

Field Instruction and the Social Work Curriculum

OVERVIEW

This introductory chapter provides the historical and current context for understanding the requirement of field instruction in social work programs. It also begins to answer questions about student preparation, supervision, and the coordination of field instruction within the larger educational program.

Why Do Social Work Students Have Field Instruction?

As professionals in the making, social work students attend classes to learn practice principles, values and ethical behaviors, a body of specialized knowledge, and the scientific basis for practice. In field instruction, students apply what they have been learning in the classroom to real situations. Thus, the preparation to become a social work professional is composed of formal learning as well as practical experience—sometimes known as field instruction, field placement, field work, practicum, or internship. Such training experiences are not unique to social work but are common to most of the helping professions.

A career in social work requires many abilities. Social workers must have competence in relating to individuals, small groups, organizations, and communities; in assessing needs and problems; and in planning and intervening appropriately. Social workers have to be skilled in carrying out various helping roles such as advocate, broker, educator, group leader, mediator, clinician, community planner and organizer, administrator, and so forth. While students may not be able to acquire expertise in each of these roles during a single practicum, placement in an

agency allows them the opportunity to observe other professionals and to learn from their actions. Students can learn from any of the staff around them—all play a role in helping students to become more proficient.

Students not only acquire practical experience from the field, they are also socialized into the professional subculture. There are two important aspects of this socialization: acceptance of individuals into a professional group where common expectations are held of all members, and the development of a professional self-concept consistent with role models. During field instruction, encounters with clients, colleagues, and the professional community help to educate and indoctrinate students into the culture, norms, and values of social work. Field instruction assists students in making the transition from passive learners to active professionals.

Field instruction is one of the nine areas constituting the social work professional foundation content required in both undergraduate and graduate social work programs (Commission of Accreditation, Council on Social Work Education, 1994). It is, however, of singular importance. It is in the field that material covered in the foundation courses on human behavior, social policies, research, and social work practice gets a real-life examination outside the classroom. The practicum is particularly helpful in providing students with experiential learning in the other foundation context areas: social work values and ethics, diversity, promotion of social and economic justice, and populations-at-risk.

Field instruction is a valuable part of the social work curriculum because it allows students to test whether social work is the best career for them. The choice of a career is a major decision, and not everyone is suited to be a social worker. Because students are closely supervised and evaluated, faculty field liaisons can help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and determine whether or not social work is the best choice for them. Occasionally, faculty field liaisons must recommend that students address personal issues before entering their field placements.

Case Example

John has changed college majors four times in the past three years. He entered as an English literature major, then changed to accounting. In his sophomore year he tried both geography and Russian. After one year of Russian, he dropped out of school to "get his act together." He worked as a bartender and jokes about how easily drunks can be shortchanged and their drinks watered down. When a DUI conviction caused him to lose his driver's license, John took a couple of social work courses and did well in them although several of your friends say they have smelled alcohol on his breath during class. Last week John was fired from his job for stealing from his employer. He claims the charges are not true and plans to go to school full time next semester to become a social worker because, he says, "It's easy work—all you have to do is talk."

Questions

1. Is John ready to become a social worker?

2. What questions could you ask to help John examine his motivations for becoming a social worker?
3. Why, in your mind, should a person choose the career of social work?
4. What characteristics make a good social worker? A poor one?

What Is the Role of the Faculty Field Liaison?

The primary job of the faculty field liaison is to see that students' practicum experiences are educational. Rosenblum and Raphael (1983) describe specific faculty field liaison's duties as (1) facilitating field teaching and students' learning, (2) overseeing educational opportunities offered by the agency, monitoring students' progress, and fostering an interchange between school and agency, and (3) evaluating field instructors' efforts and students' achievements. Faria, Brownstein, and Smith (1988) identify ten liaison responsibilities, which they divide into six roles and four functions. The faculty field liaison functions are:

- *Placement*—selects field agencies and field instructors and matches them with students.
- *Linkage*—interprets school policies, procedures, and expectations of field agencies and assesses the fit between school curriculum and educational experiences provided by the agency.
- *Administration*—ensures completion of placement forms (e.g., students' evaluation of agencies, field instructors, and faculty field liaisons).
- *Evaluation*—evaluates students, field instructors, and agencies; assigns students' grades; and makes recommendations for continued use of agencies and field instructors. (More on the evaluation of students in Chapters 2 and 4.)

In the performance of their functions, you should see faculty liaisons in the following roles:

- *Adviser*—provides assistance to students in planning for practicum.
- *Monitor*—assesses agencies, field instructors, and students' learning experiences.
- *Consultant*—assists field instructors in developing supervisory skills and provides course outlines and other materials.
- *Teacher*—assists students with the integration of course work and practicum and serves as a role model to students.
- *Mediator*—assists in resolving problems between students and field instructors or other agency personnel.
- *Advocate*—provides relevant information to academic review committees (when necessary) to evaluate students' field and academic performance.

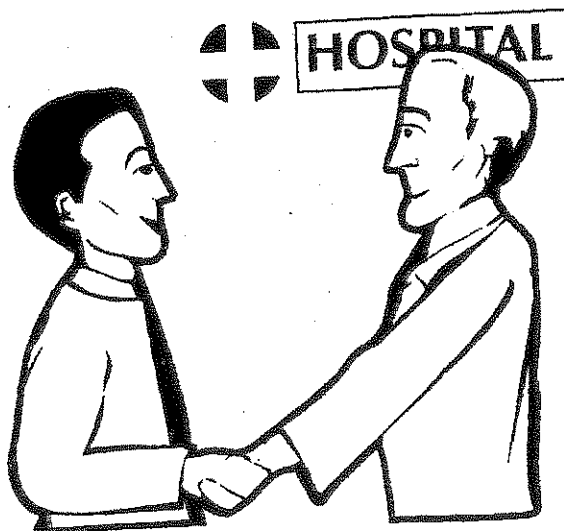
In many programs, faculty field liaisons conduct seminars to provide students with a regular occasion to share their learning and to ask for information or assistance when difficult problems arise. In addition, students may be expected to submit weekly logs of their field experiences and plan individual conferences with their faculty field liaisons. These seminars and conferences provide opportunities for faculty to get to know students, to be able to guide them when necessary, and to help with integrating theory and practice.

What Is the History of Field Instruction in Social Work?

Field instruction has always been a major part of social work training. Its history goes back to the days of the Charity Organization Societies in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when students learned social work by apprenticeship. Through "applied philanthropy" students obtained firsthand knowledge of poverty and adverse social conditions. With this *apprenticeship model*, training emphasized "doing" and deriving knowledge from that activity. By the end of the nineteenth century, social work was moving away from the apprenticeship model.

The first training school for social work was a summer program that opened in 1898 at the New York City Charity Organization Society. In 1904, the society established the New York School of Philanthropy, which offered an eight-month instructional program. Mary Richmond, an early social work practitioner, teacher, and theoretician, argued that although many learned by doing, this type of learning must be supplemented by theory. She called for a permanent group of instructors to direct the work of students, to give them theory and practice together (George, 1982).

At the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, presenters emphasized the value of an educationally based field-practice experience, with



schools of social work having control over students' learning assignments. This idea put schools in the position of exercising authority over the selection of agencies for field training and thus control over the quality of social work practice to which students were exposed.

Early in social work education a pattern was established whereby students spent roughly half of their academic time in field settings selected by the school of social work, with the school overseeing the students' experiences (Austin, 1986). This paradigm was made possible by the networking that emerged from the early organizational efforts of social work educators. For instance, in 1919 the organization of the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work was chartered by 17 programs. By 1923, 13 of the original 17 schools were associated with universities or colleges at the postbaccalaureate level. The American Association of Schools of Social Work, in its curriculum standards of 1932, formally recognized field instruction as an essential part of social work education (Mesbur, 1991).

During the first part of this century, psychoanalytic theory dominated social work education. This influence tended to focus the attention of students and social work educators on a client's personality rather than on the social environment. Accordingly, social casework as learned in the practicum emphasized helping the individual more than bringing about social justice or social reform (Sikkema, 1966).

The depression of the 1930s and the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935 brought about major changes in the country's provision of social services and need for social workers. This marked the beginning of the government's acceptance of at least some responsibility for all vulnerable groups. Until then, local government authorities had grudgingly provided for the bare survival of deserving poor. This act authorized federal grants to states for statewide public assistance programs (Lourie, 1971). Subsequent amendments to this act created several social welfare programs that have affected many dimensions of people's lives.

From about 1940 until 1960, an *academic approach* dominated social work education. This approach emphasized students' cognitive development and knowledge-directed practice. Professors expected students to deduce practice approaches from classroom learning and translate theories into functional behaviors in the field (Tolson & Kopp, 1988).

Educational standards for field instruction were refined in the 1940s and the 1950s, and field work became known as field instruction. A subcommittee on field work for the American Association of Schools of Social Work took the position in 1940 and 1941 that field teaching was just as important as classroom teaching and demanded equally qualified teachers and definite criteria for the selection of field agencies (Reynolds, 1965).

In 1952 the Council on Social Work Education was established and began creating standards for institutions granting degrees in social work. These standards required a clear plan for the organization, implementation, and evaluation of both in-class work and the field practicum. However, it was not until 1970 that

field work was made a requirement for undergraduate programs affiliated with the Council.

The *articulated approach* characterized the third phase in the history of social work-field instruction (from about 1960 to the present). This method integrates features from both experiential and academic approaches. It is concerned with a planned relationship between cognitive and experiential learning and requires that both class and field learning be developed with learning objectives that foster their integration. It does not demand that students be inductive or deductive learners but expects that knowledge development and practice will be kept close enough together in time to minimize these differences in learning style (Jenkins & Sheafor, 1982).

Students may not be aware of the tensions and strong disagreements that have existed in previous years over the purpose of field education. When social work programs were housed in other disciplines, academically minded social scientists sometimes argued that the function of field instruction was to allow students to observe and collect data on poverty and social conditions first hand. The emphasis was often on the *study* of social problems. Students were *not* expected to provide services or assist clients. Agencies, of course, wanted students to roll up their sleeves and pitch in and help with the work that they were doing. What has emerged as social work has matured as a unique discipline is a view of field education that blends both the academic and experiential perspectives.

The 1982 Curriculum Policy Statement further emphasized academic control of educational experiences in field instruction as distinct from an apprenticeship model of training (Austin, 1986).

Although there are differences among social work programs in how field instruction is conceptualized and administered, each accredited program must meet standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). More importantly, there is virtually no disagreement among social work educators about the educational emphasis that should be placed on field instruction and the necessity of its close integration with theoretical and knowledge-based instructional courses.

What Are the Current Standards for Field Instruction?

The Council on Social Work Education requires that undergraduate programs provide each student with a minimum of 400 hours of field instruction. Graduate programs must arrange a minimum of 900 hours. The Council mandates that every program "establish standards for field practicum settings that define their social work services and practices, field instructor assignments and activities, and student learning expectations and responsibilities" (Commission on Accreditation, CSWE, 1994, pp. 103 & 142). The Council further stipulates that the practicum be a clearly designed educational experience and that social work programs have articulated standards for selecting agencies for the practicum, for selecting

field instructors (agency supervisors), and for evaluating student learning in the practicum.

Your particular program may require more hours of field instruction than the minimum expected by the Council. This works to your advantage because more experience gives you a greater chance to refine your skills and to develop expertise.

Case Example

Betty thinks that the requirement of 400 hours in an unpaid field placement is too much—mainly because it takes away from time she could be on the tennis court. Tennis is easily the main interest in her life and always the major topic in any conversation she starts. Betty has the potential to become a professional tennis player and make more money than she ever would as a social worker, but wants the BSW to fall back on.

Her supervisor's schedule does not overlap with every hour Betty is supposed to be in the agency. Halfway through the semester Betty confides in you that she has slipped out two or more hours early each day her supervisor wasn't in, and also lied about the number of hours that she was supposed to be in the library doing a search for literature.

Questions

1. What is your reaction to Betty's confiding in you?
2. Does Betty have the characteristics that make a good social worker?
3. Does 400 hours of field experience seem an excessive amount of time to prepare you to be a social worker?

Are There Different Types of Field Placement?

Social work programs can organize the required field instruction in different ways as long as degree programs are educationally directed, coordinated, monitored, and meet the requirements of the Council on Social Work Education. The most common types of field placements are block and concurrent. Under the *block* placement arrangement, a student is placed in a social service agency with an approved learning plan for a block of time—a whole academic term, two full terms, or a summer term. The students devote full time (four or five days per week) to experiential learning in the agency. Under a *modified block model* students participate in field instruction in a social service agency four days each week while the fifth day is reserved for taking courses.

Under the *concurrent* placement, the students' time is divided between classroom learning and field work experiences. (Typically, students are expected to be in the agency for two or three days per week and to take classes for two or three days.) The exact proportion of time devoted to each set of learning experiences varies, depending on the type of academic term, the number of academic credits, and whether or not the students are undergraduates or first- or second-year graduate students.

Social work programs across the country have mixed and matched these two types of placements to create models of field instruction. Sometimes first-year graduate students do a *concurrent placement* (two days per week for two semesters), and second-year students complete a *block placement* (for 15 weeks at five days per week). Larger schools may offer as many as three models of field practicum for students: the *standard model*—two years of concurrent placements for 28 weeks each year at three days (21 hours) per week; the *extended model*—two years of concurrent placement for 42 weeks each year at two days (14 hours) per week; and the *reduced field instruction model*—one year of placement for 33 weeks at four days (28 hours) per week. Educationally, all of these approaches are considered sound, although students who work and go to school may have preferences for one model over another.

How Are Students Prepared for Field Instruction?

At the undergraduate level, social work programs must prepare students for beginning *generalist* social work practice with individuals, families, small groups, organizations, and communities. To reach this objective, most programs follow a three-step graduated approach. At step 1, students enroll in an introductory course in social work and may need to make application to the program.

Step 2 is the completion of basic core courses—social work practice, human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, and social work research. Step 3 is the placement of students in their field practicum. Faculty field liaisons assign students to social welfare agencies so they can acquire new skills and further refine their existing skills. In many programs, the practicum is scheduled for the senior year.

As an undergraduate student you can expect to spend between one and a half to two days a week in the field agency during a typical semester if you have a two-semester field sequence. The Council on Social Work Education requires a minimum of 400 clock-hours in the field, although it is not unusual for programs to require a few more hours than this.

How Are Students in Field Placement Supervised?

In most programs, students are placed in a public service agency under the day-to-day supervision of a field instructor who is a social worker employed by the agency. It is the responsibility of the field instructor to provide students with opportunities for contact with various client systems and to oversee students' performance with assigned tasks. Field instructors are considered members of the extended teaching staff of the school and may be granted faculty privileges such as the use of the university library facilities or discounts at the university bookstore.

Field instructors should be well aware of the social work program's philosophy, the content and sequence of courses, and the expected level of student performance. Often there are special training sessions for new field instructors—this ensures that assignments given to students are consistent with students' abilities and the program's expectations. In addition to the supervision students receive from field instructors, social work programs usually assign faculty members as advisers to students and as liaisons between the agency and the school.

Social work programs vary considerably from school to school (and sometimes even within a school) in the level of student monitoring that field liaisons do. Some faculty field liaisons will meet with their students weekly, but others may meet at the beginning, at the midpoint, and at the end of the term. Other faculty field liaisons may meet only for an evaluation at the end of the term. Some faculty will monitor students' progress by requiring written or oral assignments (e.g., case presentations, planned observations, or interviews); others do not. Even though your field instructor may be asked for a recommendation on the grade you earned in your practicum, the assignment of the grade is most often the responsibility of the faculty field liaison.

How Are Classroom Learning and Field Instruction Integrated?

The very nature of field instruction fosters integration with classroom learning—particularly when students meet regularly to discuss what they have been learning. Students often are amazed at how much knowledge they have acquired when taking turns to describe their interesting or problematic cases.

Social work programs have also employed a variety of approaches to nurture integration of theoretical content and field instruction. Some have developed close relationships with agencies and may provide consultation or occasional in-service training to the staff in host agencies. Field instructors may also serve on advisory boards to provide feedback on the social work program's field education component. Whenever the faculty and the staff of field agencies meet and discuss mutual concerns, opportunities arise to explore ways to integrate students' field experiences with classroom learning.

Efforts to achieve integration can also be more purposive, as when agency field instructors supervising students for the first time are required to attend seminars on field instruction. These sessions facilitate the integration of field and classroom experiences as field instructors are given access to syllabi, course outlines, bibliographies, curriculum statements, field manuals, newsletters, and other relevant documents.

Most social work programs place the major responsibility for the integration of classroom learning and field instruction on the faculty field liaison. As discussed earlier, the faculty field liaison may use methods such as field seminars, commenting on students' logs, or holding conferences with students to increase the integration of classroom and field experiences.

The student's role, too, should be recognized. Students can enrich their learning by sharing relevant information that they have come across, and by making a point to bring into the classroom their interesting field experiences, discussions, cases, and learning from their agencies. Equally valuable is the habit of reflecting on what is being learned in the field. Students should periodically ask themselves questions such as: what knowledge, skills, or values am I learning in field? How workable are the theories that I have been learning? How do situations encountered with real clients mesh with what I have learned in class? Because our families can influence our attitudes about life and how we view others (e.g., with punitive, condescending, or accepting attitudes), we also need to think about how our own life experiences contribute to our ability to recognize, appreciate, and affirm clients and their efforts, courage, and strengths.

The use of a professional log can be invaluable for recording your reflections about interventions, clients, and the agency, as well as what you might be learning about yourself. Perhaps you will identify areas where you need to acquire information or instruction. Your log can also include narratives of key events, problems, feelings, impressions, lists of things to do or learn, as well as reflections on your reading and questions you want to ask your field instructor. Such reflection, practiced from time to time, not only helps students integrate classroom content and field education, but also promotes students' growth as active, responsible, self-directed learners.

What Is the Purpose of Field Seminars?

As a part of the practicum requirements, many social work programs require students to participate in weekly seminars. A *seminar* is a small group of students engaged in a special study under the guidance of a professor. The basic assumption underpinning seminars is that each person in attendance has important information to share or contribute. By contrast, in lecture courses the assumption is that the professor has the most knowledge and will be the prime communicator of ideas.

Usually, field seminars are conducted by faculty field liaisons, although they may be directed by field instructors or even students themselves. Faculty field liaisons or seminar leaders make arrangements for the time and place of the meeting, and they determine the frequency of the seminars as well as the focus of each session. In addition, it is their responsibility to see that the discussions are relevant to students' current experiences in their practicum placements. Many see their seminar leadership role as helping students (1) to understand their cases in terms of applicable theories, and (2) to integrate discoveries in an area (e.g., practice) with content from another (e.g., policy or research implications).

Seminars may be highly structured, as when students are given specific reading assignments or are asked to make presentations. Or seminars may be loosely structured, as when students take turns relating significant experiences or problems that recently occurred in the field. In structured seminars, it is

likely that the faculty field liaison will choose the topics and carefully focus student discussion. Similarly, the faculty field liaison may give specific directions for seminar presentations. Here are a few suggestions if you are required to make a presentation:

1. Keep within the time limit (organize your thoughts and rehearse your presentation).
2. Begin with a brief introduction of what you intend to cover.
3. Limit your main points to three or four and support these with illustrations.
4. Summarize your main points at the end of your presentation.
5. Stimulate discussion by looking at each person as you speak.
6. Use visual aids to clarify ideas.
7. Anticipate questions, and to encourage discussion, ask several questions of your own.

Whether their seminars are structured or unstructured, most faculty field liaisons prefer that all students contribute to seminar discussions. Informal exchanges can help students feel comfortable with the way their interventions are proceeding. Learning that your peers have had similar experiences or even that they would have handled the problem the same way you did can be very reassuring. In the best seminars, students can feel free to raise questions with the faculty member or other students—to ask for resources or help with a special situation or problem.

To get the most out of an unstructured seminar, prepare ahead of time by reflecting on the past week's important events. Rank order these when time is limited, so that the most pressing matters can be discussed first. Try not to monopolize the group's time. In some instances, it may be necessary to continue the discussion with your faculty field liaison after the seminar or to make an appointment for this purpose.

In seminars, you are expected to be a good listener when others are speaking, to stay alert, and to interact with others in the group. A seminar works well only when everyone takes part of the responsibility to make it interesting by raising questions and sharing information that may not be common knowledge.

Do Students with Undergraduate Field Instruction Get Credit When They Work Toward a Master's Degree in Social Work?

Yes. Most Master of Social Work (MSW) programs allow applicants with Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degrees from schools accredited by the Council on Social Work Education to apply for *advanced standing* status. If given this status, students are usually granted a waiver allowing them to receive credit for undergraduate field experience. Depending upon the program, students with BSWs

from accredited programs may be allowed to waive one or two semesters of coursework.

The CSWE's Curriculum Policy Statement for Master's Degree Programs states that duplication and redundancy of content mastered at the baccalaureate level must be avoided in master's programs. BSW graduates entering MSW programs should not repeat professional foundation content mastered in the BSW program. "In order to verify mastery and to prevent unproductive repetition, master's programs must develop explicit policies and procedures relevant to admission, course waivers, substitutions, exemptions, or advanced placement" (Commission on Accreditation, CSSW, 1994, p. 138).

Although the basic qualification for advanced standing is graduation from an accredited undergraduate social work program, most programs also insist that applicants earn at least a "B" average in their social work courses. A written examination covering foundation course material may be required, as well as a personal interview.

Is It Possible for a Student to Have a Field Placement Where He or She Is Also Employed?

The answer is a qualified yes. Although this option is not routinely available to undergraduates, programs do occasionally allow students to be placed in the same agencies where they are employed. Because certain conditions must be met, not all employment situations qualify as field sites. Students are to be employed in agencies meeting all field instruction and other program standards and expectations. Other requirements often include: having responsibilities different from those customarily performed, having a MSW supervisor different from the regular supervisor, and receiving permission from the employing agency for release from paid duties during regular business hours in order to be a student.

The relevant CSWE guidelines read as follows:

If the student is also employed in the agency where the field practicum takes place, the availability of release time for course and field instruction should be ensured. Student assignments and field practicum supervision should differ from those associated with the student's employment. It should also be demonstrated that there is no diminution of the program's established requirements in class and field practicum and the field instruction is educationally focused rather than solely centered on agency services. (Commission on Accreditation, CSWE, 1994, p. 129)

The best rationale for requesting a practicum in the agency where one is employed is the availability of unique educational experiences—exposure to a clientele or intervention not available at any other agency. Some agencies also encourage their employees to "cross-train" so that they have a pool of better qualified and experienced staff on which to draw. These agencies may be willing to provide release time for student-employees to learn different skills within the

agency. The concern that most faculty field liaisons have with allowing students to have a practicum with an employer is that it may be difficult for the students to be viewed as "learners" by the student-employee's colleagues. Because of their knowledge of the agency and its programs, these students may be given so much responsibility that they are unable to read, study, or reflect on their new practice experiences. As a result, these students may be so busy (especially if not given release time) that they are unable to differentiate between hours spent as a regular employee and time spent as a student intern.

In our experience, large agencies (such as hospitals) provide the best models for situations where students could be both employees and students. For instance, Sue could be a hospital social worker assigned full time to the maternity unit. If a practicum within the psychiatric unit could be worked out, she would have different responsibilities and supervision. When working in the maternity unit, it would be clear that Sue was functioning as an employee, and when working in the psychiatric unit, Sue would be functioning in the student role.

Ideas for Enriching the Practicum Experience

1. Interview a student who has just completed a practicum and ask this person to describe the most valuable lesson that he or she learned in the practicum.
2. How long has the social work program been provided at your college or university? What local agencies were involved and supportive at its start? What were practicums like when the program first started, and how have they changed? Ask the social work librarian or reference librarian to help you find material to answer these questions.
3. Find the Yellow Pages of your telephone directory where social service agencies are listed. Can you identify public and private agencies? How many of the agencies have names that make it difficult to know the population or type of problem with which they work? How many of the agencies are you familiar with? How many are you encountering for the first time?
4. Take a moment to reflect on the type of cases or community problems that you will encounter during your practicum. Get on the Internet and see if you can find any useful resource material.
5. How many fields of service can you identify where social workers are typically employed? List as many as you can and then check this list against the areas of service identified in *Social Work Abstracts*, published by the National Association of Social Workers in Washington, D.C.
6. What are your particular strengths, abilities, and talents? Make a list of these and any skills or competencies you hope to develop during your social work practicum.

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