



## Off-Site MSW Field Instruction

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*Currently, the most common model for field instruction in MSW programs is supervision provided by an MSW supervisor employed at the field placement agency. However, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) makes allowances for practicum sites that cannot provide on-site social work supervision. Standard 2.1.6 states, “for cases in which a field instructor does not hold a CSWE accredited social work degree, the program assumes responsibility for reinforcing a social work perspective and describes how this is accomplished.”*

*An off-site MSW supervision arrangement has often been used for macro social work placements and for placements in under-resourced agencies in rural areas. The use of off-site supervision for urban, micro or clinical practice field settings has been less common until recently; schools have started to adopt these arrangements to accommodate growing enrollments at a time when agency resources are increasingly depleted and underfunded.*

*This issue’s Conversation explores how one urban school has developed an off-site supervision program for some of its MSW students.*

*Field Educator asked Judith Perlstein, Associate Director of Field Education and Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor at Boston University, to interview Michele Sienkiewicz, Associate Director of Field Education and Clinical Associate Professor at University of Denver’s Graduate School of Social Work, about University of Denver’s recently developed model for hiring off-site MSW supervisors to supplement the work of agency-based non-MSW task supervisors. – Editor’s Note*



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**Judith:** Michele, can you tell us why the University of Denver started an off-site supervision program?

**Michele:** I've been on the field team at the University of Denver for ten years; up until four years ago, we had a very strict policy about requiring an on-site supervisor. If we did allow an off-site supervisor, it was only for the second year; first-year students were too inexperienced and needed the role model on-site. But a couple of things happened that pushed us to rethink our policy. In 2009, we had a yield problem in a good way; that is, we had a higher percentage of students accept the offer of admissions than we had expected – sixty-five additional students accepted the offer.

**Judith:** Oh, that's a huge group.

**Michele:** Yes, it is. Some didn't enroll, but we still ended up with about fifty extra students. We were really strapped; we did not have enough placements. We had to begin to look at agencies that were more, if you will, on the fringe, that didn't have an on-site MSW, or that were in non-traditional fields, but had the possibility of incorporating social work roles.

**Judith:** And so how did you decide which of those non-MSW placements you would choose? What were your criteria for choosing?

**Michele:** We now have very specific criteria which we developed based on our experience over the last several years. At first, however, we were mostly looking for agencies that could provide a viable task supervisor who could teach students the functions and skills that they needed to learn. For example, we had a developmental disabilities agency with a program director who had been there for twenty years, but did not have an MSW. This person worked out fine.

**Judith:** So you did not start out with criteria?

**Michele:** No, a lot was learning by trial and error. When we first started we used whatever agencies we could find; we joked that we would "beg, borrow or steal." So we would always say when we approached an agency that did not have MSWs on staff, "Is there anyone in your network that could do the supervision?" And so we got volunteers, we got board members, we got people's friends, we got the staff person who used to be at the agency and now was at home on parental leave and would do it out of the goodness of her heart. So to accommodate the increase in students the first year, we relied on off-site supervisors who volunteered for the job.

When that same large group moved into their second year, we needed to find more second-year agencies. So in the second year, the school was actually able to hire some contract supervisors, and as a result we were able to open up many new agencies and place all the students.

**Judith:** So as you developed the criteria for the task supervisor, did you require that the task supervi-

sor either have enough experience, or a master's in a related field?

**Michele:** Yes.

**Judith:** Can you tell us about the other criteria? For example, do you now require that the task supervisor be on-site full-time?

**Michele:** A student can't be in an agency completely alone. But if we have, let's say, a student who is in a school and is being supervised by a licensed counselor, as long as that person is there the majority of the time when the student is there, that is acceptable.

**Judith:** So you have to have sufficient overlap in time to make it work?

**Michele:** Right, right. And preferably the whole time would overlap. That would always be our goal, but again, each situation is different.

**Judith:** So you are now using an off-site supervision model for both first- and second-year students?

**Michele:** Right.

**Judith:** Do you also require that the on-site supervisor have dedicated time for supervision and for orientation? Do they attend training for all new supervisors?

**Michele:** Yes, we have one three-hour orientation called "Field Instructor Basic Training." We cannot mandate it because the supervisors are already doing us a favor by supervising. We really encourage people to come—we bug them until they come—and we can get up to 90% turnout. As background, there is no continuing education requirement for licensure in Colorado, so there is no additional motivation to attend. We do not have a Seminar in Field Instruction (SIFI) requirement like they have in New York City.

**Judith:** Is the orientation offered before the start of the school year?

**Michele:** Because of the size of our program, we start offering it in mid-August. We're on the quarter system, so our students don't start field until mid-September. So we start in August, and we typically have two in August, two in September, two in October, and one in November.

**Judith:** OK, so they are very specific times. So if somebody maybe couldn't take one before her student began, there are different times to take it?

**Michele:** Yes. We have them as late as November in the first quarter, so that agencies that start late, or students that get placed late, or students who change and go to an agency that has never had a student before, can come. Then we also have one in January. We have one always planned for February. Sometimes it goes, and sometimes it doesn't. This year we had 15 people at the February training because we had enough students that either started in January or changed.

**Judith:** Do the MSW on-site people as well as the non-MSW people attend that together?

**Michele:** Yes, and we do have some specific pieces where we talk about the different roles. We need to do more; it's one of our ideas for future development. Typically, we spend time talking about how to negotiate the triangle of the on-site supervisor, the off-site supervisor and the student.

**Judith:** The triangle is something I want to address a little bit later in the conversation, because that's obviously a very important piece about how they work together. But let's first talk about the MSW supervisors you hire. Who is the typical person? How do you recruit supervisors?

**Michele:** Let me tell you a couple more things about how we got to this point, because I think it will help answer that question. We thought the big bump in admissions was a blip, but actually the norm now is that we have approximately 430 students every year. At the same time that we started having more students, many local agencies started to downsize or close. The combination of more students and fewer placements meant we were really stretched. In addition, the local public university started a new MSW program!

**Judith:** Ah, competition for placements is also an issue.

**Michele:** Yes, and we started to see the limitations of the "beg, borrow, and steal" approach to finding more volunteer supervisors. It was not always working to use an off-site person identified by the agency.

**Judith:** What were the limitations?

**Michele:** For example, I had to fire a volunteer off-site supervisor once, who was also a board member of that agency. How do you fire a volunteer?

**Judith:** Ensuring quality must be a bit more complicated with that type of arrangement.

**Michele:** Two years ago, we literally ran out of volunteer off-site supervisors. We got to the end of the summer doing our usual, "So does the agency know anyone? Do we have an alumnus or an alumna? Do we have an adjunct? Do we have a professor?" We ended up with thirteen students that

we could not find anyone to supervise. So actually, contracting with and hiring off-site supervisors started out of desperation.

**Judith:** Necessity is the mother of invention, right?

**Michele:** Exactly. Luckily, we had a liaison who had just left her full-time job and was looking for some additional work. While she was in the process of looking, we went to our Dean and asked if the School of Social Work could hire the liaison to be an off-site supervisor. The Dean agreed and the liaison ended up providing the supervision for nine students. A couple other liaisons split the remaining four. During the first year, we paid them an hourly rate to do weekly supervision.

**Judith:** Did the supervisor see each of them individually for an hour?

**Michele:** Yes, but it became way too costly for the Dean's budget.

**Judith:** What was the hourly rate?

**Michele:** Twenty dollars an hour, not much.

**Judith:** Yes, but it breaks your budget anyway.

**Michele:** The cost to provide off-site supervision was \$1200 per student. Those supervisors did a phenomenal job. The one who had nine students was very experienced—she'd been a liaison, a clinical supervisor, and a field instructor for twenty years. She was a seasoned social worker.

The first year was really a pilot. What we learned was that hiring experienced social workers to be off-site supervisors really made a difference. So we are currently hiring liaisons on separate contracts to be off-site supervisors.

**Judith:** So can you say more about the current model?

**Michele:** We hire social workers who are already experienced liaisons for our school and have been field instructors. In addition, they have a combination of clinical and community experience. We generally do not hire people who are primarily private practitioners; they tend not to have the lens needed to supervise a student in a fledgling, grassroots agency.

**Judith:** Yes, I can understand that.

**Michele:** The first year, the off-site supervisor we hired to supervise the nine students supervised

students at a range of agencies, including Planned Parenthood offices and a domestic violence program. She would have the supervisory meetings at the agency, she would consult with the task supervisor, and she would be involved in the development of the learning plan. She covered everything. It was really the Cadillac of models.

**Judith:** She must have been working many hours a week.

**Michele:** Yes, and from a school's perspective it was too much, but it was not too much from the individual student's perspective. We had allocated two hours a week per student over three ten-week quarters, which totaled \$1200 a student. The two hours a week included supervision time and time for phone calls, writing evaluations, travel, etc.

**Judith:** And how did she get to know the agencies and become familiar with their policies, practices, and procedures?

**Michele:** She would have the supervisory meetings on-site and then she would also spend time consulting with the task supervisor.

**Judith:** OK. And so that became too expensive and you've developed another model for hiring off-site supervisors. So, do you pay people now on contract, as opposed to hourly?

**Michele:** Yes, we pay people by contract, although we are still using some volunteers. This year we have seventy-nine students with off-site supervisors, twenty-nine receive supervision from contracted supervisors, and the remaining fifty are supervised by volunteers who do the work pro bono.

**Judith:** So seventy-nine of your four hundred students have an off-site supervisor, and fifty of the students have volunteer supervisors?

**Michele:** Right.

**Judith:** That's amazing.

**Michele:** What's interesting is that I asked our colleague at Metro (Metropolitan State University of Denver) about their number of off-site MSW supervisors this year. She said, "Well, this year we have 127 MSW students in field and only three have off-site supervisors."

**Judith:** That is a big difference.

**Michele:** I think what happened is that because they use a semester model, they filled their spots

sooner, and they probably took more of the mainstream slots.

So this year we have twenty-nine students with paid off-site supervisors, and then another fifty students who have volunteer off-site supervisors. With twenty-nine students, we'll have more data and will be better able to evaluate their experience. My sense is that the quality the students are getting with the paid supervisors is better than with the volunteer supervisors, so it is very likely that we will end up asking the Dean to pay all off-site supervisors. I don't know if he will, but this issue is not going away.

**Judith:** So with the model you have now, are students receiving individual supervision or group supervision?

**Michele:** The model we have now is that we have six off-site supervisors; we divide the supervision responsibilities for twenty-nine students among them.

Students meet for two group supervisions each quarter. The groups range from three to seven students. The individual supervisory time is arranged differently for each student. Basically we gave the supervisors a chunk of time and said to them, "You use the time for each student however you see fit. Whatever works best for each student is fine with us." Some of the students who needed more "hand-holding" meet for thirty minutes every week. Others meet for an hour every other week. So the focus of the MSW supervision becomes coordinating with the curriculum, integrating values and ethics, learning the social work perspective, and articulating the theoretical lens used to view the work. An additional three hours per quarter is allotted for work with each student for phone calls, the evaluation, coordinating with the agency, that kind of thing. Most of the supervisory meetings now take place at the school or at a neutral location so that the off-site person doesn't have to spend a lot of time driving, and it's convenient for the student, too.

**Judith:** And to clarify, each student is getting an individual hour at the agency from a task supervisor at the agency?

**Michele:** Right. So we're making sure they're getting the task supervision regularly and that that person is teaching them and observing them and knows if they come in or not. Many students have fabulous task supervision. It might be a Licensed Professional Counselor or someone with a Masters in Psychology or a Psychology Doctorate. Our point of view is that these professionals can do the clinical work just as well.

**Judith:** Is your MSW also considered the liaison to the agency, so they serve two roles? In other words, just as you would have had a liaison to the agency under the traditional model where there is an MSW?

**Michele:** We have community liaisons and for all these students, the off-site MSW supervisor is not the same person as the liaison. We wanted to preserve the separate role. Some programs, like at our Durango, Colorado program, the liaisons sometimes serve both as liaisons and supervisors. But, honestly, when it comes to conflict resolution for the ones who don't do well, it's too sticky.

**Judith:** Yes, that's what I was wondering about. So these students then have three people they are relating to: their MSW off-site supervisor, the task supervisor, and the liaison? Have you identified what type of student does best in this model? Do you try to factor this in when you assign students to agencies?

**Michele:** Well, in an ideal world, we would. But it really depends on the agency.

**Judith:** OK. Then once you decide that you are going to use an agency that requires an off-site supervisor, how do you select which student you think would be a good match?

**Michele:** Well, we have a whole choice model. We don't place students.

**Judith:** Oh. Students choose their own placements?

**Michele:** Yes, our field model for both years is that the students choose their placement, which is complicated.

**Judith:** I would imagine.

**Michele:** When they start in their first year, every student meets with a field coordinator on our team for an hour-long interview. They've already filled out their form that says what they want, and where they're going to live. In that meeting, the field coordinator will pick up characteristics and direct a student by saying, for example, "I'm not sure that agency is a good choice for you, because they don't have an on-site MSW, and you've never done this type of work before."

**Judith:** And for second-year students, how does it work?

**Michele:** The second-year students have access to our agency database; for each agency it's indicated whether there is an on- or off-site supervisor. And then it's part of the interview process with the field team—if you had an off-site this year and it didn't work for you, be sure you don't do that next year.

**Judith:** Are the students satisfied? Do they seem to self-select in that second year?

**Michele:** Well, I would say the students make the selection based on where they want to go, the type of agency or population.

**Judith:** That makes sense.

**Michele:** And if they find an agency that they think is their dream agency, they consult with one of us and we will discuss whether having an off-site supervisor is a good match. But sometimes, honestly, they don't know what it means until they get there. And that's not always a good thing.

**Judith:** Right. Have you also looked at whether there seems to be different outcomes in students' skill development for students with off-site supervisors?

**Michele:** I think as we go forward we will be able to do that more. Last year was a pilot, as we only had thirteen students receiving off-site supervision. We did an informal evaluation by surveying students and talking with the supervisors, and this year we're working on a more formalized way to evaluate it. The other local school is adding 100 students, so the squeeze on placements will continue.

**Judith:** The issue is not going to go away. Who does the student evaluation, and who does the learning contract?

**Michele:** Our expectation has always been that the student is responsible for the learning contract. The student needs to do it, and needs to run it by people, and needs to be sure she knows what's available in the agency. So the student will share it with her off-site MSW field instructor, but she really needs to sit with the task person to figure out what she can do there.

With the evaluations, they do it jointly, but the off-site MSW field instructor takes the lead. We have this complicated online evaluation tool, and only one person per student can access it. We have designated that the MSW supervisor is that one person. They're the leader of the team. They get the input from the task supervisor; typically they get feedback from students and then have a good conversation among the three of them. That's one of the reasons we put in that extra three hours for the quarter, figuring at least an hour of that would be that evaluation meeting. Then that week they probably wouldn't also have regular supervision.

**Judith:** Is there ever any role confusion or boundary issues?

**Michele:** We've had to work on the boundaries with the off-site supervisors because they're more committed to the MSW program and they're hyper-connected to the students. We've had to work with them on keeping them out of the agency business.

**Judith:** When there is a problem with the student, with their behavior, for example, how does that get handled? What are the roles of the task supervisor, off-site supervisor and field liaison?

**Michele:** Our field liaisons are the ones who are responsible for being the connection to the school. Any time there is an issue with the students, they're the ones that own the process. I supervise all of them.

**Judith:** Do you find that there's sometimes a difference of opinion or perception between the off-site MSW and the on-site non-MSW about students?

**Michele:** We haven't had that yet. When I do the numbers every year we end up having maybe 10% of the students that have some kind of an issue. That's everything, including issues like staffing changes or family deaths, so if you figure we have twenty-nine students with off-site supervisors, 10% is not many. We have had a couple like that, but one of them, for example, was a student who had some boundary issues and wasn't showing up, and the agency task supervisor is the one that brought it to the liaison's attention.

Sometimes the off-site MSW just isn't involved enough in the day-to-day to know it. So in this case, the off-site MSW's approach was, "Wow, sounds like we have a problem. I want to know more about what the student is or isn't doing."

So they all sat down and they went over the competencies. The off-site MSW and the liaison were on the same page, and could help with the task supervisor.

**Judith:** Oh, sounds like it worked very well.

**Michele:** We haven't had triangulation where there is splitting between the two professional people.

**Judith:** Yes. So it sounds like you're clear enough about the different responsibilities and roles of each of them?

**Michele:** Yes. Kathy Johnson, one of our Field Coordinators, supervises the off-site MSW supervisors, and I've spent a lot of time supervising the liaisons. We work next to each other in the hallway, so if anything, we over-communicate. You know, for example, we have one situation right now that has an off-site MSW. I supervise the liaison, and Kathy supervises the off-site. The agency is imploding. We have two second-year students there, and we're not even sure they're going to make it to the end of the year.

We're getting information from both sides, but we're pretty much in agreement on our program principles, one of which is that the students can't be alone. They need to work with someone they can be learning from, and they still need to be doing meaningful work. So far, it's been OK. It's one of those things that you just hold your breath a little bit.

**Judith:** Right.

**Michele:** We have built in some flexibility by writing the contracts for a range of students. They get paid for four to six students. They do not get paid per student, because we knew we would always be re-writing the contracts whenever there was a change.

**Judith:** So, how is pay determined?

**Michele:** We pay for a range of students, say between four and six students, assuming they could have as many as six.

**Judith:** I see. So you pay them a little bit more to make sure?

**Michele:** So if we need to, we can add more students mid-year.

**Judith:** And when you say \$450 a student, is that per quarter or year?

**Michele:** For the year, for twenty-nine students, we were allocated a total of \$20,000, and we used \$16,800 in these contracts for this year. So that's \$450 per year.

**Judith:** And they're willing to do the work for that amount of money?

**Michele:** Yes.

**Judith:** How does that compare to what you pay liaisons?

**Michele:** It's comparable. Our liaisons get paid the same as what adjuncts get paid for teaching a three-credit course for a quarter. The liaisons have a caseload of twenty students.

**Judith:** So it's like a course? A lot of schools do it that way.

**Michele:** The liaisons do one field visit a quarter, and more often if there is a problem or concern. We did a time study a while ago to arrive at a pay scale.

**Judith:** It's like a three-credit course.

**Michele:** Yes.

**Judith:** Going forward, it sounds like you envision the use of off-site supervisors to grow?

**Michele:** I think it's going to grow.

**Judith:** One of the things I'm aware of, at least in the Boston area, is that by having the requirement that students get supervision by a licensed social worker, it ensures that students get a certain kind of supervision. You could also say that it protects or creates employment for social workers. Is there any feeling, either with your local NASW chapter or professional groups, that using non-MSW task supervisors is somehow undermining social work?

**Michele:** So far it's gone the other way. The agencies appreciate what social work has added to their program, so they've now hired some of the former students and they're now taking interns. We're really seeing the market expand.

**Judith:** Do you have any recommendations for a school of social work that would like to start an off-site supervision program?

**Michele:** A program needs to dedicate time to make sure it goes well. The start-up is the most intense.

**Judith:** Any other lessons that you would pass on?

**Michele:** You need to have the backing of your Dean. I would say that we're very grateful that we have a commitment from the Dean to try this and to fund it. Often times, not only is field education a lesser priority, but there's just no extra money available. We have seen that \$20,000 is a small amount of money in a school budget that is as big as ours. We plan to keep educating our administrators and sharing the outcomes as we gather them.

Another lesson learned is to hire experienced social workers, people who've run agencies and run programs or who are retired social workers. They're just phenomenal at negotiating and doing problem-solving. It can get really complicated with so many players.

**Judith:** So you're very selective about whom you hire? You do not want a newbie.

**Michele:** Absolutely. Flexibility is huge. You don't want somebody who's very rigid, because a lot of

the world of agency work is “shades of gray.” You place somebody today, and it doesn’t mean that tomorrow all the players will be in place when they come back from summer break.

**Judith:** And you have plans to survey the students to gain a better understanding about their experience?

**Michele:** Yes, last year we did an informal survey, and now we will have two years of data after this spring about student experience with supervision, with the field instructor. Anecdotally, we had students stopping by telling us how much they liked their off-site supervisor. I would like to do a more thorough assessment since we have six supervisors, so the quality is more variable than when we had just a few supervisors during our first year.

One issue is in agency selection, some agencies that want a social work student have no idea what the social work role is. For example, one agency seemed to get it when we opened the agency, and when the student got there, they seemed to not get it! The off-site supervisor spent all year supporting the student and trying to push the agency to meet her needs. In the end, we all agreed that it didn’t work.

**Judith:** What was the misunderstanding about?

**Michele:** The agency did not do ongoing counseling and they didn’t want the students actually helping people. They basically wanted “information and referral only.”

An example with a better outcome is an agency called Greenleaf. It’s an eco-conscious, environmental program started by a woman who is not a social worker. They work with at-risk youth and do urban farming and leadership development. She had no idea what our social work student could do, but our off-site MSW supervisor who had run programs and had been at the Denver Department of Human Services for many years really helped her to formalize the intern’s roles. She had one student the first year, three the second year, and plans to take four students next year.

**Judith:** Have you found that it makes a difference if students are paired with other MSW students?

**Michele:** It does, sometimes. It depends on the dynamic between them. It doesn’t always work. If they don’t get along, that’s always a problem. But if they do get along, they can help each other negotiate and survive.

**Judith:** Michele, it’s been very interesting for me to hear about what you are doing at the University of Denver. I think the readers of the *Field Educator* will learn a lot, too!