



Field Learning in Online Social Work Programs

Author(s)

Suzanne Sankar, MSW

Editor

Interviewer

Lisa M. Richardson, MSS, LICSW

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

Are you a skeptic about online social work degrees that offer solely web-based course work? Skeptic or convert, a growing number of social work schools are embracing the online education trend by offering web-based MSW and BSW degrees. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) website lists several accredited online BSW and MSW programs. Differing from programs which require residency and some face-to-face class time, these programs are fully online and have no residency requirement.

The implications of online academic course work for student learning have been the focus for commentary and research over the last decade, yet the implications for field education have been largely overlooked as an area of inquiry.

The Field Educator wants to start the conversation about this timely subject. We invited Lisa Richardson, Director of MSW Field Education at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work, to lead this issue's "Conversations" interview with field directors from two online MSW programs: Betsey Gray, Field Director at the University of New England School of Social Work, and Elizabeth Pringle-Hornsby, National Field Coordinator, Virtual Academic Center, University of Southern California School of Social Work. Both schools have fully online MSW programs and draw students nationally and internationally. – Editor's Note

Lisa: Our topic today is field learning in online MSW programs. We are talking across three different time zones and we are all meeting for the first time. Welcome! For starters, how do you structure the field education component of an online program?

Elizabeth: At University of Southern California (USC), the goal was to have a model for our web-based program, known as the Virtual Academic Center (VAC), which would be similar to our campus-based program. For the virtual program, we have a partner company working with us on many aspects of the program, including admissions, field work, database creation and faculty training. It helps to have a partner, however, everything that the partner does must be approved by faculty and be in alignment with our school's requirements. For field education, we have trained the field education staff, many of them social workers, to conduct agency site visits. Every agency

affiliated with the web-based program must complete an initial interview and site visit to determine if it is an appropriate agency for a student placement. Before we make that final determination, our field faculty must review the materials recommending a field agency. The partner company contacts the agency, completes the initial interview, contacts the prospective field instructor and assesses the type of learning opportunities available. This information is then presented to our field faculty for approval, and is used to determine if it is an appropriate student-agency match.

In our program, we do not allow the students to select their own placements in the foundation year. As a school, we place them. We identify where the students need to go. In the concentration year, students are able to interview with either two or three agencies and it becomes a mutual selection process where they make a decision about which agency is the best fit for them.

Lisa: Betsey, at University of New England (UNE), how do you go about finding new agencies and matching students with agencies?

Betsey: Our process is a little bit different. We don't have a partner company that does that. That sounds interesting. I am a little envious. We do it all ourselves about seven months before our students are due to begin their field placement. Their field placement is done at the very end of their foundation year and their advanced year. Like USC, our goal is to have a similar model to our campus-based program. So about seven months before placement, our students participate in a four-week-long online field planning orientation that's facilitated by two full-time faculty members who are identified as our field planners. It's in that orientation that the student essentially learns about placement planning. "How do I find a placement?" "How do I interview?" "How do I choose an agency?" It's very similar to our campus-based field planning. It is a four-week-long orientation. The students have to take HIPAA training. Following that, they have a Skype meeting with the field planner.

With guidance from their field planner, students find their own field placements. We talk to them about how to contact agencies. We have a letter that they take to an agency interview because a lot of agencies expect that the school will initiate contact. I've gotten a number of calls from agencies saying, "Why is the student doing this?" The field planner then has a Skype meeting with the field instructor and the student to determine whether this is an appropriate fit, and whether this is an agency that we want to work with. Once a placement is approved, we offer an online orientation for the field instructor. We did have it required, and we still need to do some work in this area, because field instructors are just so busy that now we've made it optional.

Lisa: Of course, I am thinking of all sorts of directions and questions, but I have a clarifying question since our focus is on the online learning. Is the course where students are oriented to field placement all online?

Betsey: Yes, it is. It is totally online through Blackboard.

Lisa: Elizabeth, at USC, before you assign students to the foundation placement, are you communicating with them through phone or through Skype? How do you get to know them and determine an appropriate match?

Elizabeth: A little of both. We use the field application and a personal statement. These help us do an initial assessment of what the needs and interests of the students are. In the foundation year, for us it's more about rounding out students' learning experiences. We're trying to look for something that's different from what they've already experienced. In the concentration year, it's similar to Betsey's experience. We have field faculty members who would meet with students and learn a little bit about what each student's interests are for the concentration year. This way we can help to tailor or match students to agencies that align with their learning needs.

Lisa: And when you say that the field faculty meets with the student, is that by phone or Skype?

Elizabeth: It could be by phone or Skype. Also, the teaching platform we use has a feature similar to Skype, and allows us to schedule an individual office hour with the student.

Lisa: We've been focusing on the placement process. When you move into the actual educational experience, how is that structured specifically for online students who are in field? Students are in their home communities and they're going to the agency a certain number of hours per week. What's their education? What does their field curriculum look like and how is it delivered?

Betsey: At UNE, the students are in an 18-20-hour-per-week field practicum and a concurrent online integrative seminar. A master teacher who is a full-time field faculty member oversees the seminars, which are taught by adjunct faculty. Many adjuncts are our field instructors or former field instructors. The seminar instructors take a four-week enrichment training in order to qualify. It's a very challenging training that not everyone passes—some drop out because they realize it's too much work. The seminars consist of groups of eight to twelve students, and they are very rigorous—more rigorous than our campus-based seminars. We use a variety of tools, including Skype and Vimeo. Students do a check-in video every week, which is reviewed by the other members of the seminar. We use discussion boards and have a self-care corner. Students do weekly assignments. So, really, there are a variety of opportunities, as well as an opportunity for support in the seminar.

Lisa: Elizabeth, what are the educational structures for USC field placement?

Elizabeth: In addition to their placements, students are also in a weekly integrative seminar.

I agree with Betsey in that I think, to some extent, the web-based program is more rigorous than the

campus-based program. Based on research regarding student attention span in online classes, we adjusted our classes to 75 minutes of synchronous content. Students also have asynchronous content required prior to face-to-face class. The seminars have a syllabus which incorporates content from each sequence and students have time to discuss field-related matters and engage in professional consultation and development.

We currently do not have an integrative seminar for concentration year students; however, we have had some discussions about whether we want to incorporate an integrative seminar for the concentration students. We do create opportunities for the concentration year students to meet collectively, with their concentration liaison, for updates and consultation. Field visits are conducted for both the foundation and the concentration year; both are completed using the technology.

Lisa: You've talked about a variety of ways to use technology in field placements. You talked about Skype, about phone calls and about some face-to-face. You talked about video and Vimeo and your learning platform. Are there any other pieces that you wanted to mention about how you use technology to communicate with either the agency or the student?

Betsey: We use Skype for the majority of our field visits. I didn't mention that the seminar instructor is also the field advisor. So that person takes on the role of dealing with any issues that are happening in field, and also of doing the field visits. We have one field visit each semester. We also use email, phone and YouTube. Sometimes our students will use YouTube, or we'll use YouTube for class discussion or for assignments.

Lisa: Elizabeth, do you have anything else you would add about USC?

Elizabeth: Well, one of the things that we have implemented for all foundation year students is training in motivational interviewing as an evidence-based practice. This was first implemented within the campus-based program, thus the need to implement it in the Virtual Academic Center as well. It is eight-hour training, conducted over the course of three weeks, using live discussions, role-playing and technology. Videotaped role-plays are used so that students actually have a visual of each motivational interviewing step. They're able to practice and have access to the course information throughout the remainder of the semester. We feel that this has been a great addition that helps to prepare the students for their entry into field and supports their learning needs.

Betsey: Elizabeth, I have a question for you. You said that your field seminar is synchronous and asynchronous. We have a partner company who does all of our course design, and when we were designing our seminars we wanted something that was synchronous, but we were discouraged from that because we have people from all over the world in our program. I'm curious how you deal with the time difference in the synchronous part?

Elizabeth: Even for this interview, Lisa expressed her amazement that we are conducting the interview in three different time zones. That's the reality of our classes, too! We set a class schedule and let the students decide what times work best for them. We have traditional days that our classes are offered, but we try not to schedule classes earlier than 7:00AM and no classes later than 7:00PM, in order that classes are not ending too late in the evening.

Betsey, in addition to the time factor, you also talked about the synchronous component. In this synchronous component, the time factor really hasn't been as much of an issue as we thought it would be. But the benefit of the students all coming together and being able to hear each other, to see each other, and to talk about policy bills or laws as they relate to their state has been really great.

My seminar has students in New Mexico, Florida and California. It's a really rich opportunity for them to learn from each other, but also to have some commonality in the class as well. It has been really exciting to see.

Betsey: In the UNE field seminar, our students videotape a check-in using Vimeo each week, and then comment on the discussion board. When we made a decision to go to a totally asynchronous delivery, we had to figure out how we were going to get the very important relationship-building in place. In the pieces that you're talking about, we do that all through our discussion board.

Lisa: A question that is frequently raised about online learning, related to the discussion about synchronous or asynchronous, is how, if at all, is professional development taught or modeled? Do students have sufficient opportunities for professional socialization in an online environment? Is there more pressure on field placement agencies to teach professionalism?

Elizabeth: That was definitely a critical area of concern for our faculty. In a campus-based program, there are two places we know professional socialization occurs: the agency and the school community. In the school, we have a strong social work student community, including a student organization that the dean thinks highly of; she includes them in decision-making about the school and promotes student leadership opportunities. The VAC, similar to our campus-based program, has elected student representatives that serve as the leadership for the VAC students. In our campus-based program, there are groups and caucuses that the VAC students can also join. Faculty advisors meet with the caucuses to address issues, and also to serve as role models for professional development. The same thing occurs in the VAC, but the difference is that all of our student communities are on the web.

The VAC students have a web-based community where they can schedule face-to-face sessions with other students. They can have a community meeting with each other, so it's not just faculty that has access to our ability to connect to students face-to-face. We have hundreds of communities that have been developed in the web-based environment. That's one thing that helps with professional

development. We know there are different levels of professional involvement or different ways for students to demonstrate a sense of professionalism.

The time spent at the agency is another strong element. In our learning agreement and evaluation, we have a section from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies on professionalism. We also address professional identity when we do our agency visit with the student and field instructor. We address professionalism in the seminars. The first part of the seminar has a very structured curriculum that addresses professional identity and how one should conduct oneself in an agency. We also address ethical issues and challenges that arise in field placements. We have a number of ways in which we address issues that arise in the agency. In cases where an agency contacts us to say, "We have some concerns with this student either in their dress or interactions," these concerns are addressed collaboratively with the student, field instructor and field liaison.

Lisa: I just have a clarifying question. You mentioned hundreds of online student communities. What are some examples?

Elizabeth: We have different community, study and support groups that have been established by students and faculty. If students want to get together to study for their behavior class, we have a set of student representatives for the Los Angeles or Orange County area. For example, there is a military spouse support group, a mothers' support group, a single moms' support group, specific course study groups and a host of different community groups that students have developed and take leadership in running, facilitating, and encouraging other members to join.

Lisa: It sounds like an interesting byproduct of having an online program is that the social networking life, which is very vivid for a lot of students already, is maybe even more part of student life at USC?

Elizabeth: Yes, this was purposeful because, again, in our campus-based program, we have at least sixteen caucuses that students can join. We felt that we needed to recreate this experience so our web-based students could be part of the same communities, as well as additional communities that are relevant to VAC. We want students to be connected and not isolated in their homes. Social networking is an important aspect of having a web-based program.

Lisa: Betsey, how does the UNE online program attend to the issues of professional development and the professionalization of the students?

Betsey: We don't have anything as organized as you do at USC, Elizabeth. I'm really impressed by that, because our concern is always about how online students connect so that they're not feeling isolated. In our campus-based program, we have a student representative organization that is very active, and then, of course, we have students who are connecting more informally. So that sounds

very exciting and I commend you on that. It sounds impressive and it's something to think about. For our students, it's more informal. First of all, the type of student that we admit into our online program is typically a student with some experience in the field. So it's not a student directly out of an undergraduate program who's still trying to develop a professional identity. For the most part, our students have been practicing in a social service setting for at least several years.

Overall, I think there is some professionalism that is already there that we're building on in our program. In our learning contract, we focus on professionalism and ethical behavior. We have a statement of understanding which outlines what the expectations are for a student around issues relating to professionalism.

I think the biggest part of it occurs in the seminar. When we have our students doing their video check-ins, we have criteria, so it isn't sufficient for them to check in and say, "Everything is well," and not to really talk about what the issues were that week. We have an outline that they've got to follow, so we really ratchet it up to a professional level, even in the foundation year.

And in the online discussion groups, the students and the seminar instructors critique the check-in and provide feedback to the student, either individually or as part of the discussion board. Or, if the instructor sees something that is questionable in terms of ethical behavior, that is addressed.

In the assignments for foundation year, the students do a social justice presentation examining a social justice issue occurring in their placement. In the advanced year, they have to do a formal case presentation. In the discussion board, that conversation is initiated following the video presentation.

There are many opportunities in this seminar. We have a self-care corner where each week students have to talk about what they've done around self-care issues. We spend a lot of time in our campus-based seminars talking about self-care. We wanted to continue that in the online program. It's amazing how students have reached out to each other. The level of support and the level of connection are deeper sometimes than in our campus-based program, because they're together as a group online for a much longer period of time during the week than our campus-based students. Quite often they'll say, "Hey, can I Skype with you afterwards?" Or, "Oh, you live in Oklahoma, I live in Oklahoma too." They'll initiate that connection informally outside of the seminar. Then, of course, the professionalism extends to the work with the agency and in the field visit, talking about those pieces with the field instructor.

Lisa: Let me ask one more question that has to do with pedagogy, and then we can switch to talk a little bit about relationships with the agencies. In what ways has working in an online social work degree program caused you to redesign or rethink your pedagogical approach to student learning in field?

Betsey: When we were approached to start an online program, we said, "This could never happen. How can you teach relational skills? Social work is about relationships. How can you teach this online?" We were all skeptics, but over the last couple of years, we have really grown into being believers. Now I really believe that relationships can occur online. Students can't hide as they can in a classroom. Students have to be present. The level of learning that takes place, as I've said before, is much richer and involves many more students. Participation from students can be at a much higher level than in a campus-based program. It is possible to teach social work online.

Elizabeth: I agree with Betsey. Many of the faculty, both field and academic, entered this process with a high level of skepticism in regards to whether or not this could work, especially as it related to practice and integrative seminar. There's still some work to be accomplished; however, we have reached a level of feeling like, "OK, yes, it is possible to do that." We do need to make some adjustments in order to assure that students are getting the kind of learning experience that we want them to have. There's more effort, also, on the part of the faculty to engage with students in a different way. Faculty need to be creative in terms of teaching approach and tools used; but it is, in fact, possible.

Lisa: As I listen, certainly a lot of what you're talking about is the very recognizable pillars of field education: the seminar, the use of reflective assignments, education contracts, and field evaluation and site visits. Those pieces are in both programs and are universal to field education. It sounds like you haven't reinvented the wheel, but you really have adapted the format in creative ways.

Elizabeth: Yes, I agree. We have long-standing field faculty who have been with us for more than twenty years. We also have field faculty who have been with us just one year. They bring a range of ideas, beliefs and views related to the kind of learning that can occur in the field. As a school, we've also looked at different areas of learning and exposure for students that we may not have traditionally sought out for our campus-based students—for example, providing opportunities for learning in multiple places. A student could have a primary site with one population, and then a secondary site with another population. This allows the student to have a comprehensive learning experience.

We are being creative in terms of looking at the number of hours that a student is in field placement. Our dean is challenging us to think about learning outcomes. Is there a difference in terms of the learning that occurs when students are in field eight hours or four hours? Or is the significance of what is being learned not linked to the amount of time that the student is in the agency? We're having discussions about the manner in which field is conducted.

Betsey: I agree with Elizabeth. All of the new opportunities make online education so exciting. I know for our field faculty, we're always looking at new possibilities. We see our work as a work in progress. Nothing stays the same. That to me is what's so exciting about online education. Using the technology and using the creativity of people is challenging but a lot of fun.

Lisa: Let me move us to the development of these partnerships with agencies, which is, of course, the bedrock of field education. You potentially have new students in different parts of the country from year to year, with a lot of variability. Also, you're dealing with any number of urban, suburban or rural areas, not even in just one country. How are you managing with the demands of identifying sites for students, and developing and sustaining those relationships?

Betsey: Well, for us at UNE, this has been a challenge. We are a small program and we've been fortunate in that we have really good, solid relationships with our community partners in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. The question arose for use—how are we going to develop those relationships with agencies across the world? Again, I think this is a work in progress. I don't know if we're at the level of sustaining those relationships because we've just started placing students. I don't know how many agencies we've actually used more than once, at this point. If we have used agencies more than once, those agencies are very few.

We've always prided ourselves in that we're available to field instructors when concerns arise, or when they have questions. We really are responsive to their phone calls and their emails. I get quite a few phone calls from agencies and from field instructors. Again, what I try to do is to answer them as quickly as possible. We're talking about other ways to sustain and develop those relationships. Then our field advisors, when they have the site visits or the field visits with the student and the field instructor, go to great lengths to express appreciation to the field instructor for their very important role. Also, we reach out to them in a variety of ways. We offer benefits packages for our field instructors which include access to all of our library's online journals. They can access those from their own computer and find it very helpful. Our plan is to offer online seminars with continuing education credits for the field instructors, as a way of thanking them and letting them know how important they are to our students' education.

Elizabeth: Based on the location of our students, we have some agencies that we have used more than once. We recognize in some cases there may not be another opportunity to place a student with the agency. We would still engage with the agency in the same way in order to sustain the relationship and the possibility of placing future students within the agency.

We have a five-session, self-paced training module for a field instructor that, upon completion of the course, provides 12 CEU credits (approved by the California Board of Behavioral Science). At one time, we offered the field instructors a USC ID card in order that they could utilize some of the same resources that Betsey talked about. We would like to offer this again as something to support field instructors professionally, and have discussed whether this resource could be re-implemented.

For our campus-based program, we have an appreciation event for field instructors that is held at the end of every academic year. We also invite locally-based field instructors affiliated with the VAC.

All VAC field instructors are provided with a link to access the teaching platform. This also provides them the opportunity to conduct meetings using the platform with their liaison and their students. In cases when the field instructor is unable to meet with the student onsite, offsite supervision can also be conducted if necessary.

In terms of developing and sustaining agency relationships, we are still working on ways in which this can be accomplished. We have a sense of what it is for the short-term and for those agencies that have had multiple students; however, we need additional time for the development of the program to assess the long-term implications.

Lisa: How do you relate to existing social work schools in locations where you are developing field placements? I'm curious about your way of relating to peers who have programs in the areas where you're also looking for placements. I know in some areas of the country the consortia of field educators might be very loosely defined, and in other areas it's cohesive and formally articulated, especially with the field placement process and field instructor training. How are you relating to the host communities and the other social work programs in those communities?

Betsey: New England has a very cohesive consortium, the New England Consortium of Field Directors (NECON), which meets monthly. I don't contact them that often. We haven't needed to do that, but if I'm looking for a place, say, in the Boston area, I might email Boston College or Boston University and ask them if they have a placement in a certain area, or in New Hampshire, and they would do the same with me. It's on an as-needed basis. Then, at the monthly meetings, they're all aware of our online program. I know that Boston University is starting an online program, so there's discussion at the meetings about what this involves in terms of field placements and how we can help one another in that area. As far as the other sections of the country, I haven't reached out to any of the schools of social work.

Elizabeth: I have a similar response to Betsey's. In the California area, we have a consortium that is long-standing, more than 25 years, that meets on a quarterly basis. As a result of this relationship, many of them were aware that we were starting this web-based program. We have a large percent of students that are admitted from California, both northern and southern. Within the consortium, I have been able to consult with our colleagues regarding specific placement needs.

When it comes to the other states, this has been a point of discussion. I have not needed to contact other field directors or field faculty to ask for assistance. We have discussed whether we should consult with other schools in cases where there have been some challenges finding a placement, however, we have been fortunate so far to locate appropriate placement options for our students. I would, however, like to be able to develop relationships with those other schools of social work and to see what the possibility would be of working together, in consideration of our status as a national program. Since we have students in some areas where other schools are located, establishing some

field relationships may be beneficial to both programs.

Lisa: I do think the collaboration varies around the country. I've been in a couple of different areas of the country as a student and as a field instructor and now as a field director. My sense is that in different areas, there is some understanding that develops between different programs in order to not be stepping on each other's toes. How do you work in a competitive environment and all for the same ultimate goal? We're all collaborators and competitors to a certain extent. In some places, it might be more formalized terms that are developed among the local schools, and in other places it's probably much more loosely coordinated. It's intriguing when you're dealing with so many different geographic locations. What are the norms in that location that you might run up against?

Betsey: Yes and how do you learn about those norms unless we reach out to people? How do we know what those norms are?

Elizabeth: Recognizing that we are in an area in California where we have this huge, close consortium, we respect those relationships that agencies have with particular schools. We respect the relationship but we also recognize that we have students who are coming into the profession who will be working for the benefit of all communities. We try to work with agencies to help them to understand the unique qualities and benefits of being a USC field agency, even if it's just for one student for that one year. Ultimately, that student may come back to work in their agency and contribute to the local community.

Lisa: You both mentioned that you worked with partner organizations. Can you say more about that?

Betsey: Yes. When we started our program, we partnered, and we still have a relationship with our partner—they do all our marketing and recruitment. They also were course designers for us until recently. We've taken that over ourselves now.

Elizabeth: Our partner does the recruitment and marketing. Our admissions office works closely with our partner's admissions personnel. They make recommendations of which students to admit, and our faculty then reviews the applications and makes admissions decisions. The partner worked with our faculty to convert the curriculum from the campus-based curriculum to the web-based curriculum, and now provides both student and faculty support for using our web-based learning management system.

Lisa: What are the biggest challenges in developing and maintaining an online field education program? And what tips do you have for a school considering launching an online program?

Elizabeth: Again, you have to take into consideration that we've been in operation for one year at

USC, but we already have almost 1,000 students in the program of which half are in field placements. The size of the program can be a challenge. We are a national program with some international presence and military-affiliated students overseas. Therefore, the location of students in relation to the types of appropriate agencies in that location – for both foundation and concentration year students – can be a challenge.

To address this challenge, we have the ability to conduct a geo-mapping to identify community-based agencies that are within a geographic range of a student's residence. In some cases, there may be no MSW onsite; this might be a great agency with appropriate learning opportunities, but no MSW. We have addressed this challenge by implementing an external field instructor model where we assign an MSW who has knowledge of the program, services or populations served by the agency, to serve as the field instructor for the student and establish a relationship with the agency.

The other aspect goes back to what we were talking about earlier in terms of relationship-building; relationship-building as it relates to our presence in the community with agencies, the relationship-building with other schools of social work across the country in terms of creating alliances, and collectively finding agencies to support students who are entering the profession.

Another challenging factor can be creativity, as we discussed earlier, though we came into this program saying, "Okay, we want to make sure that we do everything that we do for our on-campus program." We're implementing the same program, but the reality is when you look at the different geographical areas that we are in, we can align in some respects but we have to be creative in other respects. And so that can be a challenge in terms of stepping outside of one's comfort zone, thinking outside of the box, realizing that there's more than one way to engage and learn. There are many social workers across the country demonstrating that there are different ways in which we work with our clients.

Betsey: And our challenges are very similar to yours, Elizabeth, especially maintaining the quality of the program with the increasing numbers. And that is definitely true in the field education component. It's also making sure that we have solid infrastructure, that we have support for our students in terms of a learning assistance center, in terms of the counseling center, in terms of whatever supports the students need. Many of our students are going through personal challenges that impact on their education, so how do we support them from afar? Our campus-based students can run across the street to the counseling center. That's not available to our online students. And in the field, as we know, a lot of issues that may be simmering in the classroom come up in the field placement. So how do we work with the field instructors to provide that support?

Along the same lines, how do we provide support to our adjunct faculty who are teaching online? Again, many of them are afar. And, Elizabeth, you alluded to this, the location of the students. There are students who are international students who are having trouble finding a field placement and

field instructor in their country. How do we address those issues?

We meet weekly. Field faculty, both online and campus-based, meets weekly. We said at the beginning that we wanted to have a comparable online field education program and we wanted to maintain the same quality as our campus-based program. One way we're doing that is to have weekly meetings, and a number of very interesting field issues arise. How do you maintain the integrity of the program and the educational needs of the students and also be flexible? We're getting many different requests and many challenging issues because of the sheer number of students. I'm sure Elizabeth is seeing that, too.

Much discussion goes on when we get these requests or when we encounter these issues. How can we best respond to the student, but also maintain the integrity and quality of the program?

Lisa: And, of course, much of what you're commenting on is also typical of any setting. Any final thoughts that you want to articulate? Any other specific tips you would have for a program that's considering launching an online curriculum for field education?

Betsey: Have a solid structure in place. That's very, very important. One of our challenges has been around our information technology (IT). That has been extremely challenging, so if it's at all possible, have a good IT structure in place, as well as the support services for the students. Have a partner, someone who can do the course design. That was extremely helpful to us. I've talked to my colleagues, and some of the other programs on our campus had to design their own courses. We provide the content. We're the authors of our courses, but they design how that will be laid out and they do it. That's been really helpful. A third tip is to make sure that you have buy-in from the faculty, because online education is hard. It's hard work and it's time-consuming, so it's really important to have buy-in from the faculty.

Elizabeth: I think for field, although we come into this with a knowledge and notion of what to do, there is a need for flexibility – to be able to look at field in a different way. The fact is that you don't have the same control when you're working in an area that's unfamiliar or remote from home campus. So just know that the face of social work looks different. I've learned a lot. I've had the opportunity to speak with field faculty at a couple of online programs that are in development. Learning how field is conducted in those programs has really helped me to think about field in different contexts, as it relates to our program in ways that we had not thought about because we had been used to conducting field in a certain way.

And when you talk about that faculty buy-in, part of that buy-in is also having them be open to creativity. There's more than one way to teach a class, or more than one way for a student to be engaged in a field experience. Having had the opportunity to talk with other field directors who are starting their online programs, the type of contact we have with other schools of social work is an important

factor. We need to also look at reciprocal relationships, so that when an online program is established, there can be some discussions about how to work together around identifying placements or developing placements so that you're not in competition with each other. In terms of student communities, we need to really understand that we don't want students to be isolated. We need to make sure that there are ways that students can be connected to each other and connected to the program.

Lisa: I want to thank you both for your time, expertise, and your articulation of so many pieces of your programs, the concrete pieces as well as the methodologies and pedagogy behind them. You've both done a fantastic job of being able to conceptualize and convey what you do. This is an emerging area of social work education and both of you are ambassadors. Thank you.

To learn more about the University of Southern California School of Social Work's online program, please visit their website: <http://msw.usc.edu/>.