



# Heed the Call: A Simulated Model for Future Field Education Practice and Response to COVID-19

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## **Introduction**

Since the cautious move towards online social work education began in the early 2000s, we have seen the growth, change, and expansion of opportunities for individuals living in isolated rural areas, especially those working full-time, those serving or having served in our military, and those with caretaking obligations. Being at the forefront of creating and offering a fully asynchronous online Master of Social Work (MSW) program in 2009, the University of New England's School of Social Work initially witnessed wariness and suspicion around online social work education. Over a decade later there is now some form of online programming at nearly every school of social work. Most have come to accept and appreciate the online delivery method of social work courses, social work training, and even social work networking.

The Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the racial, socioeconomic, and geographic disparities in many aspects of higher education, particularly field education. Social work education needs to adapt and explore the delivery of next-generation online and virtual options. In March of 2020, social work students from

across the country were asked to withdraw from their internships as many federal, state, nonprofit, and private organizations closed due to COVID-19, creating uncertainty in field education. Social work has long prided itself on being a profession of holistic thinkers, helping communities and individuals by taking into account not just what is before us, but the environment and context in which it exists. It is now time for social work educators to respond by creating a learning environment that meets the evolving needs of our students through the use of simulation-based learning.

### **Historical Barriers to Field Education**

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). Social work's competency-based education centers its standards through a holistic lens that is "informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that include practice situations" (CSWE, 2015, p. 6). Although the importance of field education and the demonstration of competency proficiency for students during their field experiences is clear, many obstacles and barriers to achieving a quality field experience exist. These challenges include limited use of best practices in supervision/field instruction, inadequate resources within agencies, field instructor burden of complex and high number of clients being served, limited time for student supervision, limited opportunities for students to engage in direct practice, and limited to no opportunity for students to have their practice observed while receiving real-time feedback (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Similar sentiments have been reiterated to the authors as some students struggle to feel prepared for careers after graduation.

If the value and importance of field education are well known, but challenges in achieving quality field experiences, outside of a pandemic, are significant, the onus is on schools of social work to provide a complement to traditional field education. During this unprecedented time, many agencies are closed or under more stress as they react to supporting communities in urgent and new ways. Additionally, during a time of social movement, social work programs, grounded in the core values of social justice and service (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), could benefit from critically examining the structure and inequities of field education. Does the structure of field education provide equity to students engaged in practical learning opportunities? Does it create unnecessary barriers for students? Schools of social work need to heed the call and provide students with an equitable opportunity to develop practice skills and demonstrate the nine core competencies set forth by CSWE (2015). One way to do this is by enhancing field education through the use of simulation.

### **Why Utilize Simulation in Field Education?**

Other health care professions, including medicine and nursing, have been using

simulation-based education for many years, and through research and literature have established its value by developing best practices for effective teaching and learning in Simulation-Based Learning (SBL) (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017). The field of social work has begun to develop its own body of research and literature establishing best practices for SBL, in line with adult learning and experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). SBL includes a holistic model of competence that includes *procedural*, the ability to perform and demonstrate the use of procedures throughout the helping process, and *metacompetence*, the ability to be introspective about one's cognitive and affective states such as self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-awareness (Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019).

Using experiential learning theories and models, social work educators can develop simulation experiences that meet the CSWE (2015) competencies, while simultaneously addressing barriers often present in field education. Simulations designed with clear competency-based skills provide well-rounded field experiences and enhance student readiness for future practice (Lee et al., 2020). SBL also can provide repetitive practice, observation, and feedback, as well as help students develop greater self-awareness, self-regulation, and assessment of practice skills (Lee et al., 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CSWE (2020) regulations, as they pertain to field education delivery, have expanded to allow programs increased discretion in creating plans for students to complete field hours, in accordance with core competencies. Additionally, allowances for simulation experience within the field seminar are being considered as practice alternatives (CSWE, 2020). With the emerging establishment of best practices in effective teaching and learning methods using SBL in social work education, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that schools of social work develop simulated field experiences. Affording students the opportunity to practice, demonstrate, and master skills grounded in the CSWE (2015) competencies could enhance learning opportunities and workforce readiness. As social workers are the largest service providers in North America (Lee et al., 2020), it is imperative that social work educators provide students with high-quality training, regardless of their ability to enter or re-enter field placements due to COVID-19 or other presenting issues in the future. At the same time, the use of SBL in field education could reduce barriers that have prevented students from completing field practicum experiences.

### **The Field Education Simulation Model (SOS)**

The Simulation and On-Site (SOS) model of SBL for field education complements face-to-face direct practice experience by offering simulated practice prior to field entry.

SBL experiences such as these are meant to enhance competency in both generalist- and specialized-year practice (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Not all students enter social work programs with previous experience. The SOS model addresses this and is based on the belief that providing an equitable foundation of practice skills, grounded in both generalist social work practice and clinically integrated practice, supports students' professional development, competency mastery, and preparation for the field. By allowing students with limited practice experience the chance to gain critical skills in a supportive learning environment, it provides each student the opportunity to maximize professional growth. Additionally, many students experience increased stress due to competing demands such as the roles of parent, partner, employee, advocate, and caretaker, among others (Moore et al., 2011; Nicklin et al., 2018). The SOS model acknowledges these competing demands and offers students an alternative to traditional field practicums.

The development of the SOS model followed a *backwards design* (Fink, 2013) where faculty identified what skills were necessary for competent, ethical, and successful social workers in the field. Simulation opportunities grounded in these skills were paramount to the experience. Next, the faculty believed providing a simulated field experience that seamlessly integrated CSWE (2015) competencies was equally critical to such a learning process. This created an opportunity for the simulation to include direct practice skills often utilized in employment settings that demonstrate competency in social work practice as outlined by CSWE (2015).

The SOS model requires no paid actors, no simulation labs, no costly programs that must be purchased, and is a model that can be created and delivered by the school's academic and field faculty. Additionally, this model reinforces content and materials from previous course work. The SOS model, for both the generalist and specialized years, spends one semester guiding students through a simulated client experience from intake to termination. The integration of research, policy, advocacy, ethics, and social justice is also infused through the SOS model. Simulated sessions, utilizing an opening case study and subsequent role plays, allow students to take the lead as the social worker to practice skills. The generalist-year SOS model focuses on ethical engagement with clients, assessment, service planning, interprofessional coordination, advocacy, and research/resource development within students' own communities. The specialized-year SOS model reinforces skills in relationship building, biopsychosocial assessments, treatment planning, assessment tools, treatment plan reviews, use of clinical approaches, resource development, and termination. Students are also tasked with practicing modalities such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Solution Focused Brief Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Supplemental videos, readings, and material are provided to assist students throughout the simulation.

The SOS model is meant to enhance student learning opportunities, provide students with an excellent foundation of skills for real-world practice, and allow students to choose their own path of education that best serves their needs and overall professional growth. Within this model there is room for variation, as students with extensive direct generalist practice skills might opt to engage in a fully on-site practice experience rather than participate in the SOS model. This model also allows students who have limited practice experience, competing demands, or other barriers to being in agency placements for significant hours each week to choose the asynchronous SOS field model for a portion of their placement.

## Conclusion

Although this model was built out of a response to the current COVID-19 pandemic which prevented students from being able to engage in direct practice, it has evolved into an opportunity for field educators to examine the way in which we support students in developing long-lasting foundational social work skills. This proposed change to field education supports students of diverse backgrounds and serves to mitigate the inequities inherent in traditional models of social work field education, all while strengthening practice competencies. The SOS model highlights field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education by reinforcing knowledge taught in academic classes and allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate mastery. The time is now for social work education to heed the call that supports growth and diversity within our profession, preparing the next generation of social workers for service to our communities.

*It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act. – The Dalai Lama*

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