



# Emerging Best Practices for Employment-Based Field Placements: A Path to a More Equitable Field Experience

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## **Abstract**

This article describes and analyzes a new approach to employment-based field education for Masters of Social Work (MSW) students. In this study, we collected qualitative feedback from multiple perspectives, including students, field educators, and faculty liaisons. We found that students and community organizations mostly benefited from employment-based field placements. Students reported that they could devote more time and attention to coursework, often experienced enhanced professional opportunities, and could more quickly apply course concepts at their field placement. Field educators noted that they modified their approach to supervision to maximize student learning opportunities. Emerging best practices related to employment-based field placements are offered.

*Keywords:* field education; employment-based; higher education; supervision

Field education is uniquely complex within social work education due to its reliance on community partners to help educate social work students. As such, field education is acutely impacted by societal changes and changes in the practice community. For example, when COVID lockdowns began, most classroom-based courses transitioned to remote meeting platforms such as Zoom. However, it is much more challenging to

transition social work practice to a virtual platform, and this significantly impacted field education. It is incumbent on social work educators in field education to anticipate societal or practice changes and quickly adapt to ensure high-quality social work education.

Several societal trends have impacted and will continue to impact social work education, especially field education. These include the increasing demands placed on practicing social workers; changes in higher education, such as the high cost of college relative to the starting pay of social workers; the increased demands placed on students to manage work, family and school; and demands from MSW students to be paid for their fieldwork (Alam, 2019; Harmon, 2017; Jarman-Rohde et al., 1997).

We argue that promoting and enabling rigorous employment-based field placements can help mitigate some of these impacts and create new opportunities. We also provide initial evaluation data and lessons learned from one school of social work's redesign of its employment-based field placement policies, processes, and expectations.

## **Background**

### **Demands on Social Work Practitioners**

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; Lewis et al., 2022). The pandemic has highlighted existing dilemmas within field education, particularly the reliance on practicing social workers who often face increasing demands, due in part to funding cuts and programmatic changes that lead to higher caseloads (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). Universities rely on the voluntary commitment of field educators to provide vital learning experiences and supervision to students. Public policy changes, such as cuts to funding for social welfare programs, have made this model more vulnerable (Jarman-Rohde et al., 1997). As a result, social work organizations are often forced to restructure and demand that their social workers carry higher caseloads, leaving less time for and emphasis on providing voluntary field supervision (George et al., 2013).

### **Financial Feasibility and Access**

The cost of a college education has continued to rise at a higher rate than inflation and income (Hanson, 2023). The threats to higher education have been well documented in terms of declining enrollment, and students increasingly demanding more from their education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). In social work education, the costs also continue to rise, and social workers' salaries lag behind those in similar professions (Alam, 2019; Carnevale et al., 2021). While social work

education has not yet experienced a decline in enrollment, part-time enrollment has increased at a higher rate than full-time enrollment (Council on Social Work Education, 2021). Part-time students balance employment and school at a much higher rate (81%) compared with full-time students (43%), meaning part-time students often have to juggle work, coursework, and familial and social obligations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). This presents a context in which creating time and energy for a 15- to 20-hour-per-week unpaid field placement can be difficult, if not impossible. The traditional unpaid field placement is becoming increasingly controversial; on some college campuses, students have staged walkouts and protests about unpaid field education (Harmon, 2017; Hughes, 2022).

These factors lead to a context in which it may be too financially burdensome for some students to pursue an MSW degree. This cost burden disproportionately impacts first-generation college students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students who have children (Fry, 2021; Williams et al., 2022). One recent national study found that the out-of-pocket cost of attending public college is two to five times higher for student parents compared with their peers, and that the students would need to work 52 hours per week to afford both tuition and childcare (Williams et al., 2022). A social work degree may not be financially feasible for many low-income individuals.

The social work code of ethics is based on social work's core values of "service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person..." (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). People of color continue to face discrimination in the forms of wealth, housing, politics, and criminal justice, among other factors (Miller & Garran, 2007). Accordingly, most social workers are employed in organizations that primarily serve high-need populations, including populations that are overrepresented by people of color, populations below the poverty line, and/or involved with the child welfare system (Salsberg et al., 2020).

Social work is still a predominantly white profession. According to the Center for Health Workforce Studies & NASW Center for Workforce Studies (2006), 85% of licensed social workers identify as white, which is a higher percentage compared to the population as a whole (64–66%; Loya, 2012). This presents a discrepancy in which predominantly white social workers serve mostly clients of color. Expanding access to a social work degree is crucial for multiple reasons:

1. Providing pathways to a social work degree for students from low-income backgrounds is consistent with social work ethics and its focus on social justice.
2. Social work practice must increase the number of social workers who resemble and share experiences with the clients they serve.
3. Social work education must adapt to the changing needs and demands of the students they teach.

## **Employment-Based Field Education**

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has long permitted the use of field placements within a student's place of employment (referred to here as "employment-based field placements"). Traditionally, these placements required students to be engaged in different activities from those of their employment and with a MSW supervisor who was not their job supervisor. This was partly to protect the learning environment for students and avoid dual roles (Sankar, 2012). Starting in 2020, and continuing with the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, CSWE presented new language and criteria for employment-based field placements, loosening some of the previous guidelines, including the opportunity for students to count their work hours as field placement hours (CSWE, 2022). Currently, there is no research regarding models of employment-based social work field education. This is an emerging area of research, especially related to the CSWE change in guidelines.

## **Challenges with Employment-Based Field Placements**

Despite the advantages of providing employment-based field opportunities, some argue that this approach is less than ideal. For instance, critics of employment-based field placements identify challenges such as student role confusion, challenges in developing high-quality learning experiences, and barriers to agencies fully supporting learning experiences (Sankar, 2012). In addition, some argue that the missed opportunity to take a proper "learner's stance" within the organization could impede student's development of essential social work skills.

Ultimately, the question has been raised about the negative impact this may have on the profession as a whole. By opening up the opportunity to complete field placements in employment settings, does this lead to the perception that the profession of social work is lessening its standards and that social workers are less prepared for the workforce? Given that social work is one of several mental health professions, including counseling and psychology, some argue that we must also consider how changing policy around employment-based placements impacts how the social work profession is perceived.

## **Program Description: Our Approach to Employment-Based Field Education**

Since CSWE relaxed some of the standards relevant to employment-based field education in 2019, our approach has evolved each year. Currently, students can apply for three different structures of employment-based field placements. We take a systemic approach to the implementation of employment-based field placement policies and guidelines. At the end of every academic year, we survey all stakeholders, including faculty liaisons, students, and field educators, about their experiences with

employment-based field education. We then review the feedback and revise forms, policies, and resources accordingly.

## **Traditional, Separate Employment-Based Field Placements**

In this type of placement, students' field activities and supervision are new and different from their regular work activities. We acknowledge that a field placement experience separate from a student's work is often seen as best practice, since it allows students to experience new programming, new people, and often new intervention modalities. Many of our partner organizations allow only this type of employment-based field placement.

## **Work as Field**

In this model, students apply to have their regular work duties "count" as field hours. We only allow students to count up to 15 hours per week. To be approved for this approach, a student must demonstrate a link between their work activities and the nine social work competencies (CSWE, 2022). Additionally, students who are requesting to count their regular work duties as field will be expected to create a learning contract that contains at least one project (the "capstone project") that spans two semesters, relates to the majority of the nine competencies, reflects social work values and ethics, and demonstrates substantial professional growth and development. An example of a MSW student's capstone project proposal is below.

I will gather research and information on the benefits of meditation and mindfulness on mental health and for providers. I will also research the benefits of implementing mindfulness groups in mental health housing programs. I will create a training for staff and educate them on mindfulness and meditation benefits as providers and for clients. There is research that utilizing mindfulness improves people's abilities as providers; it can help you be better attuned to client needs, for example. I will implement a reoccurring meeting with staff where we participate in a meditation together. I will implement a twice-weekly mindfulness group for clients that will entail education on utilizing mindfulness in day-to-day life and a guided meditation. For the clients that choose to participate, I will request that they track their meditation minutes for research purposes. I will conduct a questionnaire with clients and staff before and after implementing the program. The student will fully research the topic of stigmatization and bias against individuals with psychotic disorders in the field of social work. The research compiled will be used to create and provide an agency training on the topic. The student will then evaluate the training results.

## Blended Approach

A blended approach is the newest addition to our employment-based field placement options. We heard from students that the two models described above can seem “all or nothing.” For example, several students mentioned that their human services job allowed for 10 hours per week in a separate program working with separate clients, but not the required 15. Still, they were forced to abandon that approach and apply for the “work as field” option due to the inflexibility of our models.

A blended approach allows students to apply to count some of their employment hours as field as long as they can connect their work activities with the nine social work competencies. The other portion of the student’s placement is spent doing social work activities that are different from their job. An example: A student works as a case planner for clients experiencing homelessness. She applies to count eight hours of her job as field and spends an additional seven hours in the organization’s children’s therapeutic unit. Students who apply for a blended approach must also complete a capstone project similar to the projects described above.

## Methods

This evaluation was designed by three social work faculty members whose roles primarily involve field education. We designed the evaluation as a qualitative study to help answer our research questions: (1) How do students, field educators, and faculty liaisons experience our approach to employment-based field placement? and (2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of our current approach to employment-based field?

To answer the research questions related to students, at the end of the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 MSW students were asked to complete surveys about their experience participating in an employment-based field placement. The survey was sent via university email to all MSW students who were approved for any form of employment-based field placement, including both traditional (separate field and work duties) and students who counted some work hours as field hours. The students were not given a timeline for completion of the survey. The data were collected and analyzed two weeks after the survey was distributed. For the academic year 2020-2021, 28 students completed the survey, and in 2021-2022, 15 students completed the survey. Of the student respondents, 20 had separate work and field activities, 20 did not have different work and field activities, and three answered “other.” The survey contained ten open-ended questions that asked broadly about the student’s field experience, including how it impacted their learning, personal life, and professional life, and why they chose to pursue an employment-based placement.

To answer the research questions related to field educators, at the end of the academic

year field educators who supervised employment-based MSW students were emailed a voluntary survey consisting of eight questions. The field educators were not given a timeline for the completion of the survey; the data were analyzed two weeks after the survey was distributed. In 2021, 11 field educators completed the survey, and in 2022, 17 field educators completed the survey. Twenty-three of the combined field educators indicated that the student they supervised had separate field and work activities; five field educators supervised students that counted some or all of their work hours as field hours. The goal of the survey was to better understand the field educator's role in employment-based field placements, with the eventual goal of creating a set of best practices. Several themes emerged and are described below.

At this school of social work, faculty liaisons are adjunct faculty members employed by the school to serve as the main point of contact for a group of students and field educators. Faculty liaisons are required to maintain ongoing communication with the placement site and conduct one site visit (in-person or virtual) with the student and field educator each semester. At the end of the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, faculty liaisons were surveyed about their assessment of employment-based field placements. Ten field educators completed the survey in 2020-2021, and two completed the survey in 2021-2022.

## **Analysis and Positionality**

To address our research questions, we conducted a qualitative rapid analysis approach (Gale et al., 2019; Lewinski et al., 2021). As study authors, we independently read and made summary notes for each open-ended response by each participant group (students, field educators, and faculty liaisons) using a data analysis matrix. We then met to compare our summaries, discuss any discrepancies, and come to a consensus. The next step involved discussing and identifying themes and noting quotations that highlighted the themes. As faculty working in field education, we acknowledge the potential for subjectivity and bias, e.g., the desire to focus too much on the positive feedback about our work and to minimize the negative. Throughout the analysis process, we attempted to examine critically any assumptions or biases that may have influenced our analysis and which themes were selected to be highlighted.

## **Results**

### **Student Results**

#### *Why an Employment-Based Placement?*

When asked about why they chose an employment-based placement, several themes emerged. Over 30% of the respondents explicitly commented that their life

circumstances would not allow for a traditional MSW field placement (one outside of and in addition to their employment), citing caregiving responsibilities and demanding employment responsibilities. For example, “[I chose an employment-based placement] because I’m a working mother of two young children. I feel like it would have been impossible for me to successfully get through the program if I did not have this option.” Additionally, several students remarked that choosing an employment-based field placement was better for their learning and career development. One student said,

I would have had to quit my job in order to do my internship. Now I will actually be able to dedicate more energy to my work and I will be eligible for a very substantial promotion. My work is social work, and I strongly believe this option should remain open for future students. It opens so many doors for students who are already doing the work, rather than pulling them out of their already established place in the field.

By choosing an employment-based field placement, students noted that they could better manage the competing demands of their life (family, classes, work, field) while not sacrificing their field learning. One student mentioned, “Both the experience, gathering and solidifying the information, and then offering and providing the training, managing questions, and gathering feedback from other agency staff was incredibly insightful, challenging and well-received.” Several students highlighted how their capstone project made a substantial positive impact at their employer, with one student saying “My capstone project was apparently such a good idea that the agency created a whole workgroup around it. We meet monthly via Zoom now and have laid the foundation for what we want this to look like.”

### *Enhanced Learning: “Applying What I was Learning to What I was Doing.”*

Students highlighted their ability to quickly integrate and practice concepts, theories, and interventions they learned from their MSW courses into their field placements. One MSW student remarked, “In one course, we learned about different leadership roles, and this helped me when I was the lead on a project for my internship.” Students felt that having an established position within an agency, with regular duties and/or clients, put them in a position to integrate field and classroom learning more quickly. This, in turn, seemed to enhance their work and field learning. One student commented, “It was helpful being able to use work experiences for classroom assignments. Work-based field made me feel more productive and focused on work tasks and school tasks.”

Several students who counted some regular work hours for field commented about how their capstone project allowed them to apply course concepts. One student remarked, “I created a training on trauma-informed care and presented it to my



supervisors and higher-ups. I was able to take my current job skills and apply that to my field placement and learning opportunities.”

### *Promotion of Student Well-Being*

Students were asked how an employment-based field placement impacted their academic experience and personal life. From an educational perspective, students noted that a work-based field placement gave them more time to focus on academics, homework, and reading. Having their field placement at their job eliminated a commute to an outside agency, which freed up some time in students’ schedules. One student remarked, “I simply did NOT have the time to commute etc. to a new agency, go back to class, then back to the office (I tried in my first year and it led to stress, and other serious adverse health outcomes).”

Students consistently mentioned that the added flexibility of an employment-based field placement allowed them more time to spend on their coursework and assignments, or even to take the specific classes they desired. One student echoed this sentiment:

I was able to actually balance work-school-person unlike other students that I know who have struggled to keep up with coursework. I feel like I’ve really been able to attend to my classes and assignments and truly learn rather than just getting through it.

From a personal life standpoint, students mentioned that an employment-based field placement positively impacted their ability to set clear boundaries between work, school, and family. One student noted, “It’s been highly beneficial to take care of my field work within the hours I am able to make a living so I can set clear boundaries between field work and school work without being overworked.”

Further, several students mentioned that their employment-based field placement gave them the time and flexibility to focus on self-care. One student remarked, “I was able to still attend to my self-care and mental health and felt like I still was able to really focus on school and not just ‘phone it in’ in my other classes.”

### *Expansion of Professional Opportunities and Career Growth*

Many students chose to pursue an employment-based field placement due to a genuine interest in their work, practice area, and clients served. Further, several students highlighted how an employment-based field placement allowed them exposure to new programs and aspects of their organization, which had the added benefit of raising the student’s profile within the organization. One student commented:

Being able to network with my MSW supervisor outside of the normal duties within my current job role, I was exposed to several growth opportunities within the agency at large (e.g., group supervision, partnering with other affiliates for collaborative community coordination efforts).

As a result of increased exposure to their organizations, several students noted new opportunities, promotions, and awards that resulted from their expanded field placement role within the organization. A student noted, “I have now gained relationships I would have never made beforehand, and was even nominated and accepted into [the employer’s] Acceleration Pool/Succession Management Program by my MSW supervisor, which would have never happened without this employment-based field opportunity!”

## **Field Educator Results**

### *Supervision as a Tool to Connect Classroom and Field Learning*

Field educators consistently mentioned that the focus of their supervision with MSW field students significantly changed compared to how they would typically supervise an employee. This was true both for field educators who were the work supervisor for students and for field educators who were not familiar with the student’s work duties. Field educators used supervision to connect concepts from the MSW curriculum to the student’s experience at their field placement. One field educator remarked, “More emphasis [was placed] during supervision on connection between the work they do and what they are learning in school – putting names to things they already do or learning new techniques and discussing how to apply them at work.” Additionally, field educators highlighted the importance of helping students learn and understand field experiences from a social work perspective. One field educator said, “We often discussed situations with a clear reference to the social work lens.”

### *The Importance of Boundaries and “Sacred Time”*

Field educators noted the importance of setting clear boundaries and ensuring role clarity between the student as a worker and the student as a learner. Several field educators highlighted the importance of the learning contract to help clearly define roles and activities. One field educator described helping the student cultivate “sacred time” to focus on learning-specific tasks and activities contained within the learning contract. In addition to helping to clarify roles and activities, several field educators highlighted the use of the learning contract to help concretize role separation and boundaries, and to ensure that the student had the time and space to be a learner. One field educator remarked that the learning contract was “crucial” to the student’s success. For students who had separate work and field activities, field educators

highlighted the importance of setting clear boundaries and expectations with the student, field educator, and other agency staff. One field educator commented, “We would discuss ways to stay clear of working their typical job duties as it is easy for them to drift back that way.”

### *Intra-Agency Networking and Opportunities*

In addition to helping students develop competency and add depth to their learning contract, field educators frequently mentioned linking the student with different programs or experiences within the agency as a way to expose the student to different aspects of social work. Field educators frequently cited finding “opportunities outside of traditional roles and responsibilities” as a way to prioritize the student’s role as learner and help them develop all of the core social work competencies. Rather than a focus on a student’s core job responsibility, field educators encouraged students to take advantage of other agency learning opportunities or agency needs. For example, one field educator mentioned encouraging the student to “attend outside macro level meetings; review policies and procedures, both internal and external; create a resource guide external to agency for use by all case managers.” Another field educator mentioned that prior to the student starting their placement they contacted other programs and departments within the organization to create a list of learning opportunities for the student.

### *Drawbacks*

One field educator mentioned challenges or drawbacks to student learning. A field educator for a student who was using their job duties as their field placement highlighted, “It was extremely difficult to help the student in regard to their role as a learner because the student was very good at the job.” Additionally, the field educator disagreed with the changes that allowed students to count work as field, which made it difficult for them to supervise the student. Further, almost all field educators mentioned that for this model to work, they needed to change and adapt their supervisory style, which provides a further burden on field educators, who are often volunteer educators for social work students.

## **Faculty Liaison Results**

### *Strengths*

Faculty liaisons also saw employment-based field placements as a better fit for working students, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from rural communities with few social work field placement options. One liaison remarked, “I can see how this would allow someone to get their education without compromising

their employment and life balance.”

Several liaisons highlighted how employment-based field placements allow the student to view their employment from a new perspective, which can have a reenergizing effect. Further, liaisons reflected that employment-based students can more quickly apply concepts from the curriculum to their everyday work, given its familiarity and their relative independence.

### *Challenges*

Liaisons mentioned challenges associated with a field educator and work supervisor being the same person. One liaison worried that it was “business as usual,” that the student may not take on additional learning responsibilities, and that there was a lack of “checks and balances” if a field educator or agency did not adhere to the learning activities and opportunities outlined in the learning contract and employment-based field placement application. Liaisons also noted potential issues regarding equity and fairness compared with other students who were completing an outside field experience. One liaison remarked, “[Employment-based field] seems a bit unfair to other students who are working and doing field placements on top of their work.” Some liaisons compared employment-based field placements with traditional outside field placements, and noted that employment-based students may miss out on some of the less obvious benefits of an outside field placement, including meeting new people, learning a new agency culture, and potentially working with new clients or modes of intervention. Last, liaisons commented about being confused themselves about the different types of employment-based field placements and the requirements of each.

### *Different Liaison Approach*

Faculty liaisons were asked to answer questions about their approach to liaising with employment-based field placements and whether they had suggestions to strengthen these types of placements. Several liaisons noted that they took a different approach to communicating with students and field educators in employment-based field placements. Particularly, the liaisons focused on ensuring that clear boundaries were being adhered to, and that the student and field educator were able to link the student’s field work to the curriculum. For students who are counting their regular work as field, one liaison noted, “I ask the student to provide more specific details about how their experience is incorporating the core [social work] competencies.” Faculty liaisons also encouraged students to find learning opportunities, roles, and experiences that were outside of their normal job duties. Last, liaisons offered several ideas to improve the quality of employment-based field placements, including more liaison “touch points” with the student and field educator; specialized training for field educators, students, and faculty liaisons; and assigning an outside field educator to

supervise some employment-based field placements.

## Discussion

It is clear from our findings that the new CSWE guidelines for employment-based placements offer both challenges and opportunities. The primary challenges include ensuring that appropriate boundaries are in place for the student and guaranteeing that it is a substantive learning experience. Additionally, not all field educators and/or agencies are in agreement with these flexible standards. These challenges are important and it is essential that schools of social work develop policies, procedures, and best practices to address these challenges.

This model presents significant opportunities as well. The strongest theme that emerged from our findings (with students, field educators, and liaisons) was that utilizing employment-based placements in which a student can count some or all of their work as field hours promoted student well-being. Students were not forced to choose between employment or school. They did not have to sacrifice additional time in their schedule to fulfill another field placement. They were able to balance their personal, professional, and academic demands much more successfully.

Allowing students this increased flexibility is also responsive to criticism within social work education (and higher education in general) that higher education is inaccessible to many people, especially racially and economically underrepresented groups (Fry, 2021). At a time when social workers are desperately needed, this is a way to make the field requirement less burdensome for students and level the playing field just a bit. There is also a growing call to pay field students for their field service (Harmon, 2017).

We argue that these expanded guidelines may allow for expanded partnerships with agencies. If an organization is aware that they do not need to sacrifice an employee's time for an outside field placement, it may be an incentive to support the employee to pursue an MSW degree. It has the potential to be a less burdensome experience for both student and organization. Allowing one's work in human services potentially to be credited as field hours responds to many issues that are confronting higher education.

Finally, both students and field educators in our study reported that they had enhanced learning opportunities within their employment-based placement, including increased opportunities to be exposed to new departments, areas of practice, skills, and expanded leadership opportunities. While some field educators and liaisons worried about the placement being diluted in terms of the learning experience, many other students and educators reported the opposite—that the experience provided opportunities for significant learning, growth, and advancement within the

organization.

There may be practice implications for social workers who participate in employment-based field placements. A consistent theme in student responses cited their ability to quickly practice and utilize the skills and knowledge learned in the classroom with clients at their work-based placement. It is conceivable that students who participate in employment-based field placements are equipped to “hit the ground running” and quickly implement advanced social work interventions. Future research will focus on gaining a better understanding of the practice implications of these field placements.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of this study. The survey data were collected from a single school of social work, so generalizability of results to other contexts is limited. Further, participation in the survey was optional; it is possible that the beliefs and attitudes expressed by those who chose to participate differ from those who opted not to participate. Although results should be interpreted with caution, the current study provides valuable information on a variety of perspectives as they relate to the implementation of CSWE’s new employment-based field guidelines.

### **Recommended Best Practices**

Based on our study as well as our experience, we offer the following best practices for integrating CSWE’s new employment-based field guidelines.

#### **Clear Expectations for Students That Offer Some Flexibility**

Students should be informed in a clear way of what the opportunities are for their employment-based field placements. Clear marketing and outreach are essential, including examples of what successful placements have looked like in the past. It is also important to communicate that there is some flexibility in how to approach employment-based field placements. A student’s field hours do not need to be spent in a different unit entirely. Perhaps there is a way to gain exposure to something new while also counting some of the “regular” work hours for field.

#### **Prioritizing Students as Learners**

Students and field educators must understand that student learning must be prioritized in employment-based field placements. New learning, opportunities, and responsibilities should be explored with the nine competencies in mind. Supervision is another important component. Field educators should be oriented and trained to support the students as both students and learners (not just as employees). All parties

must agree to prioritize learning and skill development as the focus of the experience. Utilizing the learning contract to clearly define tasks and responsibilities is an excellent strategy reported by both students and educators to help anchor the student's placement in social work skills and competencies and to ensure role and task clarity.

### **Increased and Intentional Oversight and Support**

The learning needs and support for students and educators engaged in an employment-based placement are unique and warrant consideration. For field education administrators, it is essential to develop a clear and thorough employment-based field application that emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of the student and educator and gains everyone's buy-in. Supports such as individualized and group meetings and informational sessions have been found to be helpful. A thorough vetting of students' applications should also be considered, and further follow-up with the student and/or agency may be necessary to ensure the key components of the experience are in place.

Field departments should also consider the unique needs of employment-based field educators. They need a different orientation to their roles and responsibilities than do traditional field educators. Liaisons should be intentional about their site visits and check in on boundaries, role confusion, and other challenges. They also may need to offer increased touchpoints and check-ins.

### **Conclusion**

Employment-based field placements do not solve all of the challenges of social work education, or of field education. However, they expand opportunities, particularly for part-time, nontraditional, and working students, and promote many of our values as social workers and social work educators. We argue that allowing for employment-based field placements, including those that permit students to count their work as field, can be done in a way that creates quality learning opportunities for students, and can benefit both students and agency partners. Our findings suggest strategies for ensuring robust employment-based field placements, including creating and communicating clear expectations, prioritizing students as learners, and increasing intentional oversight and support for employment-based placements. Utilizing these emerging best practices can meet the growing demand for flexibility in social work field education, and expand and diversify the pool of students who can pursue an MSW degree and become meaningful agents of change.

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