



# Responding to Behavioral Concerns in Field: A Team Approach

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## **Introduction**

The topic of professional gatekeeping continues to be confusing and contentious for social work education. Social work educators and programs are aware of the need to establish and enforce standards for competency and performance, and recognize the expectation from the profession to do so, but these gatekeeping standards and expectations can be elusive to define. Programs often struggle to articulate and specify standards, especially values-based competencies for attitudes and behaviors often considered to reflect professionalism, as opposed to content-based competencies that focus on knowledge and skills (Paulson & Rinks, 2018). Programs typically must decide not only what standards to emphasize, but how to specifically define them, to communicate them to students, and to do so ethically and legally throughout the educational training process – from admission to performance and behavior while in the social work program and during field placements (Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013; Hylton et al., 2017).

This also challenges field programs to develop processes for identifying and responding to performance and behavioral concerns, especially when such issues jeopardize the student's placement. While not all performance or behavioral concerns result from mental health issues, students who experience such challenges may end up

having problems during field due to the impact of their condition on their functioning.

Unfortunately, such issues are on the rise. Several authors have highlighted the growing prevalence of mental health issues in adolescents and young adults, including mood and anxiety disorders, psychiatric hospitalizations, and suicidality (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). This trend has also been observed in college students generally, including social work students (Lynch et al., 2021; Reardon, 2012; Todd et al., 2019). Limited resources and psychosocial stressors, such as employment and family commitments, can also create possible issues for students' performance in field as they struggle to balance their life circumstances with academic expectations. Sadly, these have been exacerbated in recent years, especially since 2020 and the COVID pandemic, leaving programs to continue to adapt and refine their policies and practices for addressing these concerns (De Fries et al., 2021).

Although there are multiple possible causes for behavioral concerns in field, programs still must find ways to address them. This article is an overview and discussion of strategies adopted and implemented to address these concerns over the past several years in undergraduate and graduate field education at a midsized Midwestern university.

### **Approaches Prior to Students Entering Field**

In 2015 the Field Education Department began to institute changes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to address these growing concerns over performance and behavioral issues during field placements. The earliest steps in this process included intentional collaborative conversations with community agencies and providers who work with students to identify the concerns and challenges they were experiencing with student performance, as well as their expectations for student learners. Field Education then also engaged faculty field liaisons in conversations around this same topic.

The results of these conversations highlighted that the primary concerns that partner agencies, agency field instructors, and faculty field liaisons were encountering were not critical deficits in content knowledge and skills, but rather in problematic behaviors exhibited by student learners while serving at the agencies. The most common concerns identified by agencies, agency field instructors, and faculty field liaisons included issues with attendance and tardiness; violations of agency policies; student resistance to feedback and correction; substance use interfering with performance or violating agency or university policy; breaches of confidentiality; and boundary issues with recipients of services, especially concerning the use of social media.

After identifying the primary issues and concerns, Field Education made behavioral

expectations more explicit in their field manuals (University of Southern Indiana Social Work, 2021), and incorporated these expectations about behavior into mandatory student field orientation and trainings for agencies and faculty. The students' field orientation also emphasizes the importance of self-care and the challenges field education can place on emotional health, and includes encouragement to access supportive resources when necessary, including the university counseling center or other services and providers in the university or greater community.

Field Education conducts two formal supervisor trainings each academic year for partner agencies (Rinks & Wilderman, 2021). These trainings review required elements of field education, including an outline of problematic behaviors in field and how to address them. Formal trainings are also held twice a year with field faculty liaisons. Field Education actively networks with partner agencies and faculty field liaisons to promote open communication and early intervention. An additional goal of identifying and outlining expectations for field faculty liaisons and agency field instructors is also to hopefully reduce the likelihood that any issues with student performance might be the result of factors beyond students' control, such as poor supervision or support from a supervisor, issues within the agency, or lack of experience or investment on the part of the liaison or field instructor.

With agency field instructors and faculty field liaisons, the trainings also include guidance on the problem-solving process and whom to contact for assistance. The revisions to the manuals and the inclusion of these expectations in the orientations aimed to make the intervention more preventative in nature, but also to formally specify behavioral expectations in policy for students, the social work department, and agencies. These behavioral expectations, including professionalism, communication, and appropriate use of supervision, are now also formally assessed alongside direct practice skills during midterm and final evaluations.

### **Approaches Once Students Enter Field**

The next step in our program's response to addressing behavioral concerns was the development of a process to document these concerns and the planned approach for addressing them. The Concern Report developed by our program documents the incident as well as an action plan for improvement (University of Southern Indiana Social Work, 2021, p. 74).

There are two key features to the report. The first is that the behavior in question is objectively and behaviorally specified. This helps to avoid the tendency for field faculty or agency field instructors, who are trained and skilled social work professionals themselves, to begin to "diagnose" the difficulties or to shift into the role of "provider" as opposed to educator or supervisor. A second key feature is that

a corrective plan is outlined with specific goals, corrective actions, and identified time frames for reevaluation. Corrective actions might also include plans for a student to access community services and resources to address their challenges. Expectations and consequences are clearly stated on the form and throughout the process.

As part of documenting and addressing concerns, a meeting is held with all relevant parties. These are typically the student, agency field instructor, faculty field liaison, and the director of field education. If the student has disability accommodations, their support person is present as well. The problematic behavior and plan of action are discussed, and all parties agree to the terms of the Concern Report by signing and dating the form. A follow-up meeting is also scheduled to monitor the situation. These reports are stored by the director of field education in a secure location and kept for the remainder of the student's time at the university. Once students graduate, if no further incidents are recorded, these documents are destroyed and do not become a permanent part of the student's academic record.

All BSW and MSW students are informed of the behavioral expectations and the problem-solving corrective process for addressing issues during the field experience at their mandatory field orientation. Examples of identified problematic behaviors are included, and the Concern Report is outlined. The students are accountable for this material and sign documents affirming their awareness of these expectations, processes, and commitment to abide by them.

### **Implications**

Several benefits have been observed from implementing these changes. Partner agencies have expressed their appreciation for the responsiveness of Field Education in addressing their needs and concerns, especially as they provide students a venue for interacting with recipients of services and strengthening their direct practice skills. Several have commented that they feel an increased sense of partnership and being included as "part of the team." Agency field instructors and faculty field liaisons have expressed several points of appreciation for the policies and practices. Both groups have stated that they find the annual trainings helpful in several ways, including the university being able to offer continuing education hours, the enhanced sense of community and collaboration, and an increased clarity on what problematic issues to identify and policies for addressing them. Clearly defined expectations and more formal policies have helped them feel more supported.

Having clearer behavioral expectations and defined processes for addressing concerns has also been beneficial to students. In fact, the greatest benefit we have observed from implementing these processes has been the way they support student development and success. Our motivation in developing policies and practices, and our tone in

communicating these to students and partners, is developmental and not punitive. We communicate to students the function and rationale for these expectations, and that the overarching goals are to help them develop into competent, successful, professional social workers.

Since implementing these changes, we have had fewer students terminated from field placements, and the limited number who were terminated were often more successful in their next placement after going through this process. In our program, which routinely places between 120 to 130 undergraduate and graduate students in field placements each year, 11 students were terminated from their field placements due to behavioral and performance issues in the year prior to implementing these changes. The program implemented these changes in 2015, and over the last six years the program has only had between one and four students dismissed from field each year, with one year where no students were terminated from their placements. This is a positive development for all involved in the field process, because being terminated from field placements is very disruptive to agencies, to field programs, and most of all to the educational process and development of students, possibly even negatively impacting their ability to progress in their education and training in a timely manner.

Students have also responded positively to the up-front and clear messaging about expectations and consequences. Our experience has been that having these formal systems in place allows for earlier identification of and intervention with issues, and that the quicker these issues are addressed, the more likely they are to resolve with positive outcomes. The development of a clear action plan with actionable steps and identifiable resources also enhances the ability of students to access assistance and support that will help them to be able to successfully complete.

While demonstrating content and values-based competencies during field placements is necessary and important, field educators also need to monitor and support the educational and behavioral needs of students in field, especially for students struggling with mental health concerns, limited resources, or significant psychosocial stressors. The approaches described in this article strive to do this by establishing an intentional and formal process for setting policy, specifying clear standards and expectations for all involved, communicating those through formal trainings, taking supportive corrective actions that are empowering as opposed to punitive, and doing so all in the spirit of promoting student success.

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