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Faculty Field Liaisons: Ambassadors of Implicit Curriculum

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Abstract

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires social work education programs to assess both the implicit curriculum and the explicit curriculum. There is a divergence in the literature regarding these types of curricula; research on explicit curriculum is prevalent, while research on implicit curriculum is nominal. The implicit curriculum for social work education provides a powerful mechanism for assessing the atmosphere and culture of the learning environment for students. The field program is a natural, if challenging, venue for social work programs' assessment of their implicit curriculum. As such, the role of the faculty field liaison becomes a critical piece in understanding the implicit nature of the field education experience. This research project explored for purposes of program evaluation the role and responsibilities

of faculty field liaisons over five years, using exit surveys completed by graduate-level social work students (N = 168) and their assigned field instructors (N = 244). The findings suggest that the role and responsibilities of the faculty field liaison—especially when staffed by a full-time tenure-track faculty member—for both groups of respondents contributed to higher rates of satisfaction with the overall field experience, a desire for more site visits, and more effective relationships.

Keywords: faculty field liaison; implicit curriculum; field experience; social work

The Council on Social Work Education ([CSWE] 2015) requires social work education programs to assess both the implicit and the explicit curriculum. There is a divergence in the literature regarding these types of curricula; research on explicit curriculum is prevalent, while research on implicit curriculum is nominal. The implicit curriculum for social work education provides a powerful mechanism for assessing the atmosphere and culture of the learning environment for social work students—especially given that the field education experience is viewed as the profession's signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) and is governed by stringent standards (Grady et al., 2018).

Accreditation Standards

Social work programs are guided by CSWE accreditation standards in how they structure their curriculum and provide educational experiences for students (CSWE, 2015). While these standards provide guidelines that programs are required to follow, there are benefits to having a common structure among programs. These standards ensure that students are getting the coursework and field education experiences that will provide the knowledge and skills necessary to be competent social workers.

Social work programs are required to define how their mission, goals, and curriculum are consistent with generalist practice. The curriculum must address the nine competencies identified by the CSWE (CSWE, 2015). Building on generalist practice, master's programs are required to identify specialized curriculum that focuses on specific populations, problems, and methods, and augments the nine competencies. Thus, accreditation standards ensure a strong infrastructure for the education and professional training of students seeking to become professional social workers. As such, accreditation standards for social work programs require a level of attention and intention in planning that extends into the intentional evaluation of both the explicit and implicit aspects of the curriculum.

Defining the Role of the Faculty Field Liaison

In the context of social work field education, the first mention of the term "liaison" in

CSWE documents was in 1967, in reference to undergraduate programs:

> The college or university should designate a particular faculty member(s) with explicit responsibility for the field experience program; she/he should plan this program, establish contact with the various agencies and services, provide liaison between agency supervisors and faculty and have ultimate responsibility for evaluating and grading students' learning experiences (Raskin et al., 2008, pp. 177–178).

Various definitions of the term have appeared since this first reference. One definition of the faculty field liaison was "the representative of the department [or] school who coordinates and consults with the agency administrator, field instructor, and student in regard to the needs and expectations of all parties involved in the education of the student through field instruction courses" (Urbanowski & Dwyer, 1988, p. 212). Faria et al. (1988) defined the role of the faculty field liaison as including the responsibilities of an advisor, consultant, teacher, monitor, mediator, and advocate. The faculty field liaison may have a role in placing students, and is the connection between the school and the agency, is an evaluator of field education outcomes, and is an administrator of the overall field education experience (Ligon & Ward, 2005).

The 2015 CSWE Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) do provide standards for field education for social work programs, but do not define the role and function of the faculty field liaison (CSWE, 2015, p. 13). Consequently, the roles and functions of faculty field liaisons vary among social work programs. Despite this variability across programs, there is a universal focus on assisting social work students to apply the knowledge and theory they learn in the classroom setting to the practice of social work in their field placement experiences (Grady et al., 2018; Grady et al., 2020; Larrison & Korr, 2013).

Tully (2015) stated that "the faculty field liaison is one of the primary persons responsible for ensuring that theoretical concepts from the classroom are transferred to the internship setting" (p. 10). It is the responsibility of the faculty field liaison to be the connection between the school and the field agency, to educate the field agency on the CSWE competencies, and to support field instructors in identifying and providing opportunities for the field students to demonstrate skill learning (Krase et al., 2021). Hendricks et al. (2013) explained that faculty field liaisons have the following responsibilities: (1) advising the social work program (faculty field liaisons "provide resources to the educational endeavor. They may offer suggestions on modifying teaching methods and assignments" (p. 222)); (2) instructional responsibilities (faculty field liaisons "become advocates for and guardians of the student's educational experiences in the field" (p. 222)); and (3) faculty field liaisons "gather information on student learning opportunities and provide information to the field education office on learning opportunities in each setting" (p. 222).

The faculty field liaisons can be full-time or part-time faculty, or an adjunct instructor. Some faculty field liaisons are responsible for the placement of students in field agencies. Field placement site visits occur with the faculty field liaison during the semester to maintain contact between the school, the field instructor, and the field student. At the site visit, often the faculty field liaison reviews the student's progress and clarifies any learning issues (Hendricks et al., 2013; Krase et al., 2021). The faculty field liaison may or may not be required to instruct a field class that is taken concurrently with the student's field placement.

Faculty Field Liaison: Explicit Curriculum

CSWE defines curriculum as either implicit or explicit. The explicit curriculum includes social work's signature pedagogy, field education, which will be discussed in greater detail below. In addition to field education, the explicit curriculum outlines generalist and specialized practice (CSWE, 2015). Generalist practice utilizes a person-in-environment perspective and liberal arts knowledge as a basis for the wide range of prevention and intervention strategies that social workers can use to promote well-being in individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (CSWE, 2015). Additionally, generalist practitioners engage diversity in their practice, and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. They recognize, support, and build on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings.

The field experience should directly connect what is learned in the classroom to practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, at both the generalist and specialized practice levels. At the BSW level, students focus on generalist practice with a wide variety of populations, in a wide range of social work settings. At the MSW level, students focus on specialized practice with a particular population and/or problem. Faculty field liaisons have an important role in the facilitation of the learning that occurs in field education.

Faculty Field Liaison: Implicit Curriculum

The field placement experience, known as the signature pedagogy of social work education, embodies the practices, structures, and content required to prepare students for the social work profession (Shulman, 2005). It is one of the faculty field liaison's roles and responsibilities to bridge classroom knowledge with the social work field experience. These roles and responsibilities manifest in both the explicit curriculum and the implicit curriculum (Hall & Valdiviezo, 2020). The CSWE EPAS asserts that the "implicit curriculum is as important as the explicit curriculum in shaping the professional character and competence of the program's graduates" (CSWE, 2015, p. 14). Furthermore, "the field experience should be included in an assessment of the

implicit curriculum in social work education" (Peterson et al., 2014, p. 472).

Thus, the implicit curriculum as defined by the CSWE EPAS (2015) includes "the culture of human interchange; the spirit of inquiry; the support of difference and diversity; and the values and priorities in the educational environment, including the field setting" (p. 14). The faculty field liaison's responsibilities center on the delivery of content, as well as the facilitation and remediation of dynamics (implicit curriculum) that occur within the field experience (Krase et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2019).

Method

Field education programs are a natural, if challenging, venue for social work programs' assessment of their implicit curriculum. As such, the role of the faculty field liaison becomes a critical piece in understanding the implicit nature of the field experience. Certainly, the faculty field liaison provides direct education instruction, as is expected within the explicit curriculum. However, the nature of the mentoring, supervising, and supporting of both students and field instructors within their field experiences contains aspects of implicit curriculum (Grady et al., 2020).

Purpose

Exploratory research seeks to study a problem that is not clearly defined, and works well for gaining an understanding of a complex dynamic (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). The duties, roles, and responsibilities of the faculty field liaison yield several opportunities for program evaluation research, especially given the complex dynamics inherent in social work field education programs (McMahon et al., 2020). The purpose of the authors' research was to explore the roles and responsibilities of the faculty field liaison and the contributions of the implicit curriculum to graduate-level social work field experiences. Self-reporting surveys were administered to graduate social work field education students and field instructors to identify the factors of the implicit curriculum that contributed to the field education experience.

Data Collection

The data was collected from participants (social work field education students and field instructors) in a graduate-level field program at a small regional urban commuter-based campus in the Midwest US. A purposive sampling strategy was employed whereby data was collected annually over a five-year period, and participants were intentionally selected based on their participation in the department's field education program (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). All participants were mailed a copy of the survey (entitled "Evaluation of the Faculty Field Liaison") at the end of the field experience, which occurs at the end of the semester. Participants were encouraged, but

not required, to complete the evaluation and send it back to the field coordinator. A self-addressed envelope with prepaid postage was included with the mailing. Thus, participants self-selected to complete the evaluation form. The survey was sent once, and no additional outreach was made to participants who did not respond to the initial survey.

The data was collected as part of a larger field education program evaluation project. Program evaluation research provides useful data to drive improvements (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which is a required process for accreditation of social work programs. This study sought to collect data from adult, graduate-level MSW students and their assigned adult field instructors. As such, it met criteria for an institutional review board. Researchers applied and received IRB approval, exempt status, for this project (2017-2018-75). For purposes of this study, only the quantitative data will be reviewed. Demographic information on the respondents was not collected.

Participants

Each graduate-level social work student was assigned a social work professional—typically known as a field instructor—for educational support supervision of their field experience. The data was collected at the termination of each field experience from both the social work students (N = 244) and their assigned field instructors (N = 168). Response rates can vary by the style of survey distribution. The response rate for this project was approximately 45% for graduate-level social work students and 40% for field instructors, which is viewed as adequate given that the survey was sent via standard mail and required written completion (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Survey Instrument

The evaluation of the faculty field liaisons included a paragraph explaining the intent of the evaluation and basic instructions for the tool. Participants were asked to respond to a list of questions, divided into two sections. One section contained three true/false questions, which asked respondents to determine agreement with whether the field liaison 1) communicated with the student early during the semester/year, 2) visited with the student at the agency during the semester/year, and 3) met with the students during the semester/year.

The second section consisted of questions with responses of agreement. Level of agreement was ranked according to a Likert scale containing five points, with a range comprising "strongly agree," "agree," "undecided," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Questions targeted agreement to statements regarding whether the field liaison provided useful consultation about the school's curriculum, facilitated discussion of field practicum learning objectives, was helpful in reviewing written

learning plans, helped to advance the quality of the experience, responded promptly to needs of practicum students, communicated at appropriate intervals, responded to calls and messages, addressed problems or issues that arose, expressed interest, reviewed practicum assignments, helped evaluate practicum performance, and contributed significantly to the experience. In addition, researchers looked at respondents' responses relating to the number of site visits that occurred versus the number of site visits they thought were needed. Lastly, the survey asked if respondents would highly recommend their field liaison.

Both the student and the field instructor versions of the evaluation contained the same instructions and two sections of questions. However, the evaluation tool for the field instructors contained additional questions: one true/false question and two additional questions targeting agreement. As such, the student evaluation contained 18 questions, while the field instructor evaluation contained 21 questions.

Coding

The true/false questions were coded as 2/1, where the higher number indicated agreement. The remaining questions utilized a Likert scale rating of 1 to 5. Favorable responses were rated higher.

Data Cleaning and Sorting

As is common in survey-based research projects, questions sometimes can be overlooked and/or multiple answers can be selected (Curran, 2016). Both data sets were reviewed for missing data. In data set one, the evaluations by students, there were a total of 3,360 data points. Out of these 3,360 data points, 43 answers, or 1.3%, were missing. In data set two, the evaluations by field instructors, there were a total of 4,880 data points. Out of these 4,880 data points, 98 answers, or 2.0%, were missing. No pattern was noted regarding the missing data; the missing data appeared random and were not connected to the same question, same recipient, or same answer pattern (van Den Broeck et al., 2005).

To avoid pairwise deletion of data, mean substitution was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Any missing data was substituted with the mean of that variable. Mean substitution provides a simple formula to adjust the standard error for the uncertainty caused by missing data. In data set one, the evaluations by students, mean substitution was used for 43 data points (1.3%). In data set two, the evaluations by field instructors, mean substitution was used for 98 data points (2.0%).

Demographic Information

Both surveys were anonymous, in that respondents did not use their names. Demographic information was available for the type of field settings and ranks of the faculty field liaisons. All agency and faculty names were deidentified and coded. Surveys were categorized into CSWE agency codes based on field setting type, and categorized by the rank of the faculty field liaison being evaluated.

Results

Faculty field liaisons at this institution are responsible for facilitating field seminars (classroom sessions), reviewing and grading field assignments, assigning the field grade, completing site visits (two per semester), verifying contact hours, and collecting midterm and final evaluations. Given the multifaceted nature of the data, the results section is separated into three sections to promote readability. The first section reviews demographic data by field settings, and employment classification for faculty field liaisons. The second section highlights the results from the reviews of the field faculty liaisons by field instructors. The third section explains the results of the review of the faculty field liaisons by social work students.

Demographic Data

In data set number one, the evaluations by students, and data set two, evaluations by field instructors, the field sites were matched to CSWE agency codes. Not all agency codes were accounted for, as several agency types did not return any surveys during the time of this study.

Field Sites

In data set one, mental health (n = 38, 24%), child welfare (n = 21, 15%), and school (n = 36, 22%) were the most frequently classified agency settings. Likewise, in data set two, these same agency types emerged as the most frequently used types of agency; child welfare (n = 42, 17%) was the most frequent agency typed, followed by a tie between mental health (n = 41, 17%) and school (n = 41, 17%) settings. The CSWE agency codes were regrouped to ensure comparable group sizes. This aided in achieving greater statistical power and incorporated a greater range of analyses. See Table 1 for a review of the regrouped agency codes.

Table 1

Adjusted Grouping of Agency Codes by Data Set and Frequency

CSWE code	Agency type	Data set one Student evaluation $N = 168$ *n* (%)	Data set two Field instructor evaluation $N = 244$ *n* (%)
Group	Health care		
4	Aging	13 (8%)	21 (9%)
14	Health	3 (2%)	10 (4%)
18	Rehabilitation	6 (4%)	13 (5%)
Group	Special populations		
1	AODA	7 (4%)	15 (6%)
8	Developmental disabilities	2 (1%)	5 (2%)
9	Corrections	5 (3%)	7 (3%)
10	Homeless	7 (4%)	10 (4%)
11	Domestic violence	4 (2%)	2 (%)
12	Family service	7 (4%)	9 (4%)
13	International	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
15	Immigration	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
16	LGBTQ	1 (1%)	6 (2%)
17	Military	0 (%)	0 (0%)
19	PTSD	0 (0%)	0 (%)
Group	Macro-Level		
2	Administration	2 (1%)	3 (1%)
3	Advocacy	6 (4%)	10 (4%)
6	Community development	4 (2%)	2 (1%)
20	Program evaluation	2 (1%)	2 (1%)
21	Public welfare	0 (0%)	0 (%)
23	Social policy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
24	Other (EAP)	4 (2%)	5 (2%)
Group	Child welfare		
5	Child welfare	21 (13%)	42 (17%)
Group	Mental health		
7	Mental health	38 (23%)	41 (17%)
Group	School		
22	School	36 (21%)	41 (17%)

Faculty Field Liaison Rank

Just as there are codes used for agency type, there were also codes used for the rank of the faculty field liaison being evaluated. Two types of codes for rank were developed: A faculty member who was a full-time employee with a PhD and in a tenure-track position was coded as a one; and a faculty member (most typically viewed as an adjunct) who taught one or more courses and was neither a full-time employee nor in a tenure-track position, and may or may not have held a PhD, was coded as a two.

In data set one (N = 168), the evaluations by students, faculty coded as one accounted for 50, or 30% of the surveys, and faculty coded as two accounted for 118, or 70% of the surveys. In data set two (N = 244), the evaluations by field instructors, faculty coded as one accounted for 66, or 27% of the surveys, and faculty coded as two accounted for 178, or 73% of the surveys.

Evaluation of the Faculty Field Liaisons by Field Instructors

This section of results targets the evaluation of faculty field liaisons by field instructors. The field instructors were asked a series of questions; the researchers analyzed the answers in relation to the field instructor's agency type, the rank of the faculty field liaison, and the reported thoughts on site visits. This section is organized accordingly.

Questions by Agency Type

The field instructors' perceptions of faculty field liaisons were evaluated based on the type of agency they served. Overall, the data indicated that evaluations of faculty field liaisons varied only minimally as a function of agency type, at both the macro level (e.g., overall evaluations) and the micro level (e.g., specific attributes). For example, a one-way analysis of variance indicated no meaningful difference in overall performance reviews (F (17, 236) = 0.93, p = 0.54) by agency type. Similarly, field instructors did not differ in recommending their faculty field liaisons across different social work settings (F = 0.65, p = 0.66). Nor did perceptions differ of the faculty field liaisons' contributions to a successful practicum (F (5,238) = 1.31, p < 0.26). In all cases, reviews were similar across agency types.

To further illustrate the consistency of reviews across agencies, respondents were asked to evaluate their faculty field liaisons based on several critical criteria related to field work. Table 2 presents correlations between variables (communication, addressing of problems, quality of curriculum consultation, and ability to review student's assignments) both overall and within each agency type. The results indicate some variation across agencies in this respect, though basic patterns were similar

throughout. For instance, there was a modest-to-strong correlation between quality communication and problem-solving capacity across all industries, ranging from 0.60 ($p < 0.001$) in macro-level agencies to 0.80 ($p < 0.001$) in school/education agencies. In short, the data indicate that reviews of faculty field liaisons are determined principally by characteristics of the faculty field liaisons themselves, not the features of the environments in which they are working.

Table 2

Correlations of Indicators by Agency Type (Field Instructors)

Agency type	Indicators	Good communication	Addressed problems	Quality of consultation
Overall	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.73*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.76*	0.72*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.72*	0.80*	0.73*
Health care	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.61*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.60*	0.68*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.61*	0.79*	0.54*
Child welfare	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.77*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.85*	0.72*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.62*	0.67*	0.61*
Mental health	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.77*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.82*	0.73*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.84*	0.80*	0.83*
School/education	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.80*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.73*	0.75*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.84*	0.83*	0.91*

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better.

Indicators by Rank and Status of Faculty Field Liaison

If faculty field liaison evaluations do not vary significantly across agencies, do they differ in other ways? Our analysis shows that they do, most notably in terms of position status: Evaluations of faculty field liaisons were significantly higher for full-time faculty that serve in a tenure-track position than for those holding part-time or adjunct positions.

Several key empirical findings, presented in Table 3, support this statement. First, the overall faculty field liaison performance evaluation was, on average, nearly a full point higher (on a five-point scale) for full-time faculty that serve in a tenure-track position as faculty field liaisons relative to part-time faculty field liaisons. Second, respondents "highly recommended" their faculty field liaison more fervently if they were full-time in a tenure-track position, rather than part-time or adjunct faculty. More generally, full-time liaisons were rated meaningfully higher than part-time faculty field liaisons across every indicator in the dataset. These findings underscore a critical takeaway from this project: It is the experience of faculty field liaisons that best predicts success in the field, not the type of agency in which they serve.

Table 3

Indicators by Rank/Status of Faculty Field Liaison (Field Instructors)

Rank/status	Part-time/adjunct		Full-time/ tenure-track		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Overall performance	3.88	1.16	4.70	0.63	5.43	<0.001*
Highly recommend	3.95	1.03	4.83	0.48	6.72	<0.001*
Capacity to contribute significantly to experience	3.68	1.12	4.65	0.59	6.72	<0.001*
Good Communication	3.87	1.08	4.70	0.63	5.89	<0.001*
Addresses problems	4.01	0.83	4.76	0.50	6.88	<0.001*
Quality of curriculum consultation	4.16	0.94	4.85	0.36	5.82	<0.001*
Ability to review student's assignments	4.01	0.86	4.65	0.59	5.62	<0.001*

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better

Site Visits

A second critical finding in this project concerns the frequency of site visits. We asked all respondents to indicate whether they thought that the number of visits was fewer than needed, exactly the right amount, or higher than necessary. Perhaps not

surprisingly, given the limited resources of many programs, respondents generally felt that the number of site visits preferred was higher than the actual number of site visits provided. Table 4 demonstrates that both overall and across individual agencies there was a statistically significant difference: Respondents consistently perceived the number of actual site visits to be fewer than the number of site visits they felt to be necessary. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, we did find that the perceived gap was larger when the faculty field liaison was not a full-time worker. On average, field instructors working with part-time faculty field liaisons perceived a need for 0.57 more visits than they received ($t = 7.92$; $p < 0.001$); instructors working with full-time faculty field liaisons perceived the need for 0.21 additional visits ($t = 2.42$; $p < 0.02$). In both cases, however, the number of visits *needed* was statistically higher than the *actual* number of visits.

Table 4

Perceived Need of Site Visits by Agency Type (Field Instructors)

Agency type	Perceived number of visits needed		Number of actual visits		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Overall	1.64	0.87	1.17	0.71	6.55	< 0.0001*
Health care	1.34	0.64	1.05	0.53	2.35	0.02*
Special population	1.67	1.06	1.24	0.70	2.46	0.02*
Macro-level	1.59	0.67	1.14	0.47	2.62	0.01*
Child welfare	1.79	1.79	1.36	0.96	2.06	0.04*
Mental health	1.71	0.81	1.05	0.50	4.42	< 0.0001*
School/education	1.76	0.83	1.17	0.86	3.13	0.01*

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better

Evaluations of the Faculty Field Liaisons by Students

This section of results targets the evaluation of faculty field liaisons by students. The students were asked a series of questions; the researchers analyzed the answers in relation to the field instructor's agency type, the rank of the faculty field liaison, and the reported thoughts on site visits. This section is organized accordingly.

Questions by Agency Type

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether students evaluated faculty field liaisons differently as a function of the type of agency in which the field placement occurred. Consistent with the findings above, the student data revealed that evaluations of faculty field liaisons were statistically consistent across

agency types. There was no evidence that faculty field liaisons in certain types of agencies were perceived to perform better than others (F (17, 150) = 1.26, p = 0.23). Nor were students more or less likely to recommend their faculty field liaison in one type of setting versus others (F (5, 162) = 0.95, p = 0.45). Finally, as before, students viewed faculty field liaisons as making contributions to a successful field experience across all agency types (F (5, 162) = 1.01, p < 0.41). Overall, the student data contribute additional empirical evidence that evaluations of faculty field liaisons are minimally, if at all, affected by the type of agency in which the student is placed. In other words, faculty field liaison performance—good or bad—appears to be independent of the type of industry in which service is rendered.

Correlations among the variables of interest—communication, addressing of problems, quality of curriculum consultation, and ability to review student's assignments—were compared across the overall data set and within each type of agency. These correlations provide a sense of the relationship between strengths in one area and strengths in others. The data in Table 5 reveal that, as with the field instructors' responses reported above, robust, positive, and statistically significant relationships emerged across nearly all variables and within all agencies. Some correlations were extremely robust, pushing above 0.90. Others were somewhat more modest, in the 0.50 to 0.75 range, indicating somewhat more variance but a high degree of association. However, there was one exception to this pattern.

Within the school/education sector, there was a directionally positive but statistically insignificant relationship between students' perceptions of faculty field liaisons' ability to review student work and the overall quality of their consultation. This aberration was an outlier, but was an important piece of evidence that some modest differences do emerge across agency types, even though overall perceptions are quite similar. These data support the conclusion as noted above: Reviews of faculty field liaisons are a function of the faculty field liaisons themselves, not the type of agency in which they work.

Table 5

Correlations of Indicators by Agency Type (Students)

Agency type	Indicators	Good communication	Addressed problems	Quality of consultation
Overall	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.74*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.63*	0.69*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.59*	0.61*	0.58*
Health care	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.67*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.84*	0.62*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.70*	0.60*	0.66*
Special population	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.77*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.64*	0.68*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.57*	0.53*	0.63*
Macro-level	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.75*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.50*	0.72*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.74*	0.76*	0.63*
Child welfare	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.86*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.93*	0.93*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.68*	0.70*	0.74*
Mental health	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.76*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.71*	0.82*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.40*	0.57*	0.60*
School/ education	1. Good communication	—	—	—
	2. Addressed problems	0.75*	—	—
	3. Quality of curriculum consultation	0.52*	0.51*	—
	4. Ability to review student's assignments	0.65*	0.57*	0.26

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better

Indicators by Rank and Status of Faculty Field Liaison

In the previous section, the principal determinant of faculty field liaison evaluations was experience: Full-time faculty that serve in a tenure-track position were rated consistently higher by field instructors than those holding part-time or adjunct positions. Students observed the same relationship between experience and performance. Table 6 contrasts the efficacy of part-time and full-time faculty field liaisons. A series of *t*-tests conducted to determine whether the differences in mean values were statistically significant. *T* statistics and *p* values are presented on the right-hand side of the table.

Table 6

Indicators by Rank/Status of Faculty Field Liaison (Students)

Rank/status	Part-time/adjunct		Full-time/tenure-track		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Overall performance	4.10	1.16	4.70	0.68	3.60	<0.001*
Highly recommend	4.13	1.14	4.84	0.37	4.24	<0.001*
Capacity to significantly contribute to experience	3.97	1.19	4.52	0.68	3.03	<0.005*
Good communication	4.30	0.91	4.70	0.46	2.98	<0.005*
Addressed problems	4.39	0.73	4.66	0.48	2.41	<0.05*
Quality of curriculum consultation	4.38	0.82	4.84	0.37	3.81	<0.001*
Ability to review student's assignments	4.16	0.97	4.60	0.64	2.94	<0.005*

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better

Although the raw *t* statistics are somewhat smaller in Table 6 than the findings presented in Table 3, it was consistently observed that faculty field liaison experience was a crucial predictor of success. Across all variables, ratings were higher for full-time faculty field liaisons than for part-time faculty field liaisons. It is worth noting that the magnitude of the differences varied more in the student data set than in the field instructor data set.

The difference in perceived capacity to deal with problems was just over a quarter of one point on a five-point scale. The difference was statistically meaningful, but the averages were relatively close to one another. On the other hand, some variables saw differences of greater than half a point on a five-point scale, an effect that was substantively more robust. Despite this variation, the results are clear and consistent across both datasets: Faculty field liaison experience, not agency setting, is what matters. More experienced faculty field liaisons working in full-time positions were

consistently rated higher than those working in a part-time or adjunct capacity.

Site Visits

The final empirical analysis investigated student perceptions of site visit requirements. As reported in the previous section, field instructors consistently perceived the number of site visits conducted by faculty field liaisons as smaller than the number of site visits they felt would have been ideal. Interestingly, evidence in Table 7 indicates that student concerns about site visits are often less severe than those of field instructors. On average, students perceived 1.35 site visits to be appropriate, a rate higher than the 1.13 (on average) actual site visits that were conducted. This is a small but statistically significant effect. Overall, students and field instructors alike would like to receive more site visits.

Table 7

Perceived Need of Site Visits by Agency Type (Students)

Agency type	Perceived number of visits needed		Number of actual visits		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Overall	1.35	0.75	1.13	0.61	3.11	< 0.005*
Health care	1.41	1.18	1.27	0.98	0.43	0.68
Special population	1.30	0.77	1.12	0.55	1.11	0.27
Macro-level	1.50	0.62	1.11	0.32	2.36	0.03*
Child welfare	1.33	0.66	1.00	0.55	1.78	0.08
Mental health	1.28	0.69	1.16	0.72	0.81	0.42
School/education	1.36	0.59	1.06	0.33	1.70	< 0.05*

* Statistically significant correlation at the .05 level or better

Differences emerged when evaluations targeted each agency type. As reported in Table 4, field instructors indicated that the desired number of visits reliably exceeded the actual number received. Among students, perceptions of site visit adequacy varied by agency type. In the macro-level and school/education agency types, students perceived a need for more site visits than what occurred. However, in all the other types of agencies, a statistically significant difference did not emerge. That is, students felt that the number of necessary site visits was similar to the number of actual visits. True, the raw average for perceived visits was higher than actual visits in every category; however, in many cases the variation was large enough that a statistically meaningful difference did not appear. A key takeaway from this study is that students tend to be less concerned than field instructors about the adequacy of site visit rates.

Discussion

The evaluative data provided by field instructors and students reveals three important patterns. First, while different types of agencies may benefit from, or even require, specific skills or attributes, there were very few differences in the evaluations of faculty field liaisons as a function of agency type. Skills in one area tend to correlate with skills in another, regardless of the type of agency that was used for the field experience. This is not surprising, given the second major finding: It is the *experience* of tenure-track/tenured/full-time faculty field liaisons that tends to produce the most effective relationships with students.

Full-time faculty field liaisons consistently were rated higher than part-time faculty field liaisons. While these data cannot precisely determine why that is, there are a few explanations, discussed below, that may inform the training and assigning of faculty field liaisons in the future. Finally, field instructors routinely expressed a desire for more site visits, regardless of agency, and regardless of faculty field liaison. While working with a full-time faculty field liaison may reduce the number of visits instructors believe are necessary marginally, instructors across the board desired more visits than they were getting. Students tended to see more alignment between the number of actual site visits and the desirable number of site visits, but this group, also, generally perceived a need for a greater frequency of such visits.

There are several possible explanations as to why field instructors and students have higher levels of satisfaction with full-time faculty field liaisons. One of the indicators of satisfaction was the perception that faculty field liaisons provided quality consultation on the curriculum. Full-time faculty are more likely to teach a greater number and variety of courses due to the nature of their full-time jobs as faculty members. They are also more likely to be involved in curriculum development and ensuring that the curriculum appropriately addresses the competencies that students need to demonstrate in the field. In contrast, part-time faculty field liaisons are likely to have other jobs, and may only teach one class per semester. They also may work only as faculty field liaisons within the social work program, and not teach any additional social work courses. This more limited teaching can impact the part-time faculty field liaison's understanding of the curriculum and the ability to assist the students and field instructors in integrating the curriculum with the field experience. As stated earlier, faculty field liaisons provide education to the field instructors on the CSWE competencies, and help them identify and provide opportunities for the field students to demonstrate these skills (Hendricks et al., 2013). Those with more teaching and curriculum development experience may perform this task more effectively.

Another indicator of satisfaction is related to communication. Full-time faculty liaisons were rated higher on their communication abilities. One explanation for this could be

related to their status as full-time employees in the social work program, which may make them more available to communicate with the field instructors when needed. As mentioned above, part-time faculty liaisons are likely to have other jobs and therefore be less available to the field instructors and students when communication outside of the site visit is needed. Full-time faculty may also be more effective at communicating, particularly using technology, by which they can address problems more immediately outside of site visits. Additionally, full-time faculty were rated as better able to deal with problems that arose in the field. This could relate to the greater experience of full-time faculty field liaisons, as they may have been less likely to come across problems they had not faced in the past.

The higher satisfaction with faculty field liaisons who are full-time faculty could be due to the relationship a field student may have developed with them. This relationship could have been established with the field student having the full-time faculty field liaison as an instructor in previous courses or as an academic advisor or research mentor, or possibly involved in student organization activities. Part-time faculty field liaisons are not necessarily afforded the opportunity of even knowing a social work student prior to being assigned to work with them during their field education experience. The establishment of a relationship prior to the field education experience would allow more open communication, and provide a foundation of understanding if the field student experiences difficulties.

While it is important to consider the possible reasons for the greater satisfaction with full-time faculty field liaisons, most social work programs do not have enough full-time faculty to meet all of their faculty field liaison needs. Therefore, programs should do additional training with part-time faculty liaisons to close this gap. One suggestion is to ensure that part-time faculty field liaisons have the necessary knowledge about the program's curriculum and how it addresses CSWE competencies, in order to more effectively support field instructors in providing appropriate experiences for students. Faculty field liaisons with less experience in the liaison role should also receive training on problems that may come up during the field experience and how to address them. Additionally, the field coordinator should ensure that any part-time field liaisons have adequate time and are available to communicate with field sites.

Strengths

This study provides an opportunity to explore the nature of the implicit curriculum in social work education and its critical value in relation to the field experience. The findings highlight the importance of education centered in the relationship between the students and the faculty field liaisons, as well as the importance of professionally meaningful partnerships between the faculty field liaisons and field instructors.

The study demonstrates some additional strengths beyond a contribution to the knowledge base. First, the measurement of the dependent variables is a strength, in that the sample size was diverse and robust. The nature of implicit curriculum evaluation can be nebulous, given its inherent subjectivity, but the consistent use of a survey collected across time helps to strengthen the findings. Second, this study employs quantitative methods. These methods provided a targeted review of the findings, free from researcher bias. Lastly, the use of basic demographic data (field site categories) and the employment status of the faculty field liaisons helped the researchers strengthen their understanding of the respondents' implicit experiences, while also generating insights into potential staffing patterns for social work field education programs.

Limitations

The purpose of this research was to explore the nature of the implicit curriculum within field education in relation to the roles and responsibilities of faculty field liaisons. As such, it is limited in some ways. Therefore, the results should be viewed as context-dependent and not universal.

First, because of the convenience or purposive sampling, the findings might not be representative of other institutions' social work field education programs. In addition, the reclassifications of agency settings were not random. Second, there are limitations with any self-reported data. Of particular concern is social desirability bias, which is the desire of the respondents to please or present their answers in a favorable way (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Third, this research project was, at its core, program evaluation research. Thus, the design did not control for threats to internal validity. It is possible that other factors could have influenced the dependent variables, such as, but not limited to, the amount and/or type of the previous experience of the field instructors. For example, the study was not able to assess the field instructors' level of supervision experience, how many students they had provided field instruction to previously, and the nature of the field instructors' past associations with the faculty of the social work program. Furthermore, broader demographic information on the field instructors—especially their years of experience and their comfort with the provision of supervision—could have helped further contextualize the value attributed to engagement with the faculty field liaisons. These limitations could be fruitful considerations for guiding future research.

Conclusions

The results of this study showcase the role of the faculty field liaison in building relationships, fostering understanding, and mentoring both graduate-level students

and their field instructors in the unique pedagogy of social work field education (Grady et al., 2020). The findings highlight what is already known about implicit curriculum: That successful learning is as much about the overall learning experience and the social environments that promote it as it is about the content of courses (Grady et al., 2018). The implicit curriculum seeks to measure the fluidity of support, the essence of engaged supervision, and the relationship-centered dynamics that generate successful learning for students.

The role of the faculty field liaison and the attributes of the faculty members that serve in that role are key considerations as social work programs evaluate their implicit curriculum. It is both characteristics—role and attributes—that promote, support, and contribute to success in the field experience for students as well as for field sites. It is essential to include adequate training to faculty field liaisons—essential not only to the process of field education, but also to the impact of the implicit curriculum as it relates to the success of the field education experience. It is then equally as critical to the dialogic of implicit curriculum for programs to explore how faculty field liaisons engage, assess, and intervene in support of field education as it is for social work education programs to evaluate their field education programs (Morton et al., 2019).

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