



The Future of Field Education: A Conversation with Darla Spence Coffey

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Editor's Note: In this issue's Conversation, Dr. Darla Spence Coffey, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Social Work Education, is interviewed by Springfield College's Director of Field Education and Professor, Dr. Bill Fisher. In a wide-ranging interview we learn about Dr. Coffey's thoughts on the preliminary findings of the recent national Commission on Field Education (COFE) survey, and her impressive efforts to better link Field Education to federal workforce development initiatives. CSWE's new affiliation with The National Center for Inter-professional Practice in Education is also discussed. Preliminary findings of the COFE survey of Field Directors on Models, Staffing and Resources can be found at <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=85087>



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Bill Fisher: Darla, first I'd like to start by recognizing the importance of your leadership in working to improve field education. As co chair of the task force that will be examining the results of the field education survey, I'd like to say that it's very positive that there is an increasing understanding of the central role of field education.

Darla Spence Coffey: This has been very natural for me. I have a BSW, MSW, and PhD in social work. I'm a social worker through and through. I spent many years practicing social work before I even considered going into the academy.

As a social work student, I had some fabulous professors, but I would be hard pressed to give you any details about the classes that I took. I could definitely tell you some detailed stories about my field experiences. Those are the experiences that really bring things together for students. It's really important for me to contribute and lead in these conversations.

For me, field is absolutely the heart of social work education. I always cringed when I heard folks talk about social work education and field education as though they were two separate entities. Hopefully, we'll get to the day when we say "social work education" and everybody in the room understands that means field is intricately integrated into all of that.

It's been an honor and privilege to be in my position and try to find ways to highlight the importance and elevate the conversations about field education.

BF: The initial findings of the state of field survey, an initiative of CSWE and COFE, were recently released. What implications do you see in a preliminary look at the data?

DSC: First, let me thank you for the work that you did on the report and the ongoing work in terms of diving deeper into this data.

I'm looking forward to what we decide to focus on within the data. In general, it highlights a number of things that we're doing very well. It also highlights that as much as we talk about the need to have creativity and innovation, we're still relying on traditional models for the structure of field education. That surprised me.

For example, in terms of the academic year, a student starts in the fall, and goes through the spring. We really have not budged in terms of how field has been historically structured. That was a bit surprising.

BF: If I can offer an insight on that, new models could really enhance the learning experience and the skill development, but they're also complicated to administer.

That's something that we don't always consider when we're exploring a model, that is, if you have half of your student body pursuing one model, and a third pursuing another model, and a quarter pursuing another model, it's very complex to administer. That, of course, brings us back to resources. That's one caveat that I would add to the idea of alternative models, alternative models usually require more resources.

DSC: I know.

BF: How do you see deans and directors using the information from the survey? Do you think there are some important takeaways for them?

DSC: I have a great appreciation for the pressure that deans and directors experience. They're betwixt and between, dedicated to quality social work education as well as needing to answer to provosts and to presidential priorities.

We know that lots of our programs are seriously struggling with finances. State support of higher education has been declining.

I'm hoping that deans and directors are looking at this data through a few different lenses. I hope that

there are conversations about this data in faculty meetings so that faculty and field directors, and deans and directors, can all wrap their heads around the data, what it means, and what implications there might be for their program.

More than anything I feel like there's a great launch pad for important conversation. We haven't yet gotten to the place where we can really begin to highlight some of the alternative ways of doing things, and that's also going to be helpful.

The data that we have right now in this initial report on the state of social work field education is extraordinarily important, and it might even be a wakeup call. For instance, two years ago in our annual survey of programs we saw a tipping point where there were more part time faculty than full-time faculty.

That's huge to start thinking about how more than 50-percent of our curriculum is being delivered by faculty members who have a more tenuous relationship with the university and the school or program. What does that mean?

Similarly we learned in the field survey that only a third of field directors are on a tenure track, all others are contracted, what does that mean? In some institutions, the contract status is preferred by field directors because it relieves some of the pressure around scholarship and service. But does that come at a cost to overall programs?

These are the kinds of things that are likely to be the topics of conversations among faculty and deans, and among deans themselves, when they're talking with other deans about their field programs.

BF: We're hopeful that those discussions will occur. It all goes back to quality education and quality service to the community. The more we keep that in mind, the more we can be cognizant of the limitations, but also the opportunities that field directors and field staff have to assure effective field placements. How do you envision that CSWE and COFE might use the data?

DSC: I've had brief conversations with Rebecca Brigham, chair of COFE; we're looking to partner with COFE to enhance field in a number of different ways that are consistent both with the summit and some of the findings of the survey. This is, to my knowledge, the first time we've ever focused our lens on field education in this way.

BF: There were a couple of university based surveys back along, but this is the first time certainly CSWE has.

DSC: Right. When I heard that, I was very surprised that in fact we had never really done a survey of field directors before, that is, a survey completed by the field director. This differs from the annual CSWE survey usually completed by the Dean or Director.

What we have now with the survey findings is a better picture of what current field really looks like. Now, what additional data do we need to move forward? That's our next step to figure that out.

BF: There was a brief section on some of that qualitative material that you're talking about. I do think that that will be helpful.

I will say that in listening to lots of folks that are either field directors or more involved in the field education component of their programs, I don't think there will be a whole lot new being heard. I feel like the

data is really what's going to be helpful.

I don't know if I'm being very clear, but we understand that field directors feel a great deal of pressure, and for good reasons. There's no need to sell me on that. But it helps in conversations with deans and directors who then can use the findings in their conversations with provosts. The data really helps.

One of the motivations for the survey was to have more than anecdotal information about the conditions in field education. For example, we learned that approximately 44-percent of all field directors don't have an administrative assistant dedicated to field, which is shocking to many people. Of course, when we do the breakdowns, we'll find out whether those are smaller programs or larger programs. But the extent of the intricacy in maintaining a database of names and numbers and email addresses is important to take into consideration.

What I tell anybody who will listen, including my dean and faculty, is that every year is a new year. The landscape is always changing in terms of field placements and what's available. So we're almost almost always starting with a clean slate in terms of finding and locating quality placements.

Certainly, the network that we've all developed over the years is helpful. We couldn't do our jobs without it. That little tug of desperation when field placement season starts up again and you don't know whether 15 of your greatest supervisors are actually going to be available or not, it's an ongoing challenge.

DSC: I know, it's always a challenge. I made a decision when I started this job to also be a student of other professional education associations so that I could understand how other professions handle clinical education and internships.

In nursing, for example, they decide the size of their incoming class based on the number of clinical sites that they have. We don't do that in social work. We throw open a wider door and with that brings diversity. But then there is always concern about having enough quality field placements.

I do think that we might need to start rethinking that approach. But we understand that deans are pressured by their provosts to not cap admissions. However, in order for us to be able to ensure that students are getting a quality field experience, there may need to be some limits. This may be an issue that we're going to need to start wrestling with.

BF: I want to go back to the 2014 Field Education Summit. The purpose of the summit was to engage social work leaders in a planning process to expand the capacity and enhance the quality of field education. It's been almost two years, how do you think we're doing with this?

DSC: First, I want to say that there was no question that it was important to have this summit. But then it became controversial because of the way that I decided to structure it. I want to spend a little bit of time with that because there was a great deal of intentionality with the structure.

I wanted to ensure that field directors were not the only cohort represented at the summit. To think outside of the box and to create change in field education, we wanted to expand who was present. That's why we wanted to have teams of representatives from each participating program - field directors and their dean or director or another faculty champion of field.

Another reason I decided to do that is my own experience. Whenever I've had an opportunity to attend a conference with a colleague from my same institution, the likelihood of it gaining traction to make some changes at my institution is increased because I have a partner. The hope was that the summit would cre-

ate the connections and plant the seeds for innovation and more conversation.

BF: Building the relationships was important.

DSC: Yes, absolutely. I wanted to make sure that was front and center. I knew that this was only going to be a start. A big part of what I was hoping for was that these rich conversations would be taken back to campuses, within programs and across programs.

I've also begun thinking about a way to gather folks together again to say, "What's changed? What are you doing differently? Did you try something that worked? Did you try something that was too difficult to sustain? What can we learn from that?"

In general I feel like there has been a lot of support for elevating the conversation and the importance of field education as central to social work education. When I have an opportunity to talk to a foundation or to a federal agency about workforce development or funding social work education, I'm very intentional about bringing field education into the conversation front and center.

The social work HEALS grant is a great example. It's a collaboration with NASW and funded by the New York Community Trust. There is a cohort of students from 10 different institutions who are working in integrated healthcare settings. We're helping organizations rethink how they're delivering healthcare and we're creating the field settings that we need so students can be prepared for tomorrow's practice environment.

CSWE also has another initiative funded by the New York Community Trust, or more specifically, the Fund for Social Policy Education and Practice, that focuses on elevating policy and policy practice in field education. It's very much about how to get students placed in settings where they'll be able to really engage in policy practice. We're responding to a concern that policy practice is a part of the field that has gotten lost. These are two examples of where CSWE has taken leadership to move the needle in field education.

BF: Those are wonderful initiatives and reflect the need to respond to a complex and continually changing environment. Many of us truly appreciate the efforts of CSWE to, as you say, move the needle to create educational opportunities that are enhanced, and are up to the minute, that promote diverse learning experiences. This builds on another question. A persistent issue is the need for sufficient resources for field education.

DSC: While I do not want to make light of that very important issue, the truth is there isn't a sector in our society that feels it's sufficiently resourced at this point. Field offices understandably feel overwhelmed with the demands of establishing, maintaining, and nurturing relationships with organizations that can be good field sites. And, of course, these sites often feel completely overwhelmed because human service organizations don't have sufficient resources. It's really across the board.

One of the things that I've thought about is that there seems to be a growing recognition within the academy, particularly in programs that are located at institutions other than the Tier One research intensive institutions, that our focus is first and foremost about higher education. In other words, teaching and learning is central to our missions. This shift may create an environment where research on teaching and learning is more valued; this is an area that has not been deemed very worthy in terms of faculty tenure and promotion. I feel like that's changing on many campuses, so there may be more faculty drawn to do research on learning outcomes, including in field education. That's not saying that research isn't important, but research about teaching and learning is an incredibly valuable scholarly agenda that needs to be

supported. I do feel like that might help.

The higher education sector has been feeling heat from members of Congress who are demanding more accountability from universities and colleges for tuition increases and the overall cost of education. Also, I'm hoping that these new funding opportunities that are bringing resources to field education will help to engage more faculty interest in field education.

The new policy practice initiative should draw in faculty dedicated to social policy; it's a great opportunity for them to get involved with ensuring that students have policy practice experience in field education. I feel that too much of the resource question stems from the divide between field faculty and other faculty. I'm hoping that the policy practice initiative becomes a model that helps to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility among all faculty for all components of the curriculum.

BF: The more CSWE can encourage that vision the more benefit there is overall. Do you see CSWE continuing to advocate and lobby for research funding and continued funding of training grants?

DSC: I do. The challenging part about external funding from foundations and federal agencies is that their resources are also limited. They're interested in shaping the direction of issues through financial incentives like grants, but they only want to get things started, then it's up to us to sustain these initiatives. Sustainability does, in fact, become the bigger challenge. But we are always looking for more funding opportunities, and field is very much a part of every conversation.

So here is a good example. I met with three officials from [the] Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) yesterday, and field education was a central part of the conversation. Often workforce development is seen as something that happens in the four walls of the classroom, or in the online environment. My emphasis was on the important role field education plays in workforce development. I highlighted that the rubber hits the road when students are working in collaborative teams in their field practicum. I hope this perspective helps to steer funding in the direction of field education. I feel like it's something that I'm constantly looking for, though I can't promise that we're going to be able to always increase funding externally.

Schools and programs need to be thinking creatively and about how to innovate and not feel constrained by the accreditation process. One reason that we struggle with the changing and very demanding work environment is that we keep trying to do what we've always done but with fewer resources. That dynamic contributes to the stress.

At some point you've got to say, "Let's pretend we're going to start this new, to see if we can figure out a different model." But a lot of programs talk to me about not feeling free enough to try things because they're afraid of the accreditation process. I pull out the accreditation standards myself, all the time, because there are things that people are reading in these standards that don't exist.

BF: Yes. You are absolutely right. I've encountered that several times. I encountered it for myself when I was a new field director, that somehow there was a law somewhere, and I needed to follow it. Then when I really investigated it, there was no such law. No such rule.

You raised an interesting question for me that I know field directors and faculty struggle with regarding students who come to social work with a solid background in social work skills. These are students without the credentials, but with substantial experience. How do we zero in on their learning needs? How do we assess their starting level of competency, which might be more advanced than a less experienced

student?

In the field placement process, we take into account age, background, [and] populations that have been worked with before. We take into account whether there is very little or no experience in the student's background. Based on that understanding we match a student to the appropriate placement, in that way individualizing the learning.

DSC: I have already begun talking about this, and you'll hear me talking more and more publicly about it. In 2008, when the Commission on Educational Policy and Accreditation decided to move towards competencies and away from prescribed content areas, the big elephant in the middle of the room, so to speak, is that we still held onto some very traditional things that are not competency based at all.

If we're talking about competencies, we need to be consistent. Consistency will require us to examine things that have been sacred cows, like no credit for prior learning, or work experience. For a true competency based approach, that's inconsistent. I know, both as a faculty member and as a program director, I had a hard time explaining to students that had tremendous background and competency before they ever stepped into orientation at our program, that they were still required to take every class, and spend every hour prescribed by the CSWE's Commission on Accreditation standards.

There's not a whole lot of appreciation for accreditation, across the board, in Washington, DC. There's a feeling that this is, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," like there's some questions about the peer review process, which I definitely support. I don't want bureaucrats deciding what is quality social work education. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't ask questions and have conversations about accreditation. There are ways for us to learn from other competency based education programs that have figured out how to assess students individually. All students might not need to spend the same amount of time in class or field.

Yes, it will mean individualizing learning, but your point, Bill, we're already doing that a lot, or at least we should be. I feel like it may be the next frontier in social work education.

I'm not going to say that somebody who has worked two or three years as a supervisor of a group home doesn't need to do any field. No, that's not true, because there is a difference between being an employee and carving out time to reflect. However, learning and working are not mutually exclusive, either. The 2015 EPAS just got approved and everybody is understandably pretty much exhausted by that process. But now might be the time for us to encourage some pilot studies to explore assessment of competencies through different pathways that could include things like prior learning or prior work experience.

We don't know enough, yet. We can't just say, "The standards require 400 hours (Bachelor's level), or 900 hours (Master's level)." This is being examined. There's actually a task force made up of members from the Commission on Educational Policy, Commission on Accreditation, and Commission on Research that are tackling, "How do we assess this standard that is not really evidence based?" What is the evidence that exists that 400 and 900 are the magic numbers? That's been scary for folks to look at, but it's time for us to do exactly that.

BF: If we're really thinking about creating or developing competent professionals, not taking only what they want to do into account but taking what they can do and have done into account, it seems like a natural professional developmental process that we would be open to.

DSC: Absolutely. You're going to see that.

BF: Is there anything else you'd like discuss?

DSC: Yes, you've probably also heard me talk about the role of social work and inter professional education and collaborative practice. CSWE was recently accepted as an institutional member of the Inter professional Educational Collaborative, which was a very important milestone and didn't happen overnight. It's something that I've been advocating for the last couple of years. Our membership in IPEC highlights the role of social work on inter professional teams. The conversation about inter professional at this point has been largely about healthcare. One of our goals is to begin to broaden the notion of inter professional to other areas, because we know that social workers work in the law, in the arts, and in architecture, for that matter.

BF: It's so important in this day and age especially with the changes instituted under the Affordable Care Act. We should be working on how we can better integrate inter-professional learning activities in field and in the classroom.

DSC: I had a conversation with Barbara Brandt earlier today. Barbara Brandt is the Director for the National Center for Inter professional Practice and Education that was funded by HRSA, and the Macy foundation, RWJ, and Hartford. It's a momentous public-private initiative. She will be our open plenary speaker at the APM in November. She wanted to know if it was okay with me that she challenged us to stop asking about our place at the table and encouraged us to be leaders in the inter professional education space. I said, "Of course, yes, because we should be!"

BF: Many of us feel that there has been a tremendous leap forward in bringing social work field education to the table, so thank you for spearheading the IPEC collaboration as well.

DSC: Oh, it's certainly my pleasure. The reason I mentioned it is because good IPE is fundamentally about field. It can't just be something that's in the classroom. If students are not having the opportunity to practice delivering services in this way we aren't going to be able to change the way services are delivered, and so this is very much an issue that's got field front and center.

BF: Absolutely, yes. The experience of that can't take the place of the theoretical. It has to be experience.

DSC: That's right.

BF: I know COFE and the research and publications committee appreciate your interest in doing this interview, your interest in the survey, your interest in field education, and the major and very forward looking initiatives that you're taking on and pursuing. It's an exciting time.

DSC: Thank you. I really appreciate the dedication to quality social work education. It's so rewarding to partner with people that have the same vision.

BF: Thank you for participating in this discussion.