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A Map for Structuring and Supporting International Social Work Practicum Placements

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Literature Review

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) recognizes field education as the signature pedagogy of the social work profession (CSWE, 2008, 2015, 2022). *Signature pedagogy* is a term used to describe the most influential educational strategies within an area of study (Shulman, 2005). In their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the CSWE (2022) defines signature pedagogy as “elements of instruction and socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline: to think, to perform, and to act intentionally, ethically, and with integrity” (p. 20). *Field education*, also known as practicum, refers to courses where students demonstrate mastery of the social work competencies in a professional setting (CSWE, 2008, 2015, 2022). Practicum experiences prepare students for practice and provide context for classroom learning (Brzykcy et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Rai, 2004).

During the practicum experience, students practice their newfound professional skills and demonstrate competency development through the performance of a service or helping role under the supervision of an expert practitioner (CSWE, 2008, 2015, 2022; Wayne et al. 2010). The supervision provided by the practitioner, also known as the

field instructor, is a foundational pillar of students' learning experiences (Rai, 2004). Field instructors promote connections to theory, provide conceptual frameworks, assist with reflection, and model evaluative feedback for students (Bragg et al., 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2018; Wayne et al., 2010).

Internationally based field placements can be structured in a multitude of ways among different universities. Student-identified placements through United States-based universities may include US-citizen students residing overseas and seeking placement in their locale as well as students located in the US desiring an international placement (Matthew & Lough, 2017). Placement structures include, but are not limited to, student-identified placements, university-to-university or agency agreements, third-party company placements, and university-based study-abroad programs (Fox & Hugman, 2019; Zuchowski et al., 2021).

International placements offer unique benefits for exposure to global issues and can broaden students' perspectives and enhance their social work practice skills. The environment of international field placements can provide social work students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in unfamiliar and rich cultural learning experiences (Remanente, 2021). Reported advantages of international placements for students, supervisors, and organizations include mutual cross-cultural learning, increased insight into world power dynamics, and increased involvement in advocacy of global causes (Attrill et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Lough, 2009; Lough et al., 2012). Different cultural contexts and social systems provide students opportunities to deepen understanding of complex social issues and improve cultural humility (Remanente, 2021).

Alongside these unique opportunities arise unique challenges. There is increased potential for barriers and stressors for the student, the field program, and the field partners. Common barriers and stressors include language barriers, perceived supervisor burden, cultural norm differences and conflicts, and elevated risk of poor placement outcomes (Attrill et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Lough, 2009). Students frequently reported isolation as a challenge during an international practicum placement (Lough, 2009). Other challenges include the complexities of placement identification, malpractice insurance, agency vetting, and time zone differences. Inadequate support for supervision of students is a reported impediment to international field placements (Lee et al., 2019).

Appropriate and intentional support for international placements aids in the development of effective placement implementation and facilitates mutual learning for students, instructors, and organizations (Lough, 2009). Lough identified student preparation prior to placement and regular support while in the field as important to the success of placements (2009). Preparation is multi-faceted, and can include not only

student preparedness but also agency and field instructor training and preparation. This helps to establish student expectations and increase student readiness to learn. Consistent field support is necessary to ensure proper student supervision and learning. Students familiarizing themselves with the cultural standards of supervision style in the particular geographical setting can provide a foundational framework for their experience (Pawar, 2017). Utilization of electronic and digital technology is becoming increasingly integrated into the field of social work, and supports both domestic and international social work students in field placements (Kurzman, 2019; Panos, 2005).

One Program's Design

This article explores one school's transition to including internationally based field placements in their practicum program. Prior to 2019, this social work practicum program, located within a midwestern university, rarely approved out-of-state practicum placements, and did not have the infrastructure or resources to support or approve internationally based options outside the US. However, during the 2019-2020 academic year, two monumental things occurred that elicited changes: the implementation of an online MSW program and the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost overnight, the program received several requests for international practicum placements. The online program opened a pathway for US citizens living abroad to access social work higher education and an MSW degree, particularly among spouses of deployed military personnel. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several current students required accommodation for international practicum placements, as they needed to be closer to immediate family. The decision was made to support current students who were residing internationally and to include in the new student application process those with international practicum needs.

Over a three-year span (2019–2022), three different types of international practicum placements were developed that created pathways for expansion within the university's field education program: students who are American citizens but reside overseas, students who are geographically located on the continental US but needed to relocate internationally, and students who choose to study abroad through a current university program. During the first year of supporting international practicum placements, the need to recognize in particular the population of American students living overseas became apparent. These students were living in unfamiliar cultures with different laws, norms, and time zones from the university. These students needed to stay in their geographic location for practicum placement and had already proven academic success through completion of other curriculum coursework in which an understanding of diversity and cultural humility had been demonstrated.

As the program began to support internationally based practicum placements, themes

emerged related to barriers and struggles that required more resources and delayed timelines. These practicum planning considerations included, but were not limited to, the following:

1. Additional time and resources were required to identify potential practicum placements.
2. A more thorough assessment of proposed practicum learning and activities was needed, to ensure that educational standards were attainable.
3. Individualized processes and lengthy negotiations were required to legally contract with agencies.
4. Increased communication was needed to explore and understand international structures for student professional liability insurance, or alternative options based on location.
5. Added considerations of regional and agency safety concerns were required.
6. Mutual agreement of thorough learning plans that emphasized student supervision and high communication needs was needed.

In response to these emerging planning needs and concerns, the field education program adopted new policies that specifically addressed the scope of international activities, expectations of supervision and communication, use of technology, and safety considerations (University of Oklahoma, 2023). Since working with students who are geographically located overseas requires additional considerations, and because each international placement comes with its own set of special circumstances and complications, the new policy reinforced a demand for earlier planning timelines, to begin at a minimum two semesters prior to beginning practicum, and continuous communication, including a face-face meeting either in-person or virtually. Many times these students need to begin planning immediately upon entering the educational program. This allows adequate time for thorough communication with both the student and practicum agency. This redesigned process and expanded timeline allows for more support for practicum students in negotiating the design of the practicum and securing approvals of multiple stakeholders.

Many students with international practicum placement needs are located on military bases located all over the world. These military-affiliated programs may include multiple MSW practicum students, have limited spots available for practicum students in traditional settings, and require multiple levels of high-level government approvals that need lengthier timelines. Due to barriers such as language differences in some geographic locations, there may be limited possibilities for international placements that are not military affiliated, creating a practicum scarcity that reinforces the importance of navigating these larger bureaucratic systems professionally.

Additional training for students, field instructors, and organizations can ensure that the key concepts of the social work core competencies are operationalized in learning

activities in the agency setting and practicum placement (CSWE, 2022). Whereas these conversations may lead to new professional connections and opportunities for positive student support, they also require generous staffing resources. These formative meetings include brainstorming teaching and learning activities; examining agency policies for vetting purposes; identifying and problem solving any concerns, especially those related to safety and risk management; addressing best practices locally for student professional liability insurance; discussing creative ways to ensure access to learning expectations; and building alliances and partnerships with other agencies.

International placements may also reflect the limited availability of those willing and able to perform the role of field instructor (University of Oklahoma, 2023). In these cases, an off-site field instructor might be required to fulfill programmatic and institutional accreditation standards (CSWE, 2015, 2022). Responsibility for identifying an off-site field instructor needs to be specified in field education policies; this university works in cooperation with the student to locate an MSW-degreed professional affiliated with the agency or the university to serve in this leadership role. Development of a clear plan for off-site field instruction is vital to the student's success during practicum, specifically in regard to defining the role of all of the key members involved, and strategizing on the logistics of who will provide feedback and how and when feedback will be provided.

Another critical piece for the off-site field instruction arrangement is the identification of an on-site person to serve in the role of preceptor. This on-site person supports day-to-day supervision, assists with the completion of an affiliation agreement between the site and the school, aids the student and school in identifying the most appropriate student professional liability insurance, ensures access to and oversight of learning activities built into the student's educational learning contracts, and provides ongoing performance-based feedback to the student and the assigned field instructor.

Once the site has created a comprehensive learning plan for the practicum experience, completing a contractual affiliation agreement could take anywhere between two weeks and six-plus months. Affiliation agreements may be complicated, as legal personnel from both the university and the agency may need to be involved in reviewing the documents. The process of securing the affiliation agreement can be especially complex if a student desires a practicum site that generally operates in a different language than the home university.

For the university-based faculty and/or staff who serve as the connections between the agency site and the university, supporting international placements might alter traditional business hours due to differences in time zones. University faculty and staff supporting international placements need to be flexible regarding their availability to accommodate field instructors and students as they provide site support. For the

international practicum, this could mean that site visits may occur at atypical hours of the day. When there is a 13-hour time difference, for example, the possibility of doing a site visit during regular business hours may not be feasible.

Advanced planning for the alignment of shared technology will be critical for reliable and consistent communication. Field education programs may need to rely on alternative web-based applications. Ease and effectiveness in communication is a critical consideration for continuous partnership between international practicums and the university.

Lessons Learned

Over the course of two years, certain themes began to emerge. First, every international placement has its own set of special considerations that need to be identified and navigated. This aspect was magnified during the global pandemic, when countries deployed enhanced crisis responses and rigid protocols. These nuances can be observed in every aspect of the planning process, in agency-specific policies, and in the variety of cultural norms, highlighting the need for an open approach, comprehensive vetting, and student competence in cultural humility and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusivity. This program requires students to have completed core foundational social work courses in which they have demonstrated knowledge, behavior, and skill acquisition, have learned how to apply the code of ethics, and have become able to embrace the role of learner when practicing cultural humility – all prior to launching into practicum.

Secondly, effective communication among the students, the field partners, and the school is vital. It quickly became apparent that students and field instructors must speak the language of the clients as well as the primary language of the university faculty and staff. The program's experience has been that the concept and reality of "fluency" has multiple meanings, and is dependent upon contextual and cultural understandings. Logistically and developmentally, this could reflect varying levels of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. When students are being asked to complete higher levels of critical thinking and skill execution, they need to complete these tasks and communicate in a language in which they feel comfortable speaking and writing, as these two pathways of communication are vital for their creation of learning plans, accomplishment of practicum activities, and provision of service to clients. Additionally, students, field instructors, and university faculty must be able to communicate with each other in order to successfully support students and to ensure evaluative fidelity. Communication channels need to be succinctly and clearly defined, from the practicum placement vetting stage through the final evaluations of student performance in the practicum placement.

Lastly, the most prevalent theme was the need for flexibility. Whether managing time zones when scheduling virtual site visits or supporting students who experience military relocations, the need to be open and adaptable has been a mainstay in supporting internationally based practicum placements. Investing resources in navigating pathways for international practicum placements improves access to education as an equity element for students, while broadening and enriching the scope of student cultural understanding and social work practice within global communities.

Conclusion

The educational and practice benefits for students and professionals regarding international placements align with the principle of social justice by increasing education equity and access to higher education. The highest number of students requesting international placements in our program are military spouses, a majority identifying as female and as being representative of a minority group. Mitigation of geographical barriers through online social work education and international field placements improves the availability of and access to quality higher education for any potential student desiring to accomplish an educational goal, and successful completion has the potential to positively impact and improve their life through social and financial gains. Access to higher education while living internationally allows these students to acquire the knowledge and skills to address societal problems, and supports the principles of equity, inclusivity, and advocacy that drive the profession of social work.

Across the existing literature there is a clear call for future research and investigation into international practicum placements (Lee et al., 2019; Lough, 2009; Lough et al., 2012; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). The limited information shared thus far indicates a need for thorough review and evaluation of the outcomes and support needs of students, supervisors, and organizations in regard to international practicum placement experiences. There is also an opportunity to better understand best practices for structuring placements and supervision models (Wayne et al., 2010). The call-to-action requests more advanced research and continued explorations into the impacts of access to higher education programs, specifically regarding international social work practicum placements, as well as the impact on globalized human services and the continued challenges to higher education programs.

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