



Preparing Future Field Educators: Reflections From Developing Placements Within the Field Office

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Across the country, individuals are continuing to choose social work as a career. Although this is exciting for the profession, pressures to increase enrollment directly impact the number of field placements needed for students (Ayala et al., 2018; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015b). This may cause additional stress in finding students a placement. Meade et al. (2015) reported that schools of social work grapple with the increase in student numbers and the decrease of student field placement opportunities due to competition, the practicum needs of online programs, and the operational strains of social service agencies. Additional challenges further complicating the field placement process include students' needs for flexibility in scheduling, transportation, and, for students with disabilities, accessibility (Meade et al., 2015; McKee et al., 2015).

This article describes the development of an alternative field placement within the social work field office to address current field challenges such as the needs for increased flexibility, virtual work, access to quality placements, and exposure to potential career options in field.

Win-Win Arrangement

A field education university-based placement is a “win-win” situation for the intern and the field office. As stated above, field placements have become more challenging to find (Ayala et al., 2018; CSWE, 2015b). The field office placement provided an additional field opportunity for social work students interested in learning about administration, research, community work, and higher education at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Field faculty were able to tailor tasks based on students’ interests. For example, if an intern had an interest in housing and homelessness, they would be connected with housing expert researchers and agencies. Moreover, interns had access to regular supervision with experienced social workers. This field placement provided an opportunity for students to learn more about the structure, joys, and challenges of field education.

At the same time, the field office benefited from being able to socialize students into field education and give back to the profession. Interns also offered fresh student perspectives, and assisted with special projects that contributed to the mission, such as extending community engagement and providing supplemental programming for students. Lastly, this process allowed the field office to build greater partnerships with other schools of social work.

At a broader level, this field placement is also a “win” for field education overall. Oftentimes, field faculty and staff have no prior training in field education administration. Although helpful resources such as *Managing a Field Education Program: A Training for New Field Directors* (CSWE, 2021) and general trainings for new field instructors are available, these are offered postdegree. This field placement provides in-depth training and access to field administration and academia while interns are actively pursuing their degree.

Making the Connection to Social Work Competencies

In developing the field placement, it was essential that interns were clear in regard to how each task was linked to the development of social work skills. Table 1 provides an example of tasks related to the CSWE 2015 EPAS competencies (CSWE, 2015a) including a range of micro, mezzo, and macro learning opportunities.

Table 1

Sample Tasks Related to CSWE 2015 EPAS Competencies

CSWE 2015 EPAS	Sample Tasks (Can be tailored for generalist and specialized years)
Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Utilize technology to facilitate mutual aid groups with field students ● Complete weekly placement reflection logs and discuss with field instructor during supervision
Competency 2: Engage in Diversity and Difference Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learn about the field student experience through interactions with current field students in mutual aid groups ● Identify personal biases that may impact work within the field office setting
Competency 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide students with information related to campus resources that address food insecurity, financial need, and mental health services. ● Identify areas for improvement in field office policies to better advance student equity in placement
Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analyze field office student survey data ● Present recommendations to the field office based on field office student survey findings
Competency 5: Engage in Policy Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review national policies that impact college students ● Attend stakeholder meetings to advocate for changes to college/school policies that impact students
Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apply knowledge of ecological systems theory to engage with students ● Identify how empathy is used when encountering difficult situations while facilitating the peer-led mutual aid group

Competency 7: Assess with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

- Collect and interpret field students' interview data
- Collaborate with field office faculty to assess strengths and challenges of field programming. Establish goals to address challenges

Competency 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

- Participate in interdepartmental collaboration with social work and nursing students during a simulation
- With field office faculty, facilitate effective placement transition out of the role of field office intern

Competency 9: Evaluate with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

- Identify a survey method to assess student satisfaction with field office processes, and present recommendations.
 - Utilize survey responses to self-reflect on areas for improvement in facilitating groups
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Major Administration Frameworks

It was important to the field office to ensure that the intern understood the theoretical underpinnings of conducting administrative social work within a higher education framework. In a series of discussions with field office faculty, the intern was introduced to higher education administration theories such as social systems, leadership, and contingency theories. In addition, field office faculty shared information about other university processes and procedures related to the selection and evaluation process for faculty, rank and salary matters, research, curriculum development, and accreditation. To assess the intern's knowledge in this area they were often asked to assess hypothetical situations using these frameworks.

Key principles related to social work administration (Skidmore, 1995) were reviewed along with *Social Work Field Directors: Foundations for Excellence* (Hunter et al., 2016) to cover topics such as roles and responsibilities, the field placement process, and critical issues within field education. Interns were also challenged to consider factors such as operations (e.g., decision making, planning, programming, and budget management), communication, community relations, and growth and development (e.g., leadership, professional development, and self-care). Interns were offered opportunities to apply administrative principles through assignments such as conducting outreach to students and organizations and presenting to field instructors during a training.

Process for Creating a Field Office Placement

Hosting a social work intern was a new venture for the field office, which required communication with and buy-in from administration. The field office outlined a proposal for this field placement opportunity by creating an intern job description and sharing it with the school director for approval. The job description described the campus setting and proposed CSWE competency-related learning opportunities and projects. In the proposal, the field office gave particular attention to how this internship would be a mutually beneficial partnership, creating field opportunities for social work students and expanding school partnerships, in addition to creating community-engaged initiatives and research/scholarship opportunities. Essentially, the intern would supplement the work of the field office through new projects and opportunities that directly relate to social work competencies. Additionally, the field office advocated for parking permits estimated at \$480 for student interns; however, these funds were not utilized due to COVID-19.

Creating a new placement opportunity entailed looking at logistical issues for hosting an intern. Due to uncertainty related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the field office considered the flexibility of the placement, the nature of field office work, the barriers an intern may face, and the minimum requirements needed to have a successful internship.

Regarding interviewing, the intern job description was shared with regional social work programs to recruit interested field students. Field faculty also identified a template for interview questions to assess for student fit.

Technology

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the internship offered a fully virtual placement. In order to attend meetings and access placement-related work, field office interns needed to have access to a computer with internet and webcam capabilities. Social work interns were provided with university login credentials to access the university's email, online learning system (Canvas), and Google/Microsoft office products. Interns were not permitted access to student records or confidential university systems. Field office faculty went through the information technology office to create temporary accounts for the social work interns, which remained active for the duration of the internship.

Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

Social work interns were expected to perform in an ethical and professional manner, including upholding confidentiality. The field office considered what situations might

be sensitive (such as a university student being terminated by a placement, or a university student failing a field course). It was decided that social work interns would not be permitted to coordinate placements, access student records, or listen to or weigh in on student concerns during field education committee meetings. Faculty outside of the field office were notified not to share sensitive information with interns during interactions. To protect privacy, general scenarios were shared with interns, without revealing specific identifying information about university students and placements. Interns also had access to anonymous survey data for assessment purposes, and were not able to link specific students with survey data.

Mutual aid groups gave interns the opportunity to connect with university field students. These groups were optional opportunities for university students to connect with their cohort and the field office intern. The field office discussed boundaries with each intern, noting that while they are also a social work student, there are internship-specific boundaries to uphold, such as limits of confidentiality, not sharing any university student information discussed during groups, and not adding or accessing students on social media.

Student Reflections

In the fall semester the field office hosted a BSW student intern, and in the spring hosted an MSW student intern. Both students were in virtual block placements. Below are the student reflections regarding their experiences.

BSW Student Reflection

My first day in my internship was overwhelming, coming from a smaller school in rural North Carolina. I was skeptical about what my internship would entail because I did not know what social work would look like in the field office. However, it did not take me long to learn that they do social work every day. My first two weeks were full of reviewing on- and off-campus resources and policies. My biggest challenge during that time was trying to adjust to the size difference. I felt intimidated by the change; however, my field instructors were incredibly supportive. I felt completely comfortable reaching out to them and asking for help when I needed it.

In the third week, the most significant work was developing the online field orientation, for which I created a field education handbook quiz and a module on case management. I also participated in the process of amending some of the Title IX policies in the field handbook due to national legislative changes. I realized then how much policy truly affects the field office. Being allowed to observe and help with this process was important work, and I felt lucky to be

part of it. In the fourth week, I created a recruitment packet that would be used in onboarding new agencies. The packet is a vital part of the work the field office does and will be used for years to come. Although this was a great project, it also caused me a lot of stress. It was hard for me because I wanted to make sure it was perfect. However, after several weeks of working on it I submitted it to the field office.

In the remaining weeks of my internship, I began my peer-led mutual aid group, modeled after the University of Buffalo School of Social Work's Online Peer Led Mutual Aid Groups (University of Buffalo School of Social Work, 2021). This was a project I worked on from the beginning of the semester. The peer-led mutual aid group was conducted via Zoom and hosted by me for social work students in field placements. I know this group was incredibly important because many social work students were feeling burnt out due to the pandemic changing their first experience in a practice setting. During the sessions, students would discuss the immense stress and pressure they were under, and how COVID-19 has made them feel "hopeless." I provided empathy and interventions focused on self-care to help them cope with those feelings. This was the moment I felt fully competent in my social work skills. I was able to apply the knowledge I learned throughout my studies, as well as what I learned so far in my placement.

I had no idea going into this placement how much social work could be done in the field office. As I stated before, I was skeptical of the placement teaching me what I needed to learn. This internship has taught me so much about myself as a person and social worker. I have done research, analyzed data, and presented the data to a committee. I learned that policy is in everything; it is a huge part of daily work, and it changes constantly. I was also able to really understand what self-care is during this internship. It is often talked about during class, but until I was in my field placement, I didn't realize how important it is. I have a new love for administrative and higher education social work, and am considering that as a possible career goal.

MSW Student Reflection

Initially, becoming an intern with the field office was not my ambition. As I reflect, I have definitely felt a desire to aid, support, and contribute to the preparation of other social workers. Field placements are essential to equip agencies with more social workers prepared to support those in need.

This placement was a virtual placement conducted through video conferencing. One might assume that a virtual placement is not as substantive as one conducted in an in-person setting, but this was not the case. The field instructors

were purposeful in ensuring that the activities contributed to the continued development of the social work competencies.

Learning opportunities were dynamic and varied during the field placement. I was able to gain skills in curriculum development when completing the course matrix for the Child Welfare Education Collaborative partnership. I became very familiar with the course syllabi for both the BSW and MSW programs by assessing what lessons, activities, and assignments met objectives. Participating in this work expanded my view by highlighting the importance and effort put forth to provide students with the learning activities that prepare them to do the work needed by their child welfare placement.

Another activity during the placement with the field office included developing a social work intern handbook template and presenting it during a field instructor training meeting. Many different agencies host students, and while some larger organizations possess their own handbook for their interns or provide an employee handbook, there are other agencies who have no intern handbook for their field students. Creating the template allowed me to consider the many topics of interest that would be helpful in facilitating smooth transitions into placements. Topics included field instructor expectations, organizational charts, contact information, parking, what to do during downtime, recommended readings, and much more. Presenting the template during the training provided another opportunity for engagement and public speaking.

During the placement I also contributed to the school's Racial Justice and Ethics Taskforce, which allowed for further development of the skills necessary to master the advancing human rights and social justice competency. This work included evaluating courses and highlighting where antiracist teachings were or were not being provided. I was able to participate in some very thoughtful and honest conversations. Additionally, I contributed to laying groundwork for a renewed commitment to prioritizing antiracism in the program.

The field office intern opportunity proved to be a very important form of social work in preparing social workers with the skills and potential to make an impact on the world around them.

Reflections and Points of Consideration

The field faculty did a considerable amount of preplanning and discussion. Field faculty assessed viable learning opportunities, the ability to provide quality supervision and manage logistics, and the time commitment, and secured buy-in from administrative leadership.

Ultimately, the field placement was successful in incorporating classroom learning, individual life experiences, and application of self-awareness and regulation into a rich field experience. An essential factor in the placement's success was the development of a mutually beneficial experience for the student and the field office. The field faculty viewed the student as an enhancement to the field office, and provided space for students to play a critical role in contributing to field education. Initially, students might have been skeptical and unsure since it is not in an agency setting; however, field faculty were intentional about acclimating the students to the university culture and campus resources, and tailored the placement to their learning goals.

Potential limitations must be considered as well. For instance, the cost of on-campus parking could be seen as a financial burden to the host institution. Schools should consider the funding sources for and budget limitations of having a parking permit available for an intern. A second possible limitation is that faculty and staff may be unaware of the roles and boundaries of the social work intern. For example, a faculty member who is not the field instructor may attempt to delegate tasks to the social work intern, such as administrative tasks or tasks that a graduate assistant may typically be responsible for completing. The field instructor should be able to clarify the roles of the social work student intern, and ensure that all assignments are communicated efficiently from the field instructor and specifically related to social work competencies.

Another particular limitation may be the virtual format of the placement (if the placement is fully virtual). Field instructors should assess how they can observe the professionalism and nonverbal communication of the student, and they may be unable to fully assess these virtually. Other limitations may involve issues during the onboarding process, such as technology and account access, procedural issues related to affiliation agreements, and adequate physical space, if needed. A final consideration is acknowledging that the social work intern will have access to see the inner workings of the host field office and could share those experiences with their own institution. Furthermore, field colleagues in partnering schools of social work need to be prepared to address concerns if conflict arises related to student performance.

In reflecting, field faculty have found that having a field office placement is a rewarding process in assisting students to grow and develop their social work skills. The arrangement is a sustainable way to enhance field office operations, strengthen partnerships with other schools of social work, give back to the profession, and

support field education.

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