



Developing and Supporting Virtual Social Work Practicum Placements

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Practicum¹ education continually evolves and adapts to meet the needs of our changing and dynamic social work environment. This entails exploring new settings, stepping outside of a traditional view of social work service provision, and considering a myriad of clinical service delivery options to best respond to client needs (Harriman, 2016). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, practicum offices across the country adapted their operations to enable students to meet practicum requirements. During this time an important call to action was raised, asking practicum educators to consider virtual options for practicum education (De Fries et al., 2021; Rogerson et al., 2020). Educators recognized that a new model of service delivery was critically important, as the use of technology had become increasingly essential to the social work field for pandemic-related responses and to fill gaps in service highlighted during times of crisis. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) also adjusted and clarified requirements for virtual placements and supervision, acknowledging the importance of flexibility during this time (CSWE, 2020). In this paper, we define *virtual placements* as placements in which all or most of the work with clients is conducted virtually.

1 The authors have chosen to use the word “practicum” in lieu of “field” in response to their university’s efforts to address concerns related to the use of oppressive language within social work education, particularly pertaining to the historical connotations connected to “field work.”

Telehealth is work conducted with clients via a virtual platform, which may occur on- or off-site. Further descriptions of the type of agencies and modes of delivery utilized are discussed below.

We must not think of virtual placements only as a solution for pandemic-related placement concerns, but also as a way forward for provision of social work education and services. Schools of social work play a crucial role in supporting, educating, and training students in learning new skills in telehealth (Browne et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2021; Rinkel et al., 2023). This paper reports on how one school of social work established virtual placements, as both social work agencies and student needs demanded a shift to virtual service provision. Recommendations are made for programs seeking to establish these types of placements with regard to a) student fit, b) developing robust learning experiences, and c) supervision and supports. Special attention is paid to the changing contexts of the profession and the incorporation of virtual placements into social work education.

A Move to Virtual

As agencies have shifted and adapted to incorporate virtual work as a result of the pandemic, recognizing how practicum placements might be provided in a virtual-only context must be part of the conversation. The pandemic opened the door for greater innovation and reflection on how social work services are provided in a variety of contexts, particularly virtual delivery (Fronck et al., 2021; Lambert, 2020; Mitchell, 2022; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Schools of social work now have the opportunity to partner with agencies and support the development of critical practice skills for students in a fully virtual environment. This includes agencies that were already providing services virtually via telehealth, and agencies utilizing virtual platforms or hotlines.

As schools of social work explore virtual placement settings, there are several considerations necessary in order for the school, the agency, and the student to ensure an appropriate fit and learning experience. This paper reports on the experiences of practicum educators working with students in the online program format (all coursework asynchronous) at Rutgers University School of Social Work, and provides recommendations for schools of social work who may be considering incorporation of virtual placements into practicum education. As a large online program (approximately 900 students, nationwide), during the height of the pandemic it became necessary to think outside the box to meet the needs of students in completing their placements. Some students were located in areas with limited opportunities for placements due to the pandemic, and some shared health risks/concerns, and/or saw an increase in caretaking responsibilities, requiring the need for alternatives. To ensure a comprehensive learning experience, we were dedicated to finding

opportunities with social work agency partners where students would be able to meet learning competencies, even if in a nontraditional placement setting. In doing so, we developed several virtual-only placements across the country that continue to be used to this day to meet student needs, even outside of the pandemic crisis. The virtual placements developed include a range of agencies using technology to engage with clients via virtual or telehealth platforms using videoconferencing, phone, or text/chat messaging. The types of clinical services provided vary depending on the agency, but include counseling, case management, crisis intervention, and outreach.

A Recommended Model for Developing Virtual Placements

Assessing Student Fit for Virtual Placements

Virtual placements can meet the needs of nontraditional students who are completing their education, even outside the scope of the pandemic or health-related concerns. For example, military-affiliated students who may live abroad, or who move frequently due to military obligations, may benefit from the flexibility of a virtual placement. Traditional in-person agencies may be reluctant to take on such a student for a short period of time, but a virtual placement may allow for consistency of setting as a student changes physical location. Students who work full-time or have schedule restrictions may be a good fit for a virtual placement, particularly on crisis hotlines that operate 24/7, provided students have specific time dedicated to completing their practicum hours. Additionally, students who live in remote or rural locations where access to social work agencies is limited may also benefit from this type of placement.

While many may benefit from this option, virtual placements will not be a good fit for all students; thus, practicum offices play an integral role in assessing for fit. In working as practicum educators with students, we have found that some of the student characteristics that can negatively impact learning in a virtual placement include not being independent learners, being inexperienced in the field, lacking reliable access to the internet, and/or struggling or are uncomfortable with technology. Assessing the student's level of independence and accountability is important; while students will not be completely alone in a virtual setting, it is different from a space in which others physically see you (and vice-versa) and may require some additional comfort with and initiative to reaching out for support when needed. Some students may request a virtual placement because they feel it will best meet their needs, but program staff must dedicate time to further assess the fit to ensure it will provide an appropriate learning environment for each student. While virtual placements provide flexibility for students, they must be treated with the same level of commitment as an in-person location – meaning students must have a confidential workspace in their home that they can work from, and they must be focused on their practicum work during a consistent practicum schedule. For example, students who have caretaking

responsibilities in the home need to consider coverage for those responsibilities during their scheduled practicum hours.

As programs consider which students to refer to virtual placements, it is important to continually review the expectations with students, both before an interview and during the placement, including the training period. Practicum faculty/staff should discuss with students how the experience will be different from an in-person placement, and how work may look or be completed differently in this setting. Students should also be made aware of and prepared to complete any onboarding requirements that may require additional training outside of the regular schedule. Encouraging students to provide feedback and be open about their experiences is key. For students who may request this option, programs may want to consider a short survey or checklist for students to complete prior to a referral, to assess readiness. Finally, for students who request both generalist and specialized placements in a virtual setting, programs will need to assess that this type of setting is a good fit for sustained student learning and is able to meet both levels of learning competencies. (See Appendix A for a sample checklist to assess students' readiness for virtual placements.)

Developing Virtual Placements

As social work practicum education departments consider developing virtual placements, it is important to determine agency needs. This is similar to setting up an in-person placement, ensuring that not only learning competencies but also logistical factors can be met, such as how many hours students need to complete, how long students are in placement, what experiences (advanced/specialized or generalist) are available, and if the agency has enough work to support students and supervision structures. Virtual placements may be developed through relationships with existing agencies that are now providing telehealth services, as well as new relationships with agencies providing services in this way.

When speaking with an agency to set up a new virtual placement, it is important to ask about the structure of the placement: the work that will be done, how and where it will be done, and with whom. When determining the structure, students should be given details about how they will be engaging in direct practice work with clients. This includes the type of clinical work being conducted (e.g., counseling, case management), and where it occurs, as some agencies may have on-site components required for training, supervision, or use of technology. It is also important to understand the technology students may be using (e.g., video conferencing, texting, phone calls) and if students are responsible for providing their own equipment, as well as ensure that security measures are in place for any data and client information that may be accessed online or virtually. Asking about training is essential: is there

training that must be completed prior to students getting more in-depth work, does training occur throughout the placement, how many hours are required, and are there consequences of a student not completing certain aspects of the training (i.e., must it be completed successfully for the student to remain at the placement)? As with any agency, those that do not provide a detailed training plan should be further assessed for fit.

Agencies should also be asked what a typical day looks like for the student, so the school can understand not only what clinical work students will be involved in, but also how the student will interact with other students or staff at the agency. It is important to understand how students receive feedback, and what level of initiative they may need to take in seeking feedback or setting up meetings with colleagues. For example, it is important to ask if students will be working with others, independently, or a combination. Additionally, agencies should be asked if there are mechanisms set up for students to receive support quickly, or connect informally with others, such as through a group chat or text. (See Appendix B for a checklist of questions to ask an agency regarding virtual placements.)

Supervision and Additional Supports

Supervision must be assessed in the virtual agency environment, so that additional supports may be provided if needed. Schools should ask if the agency provides a supervisor who meets the MSW supervision requirement, or if a school-contracted MSW supervisor is needed. Identifying the MSW practicum and task supervisors is key, as well as understanding the role that each will play in the daily work of the agency, including how accessible they are for the student. This process is not unique to virtual placements, but we recommend a greater emphasis on understanding supervisor access, particularly when all parties are engaging in remote work.

At Rutgers, we found that while many virtual agencies provide adequate supervision for students in virtual settings, it was important to provide an additional layer of support to ensure student learning objectives specific to our program were met, while also creating community for students completing placements in a virtual setting, particularly those completing practicum hours on a crisis hotline or setting where much of the work is independent and fully virtual (as opposed to placements that may be hybrid). A group supervision model was applied as an additional level of support for students in particular virtual settings where students were paired with a school-contracted supervisor. Group supervision time slots are offered several times a week for students in the same virtual agency, allowing flexibility for when students can attend. During group supervision students present case reviews, discuss challenging cases, consider unique factors to doing clinical practice in a virtual environment, and receive support and validation while building community with each other.

The contracted supervisor also plays a role in reviewing and providing feedback on practicum documentation, such as the learning contract and process recordings. We have found this model to be beneficial to students and agencies alike, and would recommend programs consider this model, particularly if they have multiple students at the same agency.

A key component of a successful virtual placement relationship is ongoing support from the school for the student and the agency. The school should consistently evaluate how the program can provide support to both student and agency, and keep communication ongoing and clear with all parties. This is particularly helpful because many organizations may be working with students from multiple universities/ programs with varying deadlines and expectations. Developing a strong partnership with the virtual agency's staff/supervisors will help ensure more productive problem-solving when and if it is needed. Schools should consider how they provide training and support to practicum supervisors, and how this may need to be adapted to fit a virtual placement.

With the online program at Rutgers, much of the support provided to practicum agencies was moved to a virtual format in order to meet the needs of a national online program. For example, training for practicum supervisors has been provided in an asynchronous Seminar for Field Instruction (SIFI), agency site visits that occur each semester happen via video conferencing, and regular communication is maintained via email outreach. Programs that have an in-person model of support will need to consider how to shift these supports to a virtual format, as virtual agencies may not be local, or have a physical presence.

Considerations and Challenges

While there are many benefits related to student access, flexibility, health and safety, and increased learning about innovative social work practice tools and techniques, it is important to recognize that a virtual placement may create considerations and challenges that cannot be dismissed. This section discusses the lessons we learned while developing a model for and supporting virtual placements, along with additional recommendations. While this may depend on program size and staffing infrastructure, we recommend having a practicum education department point person for virtual placements. This allows for a more cohesive understanding of best practices, with the coordinator acting as an expert on these specialized type of placements across agencies. In addition, having a consistent point of contact for specific virtual agencies will ensure ongoing communication with all parties is clear, and any problem-solving is coordinated.

While both in-person and virtual placement settings may require a level of

independent work from students, virtual settings, due to their remote nature, require special consideration. It is important to address the impact of isolation on your students, and how that might influence their overall learning experience. Programs can develop supports for students in virtual settings to combat isolation, such as peer support or group supervision, and should work with the agency to ensure students are included in agency activities (e.g., staff training, meetings).

As noted above, continual assessment of students' fit in a virtual setting is needed. Just because the setting meets a student's scheduling needs does not mean it may be the right fit, so it is important to meet regularly with students, liaisons, and agency supervisors to ensure that the student is not only meeting learning goals, but doing so in an appropriate way (i.e., dedicating time and space to the virtual placement). If the virtual placement is not the right fit, discussions should occur about changing the placement setting.

In addition to assessing student fit, continually reviewing how the agency work supports social work learning competencies is essential. Working with the agency to create supplemental assignments/tasks to meet all learning competencies will provide a full practicum experience. The program discussed in this paper has primarily focused on generalist or clinical placements, and not macro specializations. For students who are in a highly clinical setting primarily working with virtual clients, to meet competencies they may need support in creating assignments related to policy or research. These assignments can be completed in conjunction with the practicum supervisor, and focus on macro issues related to the work of the agency, even if not directly related to the role of the social worker at that agency. There may be opportunities here for students to engage in additional learning, particularly about policies and legislation related to telehealth and virtual work that can support their future social work practice.

Finally, it is important to consider the integration of practicum and course content within the school's curriculum. We recommend collaboration between practicum staff and faculty to ensure that practice courses are updated to reflect the diverse clinical modalities social work students engage in. Practice courses should include at least introductory discussions about telehealth, as well as conversation about ethical considerations for telehealth and virtual social work, as many students may be encountering this type of work across settings.

Conclusion

We believe there is an ongoing need for virtual placements as the landscape of social work services has evolved, and that these opportunities have opened additional innovative learning experiences for students. As we continue to assess and utilize

virtual settings, it is important to consider how virtual practicums can best be utilized, strategies for developing these settings, appropriate supervision structures and support for virtual placements, and factors that may create both benefits and challenges.

Virtual placements provide numerous opportunities for students to learn new skills and methods of intervention for working with diverse clients in a virtual world, and diminish the risk of disrupted learning experiences when services cannot be provided in-person. While telehealth and provision of social work services via virtual platforms is not new, the exploration of placements in this area comes with many layers of questions and concerns. With the right level of support and coordination, virtual placements can provide experiences comparable to more “traditional” in-person placements. Technology is advancing, and social work education must respond so that our students are prepared to do this work. The recommendations presented in this paper provide an important framework for practicum education departments and schools of social work seeking to develop permanent virtual placements thoughtfully.

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Appendix A

Checklist for Student Virtual Practicum Placements

- Why have you decided to pursue a virtual placement? In what ways does a virtual placement support your educational goals?
- Do you have a dedicated, confidential and distraction-free workspace to complete your weekly practicum hours?
- What will be your weekly schedule (days/times)?
- How will you make up any missed hours? (Particularly important if the student has schedule restrictions)
- Do you have reliable access to high-speed internet?
- Do you have access to technology and equipment required to perform job duties?
- Are you aware of the supports available to you from both the school and agency? Who will you connect with if you have concerns?
- How comfortable are you with learning new technology remotely?
- Virtual internships often require a higher level of independence. How will you manage your internship and communication needs with the agency?
- Is the student requesting a second virtual placement (i.e., both generalist and specialized)? Assess fit to ensure the most comprehensive learning experience for both student and agency, along with any unique factors that may make a virtual setting appropriate for both placement levels. This includes assessing student performance in generalist placement as well as ensuring appropriate learning experiences at varied virtual agency sites

Appendix B

Virtual Practicum Agency: Questions for Consideration

Structure of the Virtual Placement

- What hours are available for students to complete practicum work?
- What does the application/interview process entail?
 - Is there a set timeline that applications must be submitted in for placement start points each semester?
- How many hours are required each week? How do students set up their schedules?
- How are students engaging in direct practice work with clients?
- How are students engaging in macro work?
- What is the existing training structure?
 - How many hours of training need to be completed?
 - Are there specific dates training is completed or needs to be completed by?
 - What are the implications of not successfully completing training?
- What technology is needed/provided?
- What does a typical day look like for a student?
 - Are breaks built in? How do students decompress from crisis work?
 - Are there a variety of tasks students might be working on each day?
- What does telehealth look like for your agency? (E.g., is the student fully virtual, or will they be required to be present onsite to complete clinical work, attend supervision, or other meetings)
- Are there unique factors to consider for Affiliation Agreements and/or university liability insurance?

Supervision

- What is the supervision structure?
 - Will the student meet individually with the supervisor?
 - Is there group supervision?
 - Do students have access to other modes of supervision, such as case reviews and training?
 - Is someone available to give students feedback between formal supervision sessions?
- How often is supervision conducted?
 - Is there a set supervision time each week?
- Who will be providing supervision? Will there also be a task supervisor?
- Is there a need for an off-site MSW instructor (if there is not an MSW at the agency)?

Agency Supports

- How will the agency help students feel integrated into the virtual agency?
- How do students receive feedback/instruction in the virtual environment?
- How does the agency connect its staff, interns, and volunteers in a virtual environment?
- Is there a designated point of contact who builds rapport with students? How do students connect with agency staff?