



BSW Students in Field: Factors Contributing to the Internship Experience

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Abstract

Drawing on field evaluation surveys, this qualitative case study explored one BSW senior cohort's ($N = 29$) perceived characteristics for successful completion of field, experience with field supervisor, and positive aspects of and concerns related to internship placement. Using thematic analysis, findings revealed that students emphasized initiative and flexibility as two characteristics that were important to being successful in practice settings. Learning opportunities and work environment were identified as positive aspects of internship sites, while lack of placement support and poor supervision emerged as two key concerns. Results will inform professionals and educators of strategies to support students' professional development through field education.

Keywords: field internship; social work education; BSW student experience

Introduction

The United States Bureau of Labor (2019) reports that social work jobs are projected to grow 11% from 2018–2028, “much faster than average.” To meet this demand, social work programs must support the development of professional skills and competencies of students as emerging practitioners. Field education, characterized as the signature pedagogy of social work education, plays a central role in this development (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). It is in field that students learn to practice the profession's ethical guidelines as well as cultivate “the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful,

intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 6).

The literature conveys a great deal of support for the emphasis on field experience as an essential element of social work education. Balauta, et al. (2017) assert that the quality of work carried out by future professionals will depend in part on the availability and effectiveness of education received during field placement. Students become familiar with the practical aspects of the profession through internship, which then helps contribute to success in the field, demonstrating the importance of integrating meaningful opportunities for professional development into field placement. This emphasizes the need to continually examine not only how students spend their time during field internships, but also the important role of educators and field supervisors in ensuring preparation for placement, debriefing, and evaluation of the quality of field activities and content.

A student’s skill development and motivation to practice social work is greatly influenced by their exposure to the field in various practice settings. Field experience allows students to appreciate the practical implementation of curriculum content and the skills needed to be successful in the field (Williamson, et al., 2010). Field also provides students the opportunity to learn to balance their personal and professional selves; boost their confidence, self-awareness, and ability to self-reflect and cope with stressors in practice; and interact professionally with agency staff and clients (Litvack et al., 2010; Williamson et al., 2010) – skills that they can continue to develop as professionals.

The ability to develop these skills is shaped by both student-level and agency-level characteristics. At the student level, student expectations, attitudes, willingness to learn, and humility have been identified as key characteristics that influence students’ experience (Clary et al., 2020; Danowski, 2012; Kamali et al., 2017). Key contributors to students’ field experience at the agency level, positive or negative, include relationships with field supervisors and field liaisons, organizational environment, and agency context (Litvack et al., 2010).

To better understand the important role field supervisors and liaisons play in students’ learning, their specific roles and responsibilities are described briefly as follows:

Field supervisors are agency staff who are assigned to individual students entering field at their particular placement site, and their primary responsibilities are to mentor, support, and evaluate students’ growth in field. Field supervisors assign tasks to students within the agency, provide weekly supervision, help students integrate and apply theoretical knowledge in the field, and provide feedback on student field

assignments related to their learning agreement.

Field liaisons are university field faculty who serve as a bridge between each student and their field supervisor at the internship site. Their primary role, as a university representative, is to reinforce field policies, mediate any concerns or issues that might arise in field between the student and the agency, review students' work in the field, and facilitate conversations in the classroom surrounding students' experience and learning in the field. The field faculty liaison also remains in contact with the field supervisor regarding students' progress in the field.

Litvack et al. (2010) found that students appear to be able to learn and grow best when they have field supervisors who are supportive, approachable, allow room for mistakes, and provide space to process students' experiences and concerns. In contrast, field supervisors who do not model professionalism, are highly critical, or appear less interested in providing mentorship can negatively affect students' field experience. The authors note that the organizational environment can play an additional role in students' ability to thrive at their field placements. Students' experience and learning are enhanced when they not only feel welcomed and valued by the organization, but also supported as they become familiar with organizational structures, norms, and practices. Similarly, field faculty and field supervisors, as educators, play an important role in mentoring students while in field placement by providing support around issues related to organizational team dynamics, culture, agency politics, and client interactions, and by helping them to process and learn from their field experiences.

Students' deeper understanding of the profession is thus shaped by their own characteristics and expectations as well as by the exposure, support, and training they receive during their field internship. Drawing on responses to the annual department field evaluation survey from one cohort of graduating Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students at a private university in Southern California, the main purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the student-identified essential characteristics to being successful in field, their perceived experiences with their field supervisors, and their perceptions of positive and negative aspects of their field placement. These annual surveys offer students an opportunity to critically self-reflect on their yearlong experience in field, an important skill that they can continue to develop in their professional journey (Ferguson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2010). Findings based on these reflections will not only add to the limited research on students' experiences in field placement, but also inform professionals and social work educators on areas of strength and concern in regard to field placement sites as well as on curriculum development to support student preparedness for field.

Field Internship Placement: Program Overview

This section provides a brief overview of the field internship placement process used by this particular BSW program. The field placement process starts with an orientation meeting for juniors, prior to the start of their field internship year. Students complete an application for field internship, and then have preplacement interviews with the BSW coordinator of field education in the second semester of their junior year. The interview provides an opportunity for students to share more about their past working and/or volunteer experience in different settings, their interests, and their preferred field placement setting.

Field placements are determined based on students' strengths, interests, and areas they indicated they would like to explore. The program considers many factors when considering possible field placements, to ensure that students are set up for success. These include factors such as areas of growth for the student, student career goals, organizational structure and culture at the field placement, supervision style that the student may benefit from, and agency expectations of the intern.

The field coordinator also consults with the BSW faculty to discuss any potential concerns with the identified placements for each student, based on their knowledge of and experience working with each student in other social work classes. Students receive an agency referral and then schedule an interview with the field instructor or agency designee at their provisional placement site within a designated time frame. If, after this interview, an agency has any significant concerns about fit and does not accept the student, the student receives a second agency referral after debriefing the interview experience and placement options with the BSW field coordinator. Ultimately, the goal is to offer students a field experience that is stimulating and educational.

Methodology

Data was collected from annual field evaluation surveys completed by the 2017-18 senior cohort in the BSW program ($N = 29$) as part of standard program assessment. All seniors complete the survey at the end of the spring semester so they can reflect on their yearlong field experience. The survey includes questions related to various aspects of their field experience; this study focused on student responses to open-ended questions regarding (1) the student characteristics and/or qualities needed for successful completion of their field placement; (2) the student-field supervisor relationship; (3) the positive aspects of their internship site; and (4) concerns about their internship site. For this study, the authors received from the BSW program a collated document of de-identified student responses to each of the open-ended questions mentioned above. Any references to an agency or supervisor in student

responses were redacted to maintain anonymity of responses. The field evaluation surveys did not include demographic questions. Aggregate demographic information on students' gender, ethnicity, and student type (traditional or first-generation undergraduate) was provided by the department.

Open coding was used to explore key themes emerging from student responses to survey questions. The authors inductively analyzed student responses for key phrases and words, to categorize similar responses and identify major emerging themes. Rather than looking for predetermined categories, this process is data driven in that "categories are allowed to emerge from the data itself" (Krysiak, 2018, p. 180). Coding was conducted manually by each author, as students provided brief responses (a few sentences or a few key words) to the open-ended questions. To increase rigor, the authors examined the data independently to identify preliminary codes that were grouped into conceptually similar categories using a constant comparison approach. The authors then jointly reviewed the independently identified codes and categories, and made modifications to reach a consensus on the overarching themes that emerged for each open-ended question. The study received IRB approval from the authors' university.

Findings

Of the 29 students in the senior cohort in this study, 27 (93%) were female and two (7%) were male. A majority ($n = 16$, 55%) were considered traditional undergraduate students, while 44% ($n = 13$) identified as first-generation students. In terms of ethnicity, there was an almost even number of White ($n = 13$, 45%) and Hispanic ($n = 12$, 44%) students, while the remaining four (13%) classified as "other." Students were assigned to a variety of placements linked to the university's field program. Placement sites included areas such as child welfare, immigration, behavioral health, hospice, mental health, school-based services, foster care and adoption, housing services, legislator's office, and domestic violence.

Key Themes Related to Student Perspectives on Characteristics Needed for Successful Completion of Field Placement

Five main themes emerged from student responses regarding characteristics needed for successful completion of field placement, and these included work independently, show initiative, flexibility, organizational skills, and micro skills.

Work Independently

A majority (51%) of students identified the ability to work independently as one of the key characteristics for successful completion of their field placements. Noting

that “it is more like a job than an internship,” students emphasized the importance of being “comfortable working independently” and being able to complete tasks without needing constant feedback. Students also pointed to the need to be willing to “learn independently” and “be comfortable knowing when to seek out help.”

Show Initiative

Around 20% of students identified showing initiative as another key characteristic needed for successful completion of fieldwork. One student responded stating that an intern must be “willing to take full initiative,” when it comes to fieldwork, and provided examples such as planning group facilitations, multitasking, and working well under pressure as ways to do so. Additionally, student feedback highlighted the need to be self-motivated and show initiative in taking on responsibilities without much supervision.

Flexibility

Flexibility was another major characteristic that stood out in 20% of student responses. One student reported that interns should be “flexible with no work, or with an influx of a lot of work.” Another stated that interns needed to “be patient and willing to do what is asked, big or small.” Furthermore, students shared that there may not be a day-to-day structure of responsibilities; therefore, interns should be flexible on how the day plays out and on responsibilities and tasks they were given to complete.

Organizational Skills

The importance of organizational skills for successful completion of field internship was emphasized as a key theme by another 20% of students. One student shared that although interns may experience varying levels of stress from tasks and responsibilities, they must still remain flexible and produce organized work. Additionally, students reported that future interns should be able to “organize and balance workload well,” and “create their own schedules and agenda” as examples of valuable organizational skills needed to be more successful while at field placement.

Micro skills

While different skills are needed in order to be successful at field placement, almost 21% of students identified micro skills as a major area of focus for successful internship. One student emphasized the importance of having micro skills by stating that “the student needs to have good micro skills, as most clients will call in very distressed and need validation and active listening from the student.” Students reported the importance of being able to work with specific populations such as

children and older adults, and in an atmosphere with diverse individuals. Students also stated that micro skills included being willing to jump into client contact and having outstanding communication skills.

Key Themes Regarding Students' Experience with Their Field Supervisor

Provision of support, investment in student's learning, and modeling professionalism emerged as the three major themes in students' responses regarding their experience with their field supervisors.

Provision of Support

The importance of having a supportive supervisor was emphasized in a majority (83%) of the student responses. Students appreciated supervisors who were available for questions, had an "open door policy," provided a safe space for students to debrief and ask questions, were approachable, and encouraged students as they gained skills in the field. Students also spoke highly of field supervisors who took the time to consider their interns' strengths and interests when assigning responsibilities. In contrast, students struggled with supervisors who came across as intimidating, did not provide a safe space to process difficult situations, offered limited to no encouragement, and responded critically to mistakes.

Investment in Students' Learning

Nearly 42% of the students noted their appreciation of supervisors who appeared to be invested in the intern's growth and learning. For example, one student shared how their field supervisor was "constantly incorporating theory, learning, and reflection into our time together." Others spoke about the regular and timely feedback they received from their supervisors, which greatly facilitated their learning processes. Students were grateful for supervisors who exposed them to diverse tasks, which not only stretched their learning, but also allowed them to learn more about the different aspects of their agencies. Similarly, students expressed appreciation for supervisors who pushed students out of their comfort zone and challenged them professionally. Students also highlighted how some of their supervisors helped them work through personal and ethical dilemmas by offering means to problem solve and understand the issues from multiple perspectives.

Modeling Professionalism

Another salient theme that emerged in about 38% of responses was supervisors who modeled professionalism to their interns. One element of professionalism was being honest about mistakes, which in turn helped students to be honest about their own

mistakes and learn from them. Another related element was supervisors' openness about questions they were not able to answer immediately, but to which they sought answers. Students shared that this helped them understand the importance of leaning into the learning process even as a professional. Students also appreciated supervisors who were not only knowledgeable but modeled skills in organization, structure, and the roles of a social worker at macro and micro levels. Lastly, students appreciated supervisors who modeled self-care and balancing work with other responsibilities.

Key Themes Regarding Positive Aspects of Field Internship Site

Learning opportunities and the work environment, which included supportive staff and student-supervisor relationships, emerged as the major themes regarding positive aspects of students' internship sites.

Learning Opportunities

Opportunities to learn by applying classroom knowledge in field settings was a prominent response among approximately 28% of students. Several students provided examples of opportunities given for learning and room for growth while also being taught different specialties and skills needed for the role. Students noted appreciation for agency staff who actively supported students' learning and growth as social workers. Students also highlighted the value of being able to learn through opportunities to work more independently at their field placements. Students provided examples of independent opportunities they had been given, including attending events on their own and networking. These opportunities allowed students to "learn the ropes," gain more experience working with clients, and become more independent professionally.

Work Environment

The agency work environment played an important role in students' experience in field, and students' responses focused primarily on how agency staff and the supervisor support a positive experience.

Supportive Staff. Several students (24%) noted that helpful staff members at their placement site allowed them to thrive at their field internship. Students appreciated coworkers who were supportive, kind, and engaging. Students valued a work environment where "everyone treats each other with respect." Students also reported that a supportive environment helped them become better social workers because it provided a safe space to learn how to engage and interact with clients.

Student-Supervisor Relationship. The student-supervisor relationship

was identified as another major factor in regard to being a positive aspect of field placement. Nearly 21% of students expressed appreciation for supervisors who facilitated their learning process by providing frequent feedback to guide their work. Students valued supervisors who made time to talk with the student, encouraged questions, and acknowledged mistakes as part of the learning process.

Key Themes Regarding Negative Aspects of Field Internship Site

The work environment emerged as a major theme regarding concerns about field internship sites, and included the student-supervisor relationship, work that was unrelated to social work, and lack of agency support.

Work Environment

Student-Supervisor Relationship. Just as students identified supervisors having a positive impact in their internship experience, around 10% of students identified their relationship with their supervisors as a negative aspect of their internship experience. Some students noted that their supervisors did not always appear to display a professional attitude. Others mentioned as a concern limited direct support from their supervisors, particularly for students who may be looking for a lot of support and guidance from their supervisors.

Work Unrelated to Social Work. Roughly 10% of students reported that a concern for their placement sites were activities or positions that were unrelated to social work. A few students felt that they had “no room to grow as a social worker” because their work was unrelated to social work and there was not much to do. A related concern was that students in nontraditional field settings were not able to develop or use their social work skills.

Lack of Agency Support. Lastly, almost 7% of students reported lack of agency support as a concern regarding their field placement. One student shared that their “agency did not provide any formal training or insight into how things were, which threw me off.” Additionally, some students felt the agency had difficulty supporting interns, which made them feel they were not being prepared as well as others in more organized and supportive environments.

Study Limitations

One key limitation of this study is that the findings are based on responses from one BSW senior cohort at one university, limiting generalizability. There are many factors that can influence experiences in the field, such as available resources, type of field placement, supervision style, and the student’s own motivation and drive, to name just

a few. While it is important to understand students' experiences, their responses may not encapsulate the structure, supports, or the organizational culture of the placement site in its entirety. Consequently, the field experience is described principally through the lens that the student used to reflect on their time at placement. However, although the depth of the responses is limited, they still offer a snapshot of students' broader field internship experience.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Students' experiences during field internships have an influential role on how they perceive the profession. Experiences that are positive and filled with growth, learning, support, and guidance help to build students' professional skills and ability to work in diverse settings. Since the goal is for students to be exposed to real-world work through field placement, student feedback and reflections on their field experience can offer social work educators and practitioners insights on strategies to safeguard this experience and ensure that students feel prepared and supported to grow as emerging professionals through their field placements (Clary et al., 2020).

Educators are uniquely positioned to provide students with a strong foundation for field preparedness and readiness. One way that educators in this particular BSW program prepare students for field placements is by providing service learning and practice opportunities tied to social work courses prior to students' senior year, when they enter the field. In preparing students, these service opportunities can positively influence students' perceptions on how to work in the field. Some of these opportunities include mentoring minors, working with individuals experiencing homelessness, conducting group sessions, and interacting with older adults. In these experiences, students work alongside schools, service organizations, assisted-living homes, multidisciplinary settings, and other organizations, in order to not only gain experience, but to practice the knowledge received in class.

In other words, these service opportunities serve as students' first hands-on introduction to building characteristics needed to be successful in field. For instance, students are able to practice skills that include working independently, being flexible to the needs of the service site, showing initiative by creating productive ways to serve the client, building micro, mezzo, and macro skills, and more – all characteristics that students have identified as important for success. In addition, the program guides students to success in field placement by focusing on the development of professional skills. As students take social work courses, this program assesses students' professional development based on criteria such as demeanor, self-awareness, preparedness, use of consultation, critical thinking, and collegiality. Students are also given the opportunity to connect these professional skills to field readiness. In the field, students are given the chance during weekly supervision to engage in self-

reflection and evaluation of these skills with their field supervisors, in addition to other areas of concern or interest.

The findings of this study mirror previous research that identified the student-field supervisor relationship as an important factor influencing students' experience in field (Litvack et al., 2010). Field internship can be viewed as part of the gatekeeping process in preparing the next generation of practitioners. Social work programs like this one can support student's learning through intentional partnerships with local field agencies, as well as through the purposeful placement of students based on their unique learning needs, supervisor compatibility, and agency environment, to advance their growth as developing professionals. By providing meaningful supervision; exposing students to learning, training, and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration; and modeling professionalism, social work practitioners can continue to play a vital role in creating a positive and enriching field internship experience for the future generation of social workers.

As stated before, there is limited research regarding students' experience in field placement. Further research could explore students' sense of preparedness for field internship, offering BSW programs insights into areas of strength and potential areas for improvement within the curriculum. With better preparedness for the field, students will have a more meaningful and impactful experience, resulting in students ready and equipped to enter the social work profession.

While this study focused on the experiences of seniors in the 2017-18 BSW cohort, moving forward it will be important to consider the ramifications that COVID-19 can have on future interns. Field agencies and social work students have had to process and pivot to new roles, expectations, and procedures. Additionally, students now have the opportunity to build on skills that were identified even before the pandemic, such as independence, flexibility, and taking initiative. Although this is a new adjustment, the profession of social work has proven time and time again that it has the strength, ability, and grit to adapt to such high demands. This unique atmosphere offers social work educators and practitioners an opportunity to encourage, support, and motivate students as never before. Educators and field supervisors now, more than ever, are needed by students to encourage and support their growth and ability to thrive at their internships.

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