



Students Today, Educators Tomorrow: Shaping the Social Work Curriculum to Enhance Field Education

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Introduction

The development of competence in the professional practice of social work is a primary objective of all social work programs. Field education is the “signature pedagogy” of the profession (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). It offers students pivotal learning opportunities through which knowledge can be integrated and applied to practice, and competence in practice skills can be developed. Indeed, it has been identified as the most significant component of the social work curriculum in preparing competent, effective, and ethical social workers (Bogo, 2006). However, field education faces a significant challenge in finding supervisors and internships for students. This paper describes the efforts of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto to encourage current students to make a commitment to the training of future generations of social workers.

Field Education at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW)

The overall aim of the FIFSW program in Toronto is to produce graduates who are ready to enter the field after receiving a thorough grounding in the knowledge, values and skills common to all social workers. The Year 1 practicum is perceived as a generic base for learning social work practice. All students are expected to engage in two levels of intervention: work with (direct) and on behalf of (indirect) client systems. Both levels of practice involve significant learning goals and activities that considerably strengthen students’ learning and contribute to agency mandates. The Year 2 (or Advanced Standing) practicum requires students to select a specialization and engage in a practicum that will prepare them for entry into practice upon graduation. In the 2014-2015 academic year, there were approximately 144 Year 1 students and 240 Year 2 (or Advanced Standing) students in the FIFSW program.

The Challenges

While Toronto offers a plethora of MSW student practicum opportunities, and there are excellent relationships between FIFSW and the social and health care organizations across the city, there are also considerable challenges in the recruitment of field educators. There is more competition for placements due to:

- Social work program expansion in this past decade
- Competition with other MSW, BSW, and social service worker programs for practicum opportunities
- Competition with students of other disciplines (e.g., medicine and nursing) for physical space

In addition, there are fewer appropriate placements due to:

- Budget cuts and restructuring in social work agencies
- Increased workload demands and stressful agency environments
- Inconsistency in management of social work specific placements (in some cases, coordination is delegated to other health disciplines or to Human Resources in lieu of a social worker)
- Lack of agency commitment to training social workers
- Limited agency accountability in terms of expectations/standards for undertaking student education.

These challenges and threats to field education have been well documented in the growing body of scholarship and research that has emerged in this context (Bogo, 2015; Homonoff, 2008; Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

Despite these challenges, schools of social work have given limited, if any, preeminence to the concept of the educator role within the profession. Social work curricula tend not to teach the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to make the transition to being field educators because the philosophy of teaching the next generation is not explicitly instilled in students. The authors view this as the significant 'missing link' in the process of social work education, having a direct impact on the availability of field educators for student placements. This has prompted our current focus on developing innovative and creative strategies to address these issues, particularly the lack of socialization within social work curricula and the profession regarding a commitment to student education.

The FIFSW Response

As discussed above, there are numerous stakeholders affected by the many challenges facing social work field education. The critical task at hand is to build a commitment to field education among social work graduates and the organizations which employ and regulate them. In order to achieve this systemic change, multipronged strategies involving the various stakeholders are required.

The FIFSW Practicum Office is designing a comprehensive, multi-faceted, and integrated approach targeting one contingent of stakeholders - the current students who are the future social workers - as

a starting point. The strategy comprises three initiatives to introduce FIFSW students to the pivotal role of being a social work field educator, through the involvement of the Practicum Office and current FIFSW field educators.

1. Encouraging a Commitment to Becoming a Field Educator throughout their Career

To encourage commitment to education of future social workers, structured communications to students (through their faculty-field liaison meetings as well as in placement) are infused with references to becoming field educators, including the provision of related knowledge and skills. For example, faculty field liaisons have recently encouraged their students to review their practicum as a mentoring opportunity for their future role as a field educator. One faculty field liaison said in a field visit, (to the field instructor) "Thank you so much, yet again, for being a steadfast field educator for our faculty. [...] When I think of the decades of students that you have instructed over the years, it is a huge contribution to the social work profession."

Continuing, (to the student) "Best of luck, [student], and please remember that being a field instructor has a lot of intrinsic value once you have established your future niche." The student immediately responded, "I have enjoyed my academic and field experience and will absolutely consider taking on a student once I have established my future career."

2. Information Session: Panel of Field Educators

In Canada, accreditation standards for recruiting field educators require that a graduate have two years of professional experience. This two-year gap before introduction to their education responsibilities presents a challenge. In response, FIFSW has now implemented an annual panel of new field educators sharing their experiences with students, with a particular focus on profiling the benefits and reducing anxieties related to field education.

The panel was originally conceived in January 2014 at a Practicum Advisory Committee Meeting. Students, Practicum Office staff and other key stakeholders meet four times per year to discuss practicum-specific issues at these meetings. A new field instructor was a member of the Practicum Advisory Committee at this time. The committee suggested that a panel including field instructors to speak to students about their anxieties, concerns and satisfaction with field education would be meaningful. The first panel was held over a lunch hour in March 2014, the last semester before graduation. The panel was marketed as a joint student-Practicum Office initiative via e-mailed posters and pizza was provided. Three new field instructors agreed to participate. They were newly recruited in Fall 2013, had graduated two to three years earlier and were

first-time field instructors as of January 2014. They attended their first professional development session on field education in December 2013, before practicum commencement. The second of four professional development sessions was held in late January, and the third in March.

The panelists followed guidelines for their five-minute introductions. They spoke candidly about their concerns, fears and anxieties of being a field instructor. In general they spoke enthusiastically about their new role as a field instructor and the supports they received from the school. Students' feedback was positive, with indication that the panel presentation positively influenced their decision to be a field instructor.

The noon hour panel presentation was held again in February 2015 (six weeks earlier in the school year per recommendation from students' feedback from the 2014 session) with two new field instructors only four weeks into their positions. This was an optional event for students held during a lunch hour. A notable addition in the instructors' presentation was the listing of strategic benefits the experience as a supervisor was providing to their careers. Although attendance was low (in part due to competition with other student noon-hour activities), the students' feedback was positive.

For February 2016, the panel will be a required component of a day of practicum activities. The panel will be recorded so that it can be referenced in online discussions regarding field education. Prompting questions designed to encourage students to reflect on their future role as field instructor will be provided and students will be asked for online responses. Field educators will monitor and facilitate the responses.

3. Seminar on Field Education

Facilitated by the FIFSW, a standardized seminar on the social worker as field educator will be offered to students by field educators. This will be a component of a full day of field education specific content for students, and will be an accredited and required component of the practicum. Webinar or telehealth technology can be considered for inter-site efficiencies. The objectives include: stressing the importance of being a field educator as a critical component of social work practice, exploring the various roles that field educators play, highlighting the values and benefits of educating students for the field educator and student alike, addressing and dispelling any misconceptions students may have about the role of a field educator, and addressing day-to-day practice, skills and responsibilities of a field educator.

Discussion questions and evaluation tools will include: "Are you better informed about the importance of being a field educator? As a result of this seminar, do you feel

better informed and the critical need to include this component in your social work career? Going forward, what would be helpful to continue to prepare you to be a field educator?" Students are then encouraged to provide suggestions to improve the seminar.

Conclusion and Implications for Schools of Social Work

Much has been written about the reported constraints on resources and their impact on field education opportunities. Change requires the profession's commitment to marshaling resources for promoting students' field learning and developing and maintaining field educators. A multi-faceted response is required with a key starting point of commitment across schools of social work to incorporate field education knowledge and skills as an integral component of their programs. As such, the target of the strategies detailed in this paper is social work students, while the vehicles used include the field educators, the Practicum Offices, and the faculty-field liaisons.

We urge our profession to develop similar strategies to address this challenge of recruiting field educators and we look forward to hearing about solutions. Although individual organizations and the social workers that work in them are key stakeholders, the social work bodies registering individual social workers and accrediting education programs could also play significant roles. For example, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) does not require field education/supervision content in the social work curriculum of the schools they accredit. Without this requirement, the theory, skill, and professional commitment to field education may not be entrenched in graduates of social work programs. In Ontario, the profession's regulatory body (the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers) makes no provision for social workers to provide field education to students. There is a clear opportunity for such stakeholders to require and recognize field education training and delivery in those whom they accredit and register.

If strategies like these FIFSW initiatives are successful, can be replicated at other schools of social work, and accrediting bodies support these efforts, social work students will be acculturated into the professional obligations to provide quality social work field education for future generations.

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