



# Thinking Inside the Box: Mining Field Placements within the College Infrastructure

*Author(s)*

*Jennifer Meade, PhD  
Rhode Island College*

*Laura Woods, MSW Candidate  
Rhode Island College*

*Mary McLaughlin, MSW  
Rhode Island College*

## **Introduction**

The Council on Social Work Education has referred to the field experience as the “signature pedagogy” of social work education (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Traditionally, social work field placements have been located off-campus at community agencies and facilities. However, this traditional arrangement has been challenged on two fronts. Schools of social work have increasingly large enrollments of students, a number of whom have life demands that affect their education, and some who have disabilities. Agencies find it difficult to train interns because of fiscal constraints and concerns about productivity and liability. This article describes the ways in which the Rhode Island College (RIC) School of Social Work has taken a step back and, instead of identifying a “perfect fit” for social work students within various agencies, began to discover where social workers can be matched within existing structures in the college.

## **Field Placement Challenges**

Rhode Island College School of Social Work offers students BSW and MSW degrees. Yearly, there are approximately 120 BSW and 90 MSW students. Both degrees are accredited through the Council on Social Work Education. The BSW prepares students for bachelors-level generalist practice. The MSW is a 62-credit degree program that can be completed full-time in two years or part-time in three to four years. In the advanced year, students choose a concentration: (1) clinical practice or (2) macro practice.

RIC School of Social Work places over 250 interns per school year, and the demand, especially for undergraduate placements, continues to grow. Many of these interns face challenges. While interns may enjoy more part-time options to complete their MSW curriculum, other life demands at times prevent interns from being able to complete the rigors of field placement during standard business hours (Ryan, Barns, & McAuliffe, 2011). Interns continue to express to field office staff their need for

early morning, evening and weekend hours in field placement. Interns without vehicles may find it difficult to manage the commute to an agency or home visits. In addition, some interns are coping with disabilities. With many field placement sites housed in older commercial properties, and with increased expectations of home visiting, reasonable accommodations for handicapped access can be a challenge.

Competition among regional BSW and MSW programs, coupled with access to national on-line programs, generates more demand for placements in Southern New England. However, as many community-based agencies struggle with the reduction of resources, appropriate off-campus field placements are increasingly hard to find. Changes within field sites have also added to the challenge. Seasoned MSW field supervisors are retiring. Programming changes, collapse or merge of programs, and hiring of mental health professionals without the MSW credential all impact the success of student interns within these agencies. The popular fee-for-service model for compensation prevents newer MSWs coming up the ranks from having the time or experience to supervise an intern. Additionally, sites struggle to be able to offer appropriate workspace and equipment for interns (Allen-Meares, 2000; Homonoff, 2008; Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000).

### **Benefits of On-Campus Placements**

While there is a dearth of available literature centering on field placements within the colleges and universities, a few schools of social work have worked closely within the institution to provide quality field education opportunities for students (Dessel & Crabb, 2011; Selber & Chavkin, 2014). On-campus field placements may be a more viable option for some MSW interns, as they are located where students can access campus resources, faculty, and classes. Students who have challenges with transportation, childcare, and limited flexibility benefit from having placements that are conveniently located where they also take courses. For example, many students do not have vehicles and rely on public transportation. This is problematic for many field placements. Since the placement is on the college campus with available public transportation, students are able to commute without worry.

Research highlights the advantages of having on-campus field placements (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, & Appleton, 2011; Ryan, Barns, & McAuliffe, 2011; Selber & Chavkin, 2014; Wiechelt & Ting, 2012). These advantages include: adherence to learning contracts, effective supervision of interns, access to college- and school-based resources, and support from the college community. Providing an on-campus field placement structure may allow social work interns to better adhere to their learning contract, therefore making learning their primary goal (Selber & Chavkin, 2014). According to Abbott (1986), the contracting process permits interns to meet their learning objectives by helping to bring structure to many variations of field placements. Agencies reported that social work interns who were placed on campus for their first year internships were more prepared to work with the veteran population, than those placed off-campus (Selber & Chavkin, 2014).

On-campus field placements may also allow field supervisors to focus supervision to address an intern's individual learning goals and needs. A planned approach to direct practice supervision was found by social work interns to be a great learning opportunity, which resulted in interns feeling that they were better equipped social workers in the field (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, & Appleton, 2011). Faculty members as field supervisors may have more access to campus and educational resources and training in comparison to agency-based field supervisors due to their connections with the college institution. For example, interns may be encouraged to use evidence-based practices, as they will be able to access evidence-based research and information while at their field placement (Wiechelt & Ting, 2012).

Finally, research suggests that students experience an increased sense of belonging when they have positive interactions with individuals on campus (Brittenham et al., 2003). This connection to the college campus community (e.g. peers, faculty, student organizations) positively influences student success (Barbatis, 2010; O'Keefe, 2013). When social work interns are placed on campus, the connections they make with other students, faculty and administrators at the college and school may increase their confidence.

### **Learning for Life**

Learning for Life (L4L) offered a unique opportunity for RIC social work interns to reap the benefits of an on-campus field placement. L4L was created in 2012 after Rhode Island College received a federal grant to provide support (e.g. academic, social, and emotional) to under-served and at-risk undergraduate students. The project emerged with involvement from the School of Social Work. Since the L4L model was designed to provide peer-to-peer support for students (referred to as "scholars"), there was a need to find individuals (interns referred to as "navigators") to work with these scholars. Therefore, creating field placement opportunities for social work interns was an obvious solution.

L4L represents a collaboration between on-campus and community partners to help build a student-centered and inclusive academic learning environment. In this community, every member is committed to the success of all students. In the three years that this project has been in existence, a total of 29 BSW and MSW students have worked with over 300 college scholars to assist with a variety of challenges they may be facing, including responding to academic challenges, reducing isolation, addressing life barriers (financial, housing, relationships) and mental health issues, and linking to resources and referrals across campus. In the course of their placements, social work interns are employing social work skills such as engagement and active listening, advocating with campus groups on behalf of students, and identifying systems issues that prevent students from persisting. The social work interns collectively have worked over 14,000 field hours as part of their placements with L4L. Finally, since this is a grant-funded project, it has been able to offer a stipend to all navigators. However, as plans to sustainability plans are underway, the L4L placement will ultimately be unpaid.

**Social work interns: Roles and responsibilities**

Since the project's inception, 29 social work interns have worked with L4L; 13 were BSW students, 15 were MSW I students and one was an MSW II macro/policy student. The BSW interns begin their field placement in their junior year and continue with L4L for three semesters. All of the MSW interns are placed with L4L for the first academic year (fall and spring semesters). The majority of the interns so far were women (n=22) and, while race/ethnicity or age data were not collected, L4L staff, in conjunction with the office of field education, continues to collaborate to recruit a diverse group of social work interns to best reflect the diversity of L4L scholars.

The L4L program is implemented as follows. In the spring prior to the start of an academic year, the field instructor (social work faculty supervisor) works closely with the office of field education to receive referrals of social work interns. Once the office of field education makes a student referral, the field instructor contacts the student for an interview. The field instructor interviews social work students for an internship position with L4L. She chooses, based on the best match with L4L, the MSW students to be placed with the project. L4L staff receives referrals from scholars who want services from L4L. At the end of each summer, L4L staff match navigators with scholars based on a number of criteria, including: scheduling, experience, compatibility.

At the end of the summer before the internship formally begins, the social work interns participate in a weeklong orientation and training session. This affords interns an opportunity to become familiar with L4L and the issues that they may face working with scholars, thus enhancing their learning experience. They participate in a campus tour, where they visit and hear a presentation from the various offices that provide services to students. Additionally, the training sessions involve topics relevant to working with and supporting college students: confidentiality and ethics; mental health and substance abuse problems; sexual and domestic violence; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues; financial aid; and diversity. Further, they also attend training sessions led by community partners.

When they are hired, the student interns receive a job description ([see Appendix A](#)) that was developed collaboratively with L4L staff, the social work field instructor and the project team (the group of stakeholders who meet regularly to discuss L4L). The uniqueness of the job description is in the attention that is given to providing social work interns a comprehensive learning experience that aligns seamlessly with the Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). This, in turn, aligns with the field contract that each student creates. Because of the involvement of social work the process of developing a learning contract, which can be arduous for many students, is one that is mostly straightforward for L4L interns.

## **Supervision**

A faculty member within the school of social work provides the clinical supervision for the social work interns. Using a group supervision model, the field instructor meets for two hours weekly with the MSW and also with the BSW students. Supervision is geared to students' needs, which are related to where the students are academically. For example, BSW students may wish to discuss skills such as engagement, when MSW students could be focused more on intervention strategies.

The group supervision model, as suggested by Cleak and Smith (2012), has proven to be a positive and beneficial learning opportunity for interns. One of the most frequent issues brought up by students in supervision is the difficulty of maintaining clear boundaries between their role as a student and an intern/navigator at the college. An example of this boundary issue that arose relates to those undergraduate students who live on campus. Many BSW navigators come into contact with scholars while living on campus. There are a few instances where navigators have gone to a party that was also attended by a scholar. Additionally, many social work students are also scholars and could be in classes with navigators. Supervision is a place to address how best to respond to these boundary challenges. In addition to group supervision, weekly hourly supervision is available to all navigators if needed to process issues that they may not want to address during group supervision.

A fundamental commitment of L4L is working to help change those policies that impede scholars' abilities to complete college. Therefore, the integration of policy practice in the field experience with L4L is a strong component of the learning experience. Integrating policy practice begins during the training sessions and continues throughout the field experience. L4L interns have worked on countless policy issues including: childcare on the college campus, housing when the dormitories are closed, sexual assault on the college campus, responding to mental health issues facing students, and financial aid.

Having a faculty member serve as a field instructor allows for the obvious connect between fieldwork and classroom education. Faculty are most familiar with the school of social work curricula and are able to integrate theory and practice. For example, the field instructor teaches the policy courses and brings a strong policy background. However, it is important to be mindful that the role of teacher is quite different than the supervisory role. If the L4L student intern is also in a class taught by the field instructor, there may be circumstances where the multiple roles could be confusing and challenging for the student. For example, if a student is struggling in the classroom, it may be difficult as an intern to then participate in supervision with that same faculty member. If these problems occur, the student intern brings the problem to her or his academic advisor. If there is a conflict between the L4L intern and the field supervisor, the process is that the student will attempt to communicate with the field supervisor. If the problem persists she or he will then bring the issue to the academic advisor.

## Benefits of L4L Internship

Formal evaluation of the L4L internship is planned for the near future. However, informal communication from interns has suggested that interns are satisfied with the program. As one intern said, "Being able to go to one location for classes and internship reduced travel time and gas expenses quite a bit. It also helped to better connect me to my campus and had a positive impact on my persistence as well. It was nice to have a supervisor that was a professor in the MSW program, as I felt it enriched my experience because we were provided with an education that aligned with the goals of the MSW program and the CSWE guidelines. These factors made the placement more unique and flexible."

Specific benefits have emerged from the L4L project. The scholar-clients have flourished under the care of the social work interns. Interns have enjoyed the support from other students and faculty across the college. They said that they have learned a lot in the internship and feel prepared for the next step in their education. They have adopted a generalist perspective; they have come to understand policy issues as well as making clinical connections with their scholar-clients. Faculty have helped them integrate class and field. An unexpected benefit has been the role of interns as ambassadors to the college at large, the breaking down of "silos" within the college, and the integration of several programs on campus.

The value of the peer support social work interns provide scholars is critical to the success of the project. Meeting with another student-navigator to discuss challenges they are experiencing has proven to be beneficial to the helping process. In an evaluation report this point was underscored, "The Navigators have been very good about connecting with students and showing themselves to be role models of professionalism [...] where you can go in your career and I think giving people even just thoughts of grad school that they might not have had before too. So setting the bar kind of high but being there as a peer mentor too" (Mumm, 2015).

One of the most noticeable lessons learned concerns the level of peer support social work interns have provided each other and other navigators, in group supervision or in the L4L office. Most RIC social work students enter graduate school with a wealth of experience which is integral to work with L4L. If, for example, an intern is meeting with a scholar about housing, there are generally several other interns that have resources easily available. Perhaps most importantly, interns support each other emotionally as they navigate graduate school expectations.

The skills gained through this field experience have prepared the interns for future social work placements in other settings. Informal discussions with many of the social work interns highlighted this point. Foundation year MSW students, who are now in their advanced year placement, have stated that the experience with L4L adequately prepared them for their second field placement. They received the generalist social work experience that allowed them to enter their advanced year

with an easy transition. Additionally, the BSW graduates are well prepared to enter the field in case manager roles, having spent a considerable amount of time providing resources and referrals to scholars. Finally, many of the challenges facing the scholars that worked with the social work interns are similar to challenges facing other client populations (e.g. mental health, substance use, financial, housing, domestic violence, and sexual assault).

Social work students with L4L engage in a generalist social work field placement which allows for both clinical and policy interventions. Social work interns are trained to build rapport, engage, listen, and ask questions. Given that these skills are critical to the helping process, it is not surprising that scholars would identify the work with the social work interns as the natural place to raise many issues. L4L also acknowledges the environmental and systemic connection between many of the challenges facing college students (e.g. financial, housing, mental health). When meeting with scholars, social work interns are able to connect that individual work with those system issues that may make completing college challenging. All social work interns are required to read the literature related to college persistence, and a considerable amount of time is spent discussing this information so that they begin their field experience with knowledge about the ways that research informs clinical practice, which informs policy development.

One of the most impressive benefits of the L4L internship is the connections that were forged among students, faculty and administrators in different offices at RIC. At the beginning of their internship, a campus tour is organized for social work interns to visit each campus office, introduce themselves and listen to a presentation from each office. L4L has one central location; however, the premise of the project is based on the philosophy of integrating student support services. Therefore, L4L works collaboratively with other offices around campus to provide a physical space for social work interns. For example, a social work intern, working as a L4L navigator, may be located in the disability services office.

In addition, while social workers comprise the majority of navigators, the project has recently hired a few students from majors outside of social work. The students have worked collaboratively with one another and have provided each other support. Social work interns assist the other navigators with resources and referrals for scholars, as well as helping them understand the complex issues facing college students. The other navigators have been able to help the social work interns understand the issues related to academic performance. All these collaborative efforts foster an integration of social work and the larger campus community. As ambassadors, social work interns working with L4L taught others throughout the campus about social work and the unique perspective it brings with helping students be successful in college. The profession has served as a resource for many others at the college and, therefore, extends beyond the efforts of L4L. Through having social work internships on the college campus, the value of the profession may be appreciated in its "own backyard" and many of the silos that often exist can begin to collapse.

## Conclusion

Through the lessons learned with L4L and the relationships that have developed, the school of social work at RIC has created other field placement opportunities for interns on the college campus, such as in the disabilities office. As offices see the value of social work, there is a mutual benefit for them and the school of social work to work. The offices receive the help they need and are able to allow social work to handle situations they are otherwise unable to handle, given resource challenges. At the same time, social work students are afforded an opportunity to have a relevant and meaningful field experience where they attend school.

While L4L is unique for Rhode Island College, the model of establishing field placements within the college infrastructure may be transferable to other institutions. If interested, schools of social work should begin by establishing relationships (or capitalizing on the existing ones) with offices across campus. It is important to clearly establish the unique role of social work and how that role may enhance the work that the offices are currently doing. A separate job description for the interns would help prevent role confusion. It is likely that the school of social work would have to assign a field supervisor for the intern. The field instructor should work closely with the task supervisor who oversees the daily operation of the office. Given the value of group learning, social work interns would benefit from being part of a unit, perhaps of interns working in different offices across campus. Finally, for a successful integration of social work placements on college campuses, social work should be working closely with various offices across campus.

Implementing an initiative like the L4L internship requires substantial time and resources. Although students welcome an on-campus placement for the accessibility and flexibility of hours, the interns with L4L sometimes found it difficult to establish boundaries between their work with L4L and their academic responsibilities, and could become overwhelmed. The school of social work also needed to invest considerable time to fully participate in this project. The field instructor provides group supervision to approximately ten social work interns each academic year. In addition to the preparation needed for supervision, there is also time needed for interviewing potential interns, individual supervisory meetings, contract development, and completion of field placement evaluation. The school of social work faculty is also involved in the development and delivery of the training. Programs like L4L are not a shortcut: field education continues to need support and resources from schools of social work and from the social work community. However, this initiative has demonstrated that developing and sustaining an on-campus internship can help to address the difficulty of finding available field placements.

## References

- Abbott, A.A. (1986). The field placement contract: Its use in maintaining comparability between employment-related and traditional field placements. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 22(1), 57-66. doi:10.1080/10437797.1986.10671730

- Allen-Meares, P. (2000). Our professional values and the changing environment. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*(2), 179-182. doi:10.1080/10437797.2000.10778999
- Barbatis, P. (2010). Underprepared, ethnically diverse community college students: Factors contributing to persistence. *Journal of Developmental Education, 33*(3), 14-24. Retrieved from <http://ncde.appstate.edu/publications/journal-developmental-education-jde>
- Beddoe, L., Ackroyd, J., Chinnery, S., & Appleton, C. (2011). Live supervision of students in field placement: More than just watching. *Social Work Education, 30*(5), 512-528. doi:10.1080/02615479.2010.516358
- Brittenham, R., Cook, R., Hall, J. B., Moore-Whitesell, P., Ruhl-Smith, C., Shafii-Mousavi, M., . . . White, K. (2003). Connections: An integrated community of learners. *Journal of Developmental Education, 27*(1), 18-25.
- Cleak, H., & Smith, D. (2012). Student satisfaction with models of field placement supervision. *Australian Social Work, 65*(2), 243-258. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2011.572981
- Dessel, A., & Crabb, S. (2011). Placements in social justice education. *Field Educator, 1*(1), 1-3. Retrieved from <http://fielddeducator.simmons.edu/article/placements-in-social-justice-education>
- Homonoff, E. (2008). The heart of social work: Best practitioners rise to challenges in field instruction. *The Clinical Supervisor, 27*(2), 135-169. doi:10.1080/07325220802490828
- Mumm, A. M. (2015). *Learning for life evaluation of persistence*. Unpublished manuscript, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI.
- O'Keefe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal, 47*(4), 605-613. Retrieved from <http://www.projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal.html>
- Reisch, M., & Jarman-Rohde, L. (2000). The future of social work in the United States: Implications for field education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36*(2), 201-204. doi:10.1080/10437797.2000.10779002
- Ryan, M., Barns, A., & McAuliffe, D. (2011). Part-time employment and effects on Australian social work students: A report on a national study. *Australian Social Work, 64*(3), 313-329. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2010.538420
- Selber, K., & Chavkin, N. (2014). Inside/outside training: A campus-based field unit approach for working with veterans. *Field Educator, 4*(1), 1-20. Retrieved from <http://fielddeducator.simmons.edu/article/insideoutside-training-a-campus-based-field-unit-approach-for-working-with-veterans>
- Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 46*(3), 327-339. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043
- Wiechelt, S. A., & Ting, L. (2012). Field instructors' perception of evidence-based practice in BSW field placement sites. *Journal of Social Work Education, 48*(3), 577-593. doi:10.5175/

JSWE.2012.201000110

## **Appendix A: Learning for Life MSW Navigators**

### **Job Description**

Navigators serve a key component of the support provided to students through L4L. All L4L Navigators are expected to maintain a professional representation of the project's mission to all off campus and on campus offices, as well as and most especially with, students served.

### **The following activities are expected of all student navigators who are a part of L4L:**

Make referral to appropriate services on and off campus; work with on-campus support offices to provide services to students as appropriate; ensure student completes data forms

Outreach to students for participation in the project

Provide interested students with an orientation to the project, explaining policies and services to be provided and project expectations for student participation

Support a caseload of approximately 15-25 scholars

With assistance from L4L staff, make plans with students to utilize strengths to address barriers to educational achievement; develop intervention plan with students and review progress towards objectives

With assistance from L4L staff, provide support and follow-up on an as needed basis; communication with students should be consistent (weekly) and utilizing a variety of methods (email, phone call, in-person, etc.) If scholar cannot meet in-person, a phone call is suggested to get a personal connection with the scholar.

All required data and record keeping is kept up to date for all scholars on their caseload, including progress notes, contact sheets, intake questionnaire, etc.

Weekly contact sheets must be handed in with time sheets to be paid. Navigators are not to go over their 16-hours/week schedules. Navigator is paid for 10 hours/week

Time sheets are to have hours totaled and must be handed in to L4L staff by 5pm on the Monday after the pay period ends; otherwise students will not be paid and their position in the project will be jeopardized.

Attend and participate in clinical supervision, group meetings, trainings and community lunches. The Lunches are a way to connect further with scholars. If unable to attend, must confirm with L4L staff. Navigator is responsible for missed material

Mandatory campus tour of the different entities on campus that provide resources and support to RIC students

If special projects arise, participate in these projects with oversight from L4L staff

Navigators must be available during posted office hours, and alert L4L staff of any changes to the schedule.

Attend and participate in clinical supervision, group meetings, trainings and community lunches. The Lunches are a way to connect further with scholars. Trainings are mandatory

Communicate with L4L and staff Social Work Faculty Liaison as issues arise