students then brainstorm how they will use the information from the evaluation and with whom they will share it. They also develop support for the project and identify people to help with the research.

Finally, early in the fall semester, field instructors sign a project agreement form that verifies that the agency will support the work of the project over the course of the academic year. Field instructors may or may not decide to supervise student projects once these are approved, but instructors agree to identify a primary contact within their agency for the evaluation work.

Protecting Clients and Agencies through IRB and Human Subjects Plans

Our university has an outstanding Institutional Review Board (IRB) which has provided faculty with waiver guidelines on IRB applications for class projects that are purely for educational purposes. Most capstone projects qualify for this waiver. Those that do not usually qualify for expedited IRB review. Waiver guidelines and the IRB process are reviewed in the classroom with students during the fall semester so that these can be considered and addressed as needed in a timely way. Despite these efforts, course professors sometimes have a few students who still need to address the IRB process during spring semester. Interfacing with the IRB over time has developed good working relationships, which in turn help support the social work capstone process. In order to ensure that agency clients are protected, students who do not complete an IRB are asked to complete a "[Protection of Human Subjects Plan](#)" for their projects.

Evaluation Projects that Create Change

The collaborative integration of field education and research programming in our graduate program has led to some outstanding evaluation projects. In some instances, students have won university-level awards for their work. The majority of the projects offer short and long-term insights into programmatic successes and challenges within field organizations. While many students choose to evaluate existing services on some level, there have been Capstone projects that involved developing and testing new interventions within an agency. For example, one student created a new behavior modification system within a youth residential treatment facility. This facility often used physical

restraint and sedation to address ongoing behavioral challenges. The project involved testing a new “token economy” behavior management strategy with youth that offered rewards and incentives to residents for positive behavior. As a result of this Capstone project, the hospital’s new Children and Youth Unit will now implement a “token economy” strategy that will promote positive behavioral change and reduce the need for restraint and seclusion as means of controlling undesirable aggressive and/or violent behaviors.

Facing Challenges and Looking Forward

While the collaborative capstone evaluation projects have provided invaluable knowledge to field agencies, the process of creating a structure for students to be successful has had its challenges, including the following: (1) it is very difficult if the student has placement changes during this academic year to create a quality evaluation project; (2) it is difficult for students if they have to change research professors between the fall and spring semesters of this course sequence; and (3) it seems helpful for students to have full-time faculty members teach both courses in the research sequence. The issue of placement changes has been addressed through research professors making opportunities available for these students to access and use faculty research projects and data. The MSW program director has addressed the other two items by adjusting graduate teaching assignments as much as possible to support students in their capstone work.

The intersection of theoretical knowledge and practical application offered by the capstone project provides our MSW students with breadth and depth of learning about social work evaluation. Through these individual projects, students learn to manage practical aspects of evaluation they might not otherwise encounter during their graduate work. Our hope is that this experience will contribute to enhancing their social work practice and career trajectories in positive ways.