



Addressing Self-Care for Students and Field Educators with Mindfulness: A Collaborative Approach to Field Placement

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Introduction

Field education faces unique and daunting challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partner organizations have been forced to upend their service-delivery models, students are facing new levels of stress and isolation, and field faculty have been forced to rethink the nature and form of field education. Through field education, students should develop their professional identity, learn how to work as part of a team, and learn how to interact and communicate with clients and stakeholders. With social distancing and the challenges associated with moving traditional in-person social work to remote models, field faculty must develop new and innovative models that allow students to gain those skills. Additionally, the pandemic has dramatically altered the context in which students and agencies operate. Students and agencies are facing higher levels of stress and insecurity; these factors must be taken into consideration, and models of field education should adapt to better suit the new context.

Challenges to Traditional Approaches to Field Education

In recent years, scholars have pointed out the growing challenges associated with the traditional agency-based field placement model, where a student completes a full field placement at a social work organization (Bogo, 2015). The pandemic has

highlighted existing dilemmas within field education, particularly the system's reliance on practicing social workers who are often facing increasing demands due in part to funding cuts and programmatic changes that lead to higher caseloads (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). In this model, universities rely on the voluntary commitment of field educators to provide vital learning experiences and supervision to students. Societal changes, such as welfare funding cuts, have made this model more vulnerable. As a result, social work organizations are often forced to restructure and demand their social workers carry higher caseloads, leaving less time and emphasis on providing voluntary field supervision (George et al., 2013). Further, while supervision is mandatory for field students, it is not necessarily a standard practice or priority at field agencies (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). These challenges all point to a growing tension in the existing model of agency-based field placements. In response to these challenges, new models of field education should be proposed that require less time on the part of field educators and community agencies and an increase of tangible benefits to the agency through the provision of field education. Field faculty must also adopt new approaches to field education that rely less heavily on the time and energy of agency field educators, while also providing more tangible benefits for their service.

Student Mental Health

Students entering colleges are experiencing higher levels of mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Auerbach et al., 2018). A plethora of alarming statistics back up this claim. The World Health Organization found that 35% of students reported having a mental health disorder, with Major Depressive Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder as the top two mental health disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018). In a survey of college students with identified mental health concerns, the National Alliance of Mental Illness found that 73% reported experiencing a mental health crisis while in college (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012). Reasons included extreme feelings of anxiety and depression, feeling overwhelmed or isolated, and stress about the course load. In the United States, every year, approximately 1,000 college students commit suicide and nearly 24,000 make an attempt, making it the leading cause of death among the demographic group (Fernández Rodríguez, M. D., & Huertas, I. B., 2013).

The reasons for this phenomenon vary. For one, the age of onset for mood, anxiety, psychotic, and substance-use disorders is typically in adolescence and early adulthood (de Girolamo et al., 2012). This period of development is also associated with changes in self-identity, including new and changing social structures, supports and roles, increased autonomy, and increased instability (Auerbach et al., 2018). Research indicates that social work students, in particular, are experiencing high levels of anxiety and other mental health issues (Baird, 2016). Gelman & Lloyd (2008) found that social work students, especially younger ones, seem particularly vulnerable to

pre-field placement anxiety, and that the majority of students do not engage in self-care practices. A positive, supportive, and active relationship with field educators was shown as an anxiety-mitigating factor (Baird, 2016).

Innovative Approach: Koru Mindfulness Program Field Education Collaboration

Starting in fall 2019, the University at Buffalo Health Promotion Office and School of Social Work Field Office established a mindfulness collaboration. Through this collaboration, MSW students were encouraged to attend Koru Mindfulness four-session classes and count the time as field hours with field educator approval. Students committed to the application of the concepts they learned with the clients and/or staff at their field placement sites. This offered MSW students the unique opportunity:

1. To learn and practice mindfulness and meditation for their self-care,
2. To reconceptualize field education as an integration of different experiences in different settings, rather than focusing solely on experience in one particular agency or environment,
3. To apply mindfulness and meditation skills to their interventions with clients at their field placement sites, and/or,
4. To apply mindfulness and meditation skills to train field educators and other staff at their field placement sites.

Social work students were supplementing traditional agency-based field hours by participating in the program and then bringing back the skills and concepts learned in the program. Students did this in a variety of ways, including conducting a training for their field educator or agency or infusing the mindfulness concepts into interventions and curricula at the site.

Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). People often feel stressed because they are worried about the future or ruminating on problems from the past. If they can take a few minutes each day to step out of their “thinking minds” and “just be” in the present moment, they may feel some relief. Meditation is the practice of intentionally focusing attention on a target to increase awareness of the present moment. It is a way to “build your mindfulness muscle,” (Rogers, 2016) so that mindfulness and its benefits can be accessed more easily.

The Koru Mindfulness Program was designed by the Center for Koru Mindfulness to support emerging adults. Emerging adulthood, defined as ages 18–25 years old (Arnett, 2000), is a time filled with much growth, change, excitement, and uncertainty. Mindfulness strategies allow students to access present moment experiences to assist them in managing their emotions better during tumultuous times. The University at Buffalo’s Health Promotion Office provides free four-session Koru introduction to mindfulness classes for undergraduate and graduate students. The courses assist

students in developing a formal meditation practice, as well as engage in informal, present-moment experiences in everyday life. The skills that are taught and discussed in the Koru Program include belly breathing, dynamic breathing, body scan, walking meditation, guided visualizations, eating meditation, and more. Through this program, students commit to practicing meditation 10 minutes a day and also learn, practice, and discuss 2–3 meditation activities each week with their peers. The Koru Mindfulness app was purchased for the students to use during the class and after the class concluded. The students had the option of purchasing *The Mindful Twenty-Something* book (Rogers, 2016), which complements the Koru Mindfulness curriculum.

Mindfulness and meditation practices are evidence-based methods of self-care. To aspire to a thriving career in a helping profession like social work, one is required to have an ongoing commitment to self-care. In graduate school, social work students are advised to create self-care plans that are adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of their lives and practice them to maintain balance. The perceived benefits of practicing meditation for college students include reduced stress, a more focused mind, and increased self-reflection (Gryffin et al., 2014). A study (Zollars et al., 2019) concluded that mindfulness meditation improved students' overall mental health and lowered their perceived stress. A narrative article reviewing 57 articles (Bamber & Schneider, 2015) determined that mindfulness-based interventions are effective in reducing college student stress and anxiety. Meditation training also improves mood and the regulation of intense emotions (Kral et al., 2018).

Implications for Students

This Social Work Field Office collaboration was conducted during the fall 2019, spring 2020, and summer 2020 semesters. Two seated classes were offered in fall, two seated classes and two online classes were offered in spring, and one online class was offered in summer. These classes were not intended to be taught online, but the Office of Health Promotion quickly transitioned the classes when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. During the coronavirus quarantine, students faced an unprecedented disruption to the typical field experience, including a wholesale shift to remote work environments. This caused significant decreases in working hours, sudden separation from colleagues, and uncertainty about the academic landscape ahead. Attending mindfulness classes empowered students to fulfill field hours while gaining experience in coping strategies during an uncertain time.

In debriefing sessions, students shared that mindfulness training had positive impacts overall, improving their ability to manage stress, practice self-compassion, and live in the present moment. The structure of the program facilitated consistent practice and enabled the quick apprehension of new skills. The group format also promoted cohort building; students were prompted to share and discuss their utilization of the exercises

with students they may not have had a chance to interact with otherwise. Further, this helped students conceptualize field education not as an internship requiring direct service to an organization, but rather as broad skill development and integration opportunity.

The skills gleaned from the experience have direct applications in the professional environment through interventions with clients and the formulation of self-care plans. The benefits of mindfulness for professional social workers in the field is just beginning to be defined. A study of social workers who participated in a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program found that participants reported a more positive outlook, better stress management, and renewed energy compared to their peers (Crowder & Sears, 2017). By engaging social work students in mindfulness, field educators introduce students to stress management tools that alleviate immediate distress and provide a foundation for future practice as working professionals.

Implications for Field Agencies

Field educators widely described the program positively through field department feedback. In this model, a field educator is not responsible for coordinating or overseeing all of the student's field hours; the Koru Mindfulness Program served as a supplement that freed time for field educators. Further, by mandating students to implement mindfulness material and skills at their field sites, field educators and clients often saw a tangible benefit. The skills the students learned helped expand self-care and mindfulness practices and interventions for field educators. These are vital skills for social workers, especially during a time of pandemic when levels of stress and trauma increase. Through this model, the student and the University were able to add value to the agency and the field educator.

Implications for Field Faculty

It has been clear that relying on volunteer field educators to oversee and manage the vast majority of students' field experience and learning is not sustainable – field agencies have limited resources and time. Further, we have yet to see the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; it is reasonable to assume that the economic fallout from the pandemic will exacerbate issues at field sites, which could cause sites to decline MSW field placements in the future. Field faculty must develop new models of field education that rely less heavily on agencies and add more value to them.

The partnership between the Health Promotion Office and area agencies highlights an example of a model of field education that may be more sustainable. In this model, partnerships are established with other entities that allow students to learn and develop skills outside of their field sites. By requiring the student to integrate the

newly acquired knowledge and skills at their field placement, this model attempts to provide a different sort of value to field educators. Students learn practical skills that can translate to their personal or professional lives. Social workers must develop a wide range of interventions at their disposal, and this model serves as an example of an innovative approach to skill development through field education.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the campus Office of Health Promotion and the School of Social Work represents a reconceptualization of the traditional agency-bound field placement. In this model, students were encouraged to invest time in new self-care strategies and think creatively about how to apply the strategies in field settings. This partnership also provided respite for field educators, since they did not need to provide all of the required field hours to their students onsite. This collaboration became even more valuable during the semesters influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the four-session class transitioned from an in-person program to an online course. Due to the pandemic, many students were not able to participate at traditional field sites given the new safety precautions, and field educators were feeling the strain of adapting their workday to the effects of COVID-19 for their clients and agencies. Furthermore, the entire country was coping with the new realities of life in a pandemic, including quarantining, homeschooling of children, unemployment, social isolation, and cancellations of many self-care outlets. This made the need for quickly applicable self-care strategies paramount.

Students who participated in the Koru Mindfulness classes said they appreciated learning different meditation techniques in class each week and then practicing them daily on their own to determine which skills worked best for them. They shared how the skills they learned increased their ability to reduce stress, practice self-compassion, and be in the present moment, especially during the high stress that they were experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The group format of the class also served as a source of social connection and cohort building during a time of isolation and anxiety surrounding the abrupt transition to online learning when the rates of coronavirus began to skyrocket.

Through this partnership, the University at Buffalo's field office has begun to develop a more sustainable model of field education, which reduces some of the burden placed on field educators and provides opportunities for self-care and stress relief for themselves and their clients. Field educators expressed positive feedback regarding this collaboration, both for the training it offered to MSW students and for the mindfulness content the students added to their agencies. Additionally, the mindfulness practices infused into agency curricula will have lasting impacts for the agency and the clients they serve. In the coming year, we hope to analyze the

partnership further to determine more clearly the effects on students, field educators, and agencies. Also, we intend to seek out other connections that can be used to supplement and enhance traditional agency-based field placements.

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