



# Challenges and Recommendations for Rural Field Education: A Review of the Social Work Literature

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## **Abstract**

Individuals in rural communities are in need of social workers who are prepared to address their needs. Field education helps prepare students for professional practice, and should be structured to address the needs of rural communities. This literature review examines the social work literature for best practices in rural field education and provides recommendations to improve field education in rural settings.

*Keywords:* rural; literature review; field education

## **Introduction**

Rural communities are widely defined as areas with fewer than 50,000 people and account for approximately 19 percent of the United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Rural communities possess numerous strengths, including rich and diverse cultures and an important role in the U.S. economy. However, individuals living in rural settings are also faced with challenges. Households in rural communities experience higher levels of poverty than those in urban areas (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). Several studies further indicate that people living in rural communities face higher instances of disease, infant mortality, intimate partner violence, suicide, and lower life expectancies compared to their urban counterparts (Breiding, Ziembroski, & Black, 2009; Meit et al., 2014). Disparities may be more pronounced in rural settings due to fewer services and barriers to resources (James et al., 2017). Individuals in rural communities also report facing different issues

compared to their urban counterparts. People in rural communities indicate that the biggest problems facing their community are the lack of jobs and drug abuse, while those in urban areas report crime and policing as their main concerns (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). These factors highlight the need for social workers equipped and knowledgeable enough to competently practice within rural settings.

Social work service delivery is changing. Tele-social work is a growing area of exploration and implementation for social work practice, particularly within rural settings. A recent literature review notes the cost-effectiveness of tele-social work and its ability to connect social work practitioners with individuals in remote communities (Bryant, Garnham, Tedmanson, & Diamandi, 2018). However, it is unclear how social work programs have explored or evaluated similar technology to enhance rural field education.

The Council on Field Education designates field education as the signature pedagogy in social work due to its importance and wide range of functions (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2018a). This importance is magnified in rural settings. While social work programs aim to increase student competence around diverse practice, little attention is given to place diversity (Bice-Wigington & Morgan, 2018). Rural communities often present with cultures that are in contrast to those found in urban or suburban communities. These cultural differences should warrant attention in social work programs in order to work towards practice that is more competent. In addition to cultural considerations, social work practice in rural settings often presents unique challenges. The likelihood of a social worker developing a dual relationship with an individual in a rural setting is high. Training and supervision around appropriate management of dual relationships should be intentionally addressed (Piché, Brownlee, & Halverson, 2015). Offering field placements in rural settings can be an effective approach to providing opportunities for students to gain competence in rural practice.

Finding field placements in rural settings can be a daunting task due in part to a lack of agencies and services. This serves to limit the number of students in rural programs who are able to gain rural experience. Field placements are primarily within micro, client-centered agencies with a deficit focus which does not lend itself to programmatic or policy development opportunities. All of these circumstances conspire to lead to a cycle of inadequate rural services, limited field experiences, and fewer opportunities for effective and sustainable change. The diverse issues present in rural settings need to be acknowledged and reflected in the literature on field education delivery and structure. The purpose of this literature review is to identify challenges and recommendations for social work field education in rural settings.

## Methods

Despite the unique aspects of rural social work practice and the significance of social work field education, little attention has been paid to field education in rural settings in the literature. In order to examine the challenges, best practices, and areas for further exploration, the authors conducted a review of the existing literature. The databases Social Work Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, and Academic Search Premier were searched for journals specific to social work practice, research, and education. The following search terms were used: “field education OR placement,” “social work,” “rural,” and “setting OR communit\*.” Results were limited to publications that specifically addressed social work field education in rural settings. Publication type, location, and year were not restricted.

## Results

Our search resulted in ten articles, including two conceptual papers, two qualitative studies, one mixed method study, and four quantitative studies. Eight articles were U.S.- specific, and two were Australian. Three of these studies focused primarily on social work students (Averett, Carawan, & Burroughs, 2012; Evans & Sherr, 2006; Zunz & Oil, 2009) with special focus on international students in one of the studies (Zunz & Oil, 2009). The remaining studies focused on field faculty (Beckerman & Burrell, 1994), field instructors (Taylor, Mensinga, Casey, & Caldwell, 2008; Unger, 2003), or the field program overall (Bowles & Duncombe, 2005; Kittle & Gross, 2005; Sidell, 2006; Weber, 1976). Please see Table 1 for additional details for each article.

There were significant findings from these articles that are relevant for rural field education programs to consider. One aspect presented in some of the articles discussed the challenges faced by field supervisors in rural settings. Taylor et al. (2008) presented findings regarding the challenges of supporting field supervisors in rural settings. They recommend utilizing several methods to address this challenge including the use of a mentorship program for field instructors as well as providing ongoing continuing education with supportive training materials. Zunz and Oil (2009) suggest the use of online forums for rural field instructors to build support, develop relationships, and share experiences with other rural programs. Bowles and Duncombe (2005) address a similar challenge and recommend the use of satellite models that employ community-based field liaisons. They suggest that this structure could decrease travel expenses for universities as well and increasing knowledge of communities and cultures through the use of field liaisons based in the community. Unger (2003), who

relates the importance of the field liaison visits with rural field instructors, echoes this challenge for rural field instructors. Due to a shortage of professional social workers in rural settings, Weber (1976) recommends a focus on specifically placing students in rural communities to work towards addressing problems in those underserved communities.

Another theme that developed through review of these articles was challenges faced by students in these rural programs. One aspect that is important to consider is the lack of cultural diversity in rural field settings that tend to be more homogenous communities. Beckerman and Burrell (1994) discuss this issue with the recommendation to consider expanding what is meant by diversity to include areas such as religious affiliation, SES, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Sidell (2006) adds the idea of intergenerational learning opportunities to address the limited number of programs that specifically focus on the aging population. Evans and Sherr (2006) assert that maintaining a focus on boundaries and the likelihood of dual relationships is an important aspect of rural social work field education. Averett et al. (2012) put encouraging students to consider nontraditional macro settings as a method to increase strong generalist practice readiness forth as a possibility for addressing the limited number of traditional macro placements in rural settings. An additional consideration found in the Zunz and Oil (2009) study identifies challenges international students in rural placements may face, including language barriers, cross-cultural issues, and lack of transportation. These articles clearly indicate some considerations for both programs and students in rural social work field education settings.

## Discussion

Findings from the literature review indicate specific challenges and recommendations for social work field education within rural communities. Topics from the social work field education literature include limited traditional social work placements, retaining and supporting quality field instructors and liaisons, and limited opportunities for placements with diverse populations. Recommendations were provided to address these challenges and to improve field education in rural communities.

As noted by several articles, there are limited field placement options in rural settings. An opportunity for social work students to gain both understanding and experience of rural practice is to broaden the scope of potential placements. Collaborating with faith-based organizations may have several benefits. In rural communities, faith groups often function as sources of social services beyond providing spiritual or religious support. Exploring potential field placements with churches and faith groups

may lead to an increased student understanding of the roles of faith organizations in rural communities, as well as increase student competence in rural social work practice (Harr & Yancey, 2014). Kittle and Gross (2005) further explore an alternative model of field supervision. This model allows social work students to be placed with non-MSW field supervisors, and to instead receive regularly scheduled supervision by a faculty member in a seminar or individual setting. This model may provide greater opportunity for social work students to be placed in a wider range of placements while still ensuring adequate social work supervision.

Averett et al. (2012) also highlight the benefits of placing students in nontraditional macro placements in rural settings. While macro practice encompasses a wide range of skills and placements, placements that support and enhance civic engagement may be particularly beneficial in rural settings. Research indicates that young people who lack opportunities to engage in or learn about political involvement experience declines in both resources as well as community cohesion (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017). Increasing field education opportunities targeted around civic engagement may not only be beneficial to members of rural communities, but also to social work students themselves.

Findings from the literature review identified strategies to recruit and support field supervisors in rural communities. These strategies include offering mentorship opportunities (Taylor et al., 2008), maintaining regular contact and providing program information (Unger, 2003), and utilizing a satellite model to employ remote community-based field liaisons (Bowles & Duncombe, 2005). Such strategies to connect field supervisors and liaisons with social work programs and faculty should continue to be supported and evaluated.

Another area highlighted by the literature is the need to provide opportunities for social work students to practice with diverse populations in field education. Rural communities are often portrayed as culturally monolithic and white. Non-urban communities are less racially and ethnically diverse than suburban and urban communities, however recent demographic data indicate changes. Notably, the 2010 U.S. Census indicates an accelerated racial and ethnic diversification in rural settings following the 2000 U.S. Census (Lichter, 2012). Rural communities are experiencing additional demographic shifts. Immigrant populations also account for 37% of overall growth in rural counties, and the aging population has significantly increased in rural areas (Parker et al., 2018). Field faculty should also acknowledge and address rural cultural considerations within field education. Individuals in rural communities are significantly more likely to live in the same community where they were born, and

to move back to their home community to be near their families than individuals from either suburban or urban areas (Parker et al., 2018). Rural communities often experience stronger social ties and rely more heavily on informal supports than urban or suburban communities (Humble, Lewis, Scott, & Herzog, 2013). Ethical and practice considerations that may arise in field settings, such as potential dual relationships, should be carefully considered within rural cultural contexts (Evans & Sherr, 2006; Humble et al., 2013).

The role of technology is growing within social work practice settings and social work programs. Infusing technology into field education may allow for placements in more remote locations and result in easier interaction and oversight from remote field faculty. CSWE now reports over 70 accredited BSW or MSW programs offered through online or hybrid options (CSWE, 2018b). With these technology-supported programs come new opportunities for technology-supported distance rural field placements. Rural social work programs should explore and evaluate these possibilities. However, approximately a quarter of adults in rural communities report the lack of access to high-speed internet as a major concern (Anderson, 2018). Barriers to technology such as inadequate high-speed internet in rural communities should be addressed as technology-supported rural field education is further explored.

Rural field educators should examine the distance education literature for best practices around utilizing technology to support and enhance remote or rural field placements. Diversity and culture of rural areas should explicitly be addressed in course content. This content should also be provided to field educators and supervisors to ensure that the unique and changing needs of rural areas are being addressed in field settings. Future research should specifically explore the use of technology in rural field education. Pilot programs could evaluate the effectiveness of technology-enhanced supervision and support for both field supervisors and students. Research should also measure technology and its effectiveness in students reaching individuals in remote settings.

## **Conclusion**

Social work practice within rural communities presents both challenges and opportunities unique from urban or suburban locations. Policies and programs developed for urban settings may often negatively affect rural communities when implemented in these settings (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2018). NASW (2018) further supports social work practice that enhances the strengths of rural communities and culture while also advocating for the needs of vulnerable and

oppressed individuals. In particular, these efforts should focus on increasing access to culturally appropriate services (NASW, 2018). The many potential ways electronic or online formats could enhance and supplement rural social work field education is an area in need of further examination, particularly as advances in tele-social work and technology continue to grow. Social work students in rural settings are important assets to their communities and can provide powerful voices to improve the lives of those they work with. The needs of both social work students in rural field placements as well as those of residents in rural communities should be further examined in order to improve field education delivery and structure.

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**Table 1: Article Descriptions**

Author & Year	Type	Population/Focus	Main Findings & Recommendations
Averett, Carawan, & Burroughs (2012)	Qualitative	BSW & MSW students in macro rural placements in the U.S.	Students should be encouraged to consider non-traditional macro placements in rural settings; Macro placements prepare students well for generalist practice, which is needed in rural settings
Beckerman & Burrell (1994)	Quantitative	BSW field education coordinators in rural U.S. programs	Programs in rural, culturally homogenous communities should expand placement considerations to allow more opportunity to work with diverse cultures; Consider expanding what is meant by “diverse” to include religious affiliation, SES, disability, gender, and sexual orientation
Bowles & Duncombe (2005)	Descriptive	Program that employs senior level social workers in rural Australia	Satellite models that employ community-based field liaisons may work well in rural settings by decreasing travel costs for university faculty and relying on field liaison knowledge of communities and their cultures
Evans & Sherr (2006)	Conceptual	Social work students in rural field placements	Students in rural placements should be cognizant of the likelihood of being presented with dual relationships; Culturally sensitive and ethical considerations should be weighed

<b>Author &amp; Year</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Population/Focus</b>	<b>Main Findings &amp; Recommendations</b>
Kittle & Gross (2005)	Descriptive	Rural program that uses non-MSW field supervisors and MSW field faculty instructor in the U.S.	On-site non-MSW field instructors coupled with a social work faculty member field instructor may result in more options for field placements in rural areas with a limited number of potential MSW field supervisors
Sidell (2006)	Qualitative	Gero-Rich funded BSW & MSW programs in the rural U.S.	The use of community resources in field education is particularly important for programs with fewer faculty members; Field sites should develop intergenerational learning opportunities to address the limited number of programs specific to the aging population
Taylor, Mensinga, Casey, & Caldwell (2008)	Mixed Methods	Field instructors for a rural program in Australia	Field supervisors in rural settings need support; Programs should consider providing mentorship and access to continuing education and training materials to field supervisors
Unger (2003)	Quantitative	BSW field supervisors for a rural U.S. program	Field instructors value visits by field liaisons and information on practicum experiences
Weber (1976)	Conceptual	Rural social work field education in the U.S.	Social work programs should assertively recruit and prepare professional social workers for rural practice; Consider placing students in rural communities to independently work to address an identified problem
Zunz & Oil (2009)	Quantitative	CSWE accredited MSW programs in non-urban settings with international students	International students may face additional barriers in field, including language barriers, cross-cultural issues, and lack of transportation; Online forums may be effective for rural field instructors to build support and share experiences with other rural programs