



# COVID-19: An Existential Crisis for Social Work Field Education

*Author(s)*

Stacey De Fries, MSW  
University of Washington

Julie Kates, MSW  
Portland State University

Jennifer Brower, MSW  
University of Washington

Rachel Wrenn, PhD  
University of Washington

## **Introduction**

COVID-19 shifted social work field education into an existential crisis when field placements were required to fully transition to a virtual service delivery model in early March 2020. This launched students, agencies, and field education programs into uncharted territory. The timing of a return to in-person, agency-based training remained unknown during the peak of the pandemic, and continues to be unpredictable. With no preparation for a catastrophe of this extent and duration, social work field education curricula and infrastructure required immediate redesign, using unprecedented practices, such as agency-supported, fully remote practice, and school of social work-supported alternative trainings and learning activities. In this article, the authors describe the strategies employed and lessons learned by two urban social work field education programs in the Pacific Northwest. Both programs returned to historic social work values, informed by social justice, through deepening engagement with community partners, students, and school of social work-based research centers to create innovative remote field placements designed to respond to community and student needs.

The successful response of schools of social work to the pandemic has relied on the ability of field education programs to work in partnership with community agencies to imagine and operationalize new models of teaching and learning. With field education at the heart of social work education (NANFED, n.d.), programs across the country responded quickly and creatively to support student learning, health, and safety, while endeavouring also to support the increased needs of clients served by community agencies. Although person-to-person work with community agencies was disrupted, field education programs pivoted to the new norm of remote learning and action. Field educators were faced with addressing the current crisis of supporting students to complete their academic year and field training remotely while simultaneously envisioning how to chart a potential path forward to ensure ongoing training and mentorship for the entirety of the following academic year.

Perhaps the most significant shift in thinking about the future of field education during the pandemic was the attempt to create as many remote practica as possible that would allow students to be engaged with an agency and a field instructor in real time, and so provide an integral part of the community public health response, while also attending to the health and safety of students and their families. Many students, field faculty, and field instructors were overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities of teaching their home-bound school-age children, managing the threats to their own financial and housing stability, caring for elderly or health-impaired family members, and managing their own health vulnerabilities. Students unable to continue with remote practice through their placements shifted to online social work trainings and other learning activities, with field instruction and supervision provided by their field faculty in the school of social work.

### **The Historical Role of Field Education During Pandemics**

There is a significant gap in the literature about how social work field education programs have responded to sustained and unpredictable pandemics. Most literature documents a broader response by the social work field, but little is specifically reported by or about social work field education. Hamler et al. (2020) describe social work's importance in responding to pandemics and how integral social work's role has been in creating societal balance. Park & Joo Lee (2016) report that social work can play an integral role in public health crises, and outlined four critical roles that social work could have played in the MERS crisis in Korea. These four roles included 1) taking leadership in providing information and education, 2) assisting with social distress, 3) connecting those infected to necessary treatment, and 4) developing appropriate trainings (Park & Joo Lee, 2016). Similarly, Walter-McCabe (2020) suggests that all "social workers can shine a light on the structural systems which perpetuate inequities and also work hard to improve public health during pandemics." Further, Drolet et al. (2013) report that post-secondary institutions and field agencies will continue to

play a role in pandemic planning and response by providing insight into necessary emergency responses relevant to their unique contexts.

Since the role of social work field education in response to a pandemic is missing from the literature, this article hopes to contribute to the growing need in higher education to develop plans and actions for social work educational programs to more proactively respond to extended global pandemics and climate-related crises through the enactment of innovative and responsive models of educating and training social work students.

### **Pandemic Response**

The COVID-19 crisis created a call for radical change within social work field education. For years there have been appeals for change, mostly focused on moving away from being driven by CSWE accreditation standards (Wayne et al., 2006). COVID-19 catalyzed social work educators to innovate with new curricula and educational infrastructure to support student learning and, most importantly, their role as social justice workers in community-responsive practice. Field educators, in collaboration with community partners, redirected practicum activities to enable students to continue to develop the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes necessary to respond effectively in extended crises. Field education curricula, emphasizing social justice practice, centered on the disproportionate toll on communities of color, impoverished communities, and other marginalized populations. This is the moment for social work students truly to see the depth of structural racism, particularly anti-Black racism in the United States, and the ways in which social work's mission and values can help shape programs and interventions that mitigate and aim to eliminate these inequities. The pandemic has further illuminated the tenacious hold and horrific effects of racism and implicit bias on health and safety.

As public health information crystallized throughout the spring of 2020, a new reality set in, leading field education programs to face the daunting prospect of an entire upcoming academic year requiring virtually based field education. Our new collective reality resulted in the creation of placement experiences for students in which they would be engaged in social work practice without the immediate availability of consultation and supervision from a field instructor. Implications for educational integrity, student safety, client safety, and supportive training for ethical practice required field faculty, field instructors, and students to develop innovative and sustainable methods of engagement with one another.

Simultaneously, strengthened by virtual meetings, regional collaboration increased among field education programs across the Pacific Northwest, sharing ideas,

policies, and operational procedures. This existing regional collaboration framework provided a foundation for open and rapid information sharing and invaluable mutual support. Statewide collaboration among field directors has facilitated a coordinated and collaborative approach. Additionally, field directors developed intentional partnerships with public health and human services leadership to respond to the mounting needs of marginalized individuals, families, and communities.

### Lessons Learned

The experience of COVID-19 offers valuable lessons that may affect new operational and engagement activities with communities and students. Major lessons learned include 1) the usefulness and effectiveness of virtual programming and operations, 2) the need for curricular and structural flexibility within our field placement models, and 3) the value and strength of intensive collaboration with regional and state stakeholders in response to crises. Table 1 provides a detailed illustration of these lessons as well as specific strategies employed by the two field education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Lesson	Strategies
Usefulness and effectiveness of virtual programming and operations	Increased contact and increased frequency of meetings with community partners and field instructors
	Virtual programming employed for remote onboarding, supervision, training, and oversight
	Virtual listening sessions employed to engage with agency field instructors to build community and learn how field instructors were managing the COVID 19 crisis
	Virtual trainings held for field instructors to learn about topics in remote supervision and learning in the virtual practicum environment
	Students surveyed about access to technology to learn about barriers to virtual learning in field and classroom
	Field directors reached out to University partners to create new learning opportunities on campus which can be remote (since the University shifted to all-remote campuses)

<p>Need for curricular and structural flexibility within our field placement models</p>	<p>New curricular models: innovative models of teaching and learning developed for students and field instructors</p>
	<p>Expanded breadth of learning activities: students engaged in broader work of agency, interacting with more constituents</p>
	<p>Flexibility expanded for supervisory methods and student placement schedules</p>
	<p>Employment-based internship opportunities piloted that allow for a job to count as an internship</p>
	<p>Community partners and students informed that students should expect to do whatever is needed to respond to service and program needs</p>
	<p>Alternative learning activities created for students with faculty stepping in as the student's field instructor</p>
	<p>Expertise of faculty harnessed for students to join innovative actions aimed at addressing urgent needs and social injustice</p>
<p>Value and strength of intensive collaboration with regional and state stakeholders, in response to crises</p>	<p>Statewide collaboration: regional partners engaged to develop responsive, coordinated opportunities for marginalized communities</p>
	<p>Regional collaboration enhanced via virtual meetings of the regional field consortium member schools</p>
	<p>Sector-based roundtable meetings of field instructors held to hear about their experiences and learn what they need from the University to feel supported and able to continue training students (One university is approaching this as a field of practice-based meeting, i.e., schools, healthcare, mental health)</p>
	<p>State Health Authority exploring partnership to support need for contact tracers; in one state, the Department of Human Services coordinating statewide efforts with community-based organizations to provide direct services to most marginalized communities impacted by COVID</p>
	<p>In one University meeting with local/state Consortia members to plan training events for the year collaboratively, developing a shared sample learning plan to include possible remote learning activities that require engagement with the agency vs. self-directed learning on part of student</p>

## Discussion

The adaptations necessary to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic have likely created permanent change in the core operations and infrastructure of social work field education. Though a daunting and challenging experience, field educators encountered unexpected lessons in innovation, flexibility, and collaboration that should be thoughtfully incorporated to meet the needs of our students and communities. The traditional models of field education curriculum design will be well served by our new understanding of the critical responsibility of social work programs to be prepared to respond to unprecedented crises and sustain student learning through collaboration with community partners and regional colleagues.

Future research should focus on field education's effectiveness in meeting student and community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as strategies for increased resiliency and innovation in emergency response. Anticipated climate crises, with concomitant implications for drastic environmental, economic, and health consequences, are a stark reality for schools of social work. This reality requires schools to plan for a range of crises and be prepared to respond to emergent student and agency needs. Prior to COVID-19, colleges and universities developed limited emergency response plans for events such as earthquakes and tornadoes, but not pandemics or other forms of extremely restrictive and sustained catastrophes.

Long-held assumptions underpinning educational service delivery models and curricula have been challenged and, indeed, upended by the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously held beliefs about indispensable practices have been tested and determined to be far more expendable than ever imagined. Through this crisis, we have learned that a far wider range of methods in curriculum development and delivery are possible. Ideas that would have seemed unthinkable have been tried by necessity, and we have seen that there are many ways to educate students, support community agencies, and adapt to extended interruptions of traditional education.

Given the mission of schools of social work to serve people who are marginalized, impoverished, oppressed, and isolated, our response to these crises is absolutely central to who we are and what we claim as our purpose. In times of unimaginable crisis, schools of social work must remain acutely aware of their central responsibility to prepare social workers, who are more urgently needed than ever. Therefore, it is critical that we plan innovative methods for continuing our educational programs, no matter what forces are against us.

## References

- Drolet, J., Pierce, J., Giasson, F., & Kang, L. (2013). Influenza “A” H1N1 pandemic planning and response: The role of Canadian social work field directors and coordinators. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 30(1), 49–63.
- Hamler, T., English, S., Beltran, S., & Miller, V. (2020). A reflection of and charge to gerontological social work: Past pandemics and the current COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 63(6-7), 577–579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2020.1766629>
- Park, H., & Joo Lee, B. (2016). The role of social work for foreign residents in an epidemic: The MERS crisis in the Republic of Korea. *Social Work in Public Health*, 31(7), 656–664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2016.1160352>
- North American Network of Field Educators and Directors (n.d.). <https://nanfed.org/>.
- Walter-McCabe, H. (2020). Coronavirus pandemic calls for an immediate social work response. *Social Work in Public Health*, 35(3), 69–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2020.1751533>
- Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2006). Field notes: The need for radical change in field education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42(1), 161–169.