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The Logistics of Practicum: Implications for Field Education

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Abstract

The logistics of field practicum in social work education, specifically the number of hours that students are able to complete, have yet to be reported in the literature. Survey results of 199 BSW and 507 MSW students from U.S. and Canadian Schools of Social Work shed light on the extent to which students are meeting hourly field education requirements. Findings indicate that one quarter of students do not anticipate being able to complete the required number of field hours by the end of the semester, and another quarter report not accurately logging their hours. These findings raise important questions about ethical standards and current models of field practicum.

Background

The majority of publications on field education in social work are descriptive and theoretical contributions (Colby, 2014; Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Yaffe, 2013). They include a focus on the threats that field education faces (Rhodes, Ward, Ligon, & Priddy, 1999), field education models (Raskin, Wayne, & Bogo, 2008; Sankar, 2013; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2015), gatekeeping (Raymond & Sowbel, 2015), the experiences of students (Hopkins, Deal, & Bloom, 2005; Kindle & Colby, 2008), and the experiences of field directors (Buck, Fletcher, & Bradley, 2015). Rigorous analyses of field education mandates and outcomes, however, have not been documented. This is true despite the fact that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)'s Council on Accreditation (COA) mandates a minimum number of field hours. The assumption held by many is that competency is developed and demonstrated through the experience of field practicum, the profession's signature

pedagogy. Yet, there is no published evidence examining how the required minimum hours of field education relate to the achievement of competency in social work practice.

The mandate in the U.S. of 400 hours for BSW students and 900 hours for MSW students was set in 1982 by the CSWE's COA. In their report to the House of Delegates, the COA admitted that requiring a minimum number of hours was simply "arbitrary," as reported by Raskin et al. (2008). The COA agreed to include a minimum number of hours to appease programs who needed backing to request adequate financial support for field education. Almost without doubt, "these standards are based more on tradition and the widespread assumption that they reflect the necessary components of quality field education than on evidence of their effectiveness" (Raskin et al., 2008, p. 173). The 900 field practicum hours required by CSWE for MSW students can be achieved with two 8-hour workdays across four standard semesters, suggesting that this was likely the standard by which this total was decided. Social work programs currently implement this minimum requirement in different forms. For example, many schools in the U.S. require a minimum number of hours in excess of the CSWE standards, typically 21 to 24 hours per week. Some programs allow the minimum required amount to be spread through the week in blocks of a minimum number of hours, while others allow students to negotiate the accumulation hours with the field instructor. Additional options include "block placements" which allow students to complete requirements in the space of three to four months rather than completing requirements while taking concurrent classes.

Colby (2014) has raised concerns about these arbitrary minimums asking, "What evidence demonstrates 900 hours is the tipping point in field learning [for MSW students]?" (p. 214). Colby (2014) argues that this lack of evidence suggests that social work education relies on a form of "academic mythology" (p. 206). Questions about the CSWE standards for minimum field hours arose during the recent revision of the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2015a). The National Association of Deans and Directors raised concerns in a letter to CSWE in April 2014:

[I]f we are honest with ourselves, we would recognize that our standards represent a political document as much as an educational one. We say we are an evidence-based profession, yet we set standards that have no basis in evidence. What is magical about the number of hours required for field, or the prescribed release times for program functionaries, or the number of faculty required? (CSWE, 2015b)

This reference to the "magical" nature of these standards underscores the deep-seated skepticism with which many faculty and administrators view the field requirements. Questions were also raised by a group of 77 individuals who submitted feedback through a petition during the 2015 EPAS revision process (Hooper, 2014). Their feedback was quoted on the CSWE website (CSWE, 2015c) as, "These mandatory [field hour] minimums prevent schools from innovating programs, and they prevent students/consumers from tailoring a social work degree to fit their needs, projected goals, and their desired career paths." Although the 2015 EPAS did not reflect these concerns, there is clearly

a need for more critical analysis regarding hour minimums.

The call for a rigorous analysis of field education mandates is not new (Raskin et al., 2008; Wayne et al., 2015). What is new, however, is the growing number of students reporting anecdotally that they are unable to meet the requirements of field practicum. This study was designed to explore the experiences of these key stakeholders, the voices of whom have yet to be included in the literature. Specifically, we wanted to explore whether students were able to complete their required hours each week and each semester, and whether or not they were able to make up any missed hours. If our model has not changed in over 35 years, yet students' lives have, how and where do these realities intersect? To date, answers to these questions are not published.

Methodology

We received IRB approval to conduct a study of the logistics of field practicum among BSW and MSW students in the United States and Canada. We set out to cast a wide net with a large, national sample for this first phase of our research into the logistics of field practicum. We designed a web-based survey that could be completed in less than 10 minutes to collect information about field hours and supervision. The survey consisted of 63 questions with Likert scale responses. Participants were asked to respond to statements such as, "I am able to complete the required number of field hours each week," with Likert scale responses, including "Always - Most of the Time - Sometimes - Rarely - Never." Thirty of the questions on the survey related to required field hours; other questions were designed to collect information about supervision, types of field practicum setting and demographics.

With the goal of soliciting a large sample, we designed the survey to be sent out near the end of the spring semester in mid-April 2014. Our rationale was that students would have a good sense of their ability to complete hours by that point in the semester. While sending the survey after the semester had ended would have allowed for more concrete data about the actual number of hours completed, we would have likely missed a significant portion of potential respondents. Partially mitigating this limitation was the fact that there were only a few weeks left for students in traditional semester settings, increasing the predictive validity of responses.

We recruited study participants by contacting Field Directors/Coordinators in social work programs throughout the U.S. and Canada through the CSWE and BPD Field Director listservs. We asked them to forward our email describing the IRB-approved study and included a link to an anonymous, web-based survey administered through Qualtrics. All programs that forwarded the email to their students were entered into a raffle for a \$250 donation. Each group of 50 respondents was entered into a raffle to win a \$25 Amazon gift card. Fifteen gift cards were awarded. We received 768 surveys from all geographic areas in the U.S. and Canada from students enrolled in BSW and MSW programs during the spring semester of 2014. Respondents completed the survey in 9.7 minutes on average.

To create a valid sample, we excluded respondents who did not identify their status in the program as BSW, MSW-Regular Standing (MSW-RS), or MSW-Advanced Standing (MSW-AS), resulting in a final sample of 706.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

	Total	Age 30 or younger
BSW	199 (28%)	166 (83%)
MSW-RS	392 (56%)	239 (61%)
MSW-AS	115 (16%)	77 (67%)
Career Changer	220 (29%)	99 (45%)
Female	633 (90%)	
Male	66 (9%)	
Transgender	3 (0.4%)	
Other	4 (0.6%)	
Age 21-30	482 (68%)	
Age 31-40	127 (18%)	
Age 41-50	68 (10%)	
Over 50	29 (4%)	

N=706

The majority of respondents, 90 percent, identified as female and 68 percent were 30 years of age or younger. Fifty-six percent were in an MSW program as Regular Standing, 28 percent were in a BSW program and 16 percent were in an MSW program as Advanced Standing. Career changers constituted 29 percent of the sample, 55 percent of which were age 31 or older (see Table 1).

Findings

Analyses of the survey data indicate that less than 50 percent of students report being able to consistently complete required weekly hours. Comparing student cohorts, logistic regression analyses indicate that MSW-AS students are 74 percent ($p < .007$) more likely than students who identify as BSW or MSW-RS to be able to complete their weekly hours. Fifty-six percent of BSW students report being unable to meet the weekly hour requirement; fifty-three percent of MSW-RS and 40 percent of MSW-AS students (see Table 2).

Table 2: Weekly hour requirement

	# Unable to meet weekly hour requirement
BSW	112 (56%)
MSW-RS	206 (53%)
MSW-AS	46 (40%)**

** (p<.007)

An analysis of follow-up questions indicates that 24 percent of respondents believed that they would ultimately be unable to make up hours and complete the total number of hours required for the semester (see Table 3). Logistic regression analyses did not find any differences between student cohorts, suggesting that this complication was evenly spread across type of student. Compared to less than 50 percent of students who struggled to meet weekly requirements, this finding suggests that students believed they would be able to find ways to make up their hours over the course of the semester.

Table 3: Semester hour requirement

	# Who predict being unable to meet semester hour requirement
BSW	26 (23%)
MSW-RS	50 (24%)
MSW-AS	12 (26%)

Response rates to questions about the reasons for missing field hours were lower than responses to other questions, with an average of missing 72 respondents in each cohort. The results, however, shed light on the complicated lives of students (see Table 4). The primary reason students are unable to meet hourly requirements are conflicts with paid work schedules. Thirty-eight percent of these respondents reported that these conflicts are “often” the cause of missed field hours. This proportion grows to 73 percent when including those who reported that this is “sometimes” an issue.

Table 4: Reasons why miss hours

	At least Sometimes
Conflicts with paid employment	73%
I am not well enough	52%
Transportation issues	39%
Gas too expensive	34%
Childcare	27%
I don't like my field placement	27%
Caregiving	20%

We asked respondents to share other reasons why they miss hours, and they reported 14 different reasons in four categories: academics, organizational, personal, and other (see Table 5).

Table 5: Other reasons why miss hours

Academics
My class schedule
Other class obligations
Homework is consuming
Organizational
I literally sit while I'm there; that's a waste of my time
Clients cancel and there is nothing else to do
Placement instability
Personal
Spouse was deployed
I have a disability, some days are good, some are not
Too tired
Overworked
Sick
Other
Weather
Holidays
There is no communication between University and students

When asked how they make up missed hours, 76 students reported that they make up missed hours by going to field on other days, 65 reported working longer days, and 32 reported using vacation days from work.

To assess the degree field instructors and faculty are aware of the extent to which students are not completing field hours, we asked respondents about the frequency with which they accurately keep a field log. Of the 80 percent who reported being required to keep a log of field hours, 75 percent were “always” accurate in their reporting. Twenty-one percent of the sample reported being required to sign-in at their field site.

Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that 50 percent of social work students are not always able to complete their weekly hours, and 25 percent do not anticipate being able to make them up by the end of the semester. Implications for ethics and models of field education are significant.

The extent to which social work educators and field professionals are aware of the proportion of students that is unable to complete hours or complete them at non-standard times remains unknown. However, the fact that 25 percent of respondents who are required to keep time logs reported not always being accurate suggests that many educators and professionals may not know the extent of the problem. This lack of accuracy could be a function of poor record keeping or potentially a form of unethical shortcutting whereby students over-report their hours to satisfy unattainable requirements - both of which present significant issues for professional social work. Unethical behavior is typically classified as illegal, immoral, or morally unacceptable (Jones, 1991). While its causes are debated, social work’s ethics pioneer, Reamer (2012), cites three primary sources: desperation, greed and impairment. Social work students who engage in shortcutting hours may be acting out of desperation. Often ethical violations occur in a “slippery-slope” environment in which behaviors change slowly and with relatively little notice from observers (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). If students are engaged in small infringements, such as shortcutting hours on a time log that go unnoticed or unaddressed by field instructors given the realities of strained social service delivery, the risks increase that such behaviors become normalized. This kind of “slippery slope” is a primary threat to any professional workforce, and specifically to social work, given its grounding in ethical practice.

A possible explanation for the fact that some students are not completing hours could be related to the perception that field instructors, practice teachers and/or field directors are ambivalent about the requirements. Since the passage of the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2008), there have been hundreds of published writings on accreditation standards in social work with no clear emerging consensus. That field educators may be reacting to this on-going debate with ambivalence is not implausible, especially when coupled with evidence that ambivalence is present among social work faculty in relation to gatekeeping (Raymond & Sowbel, 2015).

There could be another explanation for students not completing their hours. Social work has observed a change in demographics of students over the years (Rhodes et al., 1999). That is, students have more obligations for caretaking, more financial obligations for themselves and their families, higher tuition, and other extraneous social and emotional pressures (Hopkins et al., 2005). This may preclude their completion of the hours required from those who, in the past, were less burdened or more privileged and with more time allotted for education.

These findings also raise questions about current models of field practicum given that 50 percent of students reported not always being able to complete the required number of field hours each week. That is, half of social work students are either not completing hours or are making them up later in the semester. Respondents report making up hours by attending practicum at off-times, indicating that some students have made adaptations to the traditional pre-arranged field schedule to meet requirements. In many ways, the ability to be flexible and creative about scheduling reflects the kinds of core skills needed to manage the often-chaotic nature of modern social work practice. On the other hand, many would argue that a consistent practicum schedule is the most clinically effective way for students to develop and maintain client relationships and to provide services. Others might put forth that consistency is not only effective but ethically mandated if clients are relying on students to provide requisite services. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states, "Social workers should make reasonable efforts to ensure continuity of services in the event that services are interrupted by factors such as unavailability, relocation, illness, disability, or death" (NASW, 2008, Section 1.15).

In this first exploratory study we did not ask whether students who made up hours were doing so according to a negotiated plan, or simply when they were able to make it work. We also do not know exactly how many hours students needed to make-up each week. The degree to which the inconsistency of student hours impacts clients and organizational services is important data that we plan to gather in the next stage of our research. Other questions we plan to explore include whether being in practicum for full days is significantly different than a schedule that includes spurts of hours across several days, even nights and weekends. Additionally, we need to know more about how student field schedules, especially those that vary, impact the consistency and quality of supervision. CSWE does not mandate a minimum amount of supervision for BSW or MSW students, however state-level clinical licensure does.

There is no empirical evidence to support the number of field hours that students minimally need to reach competence or even studies that link the field experience to competency development (Raskin et al., 2008). Another implication of these findings is the possibility that we are requiring more hours than is needed given how many students are not completing all of them. This prospect would likely concern those students who go to significant lengths to meet minimum requirements, including forgoing paid income, paying for childcare, extending their coursework, and compromising health

with challenging schedules. We can presume that some would be quite upset knowing that one quarter of their peers did not complete their hours. Why should they go to such lengths if such a large portion of students is not doing so? This discrepancy is of most importance for those students who do not have the privilege of easily completing field hours. To require them to complete a required number of hours that have no proven association to achievement of competencies may well be unethical.

The limitations of this study include the fact that there is data that we did not collect due to our plan to keep the survey short enough to both solicit interest and support completion. Specifically, we do not have data on the number of hours that students are not completing each week and each semester. This information will help inform our understanding of student experiences. Further, we did not ask students to qualify the hours they missed. It may be that some missed hours were forgiven if the program's total requirement exceeded CSWE's mandate. Students would not necessarily know about the rationale for excusing hours, especially if related to accreditation standards.

The next stage of our research includes an examination of the amount of supervision that students receive while in field practicum as well as an exploration of the impact of paid work on students' ability to complete field hours. We plan to gather more detailed information about the specific number of hours that students are and are not completing each week and semester. Specific information about their paid work and caregiving schedules will also be examined. Most importantly, we seek to continue to include student voices in our work. Social work educators owe it to students to continue to examine the validity of field hour minimums, recognizing the privilege of available time that current mandates require.

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