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Field Instructors' Perceived Benefits of and Barriers to Student-Led Field Research Projects

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Abstract

Research demonstrates a chasm between the instruction of practice-informed research and research-informed practice in field education. Drawing on surveys, this study explores the perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led field-based research projects among social work field instructors at a private university in southern California. Key benefits identified included improved service delivery and professional connections between research and practice, while key barriers included lack of time and limited employer reward for supporting student research. Field instructor training, field visits, and student preparedness were noted as beneficial supports to enhance research–practice collaborations between community agencies and social work programs.

Keywords: field-based student research projects; field instructor perceptions; benefits and barriers to field-based research

Introduction

The development of the professional competency of social work students is a common interest among community agencies and schools of social work. As universities strive

to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and field practice, schools of social work rely on field instructors to reinforce classroom knowledge and cultivate student skills in engaging in ethical social work practice. Field education is thus referred to as the signature pedagogy of social work education.

In order to prepare students to engage in field practice, schools of social work must meet rigorous accreditation standards outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). As part of these accreditation standards, CSWE has identified nine competencies that build social work students' "ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" and that are considered necessary for students to develop in preparation for engaging in professional social work practice as skilled practitioners (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015).

One of the nine key CSWE competencies—engaging in practice-informed research and research-informed practice—seeks to enable practitioners to improve practice, inform policy, improve service delivery, and contribute to the knowledge of the profession through the process of evaluating practice methods (CSWE, 2015). Student research projects conducted in collaboration with field sites are potential assets to field sites that experience limitations in the time, resources, or experience needed to conduct research effectively (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Edmond et al., 2006).

Additionally, the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* identifies key values and principles for ethical behavior and practice among social work practitioners. Among these principles, the development of ethical competence is acknowledged as an ongoing process of continued education, skills development, research, and professional scrutiny, with the intention of upholding the integrity of the profession (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). Thus, to promote student engagement in field research projects is to promote student engagement in ethical practice, as well as enable students' capacity to learn from existing research knowledge, engage in research practice, contribute to professional knowledge, and implement research findings, all of which enhances students' professional competence as emerging practitioners (Shannon et al., 2012; Spicuzza, 2007).

Given the increasing emphasis on the use of scientific evidence to legitimize practice interventions and funding, it is imperative to ensure that emerging practitioners develop skills to apply and engage with research in practice environments. Studies have consistently found that students in programs that explicitly connect research to community-based experiential learning better comprehend the value of research for practice, thereby concretizing the academic–practice relationship for the next generation of practitioners (Lyman et al., 2015; Natland et al., 2016; Shannon et

al., 2012). Practitioners serving as field instructors for students in field internship placements, however, often experience difficulty in operationalizing the practice-informed research and research-informed practice competency. Specifically, they experience difficulty in translating research into practice and in viewing the practice environment as a field for research, which in turn hampers students' ability to understand the pivotal relationship between research and practice (Bellamy et al., 2006; Edmond et al., 2006).

To address these challenges, a school of social work at a private university in southern California prepares undergraduate social work students to engage in evidence-informed practice and research by having them conduct original, empirical studies based on their field internship placements, while graduate-level students develop capstone research projects tied to their field placement sites. These field-based student research projects also create an opportunity for students to conduct research within their field placement under the supervision of their field instructor and to apply practical research skills in a real-life setting, and serve as a resource for field agencies to engage in research activities. Through field research projects, students are able to use their findings to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of agency programs and processes.

Drawing on surveys (N = 56) of field instructors at currently utilized field sites, this study explores their perceived benefits of and challenges to implementing student research projects tied to field placements. As the value of practice-informed research and research-informed practice is reciprocal, understanding these perceived benefits and challenges to developing collaborative research projects in the field will offer insights on how universities and community agencies can better engage with each other to evaluate current practice methods in field, utilize research findings as a means to inform practice, and identify opportune recommendations for social work education as it pertains to field education.

Literature Review

Social Work Education and Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has been defined in many ways by researchers and practitioners within the social work profession. EBP can be defined as the practice framework used by practitioners to ensure field practice is informed by research (Najor-Durack, 2016). It is the process that social work professionals undertake to evaluate interventions and their effectiveness with clients, combining clinical experience, research findings, client values, agency objectives, and government requirements (Edmond et al., 2006; Homonoff, 2008). The push for EBP in social work practice is motivated by professional mandates to engage in ethical practice,

government mandates for accountability, and funding organizations' evidence requirements (Edmond et al., 2006). As a result, the development of students' ability to learn and implement social work practice methodology that is rooted in research is of utmost importance to social work education.

Schools of social work can be of great value to field agencies due to the research resources and expertise that educational institutions have to offer (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013). The partnership between schools of social work and field agencies can build students' professional competency as future practitioners, allow students the opportunity to contribute to field knowledge, and provide an opportunity for students to apply classroom training in the field practice setting, thus reinforcing the EBP practices they learn. Students that engage in field research grow in confidence in their ability to conduct, interpret, and implement research findings in field practice (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013). In contrast, lack of research education among social work students limits students' development of research skills and their ability to interpret and implement research findings in practice (Natland et al., 2016).

Perceived Benefits of Research for Social Work Practice

Field instructors play a key role in the practical field education of social work students, including in guiding students' understanding of the implementation of EBP in the field setting and, as relevant, providing support for student-led field research projects. The push for EBP in social work practice is motivated by professional and "ethical concerns about the effectiveness of social work practice" (Edmond et al., 2006, p. 378). Many field instructors, however, often do not follow a structured teaching model, but instead rely on "practice wisdom" to instruct students, which is an invaluable resource for identifying the most appropriate evidence-based interventions based on the unique needs of individual clients (Edmond et al., 2006; Homonoff, 2008).

While student research projects conducted at field internship placement sites can benefit schools of social work by fulfilling the requirement to teach research skills to students as part of CSWE accreditation requirements, field agencies and the clients they serve can also benefit from student research projects. Student interns enter field placement with access to up-to-date research methodology, the support of research faculty, and additional resources available to them through the university (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Shannon et al., 2012). Student-led field research projects can assist with program evaluation and facilitate improved service delivery and, ultimately, better client outcomes (Berger, 2013; Homonoff, 2008; Natland et al., 2016). Research projects also help students develop research skills and enhance student connection between research findings and practice (Berger, 2013; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; CSWE, 2015; Edmond et al., 2006; Lyman et al., 2015; Natland et al., 2016; Shannon et al., 2012).

The benefits of student research to agencies include cost-effective research support that is vital to their agency (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Homonoff, 2008), updated knowledge regarding the research topic, evidence for funding opportunities, and an opportunity to partner with the university to conduct research (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Edmond et al., 2006; Homonoff, 2008; NASW, 2017; Shannon et al., 2012; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). Field instructors' perceptions regarding the benefits of field research as a part of evidence-based practice can be helpful to universities as they consider ways to effectively partner with agencies for the purpose of field education.

Perceived Barriers to Research for Social Work Practice

While the benefits of field research projects have been noted in the research, Bledsoe-Mansori et al. (2013) state that "the gap between research and practice has proven so stubbornly persistent that it has been characterized as a chasm," which can negatively impact individuals, families, and communities who seek services but may not receive research-informed interventions (p. 179). As government agencies and corporate funding organizations rely more frequently on research findings to inform practice, the importance of practice-informed research and research-informed practice continues to increase (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013). However, if the knowledge obtained through social work programs is not applied in field practice, the result is a disconnect between theory and practice (Weichelt & Ting, 2012).

Barriers to evidence-based practice through field research identified in the literature include field instructor level of skill or education, attitudes related to research, and agency policies and expectations that may influence field instructor perceptions of barriers when supporting student field research projects. In the Lyman et al. (2015) study on the integration of research in bachelor-level field education in agency settings, agency mistrust of research intentions was noted, and in studies conducted by Bledsoe-Mansori (2013), Edmond et al. (2006), Homonoff (2008), and Natland et al. (2016), this was echoed as the risks of breach of confidentiality and negative findings.

Other factors, such as field instructor research skills, have been noted as contributing to challenges in implementing research findings (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Edmond et al., 2006; Homonoff, 2008; Lyman et al., 2015; Natland et al., 2016; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). Limited resources were frequently cited as a barrier to field research, including lack of time to support research projects and interference in day-to-day activities and responsibilities (Berger, 2013; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Bogo, 2015; Edmond et al., 2006; Lyman et al., 2015; Shannon et al., 2012; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). Field instructors indicated reluctance to support student research projects if the findings would not be useful to the agency (Natland et al., 2016). Lastly, limited employer reward was identified as a barrier, as practitioners expressed lack of supervisor support,

expectations of filling the field instructor role while keeping up with heavy caseloads, lack of continuing education, and lack of promotion incentives (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Edmond et al., 2006; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). Understanding field instructors' perceived barriers to conducting student-led field research provides important insights into possible solutions for bridging the gap between student research findings and the implementation of these findings in practice settings.

Methodology

Using the evidence found in the literature, the Department of Social Work at a private university in southern California designed a survey to explore field instructors' perceptions regarding the benefits of and barriers to student research projects conducted in field internship placement sites[1]. The survey was administered to a convenience sample of field instructors who attended an annual orientation meeting hosted by the department, and included field instructors who supervised field-based BSW student research projects, MSW student capstone projects, or both, at current field site partnerships in a wide range of settings, such as school districts, hospitals, domestic violence shelters, homeless services, child welfare agencies, mental health agencies, and a local legislator's office, to name a few. Field instructors were invited to participate in the voluntary, anonymous survey regarding the perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led research at their field sites. The final sample size included 56 of the 60 field instructors who attended the training and completed the survey, ensuring a 93.3% response rate. The study received IRB approval from the university.

The survey questions were guided by previous research on how field agencies and community partners integrated EBP into social work education, barriers to EBP within field practice, factors contributing to agency–university partnerships for implementing EBP in field practice, and faculty and field instructor attitudes towards adopting evidence-based practice in coursework and field education (Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Najor-Durak, 2016; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). Data collected from the surveys included basic demographic information regarding field instructor and agency characteristics. This article highlights some of the significant findings from the survey responses regarding field instructors' perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led field research.

The survey asked participants to prioritize the list of core CSWE competencies by selecting the top three competencies they believed students needed to be successful as social workers. The instructors were also asked to use a Likert scale (1–5, strongly disagree to strongly agree) to indicate their perceptions of the key benefits of student-led field research identified in the literature. The following benefits were listed in the survey:

1 The survey is available upon request from the corresponding author.

- improved service delivery
- better client outcomes
- enhanced professional connection between research and practice
- evidence for funding opportunities
- cost-effective research support
- improved student research skills
- updated knowledge related to research topics
- opportunities for agency to partner with the university

The instructors were asked to use a Likert scale (1–5, not at all challenging to very challenging) to indicate what they perceived to be key barriers to student-led field research. The following barriers were listed in the survey:

- risk of breach in data confidentiality
- risk of negative findings
- limited research knowledge/skills of the field instructor
- interference with day-to-day responsibilities
- lack of time to support research design
- lack of resources needed to implement research findings
- limited employer reward for time spent on research activities
- limited data for research activities

Field instructors were also invited to share other perceived benefits and barriers that were not listed in the survey.

Participants were also asked to use a Likert scale (1–5) to rate their perceptions of confidence (not at all confident to very confident) and level of involvement (not at all involved to very involved) in supporting student-led research projects. Next, participants were asked to rate their agency's level of support (high, moderate, minimal, low) of student research projects, and indicate whether student research findings were shared with agency staff, partners, or other stakeholders within their organization (yes/no). Lastly, field instructors were asked to select the top two most beneficial supports provided by the university from the following list:

- level of student preparedness
- university willingness to assist student projects
- field instructor training
- field visits
- research course professor support
- other (open)

Chi-square tests were used to examine if there were any statistically significant relationships between the level of agency support for use of student-led field-based research projects and field instructors' level of confidence and involvement

in supporting students' research-related assignments. Chi-square tests were also used to examine if there were any statistically significant relationships between field instructors' level of confidence and involvement in student-led projects and whether or not their agencies shared research findings from student projects to agency staff, partners, or other stakeholders. Lastly, chi-square tests were run to examine if there were any statistically significant relationships between field instructors' educational background (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate), prior research training or experience (yes/no; and if yes, when last training was taken: < 1 year ago, 1–3 years ago, 4–8 years ago, or 8+ years ago) and their rating of perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led research projects.

Findings

Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of survey respondents and the size of the agencies they represented. The table shows that almost 88% (*n* = 49) of the field instructors had master's degrees; nearly 51% (*n* = 28) indicated they had been a field instructor for less than one year; 50% (*n* = 28) supervised MSW capstone research projects; around 29% (*n* = 16) reported that the last research course they had taken was 4–8 years ago; and about 36% (*n* = 20) worked at an agency with 51–200 employees.

Table 1
*Sample Characteristics (*N=*56)*

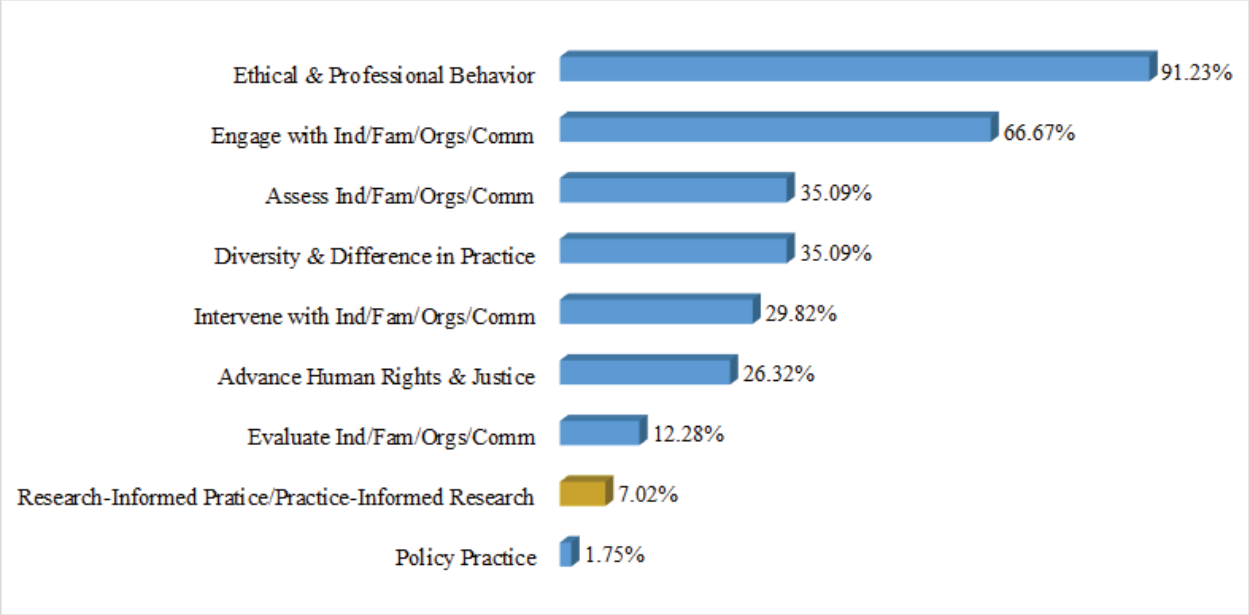
Field instructor education	Bachelor's	7.1%	*n* = 4
	Master's	87.5%	*n* = 49
	Doctorate	3.6%	*n* = 2
Years as a field instructor	< 1 year	50.9%	*n* = 28
	1–5 years	21.4%	*n* = 12
	6–10 years	19.6%	*n* = 11
	10+ years	7.1%	*n* = 4
Type of research project supervised	BSW research	14.3%	*n* = 8
	MSW capstone	50.0%	*n* = 28
	Both	12.5%	*n* = 7
	No response	23.2%	*n* = 13

Last research course taken	Within last 12 months	3.6%	*n* = 2
	1–3 years	16.1%	*n* = 9
	4–8 years	28.6%	*n* = 16
	8+ years	17.9%	*n* = 10
	No response	33.9%	*n* = 19
Agency number of employees	< 50	28.6%	*n* = 16
	51–200	35.7%	*n* = 20
	201–500	14.3%	*n* = 8
	500+	21.4%	*n* = 12

The top perceived benefits of student-led field research were identified by calculating the percent of field instructors who selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for each listed benefit on the survey. Findings revealed that the top three perceived benefits were improved student research skills (85.4%), improved service delivery (83.7%), and enhanced professional connection between research and practice (83.6%). Updated knowledge related to research topics and opportunities for the agency to partner with the university to conduct research were identified as other key benefits by 80% of the field instructors. Despite these perceived benefits, when asked to select the top three CSWE competencies the field instructors believed were most important for students to be successful as social workers, competency 4, to "engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice," was ranked eighth out of the nine CSWE competencies and selected by only 7% (*n* = 4) of the respondents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Field Instructors' Perceived Most Important CSWE Competencies Students Need to be Successful Social Workers



To better understand the low ranking of competency 4, the authors next examined field instructors' top perceived barriers to student-led collaborative research projects. The top barriers were identified by calculating the percent of field instructors who selected "challenging" or "very challenging" for each listed barrier on the survey. Findings revealed that 36.3% of field instructors identified lack of time to support research design as the top barrier, followed by limited employer reward for time spent on research activities (34.5%) and risk of breach in data confidentiality (33.3%). Lack of resources needed to implement research findings and interference with day-to-day responsibilities were identified as other key barriers by 31% of the field instructors. Interestingly, only 23.6% of field instructors noted limited research knowledge or skills as a barrier to supporting student-led field research projects.

The study then examined if there were any significant relationships between the level of agency support for use of student-led research projects and field instructors' level of confidence in supporting students' field research assignments (see Table 2). Of the 20 field instructors who noted "high" agency support for student-led projects, 17 (85%) indicated that they felt "confident" or "very confident," one (5%) expressed "little confidence," and two (10%) selected "neutral" in assisting with student field research assignments. In contrast, of the nine field instructors who noted "minimal" agency support for student-led projects, only one (11.1%) indicated confidence in supporting students, while five (55.5%) selected "little confidence" and three (33.3%) selected "neutral." A chi-square test revealed that the relationship between agency support and field instructors' level of confidence was statistically significant ($X^2(12) = 15.87$, $p < .05$).

Field instructors' level of confidence in student-led projects was also examined in relation to whether or not their agency shared research findings from student

projects with agency staff, partners, donors, board members, or other stakeholders (see Table 2). Although the relationship between field instructors' level of confidence in supporting student-led field research and agency dissemination of findings was not statistically significant ($X^2(4) = 6.38$, $p > .05$), findings revealed that of the 44 field instructors who noted that their agency did share student project findings, 30 (68.2%) reported being "confident" or "very confident" in assisting with students' project-related assignments, while seven (15.9%) reported "little confidence" or "not confident," and seven (15.9%) were "neutral." In comparison, of the 10 field instructors who noted that their agency did not share student research project findings, three (30%) were "confident," while three (30%) expressed "little confidence" and four (40%) were "neutral."

Table 2

Field Instructors Level of Confidence in Supporting Student-Led Field Research Based on Agency Support and Dissemination of Findings

	Not Confident		Neutral		Confident		
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	X^2(*df*)
Agency level of support							
High support	1	5.0	2	10.0	17	85.0	
Moderate support	4	17.4	6	26.1	13	56.5	23.99 (12)*
Minimal support	5	55.5	3	33.3	1	11.1	
Agency dissemination of findings							
Yes	7	15.9	7	15.9	30	68.2	6.38 (4)
No	3	30.0	4	40.0	3	30.0	

* $p < .05$

The study also examined if there was any significant relationship between the level of agency support for use of student-led research projects and field instructors' level of involvement in supporting students' field research assignments (see Table 3). Although this relationship was not statistically significant ($X^2(12) = 15.87$, $p > .05$), findings revealed that 15 (79%) of the 19 field instructors who indicated "high" agency support indicated that they were "involved" or "very involved" in student field research assignments, while three (33.3%) of the nine field instructors who noted "minimal" agency support were "involved" in students' research-related assignments.

Field instructors' level of involvement in student-led projects was also examined in relation to whether or not their agency shared research findings from student projects with agency staff, partners, donors, board members, or other stakeholders (see Table

3). Results revealed that 28 (65.1%) of the 43 field instructors who indicated that their agency shared findings were "involved" or "very involved" in assisting students, and 10 (23.2%) were "little involved" or "not involved." In contrast, five (50%) of the ten field instructors whose agencies did not share student project findings reported being "involved" in student projects and four (40%) were "little involved" or "not involved." The relationship between field instructors' level of involvement and agency dissemination of findings was not, however, statistically significant ($X^2(4) = 3.41$, $p > .05$)

Table 3

Field Instructors' Level of Involvement in Supporting Student-Led Field Research Based on Agency Support and Dissemination of Findings

	Not involved		Neutral		Involved		
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	X^2(*df*)
Agency level of support							
High support	2	10.5	2	10.5	15	79.0	
Moderate support	7	30.4	2	8.7	14	60.9	15.87 (12)
Minimal support	4	44.4	2	22.2	3	33.3	
Agency Dissemination of Findings							
Yes	10	23.3	5	11.6	28	65.1	3.41 (4)
No	4	40.0	1	10.0	5	50.0	

Lastly, field instructors were asked to select the top two university supports they have found beneficial as they supported students' field-based research projects. Of the 48 field instructors who responded to this question, the top two supports selected were field instructor training (60.4%, *n* = 29) and university willingness to assist student projects (50%, *n* = 24). The other key supports included level of student preparedness (45.8%, *n* = 22) and field visits (41.7%, *n* = 20). Interestingly, no significant findings emerged relating to field instructors' educational background, prior research training or experience, and ratings of perceived benefits of or barriers to student-led field research projects.

Study Limitations

The findings are limited to a convenience sample of field instructors who were present at the annual in-person training event, and did not include field instructors who

partner with the university but were not present at the orientation. The findings are also based on the perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led field-based projects as reported by field instructors practicing in urban areas of Los Angeles County. The field instructors' responses may therefore not be representative of or generalizable to field agencies in more rural areas or other parts of the country.

The population of field instructors that supported BSW students in the field was considerably smaller than the population of field instructors that supported MSW projects or both BSW and MSW projects. As a result, the study provided limited insight into potential differences in the perceptions of field instructors based on whether they supervised BSW or MSW student research in the field. Despite these limitations, the findings do offer insights on strategies to enhance research–practice partnerships between field agencies and social work programs, and on the important role field instructors play in supporting student research in the field.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the perceived benefits of and barriers to student-led field-based research projects among social work field instructors at a private university in southern California. The key benefits identified aligned with the current literature, and included improved student research skill development, improved service delivery, and enhanced professional connections between research and practice. Field instructors also reported updated agency knowledge related to research and strengthened partnership between the agency and university as additional benefits of this model (Berger, 2013; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Natland et al., 2016). Analysis of the findings appears to reflect that perceptions of benefits may be related to agency-related factors such as support of student research projects, willingness to share research findings with stakeholders, and agency history of implementing student research findings into the practice setting.

In contrast to identified benefits, the top barriers selected also supported current literature and included lack of time for research-based activities, limited employer reward to support student research, and perceived risk of data confidentiality breach (Berger, 2013; Bledsoe-Mansori et al., 2013; Lyman et al, 2015). Lack of resources to implement research findings to inform agency practices and research activity interference with daily responsibilities were also identified as key barriers. Universities should consider the perceived barriers of lack of time and agency support of projects. As part of the learning agreement that universities establish with agencies, universities should be proactive in communicating expectations regarding learning outcomes. This should include discussing with the agency expectations regarding agency agreement to participate in field-based student research; discussing with the student the agency-based research needs; devoting field supervision time to research project review, with

particular attention to the ethical use and dissemination of agency data; providing access and time to gather data; and creating opportunities to share research findings.

Overall, field instructors' perceived confidence and involvement were positive, and indicate a willingness to support students in field research projects. Significant findings appear to indicate that field instructors' perceived confidence and involvement in student-led projects are related to agency willingness to support student projects and share research findings. Based on these findings, agency policies and politics, though not discussed in this research, may play a role in field instructor perceptions regarding the benefits of and barriers to student projects.

Field instructors' perceptions of limited employer reward for time spent supporting student research may indicate feelings regarding value or an uncommunicated desire for agency recognition or acknowledgment of their service and contribution to program improvements through their support of student projects. Findings suggest that if agencies do not demonstrate or communicate an interest in student research projects, employees may feel that the time and effort invested in supporting student projects is undervalued within the organization, as is reflected in the literature (Bledsoe-Mansori et al, 2013; Edmond et al., 2006; Weichelt & Ting, 2012). As the literature suggests, agencies could demonstrate support by including opportunities for students to share their key findings with stakeholders through presentation to staff or board of directors, inclusion in agency newsletter, or other dissemination that would express a greater sense of agency buy-in (Johnson & Austin, 2008).

Participants in this study also highlighted the benefits of university–agency research partnerships. Schools of social work can partner with agencies to achieve program goals and objectives by using student research as a conduit for progress in the field, leading to the reciprocity of practice-informed research and research-informed practice. Agencies can leverage the resources available to them through universities to enhance programs and improve client outcomes. This study found that the primary supports perceived as beneficial to this partnership were field instructor training, university willingness to provide ongoing assistance to the field-based research process, field visitation, and student preparedness.

Specific approaches used by this program in support of these strategies include providing an overview of research projects and collaborative research-based discussions at the annual field instructor training, as well as establishing research check-in and oversight as part of the field liaison role. Program curriculum has intentionally been designed to promote student preparedness for completion of their field-based research project. This includes providing a yearlong research experience with sequential research methods and research projects courses, requiring a statistics course prior to enrollment in the research methods course, and assigning literature

reviews in all required social work courses. It is suggested that social work programs interested in field-based student research projects consider these practices.

Of particular interest, field instructors ranked the nine CSWE competencies in terms of what they perceived to be the top three most important social work competencies students need to be successful social workers. Field instructors selected "demonstrating ethical and professional behavior" as the most important competency, while "engaging in practice-informed research and research-informed practice" was ranked as eighth most important, ahead only of the lowest-ranked competency of "engaging in policy practice." One might wonder how practitioners can engage in ethical practice as outlined by the NASW without engaging in research to evaluate the effectiveness of practice methods, interventions, engagement strategies, and progress toward goals, which the NASW has identified as necessary for ethical practice. Additionally, other CSWE competencies involving engaging, assessing, intervening, and evaluating individuals, families, communities, and organizations all relate to and include principles of research.

Additional research opportunities exist to further findings through qualitative studies focused on field instructor attitudes toward field-based student research projects; such studies may provide more comprehensive insight into how agency support affects field instructor attitudes toward such projects. Likewise, further research from the perspective of field liaisons and university research faculty may also provide insight into barriers to field-based student research experiences as perceived by the educational institution. Social work agencies should be vigilant in exploring and leveraging the value of capturing and analyzing data in day-to-day social work practice. Without research, we do not have evidence-based practice, but instead, we are left with practice without reflection, without evaluation, and without methods to gauge measurable success.

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