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A Conversation with Cynthia Hunter

Author(s)

*Cynthia Hunter, MSW
James Madison University*

*Suzanne Sankar, MSW
Simmons School of Social Work*

Editor's Note: In this issue's *Conversation* Suzanne Sankar, Executive Editor of the *Field Educator* and Associate Dean of Simmons School of Social Work, interviews Cindy Hunter, who along with Julia Moen and Miriam Raskin, edited *Social Work Field Directors Foundations for Excellence*. Cindy is an Associate Professor and Director of Field Placement at James Madison University. More information about the book can be found at <http://bit.ly/2fxkSyX>.



Cynthia Hunter, MSW



Suzanne Sankar, MSW

Suzanne Sankar: *Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence* strikes a useful balance by providing a nuts and bolts perspective while also exploring the many dilemmas encountered by a Field Director. It's a great book for anyone new to the role of Field Director, and also offers guidance to the more experienced director who is navigating the complexities of field education. It's definitely not just a "how to book."

How did you and your coauthors, Julia Moen and Miriam Raskin decide to write a book for field directors?

Cynthia Hunter: Miriam, Julia, and I had been, on the Baccalaureate Program Director (BPD) Field Committee for several years. One of the committees' biggest jobs was to plan the annual pre-conference training for new BSW Field Directors. Over the years, we learned several things. First, not all new field directors are able to attend these national trainings. Second, when they do attend, the time allotted for the training (one half day), is not adequate. One half day is really just enough time to find out what you're in for and then to feel overwhelmed! Finally, once the Field Director Listserv was up and running, we could see the high volume of questions that would be repeated every couple of years.

To address these issues, we regularly talked about turning the presentation into a book to get a wider audience and to have a chance to take a more in depth look at several topics. We joked about taking

our PowerPoint presentation, adding some commentary, stapling it together, and then distributing it!

With Julia Moen and Miriam Raskin's input, it became clear that writing the book would be a more scholarly endeavor, which eventually became our focus.

Suzanne: One thing everybody always says about field directors is, "They're the busiest in the world." How did you get your authors, many of whom are field directors to sign on?

Cynthia: Good question. First we went to the educators who are considered national leaders in field education, members of BPD and the CSWE field committees. At the same time we turned to scholars in the field, those who were publishing their own research on field education. Marion Bogo and Julianne Wayne were obvious potential contributors. Also, we thought of Carolyn Knight for her work on training and Sharon Lyter whose work has influenced the new EPAS safety standards. Honestly, it is not even fair to mention some names and not all since the list of contributing authors is a list of field superstars. No one turned us down!

Suzanne: I noticed several of the chapters are co-written.

Cynthia: Yes, authors teamed up. Some people had strong writing, and some people had strong wisdom. People were dedicated to the end product and to getting their voices out there.

Suzanne: How long did it take to write the first edition?

Cynthia: Three years, longer than we anticipated. We didn't know how long it would take to pull everyone together to write, then bring it into one voice, and then go through then complete the editing and publishing process. We also wanted to make sure that all the Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards related to field education were represented.

Suzanne: You recently issued a revised version, that reflects the 2015 EPAS. Was the decision to re-issue based on the new EPAS?

Cynthia: The revisions were completely related to bringing the work into sync with the new standards. For the revised edition, some of the changes were straightforward because the 2008 and 2015 EPAS are similar in that they are both competency based. But some of the changes specifically the introduction of holistic competency and working on safety, are more complicated. We wanted to get material out on that topic, which is very timely.

Suzanne: Yes, many schools are working on how to best assess holistic competencies. I know some schools are trying to do more simulations or observations, which are both time and resource intensive.

Cynthia: I'm looking forward to BPD and APM to start getting a sense of what people are experimenting within those areas. I know several of our authors, inspired me to look at my assessment and training tools.

Suzanne: Agreed. The chapter written by Marion Bogo provides a very clear conceptual framework for holistic assessment.

Cynthia: Yes and I consider her book, *Achieving Competence in Social Work*, essential reading for all field directors.

Suzanne: Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence balances practice wisdom and research-based scholarship. How did you achieve this balance?

Cynthia: Our goal was to create a book on Field Education that was empirically based. We worked closely with the authors to assure that all chapters incorporated the most current research. If we thought something was missing, we'd send authors recent articles. This was possible because Julia Moen collects every piece of field literature there is! We didn't have the benefit of the recent national survey of field directors. That would have been a wonderful tool to have had for this book. I encourage field directors and program directors to look at those results on the CSWE webpage. Maybe we'll be able to incorporate those state of the field results the next edition.

Suzanne: What about practice wisdom how did you ensure that perspective was included?

Cynthia: We intentionally included topics that reflect practice wisdom because not all our practices in field education have been studied and researched. Sometimes, the literature shows us "common practices" which are not necessarily "best practices." Wherever we couldn't find empirical evidence, we provided guidance on what we considered to be practice wisdom. Then, we included the caveat that more research was still needed on the topic.

Suzanne: This is more an observation than a question, when I read the chapter on gatekeeping, I thought about how the content could be very useful for other college administrators who are interfacing with the field departments, whether it's legal counsel, or provosts, or deans.

I wonder if you also thought of that group as part of your audience.

Cynthia: We definitely thought about that, especially deans and directors. But the chief focus was on social work field directors.

Suzanne: Which makes sense. Several of the chapters could be very helpful in framing discussions with college administrators, whether it's discussions about resources, or how to handle a complicated student situation.

It helps for the field director not just to convey, "This is how we do it," but also to have a body of scholarship supporting the importance of gatekeeping, or some of the complications of gatekeeping, just to use that as an example.

Cynthia: Here's my advice to everybody who's a field director. Check the literature first! Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence gives an overview of the current literature. The Field Educator also fills the role of bringing some very relevant and practical issues to field directors. Field directors can stay current by reading the Field Educator and keeping up with the section, "What We're Reading." I love that section. It has everything about field that's new.

Suzanne: Yes, agreed! Thank you.

Cynthia: Beyond staying current, we should be collaborating with each other, and doing research with each other to answer some of the questions that we're always struggling with, questions like: "how do we best measure competence", or "how many hours in field placement are needed"? Do we even

need hours? Should competency in field be linked to hours? Maybe there's no magic behind 400 or 900 hours of field placement. Reviewing the literature and then doing our own research can help to answer those questions.

Suzanne: Right, there are a lot of sacred cows; research can help move the field to a different place. As you were talking, I was thinking that we should have an online book club, or journal club, where everybody would agree to read a certain article, or a chapter, or book and then discuss on a conference call or GoToMeeting.

Cynthia: Great idea.

Suzanne: I'll take that back to the Field Educator. Maybe we can have a Field Educator book club!

Cynthia: Or a journal club, but time is always an issue for Field Directors. It could also stimulate people to collaborate on various forms of research.

It's going to be interesting to see how the 2015 holistic competencies get operationalized, in terms of assessment in field education. I can imagine another revised edition of our book that includes examples of what other schools are doing in terms of assessment plans. Everyone's looking around to see what other schools are doing.

Suzanne: I like the idea of another edition of *Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence*. It certainly would help with the furthering the discussion and thinking about holistic assessment.

Cynthia, I want to thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to talk with the Field Educator. Thank you!

Cynthia: Thank you too!