



## A Conversation with Trudy Zimmerman

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*[Editor's note: This issue's Conversation features an interview by Suzanne Sankar, MSW, Field Educator's Executive Editor, with Trudy Zimmerman, MSW, the Assistant Dean for Field Education at Boston University School of Social Work. Trudy discusses BUSSW's innovative Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative, which is one of many initiatives funded in 2016-2017 by the Council on Social Work Education through support from the Fund for Social Policy Education and the Casey Family Programs. The aim of the funding is to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in policy practice in field education on a national level.]*



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**Suzanne:** Trudy, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Conversation. We're interested in learning about the Boston University School of Social Work Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative, funded by the Council on Social Work Education with support from the Fund for Social Policy and Education and the Casey Family Programs. Your project was one of many funded nationally with the goal of developing new models for an integrated approach to heightening policy skills among social work students. Can you start by telling us how you decided to apply for these funds?

**Trudy:** The primary impetus for us to apply came out of our program assessment data, which we have been collecting for a number of years. What we were finding was that the policy practice competency was getting some of the lowest scores on the field evaluation compared to other competencies.

Field instructors were often telling us that they had no opportunity to assess the competencies related to policy practice, thus students were given the rating of "not applicable."

We saw the grant as an opportunity to strengthen field instructors' familiarity with the policy practice

competency and their ability to help students make the connection between what they were learning in their policy courses with the policy issues that were relevant to their placement population, setting, or community. That was really our primary impetus.

**Suzanne:** Did you focus the activities of your program on the Field Instructors?

**Trudy:** They weren't the only focus. They were one of the areas on which we focused.

The ratings of "not applicable" seemed to be communicating a message to us, which was: we don't understand this, we don't have time for it, we don't know what you mean, we don't feel competent, or we don't feel confident in our ability to help students with this. We weren't sure what was behind it, but we felt that Field Instructors were definitely a good group to try to do some work with that we could support through the grant.

**Suzanne:** You understood that they were key if you were going to make some kind of changes in the learning outcomes for students.

**Trudy:** Yes. I think the other focus obviously was the students. We have several different groups of students. For example, our students who major in macro practice seem to have an easier time understanding the link between policy practice and macro practice.

It was primarily the students who major in clinical practice who would often say to us, "Why do I have to take three policy courses?" which is the requirement here. "I didn't like my policy courses. I don't understand how this relates to what I'm doing or what I eventually want to do."

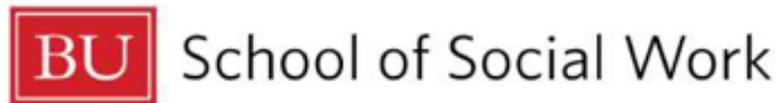
There were some students who were giving us feedback to that effect. Then, there were other students who would come to us mid-year of their first year, or maybe at the end of their first year, and say, "You know, I really didn't think I was going to like policy. I had no interest in it when I came into social work school, but I really loved my policy courses. I got very excited about policy."

Then when we would ask them about whether there were opportunities for them to engage in policy related activities in their placements, some said yes and many said no. We thought the students, obviously, would be another important group to try to influence, in terms of integrating more policy practice into their learning

**Suzanne:** Were you focusing on foundation year students, or both foundation and advanced?

**Trudy:** Foundation and advanced. We started with a very ambitious grand scheme, which we were not able to entirely do. The initial plan was to require both foundation and advanced students to do a policy related activity or assignment in their field placements.

I can explain the elements of the project and how they all fit together. This graphic shows the various area of focus of the project:



## Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative



We developed a website, through our field education website, which includes a number of different policy related resources. That website is available to students and field instructors, and it is periodically updated as we get new resources, and when new information is brought to our attention.

**Suzanne:** What's an example of some of the resources?

**Trudy:** They're primarily websites. Sometimes they are white papers or journals, but they're primarily websites of organizations doing policy work that are related to field of practice.

**Suzanne:** That sounds very useful.

**Trudy:** Then, we decided to develop four webinars for field instructors but we also invited students to participate. The topics included: an introduction to the project; a beginner's overview of policy advocacy; aging, disability, and policy practice; and the intersection of policy practice and professional social work identity. We developed an advisory committee which is comprised of several members of our policy faculty, several members of our Field Education department who are more in the policy/macro arena, and a couple of our advisors including one advisor who is affiliated with our online program. Two field instructors are also on the committee.

We set about to bolster and strengthen the Policy Practice module in our online Seminar in Field Instruction (SIFI). A group of us spent the fall revising that module, so it is now more robust. The module now includes a definition of policy practice, the CSWE 2015 policy practice competency de-

scription and a description of the three policy courses required of all BUSSW MSW students. We also added content on human rights and created a “policy practice self assessment” for field instructors which we called “your policy practice profile.”

**Suzanne:** Can you explain “your policy practice profile?”

**Trudy:** The profile is a series of questions for field instructors to answer about their own knowledge, experience, comfort, and ideas about what policy practice is and how it could be incorporated into their work with students in the field.

**Suzanne:** Did you include anything on strategies for supervision?

**Trudy:** Yes, we gave tips for how a field instructor can incorporate a focus on policy practice in supervision. We also explained an assignment that we are requiring of all foundation students.

We’re now incorporating the new online content into our face-to-face Seminar in Field Instruction (SIFI) and, for experienced field instructors, we developed an extensive handout which incorporated the new content from the SIFI. As a result, all of our field instructors are now being exposed to a more in depth look at policy practice.

**Suzanne:** Do you anticipate that there’ll be an impact on your evaluation ratings?

**Trudy:** We’ll be reviewing the student evaluations to see if there is any change for students whose field instructors took the new SIFI.

**Suzanne:** Were any of your policy faculty involved with developing it?

**Trudy:** Yes. Professor Mary Collins was involved. She’s the chair of our policy sequence and was our policy expert. We also have one staff member in the field department who teaches policy. She was very instrumental in developing the policy part of module. The rest of us are more knowledgeable about supervision.

**Suzanne:** Did you include your advisors or field liaisons?

**Trudy:** Yes, we made the module available to all the advisors, because they have an important role in supporting the field instructors and students. We hoped that it would help in shaping the conversations that take place during field visits.

**Suzanne:** What about the students? How was their learning impacted by the project? Did they have different learning experiences or assignments in field placement?

**Trudy:** They do have an assignment which is framed as a project that they do over the course of the year in their foundation field placement. The purpose of the assignment is to give students the opportunity to identify a policy issue relevant to their work in the field at their agency and the surrounding community. The students do data collection about a problem they identify. The focus is on evaluating a policy and then taking an action. The action could be providing testimony for a hearing, writing a letter to the editor, or writing a letter to their Congress person. The action could be small, but they needed to take an action.

**Suzanne:** So the emphasis was on taking an action?

**Trudy:** Yes, it requires some action on their part. We provided them with a four-section template which outlines the assignment. Then we provided them with a template for a report form, which they would fill out describing what they did, one page, very simple.

Once we review their completed work, we'll have a sense of how clearly the students understood what we're asking them to do. We'll then have a variety of exemplars that we can share with students in the future.

**Suzanne:** If a student were encountering a problem with the assignment, who would you expect them to talk to? Would you expect them to talk to the supervisor? Or would you expect them to talk to the advisor (liaison)?

**Trudy:** We encourage them to talk to whomever they think could be helpful. For example, in the beginning part of the description of the assignment we say, "Talk to somebody in your agency who is knowledgeable of that policy, who's involved with policy practice, who could identify for you some policy issues that are relevant to the agency." [This could be anyone] from the director to the clinical director, to [the] field instructor, to the person who is in charge of program evaluation, to the person who is a government liaison, depending on the agency. There could be any number of people who could start a conversation with the student.

Most students started with their field instructor. For many of them, that was probably enough and for some of them, their field instructor then suggested that they talk with somebody else.

On the basis of those conversations, then the students were supposed to identify a policy issue that they wanted to pursue. When students had difficulties determining what to do, they were invited to contact either me, or Mary Collins, or their advisor.

A number of students went to Mary, a number of students came to me, and what I found, and Mary found the same thing, is that when we talk through with the student what it was we were asking, and gave them some suggestions or invited them to give us some suggestions of things they were thinking about, that reduced their anxiety. A lot of it was anxiety about the unknown.

After they met with one of us they were then able to move ahead. Part of it was just reducing the scope and saying this is not a task force. This is not a group project. This is not going to take you all semester, three hours a week. This is a single activity that you can do in a circumscribed amount of time.

**Suzanne:** And then next year you plan to share examples of student work with other students?

**Trudy:** Exactly. We did give them examples of types of activities they could undertake but we didn't give them exemplars. We would say, "You could write a letter to your congressperson. You could invite your congressperson to come to your agency, to talk about the implications of the new administration for immigration policy."

**Suzanne:** Is there anything else you're going to do differently next year with this? What parts of it are you going to take forward next year?

**Trudy:** We'll continue assigning the foundation assignment, but we'll lay the groundwork for it much earlier, we'll discuss it during orientation and maybe even introduce it when we're meeting with students about their field placement. We'll also do more work with advisors to clarify expectations for the assignment and their role in supporting students.

Probably the biggest piece of feedback I would give to myself about this whole endeavor is that it was very far reaching and big. The scope of it was big which made it hard to keep on top of making sure that everything was moving along in a timely way.

Now we have the website, the webinars, and the SIFI. We don't have to do that again next year, which will give us an opportunity to focus more on the implementation of the project, and supporting the people who are doing the project, and helping with the project, which is where some more ground-work has to be done.

**Suzanne:** It's a big piece of work for the field department to take on to add a new project like this.

**Trudy:** Yes, it's huge.

**Suzanne:** Your Field Department is putting more resources into creating policy practice learning opportunities for students in field placement, you're making it a bigger priority. In this way you're communicating the importance of policy practice and working toward your goal of improving student learning outcomes.

**Trudy:** Absolutely. Also, in the current political climate, the implications of policy are more evident in ways that may not have been so clear to some people previously. In some ways, this is an opportune time to provide this for students and to ask students to engage in it, because it matters. It's going to matter for their clients, agencies, and communities.

**Suzanne:** [Especially] considering the impact of changes in health care policy [and] immigration policy on families and communities, just to name two areas.

**Trudy:** I think we can say that learning about engaging in policy practice is very timely.

**Suzanne:** How can Field Educator readers learn more about the Boston University Policy Practice Initiative?

**Trudy:** Policy practice initiative resources including the webinars can be found at <http://www.bu.edu/ssw/academics/field/policy-practice-in-field-education-initiative>. Also, we've submitted a proposal to the 2017 APM and hope to be presenting this Fall.