Building Research Capacity in Social Work: Lessons from the Field Practicum Experience

Author(s)

Erin Muir, MSW
University of Kentucky

Aubrey Jones, PhD
University of Kentucky

Stephanie Ratliff, PhD
University of Kentucky

Jenifer Gamble, PhD
University of Kentucky

Background

Field practicums play a critical role in preparing social work students for professional practice. Through training and instruction on skills such as critical thinking, effective performance, and ethical decision-making, practicums connect classroom learning to real-world application (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; Walsh et al., 2019). The goal of social work education is to develop graduates who are well prepared and deeply committed to improving the well-being of vulnerable individuals, families, groups, and communities, locally and globally (University of Kentucky College of Social Work, 2022). The field practicum plays a vital role in achieving that goal.

Social work has a historical commitment to both macro and micro practice. Our code of ethics and the presence of macro-focused professional organizations support macro practice in social work, yet macro-level social work practicums are not as common for students. This has been attributed to a variety of reasons, such as social work curricula that heavily emphasize clinical practice, challenges in placements and career paths, faculty orientation, regulatory practices around licensure, and student expectations (Hill et al., 2017). As macro interventions have

become more critical, macro-focused field placements offer students an opportunity to hone their macro practice skills (Reish, 2016).

Research practicums offer a valuable avenue for students to engage in macro social work practice while developing highly marketable skills. These skills differ from the program management, policy, and advocacy forms of other macro placements. Although research practicums carry some negative perceptions, such as a lack of direct contact with individuals, difficulties in data collection, and insufficient guidance or input, these practicums also have many benefits (Hewson et al., 2010). Research practicums encourage creativity, and allow individuals to develop critical thinking skills and engage in various components of research. Additionally, research practicums address a gap for online and nontraditional students who face challenges in securing local placements that fit their schedules or periods of disruption (Morris & Everett, 2024). These practicums may also fill a need for social work programs who are grappling with increasing demands for placements and limited placement opportunities, while simultaneously expanding on an essential area of skill development (Walsh et al., 2019).

The purpose of this field note is to describe the experience of a research field practicum from the perspectives of the research practicum student, the faculty researcher, the director of field education, and the field instructor.

Perspectives on the Research Practicum

This section provides reflections from the four stakeholders. Each person considered the research practicum and answered questions to guide their response.

Student Reflection

Starting the practicum in the fall of 2024, I felt uncertain and overwhelmed, but I entered the practicum with a learning mindset, focused on developing skills and gaining a better understanding of social work research. A research practicum was not my first choice for my practicum experience, but due to circumstances out of my control, it became the best choice. Through hands-on work with faculty and participants, I've come to appreciate how research—though indirect—meaningfully supports vulnerable populations, informs programs, and advances evidence-based practice.

Over the year, I completed diverse tasks and gained insight into the research process under both direct and indirect supervision. I learned that research requires patience, especially with tasks like literature reviews, data collection, and waiting on IRB approval. While the practicum provided limited structure at times, this fostered

independence, creativity, and flexibility—especially important for students with busy schedules.

I built critical research skills, including writing literature reviews and annotated bibliographies, and conducting data collection through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. I learned to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative data, use tools like Qualtrics and SPSS, and navigate ethical research procedures, including IRB applications and informed consent. These skills enhanced my discipline, time management, and confidence.

My experience was enriched by strong mentorship from [my supervisor], who met with me weekly and provided ongoing support. As someone working full-time with irregular hours, I appreciated the flexibility of remote work. Challenges included fluctuating workloads and my limited prior research experience, but my supervisor provided tutorials and guidance that made the practicum both educational and rewarding.

While I don't plan to work in research after graduation, I now better understand its value in practice. Translating research into accessible formats—such as summaries and infographics—can help address real-world issues. I practiced this through community-engaged research, including program evaluation interviews and work with advisory boards. This experience has broadened my understanding of macro-level practice and how research can drive meaningful change.

Research Faculty Supervisor Reflection

Research practicums provide a flexible and meaningful solution, allowing students to engage in faculty-led research projects that contribute to evidence-based practice and macro-level social work. However, supervising these practicums requires patience and an understanding of the skills the student has and needs to acquire to be successful in the practicum and beyond the classroom.

As an MSW student, my own research practicum shaped my career. These placements develop underemphasized but marketable skills like grant writing, program evaluation, and data analysis. Students gain hands-on experience with literature reviews, data collection and analysis, dissemination, and sometimes clinical engagement through interviews or focus groups with community partners. Beyond individual growth, research practicums strengthen the profession by bridging the gap between research and practice.

In supervising [my student], I began by learning about her goals, coursework, employment background, and research knowledge. This helped set expectations and

identify appropriate tasks and training needs. Over time, her responsibilities expanded to include interviewing agency staff for a program evaluation and joining meetings with potential research partners. These experiences allowed me to continuously assess and support her development.

Challenges do exist, such as navigating time zones and scheduling, especially for online students. I address this early by establishing clear communication preferences, weekly supervision meetings, and expectations for feedback and task updates. Another challenge involves aligning research tasks with the CSWE competencies. While some competencies like research-informed practice (Competency 4) are a natural fit, others—like intervention or policy practice—may be less directly addressed. However, participatory research often supports competencies related to ethics, communication, and engagement.

My own experiences—as a former research assistant and current community-engaged scholar—help me align research practicum tasks with learning goals. Still, I recognize the importance of guiding students in reflecting on how their work connects to professional competencies. This is an area I continue to grow in as a mentor.

Ultimately, research practicums are most successful when faculty take a structured approach—matching students to projects that align with their goals and strengths, offering both support and challenge. Students bring value to research, and I encourage more faculty and students to consider research-based field placements.

Practicum Course Instructor Reflection

Students completing a research practicum are often interested in serving communities and organizations through administrative placements and activities, while also diving deeply into a social work topic and examining its evidence base. These students are typically interested in a nontraditional practicum that provides them with considerable flexibility, in terms of working independently and with a specific mentor.

Designing a research practicum requires shifting from traditional direct practice to a more analytical, project-based approach. Students are integrated into ongoing research streams, which can be overwhelming at first, especially if they are unfamiliar with the long-term nature of research or its technical demands. Faculty mentors must assess students' skills and provide appropriate support, ensuring tasks match the student's experience level while fostering growth.

Common challenges include students' accountability in independent work, varying

familiarity with research concepts, and difficulty connecting their tasks to social work competencies. While students are not expected to master all aspects of research immediately, a working understanding of the research process, digital tools, and critical thinking is essential. Skills like using survey software, building codebooks, and navigating libraries are central, and students must demonstrate adaptability, organization, and initiative.

A key benefit of a research practicum is the deeper understanding it offers into evidence-based practice and the technical rigor behind it. Students see how research transforms data into real-world impact, building transferable skills in project management, digital literacy, and ethical decision making. However, for those seeking direct client interaction or greater task variety, the structured and often abstract nature of research may feel limiting.

To strengthen the experience, clearer expectations and tailored activity examples would help students connect their tasks to social work competencies. With the growing complexity of social issues, research practicums prepare students to evaluate information critically and support ethical, evidence-informed interventions. One former student credited her research practicum with helping her secure a hospital position due to the critical skills she developed.

In sum, research practicums offer valuable training in macro practice and evidence-based approaches, but require strong self-direction, interest in inquiry, and a fit between student goals and the practicum structure.

Field Director Reflection

All BASW and MSW students must complete generalist practicum experiences; research practicums are one type. These placements were initially created to offer flexible, remote learning opportunities and were particularly useful when students faced disruptions due to natural disasters or agency closures. Many students, especially those balancing caregiving or employment, benefit from the flexibility research practicums provide.

Recently, demand for research practicums has grown due to positive student experiences and increased faculty interest. Faculty who have supervised these practicums report high satisfaction, encouraging others to participate.

While all practicums present logistical challenges, research placements require unique coordination. Field education teams must often recruit faculty, clarify practicum expectations for students, and ensure appropriate student–faculty matches. Faculty may have specific requirements—such as multiterm placements or

particular skill sets—which adds to the complexity but also helps ensure successful, uninterrupted experiences.

Students in research practicums engage in activities such as literature reviews and data analysis using platforms like SPSS or R, and often contribute to publications. They must navigate both social work ethics and research ethics, including completing CITI training and gaining IRB approval. Developing a learning plan can be difficult without familiarity with research-based competencies, but early collaboration with faculty helps guide this process.

At the University of Kentucky College of Social Work, research practicums were rare until the past three years. Increased demand for flexibility, along with faculty willingness, has expanded these opportunities. What began as a workaround has become a valuable strategy to build student research capacity and enhance the integration of research and practice. As Proctor (2017) noted, bridging this gap is critical to advancing evidence-based social work practice.

Discussion

Social work has always been rooted in the ideal of creating and sustaining individual and societal change to advance well-being and social justice. Current trends suggest an emphasis on clinical practice within social work education (D'Aprix et al., 2004; Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). This shift raises important questions about whether the full mission of the profession is being realized. Reisch (2017) urged a renewed focus on macro practice to uphold social work's commitment to justice and systemic change. One such way to do so is through the research practicum.

Research practicums offer several notable strengths. Students develop marketable, transferable skills such as literature review, data analysis, digital literacy, and project management. They gain exposure to macro social work practice and systems-level thinking, which are often overlooked in traditional placements. The flexible, often remote format increases accessibility for students with work or caregiving responsibilities. Strong mentorship and collaboration between students and faculty enhance professional development, with many students reporting increased confidence, competence, and a stronger sense of professional identity.

However, challenges remain. Without structured guidance, students may struggle to see how research aligns with CSWE competencies. The self-directed nature of the work requires high levels of motivation and independence, which can be difficult for some. The indirect nature of research may leave students feeling disconnected from traditional social work practice. Additionally, students often face a steep learning curve with research tools and processes, and aligning practicum hours with

unpredictable research timelines can create logistical difficulties.

Lessons Learned and Implications

Students in social work research practicums contribute meaningfully to evidence-based practice, policy, and community interventions. Their tasks may include conducting literature reviews, collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data, and supporting dissemination through presentations and publications. These experiences build research, communication, and technical skills essential to professional development. However, research practicums must prioritize learning and mentorship—not just advancing faculty agendas.

Ethical engagement is central to the practicum, including informed consent, participant safety, and discussions on research impact. Weekly supervision meetings, clear task expectations, flexible scheduling, and access to tools like Qualtrics and SPSS support student success. Training resources, such as CITI certification and supervisor guidance, are also key.

Given the rise of online programs and students with limited placement options, research practicums offer a valuable alternative. Field education teams should maintain a list of faculty willing to supervise, and include required skills or preferences. Creating sample learning plans and providing orientation webinars can further support these placements.

To reduce stigma and increase engagement, field educators should clearly define what a research practicum entails and how it supports social work practice. From a student's perspective, open communication, receptivity to feedback, and the ability to work independently with support are essential. A successful practicum blends skill development with meaningful mentorship, fostering confidence and competence in future social workers.

Conclusion

In this field note, we engaged in reflective practice from four different but interrelated perspectives to identify and discuss the strengths and challenges of conducting a research practicum. Strengths and challenges were identified from each perspective. Research field placements are beneficial for social work students who want to focus on macro-level practice, gain specific knowledge in the research field, and have a sense of independence and flexibility in a remote setting.

References

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). 2015 *Educational policy and accreditation standards*.
https://tinyurl.com/yczw5a8s

D'aprix, A. S., Dunlap, K. M., Abel, E., & Edwards, R. L. (2004). Goodness of fit: Career goals of MSW students and the aims of the social work profession in the United States. *Social Work Education, 23*(3), 265–280.
https://doi.org/10.1080/0261547042000224029

Hewson, J. A., Walsh, C. A., & Bradshaw, C. (2010). Enhancing social work research education through research field placements. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 3*(9).
https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1072674.pdf

Hill, K., Erikson, C. L., Donaldson, L. P., Fogel, S. J., & Ferguson, S. M. (2017). Perceptions of macro social work education: An exploratory study of educators and practitioners. *Advances in Social Work, 18*(2), 522.
https://doi.org/10.18060/21455

Mizrahi, T., & Dodd, S.-J. (2013). MSW students' perspectives on social work goals and social activism before and after completing graduate education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 49*(4), 580–600.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2013.812504

Morris, B. L., & Everett, A. (2024). Field note—The practicum learning portal: Building resilience in social work field education during and post-COVID-19. *Journal of Social Work Education, 60*(1), 163–170.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2022.2119069

Proctor, E. (2017). The pursuit of quality for social work practice: Three generations and counting. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 8*(3), 335–353.
https://doi.org/10.1086/693431

Reish, M. (2017). Why macro practice matters. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 41*(1).
https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2016.1179537

University of Kentucky College of Social Work. (2022). *College of social work field education manual*.
https://tinyurl.com/4zu6d2cn

Walsh, C. A., Gulbrandsen, C., & Lorenzetti, L. (2019). Research practicum: An experiential model for social work research. *Sage Open, 9*(2).
https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019841922