



# Creating an Integrative Model of Education and Support for Field Instructors

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## Introduction

Field education for social work students is one of the most critical components of their training and educational experience. In fact, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified field education as the “signature pedagogy” of social work (CSWE, 2008; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Inherent in the training of students is the expectation that students will receive professional and appropriate supervision and guidance from field instructors (Knight, 2001). It is important for social work programs to provide support and training for all field instructors to ensure the success of the students, retain outstanding field instructors and continue to create high quality practicum experiences (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Murdock, Ward, Ligon, & Jindani, 2006).

However, barriers to providing quality training and support are especially significant in rural areas. There are fewer agencies and social workers qualified to serve as field instructors in rural areas than in urban areas (Unger, 2003). Smaller agencies typical in rural areas require their social workers to adopt numerous roles within the agency, resulting in less time to supervise students (Unger, 2003). High staff turnover in rural areas is an additional barrier to providing high quality field instruction, as it creates a need for continuous training of new field instructors (Unger, 2003). Furthermore, the remoteness and distance of some agencies make it prohibitive to travel to the social work program for on-site or face-to-face trainings (Unger, 2003).

Due to these barriers, social work programs in rural areas face a substantial challenge to provide the important training components that field instructors require in a comprehensive way that supports their learning needs. One technique to overcome the barrier of distance and remoteness is online trainings. Dedman and Bierlein Palmer (2011) studied the efficacy of providing training for field instructors online and found that social workers were, in fact, amenable to that form of training. Of most importance to respondents were: access to forms, articles on issues pertaining to field supervision and an ability to communicate with the social work program (Dedman & Bierlein Palmer, 2011). This supports the five components for training previously identified by Abramson and Fortune

(1990): common knowledge of social work concepts, the capacity to communicate effectively, a climate that encouraged learning, clarity of student expectations and an ability to evaluate student performance.

### **Program Demographics and Needs**

Longwood University is small and located in a rural region of Virginia. The university enrolls approximately 4,300 undergraduate students from more than 25 states. The social work program consists of four faculty and one staff member and serves approximately 80 students. Longwood University has the only undergraduate social work program within a 60-mile radius. All the surrounding counties are quite rural and have too few agency resources to support students' field placement needs. Students are thus granted the opportunity to complete field placements in their hometowns away from the university.

Allowing field placements in a large geographical area is necessary for all students to have the needed resources, but also creates many challenges for the university. The same agencies are not consistently used for placements. This leads to the utilization of field instructors who are often new staff members, who have not served as field instructors previously, or who have not served recently. Also, the agencies may be located four or more hours away from the university, which makes on campus trainings untenable. Finally, there are the constraints of time and funds available to train field instructors. As a result of the unique needs presented to this program, the authors, staff and faculty in the social work program sought ways in which to effectively engage field instructors through an integrative approach to training.

### **Survey Development and Results**

In order to provide field instructors with the level of training and support necessary to serve as a competent supervisor for students in the field, the Director of Field Education (subsequently referred to as 'the Director') and social work program faculty developed a seven-item survey to solicit information from former and current field instructors. The goals of the survey were: 1) to elicit feedback on what information instructors believed would be most helpful and 2) to determine what methods of communication might be most effective in training field instructors. This survey was developed in survey monkey. It was emailed to all professionals who had provided field instruction for the program between 2008 and 2012 for whom the program had contact information, and to those committed to providing field instruction for the first time in the Spring of 2013 (N=61).

A total of 27 professionals responded to the survey yielding a 44% return rate. The first question asked "What information would be helpful for you to have before working with a student from our social work program?" Participants responded from a list of options. Primary areas of concern for field instructors focused on the mechanics of the field education practicum, most significantly, student expectations and responsibilities (100% rated this as 'very helpful'), agency and instructor

responsibilities and the practice behaviors students are expected to learn (88.89% rated these items as 'very helpful' and 11.1% as somewhat helpful). Field instructors were also interested in policies and procedures of the field program (85.19% rated this item as 'very helpful' and 14.81% as 'somewhat helpful'). Approximately half of the respondents stated it would be very helpful to learn more about university and program responsibilities and information on the program mission and goals (55.56% for each) as well as how to decipher program forms (51.85%).

The next question listed the CSWE core competencies and asked field instructors to select from yes/no/don't know responses of whether they would like more information regarding each specific competency. The areas of most need for additional information were: engaging in research-informed practice and practice-informed research (62.96%) and engaging in policy practice to advance social and economic wellbeing and to deliver effective social work services (65.83%). About half of respondents wanted more information about: social work ethical principles (50%), critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments (51.85%), engaging in diversity and difference in practice (48.15%), advancing human rights and social and economic justice (44.44%), and applying knowledge of human behavior and the social environment (44.44%). The areas least in need for additional information were: identifying as a professional and conducting oneself accordingly (33.33%) and engaging with clients at the micro and macro level (37.04%).

When asked specific questions about how they would like to receive training, 48.15% of field instructors were interested in having a forum, while 51.85% were not. Of the 48.15% interested, 62.50% identified face to face as the format that would be most appealing while 43.75% chose an online blog. The preferred method of receipt of training material was by email (88.00%) with a newsletter following as the second choice (52.00%).

### **Program Plan**

Based on the responses from this informal survey and the program requirements for field instructor training, the Director and faculty formulated a multi-tiered plan to provide both field instructors with online as well as face-to-face contact. Meeting the needs of field instructors in a way that would be meaningful, engaging and interesting was a consideration in the development of content for the contacts. Keeping in mind the variety of learning styles that exist, as well as stated desires from survey results, contact was established using a newsletter format, e-mails, telephone calls and face-to-face field visits.

Field instructors' preferred method of communication was e-mail, which was followed by the option of a newsletter. This information, combined with the data suggesting the field manual was not written in a user-friendly format, led the faculty and Director to implement the newsletter approach. It could be used to present material in a way that was easier to read and to digest in smaller portions and provide the opportunity for additional information on CSWE standards and educational news.

New policies and procedures were developed and added to [the Longwood University Social Work Program handbook](#) in order to incorporate the new electronic means of training instructors which were developed based on survey results.

There are several lines of communication with field instructors, outlined in the handbook.

- The initial contact is an email with a welcome note, a copy of the Field Instructors' Manual, the Memorandum of Understanding and a few "nuts and bolts" policies (dates and hours students are in field, supervision requirements etc.).
- Approximately two months before the start of field, a newsletter is sent out via email to field instructors. This includes general information about the social work program and field education program, and a list of the field liaisons with contact information and photos.
- The following week, another email is sent that includes a video powerpoint presentation. This includes specific policy and procedure information, learning objectives, core competencies, and how students are evaluated.
- Approximately one week later, another video powerpoint is sent describing the stages of the field process and how to prepare for a student coming into field. It also discusses perceptions of what makes a good field placement and how instructors can make the process go more smoothly.
- Finally, information is sent via email about how to handle student concerns and how to identify when a concern becomes a problem.
- One feature of the newsletters is 'stories from the field'. Field instructors are encouraged by email to send examples of interesting issues they are discussing with their interns, which may be shared with other field instructors in a newsletter.

In addition to this contact, the faculty field liaisons serve as the connecting link between the social work program and agency regarding the student. They visit each site for a face to face meeting at least once in the beginning of the placement, maintain email or phone contact with the instructor (as per instructor preference), and provide a second visit which is either face-to-face or through virtual or phone conference. In these field visits, field instructors may point out interns' strengths and accomplishments. For example, one intern was praised for taking the initiative to develop an extensive resource guide, which was also mentioned in one of the field newsletters. There is also the opportunity to discuss possible dilemmas, like the appropriateness of taking a photo during a home visit.

Field liaisons also take care to discuss research and policy – the top two areas in the survey results wherein field instructors asked for support. Students are asked direct questions related to how agency policies are guided by research evidence. When field liaisons provide advice about how to identify research in the field, they usually find that field instructors are utilizing research methods as an integral part of their practice. Field instructors and students can also discuss how policy has an impact on their work. In response to the field instructor request for more training on introducing

students to research, we are also developing a video on “Applying Research to Everyday Practice” and are encouraging student involvement in research projects at their field placements.

### **Conclusion**

This is a small and informal study conducted for the specific purpose of improving field instructor training and support in a small rural social work program. As such, it is limited in its implications. Further research needs to be conducted in order to duplicate this method of engagement and validate its efficacy. However, interesting findings did come from this process that warrant additional focus.

Field instructors had responded in the survey that they valued multiple methods of contact from the field department. They have expressed satisfaction with our school’s innovation in communications. In face-to-face field visits, field instructors shared their appreciation of the material received and stated it had been easy to access and implement. Several also noted appreciating the ability to go back and review videos or newsletters multiple times, as needed. Receiving information in writing, in video, by telephone, and in person has addressed diverse ways to understand and digest new information. No one method has stood out as better than another; feedback indicates that a multi-method approach is most successful.

It is noteworthy that field instructors identified the strongest interest in receiving additional information in areas that students traditionally receive lower marks in during the student field evaluation process. Research-informed practice and policy practice were two competencies in which the instructors ask for additional guidance. The study further supports the need for improved training for field instructors in the areas of policy and practice behaviors as well as agency and instructor responsibilities. While policy and practice behaviors might be inherent in most social work placements, they may not be specifically delineated as areas of training or even accountability for field instructors. Within these parameters, field instructor feedback for this model was very positive.

This study encouraged important innovations in communication with field instructors and provided a foundation for future trainings specifically targeted to the areas for which field instructors requested information. This program will continue to fine-tune communication and develop trainings that meet field instructors’ identified needs. Evaluation of these trainings could include a pre- and post-test design measuring what field instructors knew about these areas before and after attending a training and reviewing material received from the university. In summary, these innovations have been a useful and positive start in providing quality field instructor training and support with limited resources in a large geographical setting.

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