



Field Instructor Training: Implications of Low Completion Rates

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Introduction

In 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) described field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. Field work provides the opportunity for students to integrate social work theory into practice, and is the optimal opportunity for problem-based learning. Because the majority of an MSW (Master's in Social Work) student's time is spent in field, it reinforces the importance CSWE (2008) places on a student's ability to demonstrate skills learned in order to meet the competencies of social work education. Due to this emphasis on real-world learning in social work education, the knowledge and skills of the student's internship supervisor, or field instructor (FI), are also very important. Given the potential impact of the role of the FI, it is required that students be supervised by a master's level social work professional who is not only a good social worker and well qualified, but ideally also familiar with best practices for adult learning, instruction, and supervision. A critical component of a social work program's quality assurance for the FI role (outside of requiring a social work degree) is providing a required FI training. Unfortunately, this vital training often has low completion rates, leaving social work programs struggling to incentivize field instructors to complete the training. Possible reasons for low completion rates include disinterest in content covered, FI's assumption that they can perform the role without training, limited time availability, and/or lack of agency administrative support. This article will provide an overview of FI training, discuss the importance of FI training, and examine ways social work programs could increase completion rates. The authors end with a discussion and call to action for social work programs to consider the student impact and importance of encouraging their FIs to participate and complete training, ideally prior to working with their MSW students.

Field Instruction Overview

Historically, students in social work programs were exposed to field instruction that focused on the mentorship or apprentice model of field instruction. Essentially, FIs were training students to become competent employees of their agency (Wayne et al., 2010). For example, students who were placed at the Department of Children and Family Services were training students to become child protective workers, hospitals were training students to become medical social workers, primary schools were training students to be school social workers, and so on. Over time, field instruction moved away from the employee development model and evolved to a comprehensive learning environment in which students were not only learning about their place of internship but also our professional values/ethics, interventions, and theories, which prepared students to work as an MSW in a variety of professional settings. This transition, although an opportunity for a more enriching student learning experience, placed greater pressure and importance on a FI's general social work knowledge base, in addition to their ability to instruct and supervise an intern.

For MSW programs, the opportunity is to create a relevant training to support FIs who are preparing the next generation of social work professionals. Content typically includes MSW program-specific field-related assignments or documents, supervision strategies, tips for working with adult learners, university policies, CSWE skill-based competencies, the NASW Code of Ethics, the NASW Technology Standards, and recommendations for content to cover during their student's orientation, such as safety protocols, organizational documentation, and emergency protocol. The aforementioned topics are included in the authors' FI training and are standard topics in many programs' trainings; however, there are no specific entities to regulate content, design nationwide uniformity, track completion rates, or explore consequences of FIs not completing their training.

Field Education Entities

The social work profession does have organizations that promote the importance of quality field instruction, offer programming to support field educators or instructors, and host general field initiatives to support the signature pedagogy of social work, field education. For example, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires all schools of social work to offer an initial FI training program; however, the content and delivery of these trainings is left to the discretion of each social work program. CSWE also has a Council on Field Education, which focuses on information dissemination and training of field educators, along with practice and policy integration. The CSWE Learning Academy facilitates training for new field directors; however, it is not intended for field instructors. Another entity is the North American Network of Field Educators and Directors (NANFED), which operates within CSWE

and focuses specifically on providing resources, networking opportunities, and mentoring for field educators (NANFED). NANFED is made up of regional consortia across the United States and is represented by schools of social work that designate representatives, typically field directors or educators. For example, the New England Consortium of Graduate Social Work Field Education Directors (NECON) contains 17 graduate schools of social work in New England, and focuses on advocacy, program development, and design in their region (NECON). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) takes a more global stance for the profession regarding supervision strategies. For example, section 3.02 of the *Code of Ethics* (Education and Training) offers guidance to social workers on the ethics of interfacing with electronic media (NASW *Code of Ethics*).

Field Instructor Completion Impact

With schools left to create their unique FI trainings, FIs are at the mercy of whatever the school creates for their training. With so many agency-based expectations, why would a social worker, who typically has limited availability to take on more duties, agree to supervising an intern which involves an additional training? Perhaps the FI sees value in giving back to the social work profession, or wants to provide a type of experience not had in their own internship. Jivanjee et al., (2016) identified in their study that FIs who take on an intern have an openness to life-long learning and a motivation to maintain a connection to a University. Many university partners provide library access or continuing education units which are great examples of that lifelong learning. There is also a reciprocal relationship to consider, as social work students can provide supplemental services to the agency's clients, essentially filling an employee gap within the agency and alleviating some of the workload burden. Conversely, students, especially at the initial stages of the field practicum, require significant guidance with onboarding and weekly supervision, and can impact an FI's already limited time. It is typically during or prior to these initial stages of placement that FIs are also asked to attend a program's FI training.

The FI role is complex, but ultimately the primary role is one of educator. FIs are essentially "in the field" educators as they assist the student with integration of social work theory from the classroom into direct practice in the agency. Although a FI might be a strong clinician, and familiar with social work values and theory, they may not be well versed in learning theory or best supervision practices. FIs may assume that they will not benefit from the training because they already are trained in social work and may not understand the implications of not completing the FI training. The table below explores some of the potential implications for students, field instructors, and the social work profession when FIs do not complete a FI training.

Field Instructor Not Completing FI Training	
Potential Implication for MSW Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive poor supervision (i.e. no feedback loop) • Feel disconnected from FI and their work with clients/ community • Experience undue stress, confusion; unclear roles • Feel unsupported
Potential Implication for FI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unaware of MSW program-specific requirements, current trends in field education, and adult learner theory • Lack of oversight and agency protocol adherence • Not meeting the students' needs in terms of learning style
Potential Implication for Social Work Profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging professionals unaware of effective field instruction and supervision models • Devaluing of the importance of the FI role • Not providing proper supervision for CSWE standards • Shortage of social workers serving in FI roles

With recognition of the importance of FI training, the authors propose the following options to improve two factors that may influence attendance: time constraints and content concerns.

Time Constraints

Field Instructor training has historically been held in person. However, considering commuting time and FI's being located across the country for national programs, virtual training may be a viable option. Dedman and Palmer (2011) indicated that online training could be a viable option, and has been a way to bridge schools being cost effective and FIs not having to converge in one physical space. Also, given the increase in online programs, FIs and agencies have become more familiar with the use of technology in the last ten years. The authors' program has embraced the online training method and hosts a hybrid FI training, with part of the training delivered through asynchronous (online) modules and the other components delivered live via Zoom, a video conferencing platform. In order to successfully complete the FI training, participants must attend two of the three live sessions and complete all nine online modules consisting of topics mentioned earlier. In order to accommodate various schedules, two series of trainings with two different start dates are held each fall, spring, and summer semester.

Content Concerns

Since there is not uniform content mandated for FI trainings, many programs

typically include orientation on school-specific requirements/ documents, onboarding procedures, and learning theory. For a FI challenged by time constraints, the interest in procedure/policy-based topics may be minimal. From a programming perspective, including content that FIs can view as adding to their own professional development may incentivize better attendance. As a result, some universities create more of a programmatic approach to maintaining a connection to their FIs (outside of the intern) with professional development opportunities, trainings, and CEUs (Zuckerman, et al., 2017). In 2015, the authors, along with field colleague Lisa Wobbe-Veit, created the FI Tune-Up, a monthly professional development meeting for FIs outside of the FI training to foster more connection and collaboration. This is a voluntary meeting, and attendance ranges from 12 to 65 FIs depending on the time of year and the topic. Analysis of attendance numbers revealed that trauma related and skill-building topics were of most interest to FIs. As a result, topics such as Trauma Sensitive Supervision, Teaching Students About Gender Pronouns, and Working with Challenging Students were added to the content of the FI training. Initial evaluations from the FI training indicated a positive response to these additional topics.

Although many programs over the years, including at the authors' university, have incentivized FI training with the offer of Continuing Education Credits (CEUs), it is unknown if this has significantly increased attendance or completion rates. The authors would propose that although CEUs do motivate some FIs, addressing time limitations and interest are of paramount importance as well to improving completion. As long as there continue to be more MSW students, improving FI training completion is an important topic that needs to be addressed by social work educators. Should CSWE require more uniformity and accountability for FI training? Or will this only serve to increase pressure on social work programs that are already attempting to encourage FI participation? Will increased accountability on FI training completion deter busy social workers from serving as FIs?

Discussion

Our FIs are critical and instrumental in shaping future social workers in their understanding of their work with clients, their role in the community, and their fit into the profession. The FI role has historically been one of volunteer service, leaving social work programs little recourse when FIs do not complete the training. So, rather than continuing to take the same training approach, it would be beneficial to problem-solve this issue as social workers do, from a strengths-based approach. If time constraints are really hindering FI completion rates, are there ways we can support organizations with FIs providing supervision? If content is challenging to create and/or not mandated, can there be a universal FI training adopted by all social work schools created by one of our professional organizations: NASW, CSWE, or NANFED? As Dill (2017) notes, understanding FI training needs is an underresearched topic. Perhaps it is time to ask

FIs what content they would like to see in the FI training? It is the authors' hope that this topic will continue to be explored as a way to support our unique partnership between MSW program, student, and agency partners.

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