Extending a Field Program to a Satellite Campus

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Introduction

According to data from the National Association of Social Workers (2015), the social work profession is still predominantly female and white, though recent data from the Council on Social Work Education (2018) suggest the social work student body is more racially and ethnically diverse, particularly among part-time students. Part-time students in both BSW and MSW programs are also older—ages 25 to 34—than their full-time counterparts (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2018). As urban, suburban, and rural communities around the U.S. continue to become more diverse, social work programs aim to graduate students competent to practice in a variety of contexts.

Over the past decade, the social work literature has increasingly acknowledged that the field requires not only effective practice with diverse populations, but a social work student body and workforce reflective of this diversity as well (Doyle & George, 2008; McCormack, 2008). According to the George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (2018) the field is on its way. Researchers found that recent graduates from social work programs were diverse in age, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Most also entered the field with previous work experience.

Changes in the student population require flexibility and adaptability in social work curricula, and in particular, in field education programs. To better meet the needs of a more diverse student body, universities and social work programs have expanded course offerings to include distance education, part-time schedules, and satellite campuses. Given changing student demographics, the first annual *State of Field Education Survey* indicated that a number of programs have students that require non-traditional field sites and hours (CSWE, 2015). Data indicate that 70% of undergraduate students have at least one non-traditional characteristic such as attending school part-time, financial independence, being a primary caregiver, full-time employment,

having a non-traditional high school diploma, and a gap between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These non-traditional students bring various skills to their social work practice. For instance, Zosky, Unger, White, and Mills (2003) examined how field instructors regarded non-traditional students as compared to their traditional peers. The authors found that compared to traditional students, non-traditional students were viewed as more competent on skills-based activities (such as case planning, assessments, and relationship building with clients) and were considered more prepared for practicum.

At the same time, non-traditional students often struggle to adjust in their first year, and feel less connected to the university (specifically faculty and peers) because of their multiple commitments outside of school (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2015; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). Since non-traditional students juggle school, work, and family life, they are also less likely to access university services (such as libraries and academic offices) and struggle to access campus support services, which are typically offered during regular business hours (Ismail, 2010; Pelletier, 2010; Rabourn et al., 2018). Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) note that "the challenge for non-traditional students lies not in developing their own social identity in the new learning community, but in striking a balance between their academic and external commitments, that enables them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success" (p. 36). It is clear more is needed to support and retain non-traditional students, and as the signature pedagogy of social work, field education has a key role to play in an academic setting.

In 2006, Wayne, Bogo and Raskin described challenges that are still common within field education: locating quality field placements and field instructors, the burdens placed on field liaisons and field directors, as well as finding placements for working students. The authors called for a radical change within field education to best meet the needs of faculty, staff, students, and field agencies. Due to the unique demands of non-traditional students, the aforementioned challenges are not only present, but are further exacerbated. While there is literature on the experiences of non-traditional students, no articles were found to guide social work programs who serve these students in a part-time program at a satellite location.

This article reports on one BSW field program's experience with adapting a long-standing traditional, full-time program on a suburban campus to a new, part-time, evening program on an urban campus in the region. When the BSW program expanded to a satellite campus in the spring of 2014, the program was designed as a part-time, evening version of the full-time, daytime offerings on the main campus. From the beginning, faculty, administrators, and staff maintained the program would continue as one accredited program, with resources spanning both campuses. The primary objective was to develop a program on the satellite campus that was

physically separate but delivered the same curriculum and held the same standards and expectations as the program on the main campus. After five years, there have been several discoveries and lessons learned that might benefit others seeking to establish an alternate campus serving a non-traditional student population.

Traditional Field Program

The University's suburban campus is the largest university within the state system and serves 17,000 graduate and undergraduate students. The undergraduate social work program has been accredited for over 40 years and has served a mostly traditional-age (18–22) student body. While demographics have begun to shift on the suburban campus with more students transferring from nearby community colleges, the majority of the students are able to attend daytime classes and complete their field placements on the two days designated for field.

Within the traditional field program, duplication of college credit was not a major concern as most students came directly from high school. As most students completed their placements during the standard workweek, there were more agency choices and little need for employment-based practicums. In addition, student flexibility meant they could complete site trainings and attend agency staff meetings.

Adaptations

Whereas the majority of the students on the main campus were traditional-aged college students, largely white and female, this was not the case for the students on the satellite campus. These students represented multiple diversities including age, race, ethnicity, economic status, language, gender, and academic history, to name a few. Many of these students also worked full-time and were raising families, which limited the time and energy they had for both classroom and field work. Moreover, a majority of the students that enrolled in the satellite campus program were transferring from an urban community college in the region, many from the Behavioral Health and Human Service program. As a result, many had field credits that could not count towards their field requirement, along with other credits that did not count toward the BSW degree. Given the extra time needed for degree completion, financial aid limits and credit transfers required constant negotiation.

In order to meet the needs of our students on the urban campus, several components of field had to be revisited. What follows is a description of four key revisions that were made: development of evening/weekend placements, expansion of employment-based options, provision of external supervision, and a pilot which allowed students to complete their junior placement during the summer months.

Evening/Weekend Placements

Since most students required placements with flexible hours, the first revision required that the Field Director work closely with community programs to learn their needs and better assess the types of agencies that offered flexible hours. As BSW students compete for placements alongside MSW students—who are often viewed as more experienced—time was spent educating agencies about the types of tasks appropriate for BSW students, and the breadth of knowledge non-traditional students brought to their field experiences. This sharing of student expertise was a major strength of evening/weekend options for both students and agencies.

It is worth acknowledging the many challenges to evening/weekend placements. First, they were difficult to find as most agencies are closed during evenings and weekends. Second, the agencies that provided 24-hour services were predominantly within drug and alcohol facilities or homeless services; hence, students with less flexible schedules had fewer placement options. Therefore, it was important for students to be aware that they might not work within their specific area of interest, but would still gain valuable skills. Lastly, as most professional staff worked during the day, even at 24-hour facilities, students completing evening and weekend placements did not always have social work supervision readily available. Furthermore, some supervisors required students to attend meetings during the day, which sometimes conflicted with student availability. The BSW program maintained that students should attempt to complete a minimum of four daytime field hours per week to ensure access to all of the workings of the agency, but this required flexibility and greater attention to scheduling on the part of students, supervisors, and agencies.

Employment-Based Practicums

In addition to evening and weekend practicum options, the second revision was an expansion of employment-based placements. Initially students could only complete one employment-based practicum, with separate requirements for their junior and senior placement. The expanded option allowed students to utilize an employment-based practicum both years if they obtained new employment, or a new work assignment, between junior and senior practicum. Their employment also had to meet CSWE's requirements, and expose students to different practice skills. The Field Director assessed the sites of students interested in employment-based practicums to ensure they were appropriate and met requirements.

Though only a handful of students met the criteria to complete two employment-based practicums, these students had significant time restrictions and greatly appreciated the flexibility. For instance, one student completed an employment-based junior year practicum and transitioned to a new position at a different agency his senior year.

As a solo parent, part-time student, and full-time employee, he required flexibility with his senior practicum. In order to choose the employment option, the student submitted a document noting the new skills his job offered and the tasks he would do as a student to supplement his learning. The Field Director then met with the student's potential supervisor to learn about the agency, share the expectations of the social work program, and learn how the supervisor would help the student separate their responsibilities as an employee from their responsibilities as a student. Given his hectic schedule, the student was grateful to have a placement option that complemented his circumstances.

It should be noted that while employment-based practicums are needed, one significant downside is that students could be fired from their jobs, thus losing their practicum and livelihood. Therefore, employers, students, and social work programs must be on the same page before employment-based practicums begin to ensure each party is aware of their responsibilities, and the potential downsides of an employment-based placement. While this was a risk most students were willing to take, it was nonetheless an important consideration.

External Supervision

The third revision reflected a shift in the provision of external BSW supervision. Prior to the program's expansion, students without an on-site social work supervisor obtained group supervision once a week through the social work program. Since students were traditionally-aged with flexible schedules, they all met with their group supervisor before the field seminar. However, that model could not work with the students on the satellite campus whose schedules varied.

Therefore, the program assigned individual external field instructors to students needing it, which provided consistent supervision that catered to student schedules. These external field instructors were paid for their time, and supervised an average of 1-3 students per academic year. Fortunately, it was not challenging to find social workers ready and willing to provide external supervision. At the same time, given the demands of practice, it was important to find supervisors who could commit to an hour of supervision per week. This revision to the traditional model of external supervision required advocacy on the part of the program with administration since it amounted to an additional cost to the program. However, given the increasingly limited number of field placements, administrators were supportive of the new model.

Junior Field

The final revision occurred around junior field, an additional 220 hours that students completed prior to senior year. Students on the suburban campus completed their

junior placement during the spring semester of junior year, and their final placement throughout senior year. Given students' responsibilities outside of school, the program initiated a pilot program on the satellite campus. The pilot aimed to ease students' stress during the academic year by allowing them to complete their junior field hours and seminar over ten weeks during the summer months. While a worthy attempt, after two summers, faculty and staff decided the pilot had not been successful. The primary reasons cited were that it was difficult to find field sites during the summer, faculty felt they did not have enough time to assess students' readiness for senior field in such a short time span, and students felt the expedited schedule caused more stress since instead of an entire term to complete their hours, they only had 10 weeks.

The expedited schedule also meant that if students did not complete their hours during the summer, their graduation would be delayed an entire year. One student, for example, was set to start her placement during the summer months. However, she did not follow the agency's onboarding requirements, and was subsequently released by the agency. The 10-week placement term made it almost impossible to find her a new placement; therefore, her academic progress was delayed. In order to address the issues which arose during the pilot program, students on the urban campus transitioned to completing junior field during the spring of their junior year, which aligned them with their peers on the suburban campus.

Discussion

The four revisions to the social work program—evening/weekend placements, employment-based practicums, external supervision, and the junior field summer pilot program—provided a number of opportunities to cater to non-traditional students' needs. Though the revisions had varying degrees of success, they offered a chance to modify the structure of the field program. Interestingly, the suburban campus is now seeing an increase in non-traditional students and, as a result, revisions made on the satellite campus have been implemented on the suburban campus as well.

In addition to these strengths, there were a number of challenges. These included upholding the standards of an accredited program and curriculum while attempting to be flexible, adapting a field program to reflect the rigor of the social work curricula and the reality of students' lives, and the mismatch between high student enrollment numbers and a dearth of viable placements (both traditional and flexible options).

Implications

Through adapting a long-standing traditional, full-time program on a suburban campus to a new, part-time, evening program on an urban campus, the BSW program learned valuable lessons. These have implications for other social work programs

hoping to expand into different communities. Programs with increasing enrollments of non-traditional students must adapt field and other curricula to reflect rigor and reality. They must balance flexibility with maintaining educational standards.

Based on their student population, programs must also re-examine the assumption of a volunteer-based field curriculum. Do employment-based practicums undermine the value of field education? What are key experiences students must get from field? Is it possible to provide these experiences in other formats? Are there other modes of developing practice skills in the field? More research is necessary to better define "quality" field education experiences.

Based on their own educational needs, students should also be asked to evaluate the assumption that quality field education can always be flexibly delivered. When the experience is compromised, it undermines the student's education and may be a disservice to the profession and future clients. Therefore, students must be reminded that field education provides an opportunity for students to learn skills necessary for social work practice.

Conclusion

In an effort to remain current, flexible, accessible, and diverse, social work programs must look at their traditional field curriculum and innovate. This article shared how a traditional suburban college campus expanded their field program to an urban campus with non-traditional students. While there were strengths and challenges to each revision, the process of revision allowed the social work program to create field placement options to best meet the needs of students. These revisions allowed the program to consider the shifting social work workforce and the unique requirements of non-traditional students. At the same time, more research is needed on what makes for quality field experiences and how to engage students on the importance of field when they have highly-demanding personal responsibilities.

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