



Complex and Competing Demands in Field Education: A Qualitative Study of Field Directors' Experiences

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The changing demographic, economic, academic, societal, and political contexts of field education in social work have been topics of much discussion and scholarship since the mid-1990s. Recent additions to this changing context include the elevation of field education to the “signature pedagogy” of social work education and the pervasiveness of commercialization within higher education. This study explores the realities of these contexts through the lens of the Field Director. Findings from fifteen in-depth, qualitative interviews suggest that Field Directors experience a complex set of competing demands at a time when needs, requests, and requirements from students, university administrators, and accreditors are on the rise, while resources in the field are diminishing.

Background

The changing context of field education has been a topic of much discussion and scholarship since the mid-1990s. Concerns have been raised about the impact of changing demographic, economic, academic, societal, and political contexts on field education (Brooks & Riley, 1996; Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, & Strom, 1997; Lager & Robbins, 2004; North Central Field Education Directors' Consortium, 2000; Raskin & Blome, 1998; Reish & Jarman-Rohde, 2000; Rhodes, Ward, Ligon, & Priddy, 1999; Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2006). Social work practice itself has changed, directly impacting the agencies where students are placed (Dalton, Stevens, & Brady 2011; North Central Field Education Directors' Consortium, 2000; Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2006). Marketplace principles and values are being applied within social service agencies, especially within a managed care environment (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Services provided by students typically cannot be billed, and agencies are increasingly concerned about losing reimbursement as a result of field placements. Field liaisons report that agencies are less able to provide teaching time for students, due to being stretched by other responsibilities (Ligon & Ward, 2005).

In addition to these evolving changes in social work practice, field education has experienced two additional significant changes. In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) named field education the *signature pedagogy* of social work education, a term coined by Larry Shulman (2005). Field is meant to serve as the “central form of instruction and learning” in social work curricula (CSWE, 2008, p. 8). During this time, social work education has also faced the increasing *commercialization of higher education*. Partly in needed response to constituent pressure, and partly a result of a weak economy, higher education is more focused than ever on customer satisfaction (Clay, 2008). At the center of these changing contexts are the directors and coordinators of field education. They are responsible for ensuring that students have field placements that are “systematically designed, supervised, and coordinated” (CSWE, 2008, p.8) while responding to the various and ever-changing contexts of social work education – a serious challenge by any standards. Despite the central and arguably demanding role that Field Directors play in social work education, their voices have only recently been included in the professional literature (Dalton, Stevens, & Maas-Brady, 2011; Hunter & Ford, 2010; Lyter, 2012). The goal of this exploratory research project is to give voice to the experiences of staff and faculty members who are responsible for managing the role of Field Director/Coordinator, as a way to elucidate current conditions and lay groundwork for future programming.

Signature Pedagogy. The designation of field education as a signature pedagogy in the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) was a result of an effort among social work educators to elevate field education’s “importance and status in social work education” (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010, p. 327). In 1987, the North American Network of Field Educators and Directors (NANFED) convened to support field education in social work in the United States and Canada. Their efforts resulted in significant changes in the recognition of field-related pedagogy at the Annual Program Meetings of the Council on Social Work Education. An important part of NANFED’s success in increasing the legitimacy of field education within social work education has been the development of local consortia to support collaboration and communication among Field Directors. Together, these efforts resulted in significant changes to the 2008 accreditation standards, including the designation of field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education.

Commercialization of Higher Education. In addition to changes in accreditation standards, social work education has faced changes within the academy at large. Higher education in the United States has come under pressure from administrators and students alike to be “customer-friendly” and to create more student-centered programming. In large part, this shift is a result of the fact that students have a heightened stake in their education, given rising tuition costs, high level of indebtedness, as well as the reality that college – and often graduate – degrees are indispensable elements of employment success. Supporters argue that a customer focus will ultimately empower students, especially those who have been historically disadvantaged; this focus will ultimately benefit all stakeholders (Soares, 2009). Opponents argue that such commercialization places the nature of higher

education at risk, namely in research ethics, athletics, and the push towards tuition-based, distance learning (Bok, 2003). Others have focused more explicitly on the shift in the student role towards that of a consumer – a paying customer who has the right to exert demands for services and products (Lager & Robbins, 2004). While many in academia, including social workers, support the augmentation of student rights, they also acknowledge the inherent risks. “Giving students what they want could sometimes come at the expense of what they actually need” (Clay, 2008, p. 50, emphasis added).

The shift towards customer service in higher education has had a significant impact on social work education, much as it has on other disciplines. Social work students are now more likely to have a “consumer-oriented approach to their education,” demanding “specific outcomes, based on the perception that they are paying for a ‘product’” (Lager & Robbins, 2004, p. 7). The area most affected by this relational shift has been field education. Increasingly, student perceptions of themselves as customers have driven the demand for specific types of field placement experiences. Students expect field experiences to meet not only specific professional criteria, including the populations with which they prefer to do their field work and the type of work they expect to do, but also personal – and often understandable – criteria such as geography and scheduling (Rhodes, Ward, Ligon, & Priddy, 1999). As Rhodes and colleagues (1999) suggest, “A dilemma exists between the need to train social workers to address contemporary social problems with some students’ demands to be satisfied customers” (p. 21).

In many cases, student demands for certain types of field placements are based on need. Students in higher education are increasingly balancing work and care-giving obligations. In 2009, 41% of full-time and 76% of part-time college students were employed (Aud et al., 2011). While these rates have stayed relatively constant for part-time students since 1970, the percentage of full-time students who are concurrently employed increased 20% during that time. 6% of these full-time students worked thirty-five or more hours per week in 2009. Among graduate students, the employment rate for those in part-time programs is closer to 88% (Aud et al., 2011). A recent study found that the need to work is the reason that approximately 14% of students leave graduate school (Nevill & Chen, 2007). In addition to needing paid employment, graduate students are often balancing care-giving obligations. Among master’s students, 37% of men and 32% of women in 2004 reported having dependent children (Mason, 2006).

The reality of this changing student demographic, coupled with a shift towards consumer-oriented higher education, is a significant challenge for social work education – specifically for field education. On the frontlines of this shifting paradigm are Field Directors and Coordinators – those faculty and staff who are charged with matching the increasing demands and needs of students with the decreasing resources in the field. In an era of managed care and fiscal retrenchment, social work agencies have had to use resources previously allocated to field education for other activities.

What follows is a report on our exploratory study of Field Directors' experiences managing these evolving dynamics. In large part, the study was guided by our own experiences with field education in suburban Philadelphia, where two of the authors are field directors.

Methods

Prior to data collection, we received approval from our Institutional Review Board to conduct in-depth interviews with Field Directors and Coordinators in social work education. Participants were selected using non-random, snowball sampling techniques, starting with contacts from the local Field Director consortium and moving to suggestions from participants about other field directors who might be interested in being a study participant, until we reached our target sample size of fifteen. We asked participants if they knew of other field directors who would be interested in participating in our study. The use of this type of sample selection technique left us vulnerable to a form of confirmation bias if the participants referred others who shared their beliefs about field education. Further, its lack of randomness limits the generalizability of findings.

Interviews were conducted by the authors and a graduate-level research assistant. We ensured that each of the interviewers had a relationship to field education as way of enhancing rapport with study participants (Padgett, 2008). Interviewers spoke with participants for an average of 75 minutes, with a range of 45 to 90 minutes. For the two cases in which the research participant was known to one of the interviewers, we assigned that interview to someone with no personal or professional relationship to the participant. Using a semi-structured interview guide, we asked field directors to respond to six exploratory questions about the nature of their experiences, starting with, "I'd like to hear about your experiences with the field placement process." In probes, we explored the extent to which they experience "demand" from various constituents, including, "Field Directors sometimes describe their experience as managing 'competing demands.' Does this ring true for you?" By having four different interviewers for this project, we were able to mitigate the possibility that any one interviewer would conduct the interviews in such a way to elicit certain responses. At the same time, this configuration could have also led to inconsistencies that impacted the data. After each interview, we conducted a check-in session to debrief about the experience (Padgett, 2008). This was particularly important for the two authors who are Field Directors, giving them space to discuss reactions and responses to the interview content. When necessary, we processed the impact that this may have had on the data, and strategized for ways to mitigate this going forward.

To facilitate the analysis of the qualitative data, interviews were digitally recorded when feasible. Phone interviews were recorded using a secure web-based conferencing program, and in-person interviews were recorded with handheld digital recorders. All recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional organization using encryption software. For interviews in which recording was not feasible, handwritten notes were taken and stored in a secure location.

Participants

We conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen individuals, one male and fourteen females, with primary responsibility for the field placement process from different programs within the United States and Canada. Five participants were responsible for BSW students, eight were responsible for MSW students, and two were responsible for a mix of BSW and MSW students. They were from programs ranging from thirty-five students to over three hundred in urban, suburban and rural settings. Participants had an average of 24.7 years in the field, ranging from 9 to 41 total years. They had been in the role of Field Director/Coordinator for an average of 8.5 years, ranging from 3 to 25 total years.

Analysis

Data analysis was designed to enhance trustworthiness of the findings through three primary mechanisms. First, we analyzed the transcribed interviews by hand using a systematic process of analysis, paired coding, and discussion. Based in grounded theory techniques, we sought to allow themes to emerge and resisted confirming our own hypotheses about field education (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This required us to acknowledge and discuss the existing biases we had about the field education prior to the coding process. Second, we specifically sought out negative cases as a way to mitigate our confirmation bias (Padgett, 2008). Specifically, this meant paying close attention to the coding of responses that did not “fit” with other responses rather than dismissing them as “outliers.” Third, we used a process of constant comparison to develop our coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We started with a “open coding” process in which we each independently coded the first three interviews for concepts, resulting in a total of twenty-two. Through discussion and consensus, we grouped these concepts into five categories of “demand” and coded an additional two interviews with this scheme. Through a process of constant comparison of new data to our proposed scheme, we found that no further categories had arisen and agreed on a final scheme. For the subsequent ten interviews, we used a process of axial coding in which we coded by category, reading each interview in search of the categories we identified. In an analysis of all fifteen interviews, we collaboratively developed a meta-theme that conceptually connected the five demand categories.

Findings

Three primary themes arose out of our analysis of Field Directors’ experiences with the field placement process. The first theme that we identified was *demands*. Field Directors manage four distinct areas of demand: 1) students, 2) administrators, 3) the state of social work practice, and 4) local resources. Here we are using “demands” as an umbrella term to include everything from expectations to needs to demands – warranted, unrealistic or otherwise – to constraints, limits, and requirements. While we might have expected to find that the new accreditation standards were an additional source of demand, Field Directors reported that the pressures exerted by the signature pedagogy designation were crowded out by these other issues.

The second theme that arose out of our analysis was the *competing nature* of these demands and the *resultant time* that it takes to manage them. The third theme to arise was the *commitment* that Field Directors have to managing field education in the face of competing demands.

Demands: Students

Data from qualitative interviews suggest that Field Directors experience different types of demands from students regarding the field placement process. Related to changing student demographics, many have needs due to the burden of balancing employment or caregiving responsibilities. Field Directors spoke to the increasing need for field placements that can accommodate complex needs:

I've experienced almost a threefold increase in students who need night and weekend placements. It's been a dramatic increase. So many are single mothers, or divorced, or separated – they need to continue to work. They are truly sacrificing to come to school. They tell me, 'I've got to feed my children. I've always wanted to come here. I'm doing the best I can, but I can't cut back at work.'

Some students are burdened by the cost and logistics of commuting to field sites and home visits, often exacerbated by caregiving responsibilities. As one student explained to her Field Director, "I'm not willing to commute to the other side of the metro area because I don't want to be away from my family." Others are balancing full-time work with limited flexibility in their schedules. "I had one student say to me, 'I work all the time and all, but I'll do field. I'll take the second shift on weekends.' As if, somehow, there will be a second shift on weekends..."

To accommodate complex schedules related to work and caregiving responsibilities, students in social work are increasingly seeking part-time programs (Newman, Dannenfelser, Clemmons, & Webster, 2007). Students are also more likely to request employment-based field placements for financial reasons, including the maintenance of health and/or other benefits (Hopkins, Deal, & Bloom, 2005). As such, Field Directors are faced with the increasing need for flexible field placements. Students, who are often unclear about the difference between "doing hours" and having supervised experiences in the field, hope and often expect to be able to work in residential settings at off hours. Although many programs require students to have some daytime hours available for field placement, it is not always feasible. "We have lots of students who don't do a full day in the field, even though it's written and we say that we uphold that. You know, the reality is we can't always do that."

These types of demands are distinct from those coming from students who have high, and often unrealistic, expectations of the work conditions in field placement, especially at the foundation level where many students are appropriately placed in generalist, case management roles. As one participant reports, "Students expect to be able to just 'order up' a field placement." They can have expectations of the field placement that are incompatible with social work practice today.

One student called to ask, 'Can I change my placement? My office doesn't have a window and the lamp is broken and there are dead bugs on the floor.' 'Welcome to social work. No, we're not going to change your placement.'

Students who are career changers or who are returning to school after years of employment can be eager to accelerate the learning process. "They don't think that they need to start at the beginning. They already know this stuff. There's nothing for them to learn at the foundation level." Others report hearing students say things such as, "I already know what I'm doing, there's nothing for me to learn here." Others are interested in advanced placements that offer perks or stipends. "I'll get first year students insisting that they go to the VA because they've heard about the stipend."

For some students, the desire to be clinical practitioners is paramount but often unrealistic. As one participant reports, "They have this fantasy about going into private practice." In an era of fee-for-service and managed care work, this expectation is often in direct conflict with the reality of practice. "I think some think they're just going to sit around and listen to people instead of actually having to be on the phone and advocate and try to get client services."

The demand for certain types of placements stems largely from the customer-focused orientation that students have regarding their higher education experience. One participant explains, "It's usually a small minority, but the students who have that [customer] orientation are the most vocal and the most determined." For graduate degrees, the stakes are particularly high, given the expectations that students have about post-degree employment. "Students tell me all of the time that they are spending a lot of money for this degree." While Field Directors largely appreciate the cost and commitment required of higher education, some are surprised by the extent of the entitlement. "There's a big sense of entitlement since they're paying for this." Another reports that "I've had students tell me they pay my salary."

The kinds of "demands" that are exerted by students, the primary stakeholders in social work education, stem from a wide range of issues from the consequences of social inequality to entitlement. Field Directors in this study remained attuned to this variation, appreciating the nuances inherent in perceptions of needs and wants.

Demands: Administrators

In addition to responding to student demands, Field Directors reported their experiences with administrative demands regarding the commercialization of higher education in terms of student satisfaction, enrollment, and retention. As one respondent explained, "The major change in education is that it has become a business so students are treated like customers." This orientation puts administrators in positions to push for accommodations for vocal students. One Field Director reports, "I have felt

pressure to make accommodations for field placements when students go above my head.” Many Field Directors understand the pressure that programs are under to retain students. “We do back off when students push us. We can’t always enforce our field policy. The students are consumers. We need them in our program.” The pressure to retain students, especially in state schools, is often a function of budget retrenchment. In one case, the University of Nevada at Reno announced in spring 2011 the closing of the social work program in response to proposed state budget cuts (University of Nevada, 2011). Although this closure was ultimately retracted after significant public outcry, the message sent to low-enrollment and high-cost programs was palpable.

Those Field Directors who work with administrators who are also social workers felt the most support, despite the pressure to accommodate student demands. As one participant reports, “All of our administrators are social workers. I think that that definitely helps.” Another explains, “Our dean is a social worker and understands how the field is changing.”

For those Field Directors working with administrators who are not social workers or who have adopted a highly student-centric approach, the pressures are high. “The dean, who is not a social worker, was pretty clear with me about the need to increase student satisfaction rates in field.” One Field Director reports enjoying the challenge of changing paradigms in social work education but reflects on the pressure she is under as a result. “Our dean is a real visionary and has a ‘never-say-never’ or ‘never-say-no’ attitude, which puts a lot of strain on me.” Stemming from financial, organizational and consumer pressures, social work program administrators often pass these demands on to Field Directors.

Demands: The State of Social Work Practice

Not surprisingly, we heard from Field Directors about the impact of the changing nature of social services — trends that are exacerbated in an economic downturn — on field education. They unanimously reported that the field is “different” today, and that those differences often place significant demands on the field education department. As one participant shared, “The field has changed. We are not seeing as much commitment towards graduate education.” Agencies are facing enormous pressure to keep up with increasing caseloads in the midst of fiscal pressures. Training a student in direct practice settings can be a drain on already strained resources. In large part, Field Directors do not see this retrenchment as a lack of commitment to social work education, but as an understandable, if disappointing, response to changing economic times. “Agencies that may have supported us before lose funding and can’t take students.” To compete in the social and human services market, agencies must maximize their staff resources. A Field Director explains, “Agencies want workers, not students.” This type of efficiency orientation necessarily requires both screening and oversight. In agencies where students are accepted, Field Directors report that students are being processed through human resources departments rather than by field instructors. “There is more gatekeeping at the agencies, so we’re dealing with HR.” Agencies are increasingly asking students to complete a

wide range of background checks, including drug testing and criminal backgrounds, before starting field placement. The administrative burden of these checks is a new part of the Field Director's role. One Field Director explained, "Some agencies are asking Field Directors to monitor the criminal background and drug testing for students as a part of their affiliation agreements." Another agreed:

Hospitals are saying that the school is responsible for sending the student [to be drug tested] and sending a letter with the result. And that has implications because I don't have staff to follow up on that. Each year, more and more agencies are looking for that sort of thing.

The increased involvement of HR departments and legal counsel at large agencies, including schools and hospitals has introduced new issues in some cases:

I'm starting to have problems with hospitals because no state agency can sign a contract with a hold harmless clause. And all of the hospitals under Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) have to have these very formal contracts that's different from the affiliation agreement that we have with most agencies.

As agencies focus on their own financial health, Field Directors report that fidelity to the supervisory hour is sometimes lost. In an attempt to maximize worker efficiency, there is pressure on workers to minimize the amount of non-billable time spent on student supervision. Many agency directors "just don't understand supervision." As another Field Director explained, "If agencies take up a core profit model, there's less time available for supervision."

Another important piece of this changing social work context is the level of instability in field placements. Largely resulting from agency budget problems, Field Directors report that programs and workers are turning over more than ever. "Now I'm working every moment right up until Labor Day and hoping that everyone is settled. Placements are constantly falling apart because of voluntary or involuntary staff departures, program funding ending and other uncertainties in social service settings." Another participant added, "At least half of the field placements from one year to the next are either newly developed, new supervisor - something has turned over." The primary challenge that Field Directors face, given placement instability, is the time that it takes to develop new placements, including recruiting and orienting field instructors, and negotiating affiliation agreements.

Demands: Local Resources

In addition to the demands that Field Directors face from students, administrators and agencies, many spoke about local, place-based challenges. In some cases, directors spoke about the issues related to being in urban areas densely populated by social work programs. "There are five social

work programs in this area. Competition for placements is stiff.” Another Field Director added, “You’re not just competing with MSW programs. You’re competing with Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) or counseling students. “You’re competing with other human service programs now. You have community colleges. A lot of students are doing internships.”

One potential outcome of this scenario, as some identified, is that such competition can jeopardize standards if there is pressure to maintain enrollment and cater to student satisfaction. Students often compare what schools are requiring for field, including the amount of input they have and the number of required daytime hours. “Field Directors need to be united – we can’t water down field requirements. Once one waters it down, we are all in trouble.”

Other programs are located in remote locations with few qualified supervisors, so that students must commute long distances. “Students have to drive ninety minutes to their placements and they don’t have gas money.” Another local challenge experienced by several Field Directors is the inability to find students to fill placements who are eager to have them:

We have wonderful skilled supervisors, and there’s not anyone that will be able to take those placements. And then, we lose those placements because of all of the special [student] needs that come into play – the needs geographically, as well as the needs for certain hours.

As another Field Director explains, “I always have far more placements than I do students to place. The part I hate about my job the most is telling an agency that I don’t have someone for them.”

In the spirit of an ecological perspective on field education, the role that local context plays in the kinds of demands that Field Directors face is a vital part of assessment. Things that present significant challenges for some programs are insignificant for others.

Accreditation Standards

In light of the 2008 Accreditation Standards which designated field education as the signature pedagogy in social work, it would not have been surprising to hear that Field Directors felt pressure to comply. Our analysis revealed that the “demand” exerted by this move towards competency-based assessment was crowded out by more pressing issues. As one Field Director explained, “Honestly, ‘signature pedagogy’ doesn’t mean a lot to people. We are up to our eyes in agencies that are closing, that are cutting their own staff. We have fought tooth and nail to keep students in their placements.” This sentiment was echoed by another Field Director who added:

The economic times here are really impacting our ability to elevate field any more than it is already, simply because it just isn’t a priority for agency people at this point. They

love our field instructor training because they can get free Continuing Education Units (CEUs), and that's the reason that they do it sometimes, not because they're interested particularly in the student part of it, but it's free CEUs.

Field Directors are faced with the very real demand and needs of students. "They don't care or know about what we mean by signature pedagogy – they just want, and I get this, what's going to work for their very complicated lives. I'm left trying to figure out how I'm going to make it all work." As another Field Director explained, "At an academic level and in-house we will talk about that [signature pedagogy] and we will make that a focus and a priority. I'm not sure out in the field it's going to make a whole lot of difference." For one Field Director, the pull of other demands extends to administrators as well. "Although I do keep saying that there is need to [focus on] this, and I think my director kind of doesn't want to handle it right now. She has other issues."

Competing Nature of Demands

A clear meta-theme that arose out of our research was the competing nature of the varied demands that Field Directors experience. As needs, requests, and expectations from students and administrators have increased, resources in the field for many programs have decreased. Field Directors report feeling "caught in the middle" trying to satisfy these different stakeholders:

It's the idea that we have program expectations and field expectations, and that the students are consumers and we need the students in our program. So, that's the balancing act to me – keeping the program good and solid, and not compromising learning; but still being able to attract students into the program.

Another Field Director explains her experience with competing demands as, "There is a certain number of students that have to come into our program. We're truly, in some ways, caught trying to provide [placements] while witnessing the issues in the field, and seeing the changing student body." Put simply, one Field Director describes the situation, "Students have expectations and agencies have less to offer."

To manage these competing demands, our respondents spoke about the different roles that they took on within their positions as Field Directors, from strategic planner to mediator to relationship manager to clinician.

The really complex skill set that we need to function in the role, everything from time management and data management to interpersonal skill to this critical thinking, to strategic thinking and being in the moment but also being anticipating what's coming down the road.

Clinical skills, according to several of our respondents are key to field education. "I think in this position you have to have good clinical skills. I left [unidentified organization] to come to this position, and I use them every day – every single day." Another explains the requisite relational skills, "It's viewing everything as a marketing opportunity. There is a huge amount of relationship building, networking and relationship building, and then nurturing those relationships."

Key to the management of competing demands is time. Field Directors unanimously reported that time constraints are a significant burden on their role. "To do this job right, you need far more time than I have to give. It's a huge responsibility." Another explains her experience with competing demands:

You're constantly trying to deal with the issues that are coming up with students, with field instructors, with agencies. There's been an ongoing change that truly has increased – I mean, dramatically over the past four or five years in terms of the issues in the field.

Field Directors recognize their limits with respect to the kinds of needs their students have given the resources available:

I don't think I can work much harder than I'm working now to meet all of these needs, even though I have great empathy for these students. And I don't want to lose this working part-time population. But there's only so much that I can do with the limited opportunities, particularly with non-traditional field placements.

The risk of this mismatch between needs and available resources is job dissatisfaction, burnout, and eventual turnover. One Field Director explains, "I really have one main source in this role of job dissatisfaction, and it's time. And last week I worked sixty-five hours, and over the last couple of years weeks like that have been the norm." This is echoed by another who adds, "I could keep a half-time secretary busy at all times. There is just so much paperwork that goes with field." Perhaps more than students, faculty and administrators recognize, Field Directors are often stretched to their limits. "We are working every day, every moment, just to keep the field program maintained and balanced."

A Commitment to Managing Competing Demands

With a firm commitment to social justice, and often with a feminist perspective, Field Directors are eager to figure out ways to support these students. As one reports, "Many of them have wonderful life experience. That's a rich population we want to keep in the field. So we do try the best we can to accommodate." Another Field Director reflects on this scenario, "I love the fact that students today have different life experiences, such as criminal records, mental health and substance issues, and they want to give back to the profession that has helped them. I love my job." Not all student demands are perceived as entitlement. Field Directors are often keenly aware of how much of a sacrifice students

are making to attend school:

I'm really cognizant that we're an expensive school. We're not a state school. My students do work-study and jobs outside of here. A lot of my students have children, and they have schoolwork that they have to do. So I'm really aware of how much time I ask them to give up.

Despite frustrations with the vocal minority, Field Directors remained optimistic and positive about the majority of students in their programs. "I think there are still a lot of students who generally have the fire in their belly and a passion for working with people. And I think that's probably the majority of them." Another reports, "There are plenty of students who write you and say, 'Thank you for all the time and effort you put into this.'" Field Directors remained optimistic about the future of field education in the face of complex and competing demands. "We can still rise to the challenge to be customer-oriented and, at the same time, maintain our integrity and ensure the competencies are where they should be."

Discussion

Directors of field education in both Bachelor's and Master's programs of social work are at the center of a complex set of demands, needs and requests. This "bind" that Field Directors are in is not news (Rhodes et al., 1999). For many years, field educators have been talking, presenting, and writing about the impact that changes at social, organizational, and institutional levels have had on field education (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Recently, field education has been faced with two new conditions: the reality of being a signature pedagogy and the commercialization of higher education. Findings from this study suggest that the commercialization of higher education, as experienced through the demands of both students and administrators, is consequential for field education. Potentially exacerbating this is the effect that prolonged recession of the late 2000s has had on programs' need to attract and retain students for budget purposes. This study also suggests that the elevation of field to signature pedagogy has had less impact on the role of the Field Directors in this study, perhaps overshadowed by the pressures exerted by recessionary commercialization.

The most important finding from this study is the addition of the notion of "competing demands" to the ongoing discourse about field education. A large majority of Field Directors in this study spoke of experiencing increasing demands from students, administrators, and accreditors in environments that have fewer resources.

Another key finding in this study is the value of Field Director's perspective on the realities of field education. They have a robust understanding of the frontline realities of field education, often with a deep appreciation of the complexities of the competing nature of field education demands. This position was clearly stated in the North Central Field Education Directors' Consortium's influential

position paper (2000) about the crisis facing field education, arguing for accreditation standards to address the importance of the Field Director role.

The 2008 EPAS outline expectations for the Field Director's qualifications and role (see section 3.4.5), including guidelines for the minimum amount of time assigned for field education. However, findings from this study suggest that even the amount of assigned time dedicated for the role of Field Director/Coordinator, 25% for Field Directors in BSW programs and 50% in MSW programs, is likely insufficient to manage the many and competing demands of field education, especially for those with nine-month or ten-month contracts and/or those with a high Field-Director-to-student ratio. Field Directors need not only additional time but also support staff, including work-study students, graduate assistants, and administrative support to manage the increasing burdens that arise with complex affiliation agreements/letters of understanding and increasing requirements for background checks.

One of the most important findings from this study is the passion and empathy with which Field Directors manage competing demands for the sake of not only social work students, but also for the sake of social justice. We must recognize that this depth of commitment, while essential to both the practical and the ethical functioning of our educational process, is at risk unless we develop programmatic strategies to manage the realities of field education in the twenty-first century.

Limitations

The design of this study creates specific limitations. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants, necessarily resulting in a sample which is not representative of Field Directors. Further, the use of the snowball technique, wherein study participants referred their colleagues to us, may have resulted in a sample of Field Directors who have similar attitudes and experiences.

Another limitation is the effect confirmation bias may have had on our analysis of the data. Despite our active acknowledgement of our existing biases and debriefing sessions during the interviews and coding, it is possible that we "heard" and "found" the data that fit with our existing assumptions and experiences with field education, especially given that two of the four authors are currently Field Directors.

Next Steps

The next, most important, step for this research agenda is to continue to pursue research on field education as a way to bolster the evidence base in this core area of social work education. This should happen with larger and more diverse samples in both qualitative and quantitative formats. Other stakeholders, such as field instructors, field liaisons, students, agency administrators, and university administrators, should be included in the research. Findings from these studies must be disseminated in ways that allow for broad access.

Further studies should include a systematic investigation of the kinds of strategies that field directors use to manage the demands that they face. In keeping with a collaborative, strengths-based approach to social work practice, we should seek to identify the things that are working in field education relative to changing economic, social service, and academic realities. If field education is to continue to serve as the signature pedagogy of social work education, we must rise to the challenge of systematically evaluating its function, application, practice, and impacts.

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