



Comparison of Face-to-Face Vs. Electronic Field Liaison Contacts

Author(s)

Fran S. Danis, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Arlington

Beverly M. Black, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Arlington

Debra Woody, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Arlington

In both the classroom and in field education, the technological revolution has impacted social work education. While electronic resources have expanded opportunities for students, they have also created new challenges for faculty and field instructors with respect to developing effective and efficient ways of conducting the basic tasks of field education. This article reports on the efforts of the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington to compare traditional face-to face (F2F) to nontraditional electronic-based field liaison contacts.

All accredited social work programs are responsible for monitoring the field placement experiences of their students (CSWE, 2008). However, the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), and section AS 2.15 in particular, puts the responsibility on the social work program for describing how students are monitored in field and how field liaison contacts with field education settings are maintained. There is no required method of monitoring students or of conducting liaison contacts; programs must demonstrate the effectiveness of their own model.

Field liaisons serve as the external representative of the social work program, giving guidance to field agencies about the educational objectives of the program and suggesting student assignments appropriate for building on classroom competencies. In a traditional model, field liaisons visit agencies at the beginning of the semester and meet in person with students and field instructors to discuss learning contracts for the placement, appropriate assignments, and requirements for hours and supervision (Ligon & Ward, 2005). Subsequent F2F meetings are held throughout the semester to monitor the professional development of students and to conduct final evaluations, in which student achievements are discussed and goals are identified for future professional growth (Raphael & Rosenblum, 1987). Monitoring activities may include reviewing student hours, ensuring the regularity of field instructor supervision, and resolving any issues between the student and instructor. When disputes do occur, it is important for field liaisons to be available and accessible. Field instructors

place high value on the availability of liaisons and the number of contacts made with them (Bennett and Coe, 1998).

However, there are a number of challenges to the traditional F2F liaison contact. Many programs have field placements in geographically diverse areas and use Skype and other videoconferencing programs for virtual liaison and field seminars (Birkenmaier et al., 2005; Leyva, 2012; Wolfer, Carney, & Ward, 2002). Shrinking university budgets and rising mileage reimbursement rates may result in field liaison visits using a higher overall percentage of the program's travel budget. Faculty members in tenured and tenure-track positions are also experiencing increased workload expectations for research and scholarship (Bennett & Coe, 1998; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). Many field agencies have also experienced budget losses, resulting in the decreasing availability of qualified MSW supervision for students. With field instructors taking on more responsibilities at their workplaces, they may also limit the number of students they can supervise (Wayne et al., 2006). Busy faculty and field instructors may have difficulty in finding time to meet F2F.

Such was the predicament in our field office at the University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work (UTA), the largest school of social work in Texas, serving more than 1300 students across 3 degree programs. Enrollment for the 2012-2013 academic year included 649 MSSW students and 629 undergraduate social work majors. Situated in the Dallas Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area, our graduates provide services to the fourth largest metropolitan area in the United States (U.S. Census, 2011), and our "local" field agencies are spread out over 9000 square miles. In response to budgetary concerns and increased workload expectations, the dean of the school of social work directed our field office to reduce or to eliminate F2F liaison monitoring, and to explore the use of technology to replace the traditional method.

Research Study

A field research work group consisting of the field director, associate dean for academic affairs, and MSSW and Ph.D. program directors identified alternative liaison contact methods and developed an evaluative study to compare the effectiveness of electronically-based liaison contacts to traditional F2F contacts. We pursued the answer to the following question: what are the differences as perceived by field liaisons, field instructors, and students of traditional vs. electronic delivery of field liaison? We sought to compare the effectiveness of F2F delivery with electronic liaison monitoring through telephone and email contacts.

Given the concerns about the accessibility of videoconferencing technology for our local agencies, we decided to limit electronic delivery of field contacts to telephone and email contact. Agencies that were contracted to provide field supervision for both undergraduate and graduate students were randomly assigned into F2F delivery versus electronic delivery. Since some agencies had multiple students assigned to them, we assigned agencies to experimental groups rather than assigning indi-

vidual students. Therefore, all students assigned to an agency received the same type of field liaison contacts. To preserve the continuity of relationships that faculty serving as field liaisons had already developed, faculty were assigned to their usual and customary agencies. Faculty assignments were typically based on matching expertise and research interests with specific agencies, and/or agencies of geographic preference for the liaison.

There were exceptions to random assignment, however. New field instructors and new agencies were excluded from the study. Our field office wanted the new agencies and instructors to have an opportunity to become more familiar with the expectations of the school and to our competency-based student assessments through more F2F, hands-on contact. Agencies that were willing to provide placements to students with behavioral challenges were also excluded from the research. Our field director believed these students would benefit from more frequent presence of field liaisons, and that the field instructors would appreciate the support from the school. After these exclusions, 113 agencies (comprised of 135 field instructors providing supervision to 264 students) were randomly assigned to either F2F liaison or to electronic liaison support. There were 16 social work faculty members assigned as field liaisons; when faculty received their semester's assignments, they were informed which agencies were assigned to which type of liaison contact.

We used our traditional end-of-the-year surveys on field liaison performance for data collection. Separate surveys were sent via SurveyMonkey to field instructors, students, and faculty liaisons. Surveys collected parallel information on availability of field liaison, quality of relationship, student access to required resources, and overall satisfaction with the field liaison experience. Additionally, we asked instructors and liaisons to suggest advantages and disadvantages of F2F and electronic contact, and to compare the effectiveness of each type of contact.

Findings

Completed surveys were received from 42% of field instructors (n = 58), 41% of students (n = 110), and 75% (n = 12) of faculty liaisons. Approximately 52% of the field instructors had F2F contact with liaisons, while 45% had electronic contact.

Advantages and Disadvantages of F2F Liaison: Field instructors and faculty liaisons reported that they believed 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 school. The identified disadvantages to F2F were that F2F was more difficult to arrange, more time-consuming, and more labor-intensive. Faculty liaisons and field instructors were more likely to comment that F2F contacts were not necessary when there were strong students placed at the agency.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Electronic Liaison Contact: Field instructors and faculty liaisons noted

that the advantages of electronic liaison included efficiency and convenience, and that electronic contact eliminated travel time to distant agencies. This method worked well if a faculty member had a strong student, and if the faculty member knew the agency and student well. Electronic liaison provided an efficient way to follow up on previous discussions, and it was easier to coordinate schedules for the participants. Although email required no coordination of schedules, some respondents expressed a preference for telephone over email.

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. Another disadvantage reported was that students didn't get a chance to meet their faculty liaisons. In a large program, not all students have met all classroom faculty; F2F field liaison provides another opportunity to personally meet a faculty member.

For both field instructors and students, the concrete tasks of field instruction were accomplished regardless of method of liaison monitoring. There were no differences in student access to resources and supervision. Students had required space and supervision, and could fulfill their required field hours. However, field instructors and students with F2F liaison contacts evaluated the faculty liaisons more favorably. In response to the survey question regarding whether F2F and electronic monitoring were effective ways to perform field contacts, faculty liaisons believed that both F2F and electronic monitoring were effective, but they clearly favored F2F methods over electronic. It is possible that faculty enjoyed opportunities to witness the growth and development of students from the classroom to the field, and to have F2F contact with the practice community. The major differences were found in perception of availability, and of relationship and consultation with liaison.

This survey represents only one semester of data collection. No comments from students were collected, so the only perspectives represented were those of the field instructors and faculty liaisons. If schools are considering adopting electronic monitoring, additional training on conducting field monitoring contacts in this way should be required for field instructors, liaisons, and students. Field offices should also consider whether an agency is amenable to non-traditional liaison monitoring before using this method. Since electronic contacts are a relatively new approach, further research should more thoroughly determine what factors increase the effectiveness of conducting field monitoring electronically.

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