

Engaging Faculty in Field Education: Strategies for Expanding Placements And Strengthening Student Supervision

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The significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all domains of social work education and practice continue to be felt even after more than five years since its onset. The evolving dynamics in response to the virus led behavioral health and social service providers to respond rapidly to the medical and psychosocial needs of the individuals and communities they served, and to do so amidst the challenges of lockdown, limited resources, and an exponential expansion in the adoption of teleservices, even in domains of practice where such use had not previously been prominent.

The traversing of limited and unpredictable funding, social isolation, economic turmoil, and the psychological impact of it all has strained the social services and behavioral health labor force, and led to a number of social workers leaving the profession. Some trends suggest that the attrition rate has been significantly higher since 2020 than pre-pandemic (Ashcroft et al., 2022; Frost, 2025). This trend, often called the great resignation, has occurred not only in social work but across multiple industries, including throughout the healthcare system and disciplines allied to social work, such as addiction counseling (Kammer et al., 2024). The strain on service networks and providers from the increased need for services, especially for smaller entities with more limited funding, has led, unfortunately, to the closure of agencies

and the reduction of services in many communities (Holcomb, 2024; Shklarski & Latzer, 2024).

Having fewer agencies, and fewer qualified social workers at agencies, has created ongoing challenges for undergraduate and graduate social work programs attempting to secure practicum placements for students. Social work programs, especially modest-sized ones situated in smaller communities such as ours, are facing downward pressure to secure placements for an expanding number of students in a shrinking number of placements, often attempting to do so in competition with students from allied disciplines (psychology, counseling, etc.) who are also seeking to secure placements at the same agencies. While this dynamic impacts us specifically, we do not believe that it is unique to us, as we have heard anecdotally from directors of other programs across the region and throughout the country that they are experiencing similar challenges.

Fewer agencies in the community means fewer potential practicum sites, and even agencies that have previously accepted interns might now be in a position of accepting fewer, or none at all, due to limited resources. Unfortunately, many agencies have less time and less capacity for taking on and supporting student learners. Increasingly, social service agencies are staffed by individuals who do not have a social work–specific degree, preventing them from supervising social work students as field instructors. Staff at the agency might not have enough experience to serve as field instructors, and even if they do, might lack experience supervising social work students and working with social work field education programs.

Historically, there has been a separation in social work departments between faculty and field education. This divide often leads field education staff to express the sentiment that other faculty do not seem to understand or appreciate field education (Holcomb, 2024). Despite obvious overlap, many programs have faculty who exclusively teach, advise students, conduct research, and engage other forms of university and community service, and who are not directly involved with field education staff or the field education process. Despite this delineation, social work faculty have often stepped in when needed to supervise students at practicum sites that do not have qualified social workers to serve as field instructors, often doing so voluntarily as service to the department. While many social work faculty have always agreed to supervise students on an as-needed basis, the profound changes in the social work field since the pandemic have necessitated more formal systems and processes for making sure they do so. This article discusses strategies implemented by a field education program at a mid-sized Midwestern university to engage faculty more consistently in addressing this issue (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1*Strategies for Engaging Faculty as Field Supervisors*

Strategy	Details
Create departmental systems and incentives	<p>Pursue offering a stipend to faculty for supervising students and potential funding from departmental budget, student fees, or external grants</p> <p>Consider offering course reassignment time to faculty supervising practicum students to allow them time to support the department and student success through supervising</p> <p>Promote positive benefits of supervising students to faculty, including supporting departmental stability and growth and student success, and emphasize how supervising students contributes to portfolio materials towards tenure and promotion</p>
Clarify processes and roles	<p>Provide training and support for faculty to help them understand field policies, processes, and practices</p> <p>Clarify roles and responsibilities to minimize and avoid conflicts associated with dual relationships</p> <p>Clarify processes for expressing grievance and pursuing corrective action</p>
Highlight benefits to faculty	<p>Allows faculty to become more familiar with agencies and services in the community, especially for faculty newer to the department and area</p> <p>Offers the opportunity for faculty to utilize their practice and research experience and expertise in support of students and community agencies</p> <p>Offers fulfillment experienced from observing students develop as professional social workers as they learn through new experiences and apply their education to direct practice</p>

Creating Departmental Systems and Incentives

Since faculty already experience significant limitations to their time due to other requirements and commitments, our program decided not to rely purely on the willingness of faculty to volunteer, and instead to offer a financial incentive for agreeing to supervise students. After making the case to administration for the need of such supervision to maintain and expand field education, promote student retention and completion, and retain Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] accreditation, the program was able to secure approval from the university to offer to faculty a stipend of \$500 per student, per semester, for agreeing to meet weekly with the student and provide social work supervision while completing practicum. This

program was able to do so through a departmental budget that is also augmented by student fees. Given that budgets continue to shrink across higher education, programs might seek to secure such funding from the university, university foundations, or from external grants or sponsorships.

If financial compensation is not feasible, programs can create other incentives to encourage faculty to supervise students. A program can consider offering course reassignment time for faculty supervising practicum students. Programs can also create documents formally recognizing the service that the faculty member has provided to the department by agreeing to supervise students, and to make this a part of portfolio materials toward tenure and promotion consideration. In addition to the stipend, the director of field education for our program consistently provides formal letters documenting the service for faculty portfolios. Departmental leadership can also consistently communicate to faculty the need for and importance of serving as field instructors for promoting the stability and growth of the department, and for supporting student success.

Clarifying Processes and Roles

Since faculty might not be directly or intimately familiar with field policies and practices, field education staff can create both individual and group mentoring opportunities to offer support. This can help reduce any uncertainty or reluctance that faculty might have about agreeing to supervise students due to concerns about not understanding what will be involved in the process or their commitment. The director and assistant director for field education in this program created a training for all field instructors to help them better understand the field process and their role and responsibilities, and to offer strategies and resources for promoting successful clinical supervision (Rinks & Wilderman, 2021).

This training is offered both live online and as a recording for those not able to attend. Through the university, participants are able to earn an hour of category 1 continuing education towards the maintenance of licensure, at no cost. Community partners have provided very positive feedback on the training and how it helps them to better understand field requirements and expectations and earn continuing education hours without cost. This has been especially true for newer field instructors with less experience providing supervision generally, and particularly to students. Faculty supervising students are also encouraged to complete this training so that they have a better understanding of the field process. Faculty with less experience providing supervision also benefit from the training through receiving guidance on foundational principles for providing supervision successfully. Having faculty serving as supervisors has also allowed the program to innovate through expanding the number of internships by engaging newer and less traditional

agencies, especially ones providing valuable social services but who might not have previously accepted students or who might not have anyone with a social work degree on staff.

Another important task for engaging faculty as supervisors is that of clarifying roles and responsibilities. Similar to the importance of role induction for preventing dropout and promoting positive outcome in services (Swift et al., 2023), faculty and students need to actively, openly, and consistently clarify and discuss what supervision is; the structure, scope, and purpose of supervision; and the expectations for faculty supervisor and student learner. Every field student completes an anonymous written evaluation of their faculty member and/or site supervisor following the completion of their practicum. This is a helpful feedback tool for the field education team and future students, but ongoing communication is encouraged throughout the supervision relationship so that needed adjustments can be made in real time and the supervision is more valuable.

There can be several possible challenges to the arrangement of having faculty supervise students in practicum, especially the potential for dual relationships. This can occur if a faculty member who is serving as supervisor is also the student's academic advisor. Meetings designated for supervision might drift into questions concerning planning next semester's schedule. If the supervisee is a current student in a class the supervisor is teaching, this could create confusion over the focus of supervision, as any challenges in the supervisory relationship might transfer into the classroom, or supervision might drift into questions about coursework.

Another issue is a field liaison or seminar instructor serving as the student's supervisor. The seminar instructor is ultimately responsible for all trainees in the seminar course, and could potentially put too much focus on their supervisee. This raises an additional concern, since the field liaison is also grading the student's work. If the field director, program director, or department chair supervises a student, this could create an issue if behavioral concerns arise with the student's performance and they end up being part of the administrative complaint and corrective process.

Each of these issues has come up as this program has expanded faculty engagement in field education. To address these important concerns, and to maintain the ethical commitments of social workers in educational and training settings to fairly evaluate students' performance, to establish functional boundaries, and to avoid multiple relationships (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021), it is important for faculty serving as supervisors to acknowledge, discuss, and invite questions about the roles and dynamics of supervision at the beginning of the relationship. This promotes a sense of clarity and informed consent for student supervisees. While not currently required, faculty supervisors in this program are encouraged to document that such

discussions have occurred, and to do so through the use of a supervision contract. This practice also helps model for students the characteristics of successful clinical supervision after they enter the profession. An important part of this conversation includes empowering students by ensuring that they are aware of processes for expressing and addressing grievances with the supervisor if issues or conflicts arise.

Highlighting Benefits to Faculty

Since field is the signature pedagogy for social work education, the ability for faculty to see the connection between field education, student learning plans and experiences during practicum, and the CSWE's Educational Policy and Education Standards (EPAS) helps them to be aware of what these standards are and to make sure that their course objectives and content are not only connected to the EPAS but also how those connect to field. Having the entire social work department more engaged with this process not only helps faculty to support students as they go through the field process and connect their classroom learning to direct practice experiences, but also helps the program be more connected to the accreditation process, especially during times of self-study and reaffirmation. Engaging faculty more directly with field can also create a greater sense of cohesion within the department. Even if faculty are not supervising students, encouraging them to become more involved with field-related committees and advisory boards with community partners can also strengthen this awareness. Through this process, faculty become more familiar with colleagues and agencies in the community, and the community becomes more familiar and engaged with faculty.

While it might seem self-evident, a final important factor for convincing faculty to serve as supervisors for students is to articulate and highlight not only the benefits to the department and profession, but also potential personal benefits to them individually. Supervising students can help new faculty become more familiar with the community, the agencies in the area, and the services they provide. Supervising students at agencies providing services consistent with the faculty member's area of research or practice experience can also allow faculty to use their expertise to the benefit of students and the community. These connections potentially can lead to service opportunities on local boards or the possibility of conducting applied research or practice evaluation. Involving junior faculty—especially those newer to the university and community—with field has consistently led to research and service opportunities that support their work towards tenure. Since clinical supervision skills are not universally taught in graduate social work programs, many faculty might have never learned how to be supervisors and can benefit from developing increased skills in this specialty area of practice and increasing their comfort, confidence, and competence with providing social work supervision (National Association of Social Workers & Association of Social Work Boards [NASW & ASWB], 2013).

Remaining Challenges

This article solely addresses the challenges that social work programs face when maintaining and expanding placement opportunities for students through ensuring adequate supervision, and the potential benefit of engaging faculty as a resource to meet this need. While this is an important area of field education to address, and these strategies have helped our particular program, several notable contemporary challenges to social work field education persist. As mentioned previously, these include reduced numbers of placements due to agency closure, loss of staff, and limited supervision opportunities. Students also increasingly face the additional challenge of trying to complete their education and field education while experiencing the rising cost of higher education, limited opportunities for paid internships, the challenges of completing school and practicum while attempting to work, and managing their own mental health (Holcomb, 2024).

Although it can be rewarding and fulfilling for faculty to witness firsthand students' success as they experience meaningful and enriching opportunities during their practicum and connect classroom knowledge to real world applications, not all faculty will want to engage. Even when financial and institutional incentives are offered, some faculty will decide that they are not interested, and that the extra time and responsibility required to supervise students is not appealing to them. While regrettable, this will always be the case. It is not necessary for every faculty member to be involved, but it is increasingly important for more faculty to be involved. That has been the experience of our program. Despite the added financial incentive of a stipend and consistent messages from departmental leadership about the need to have more faculty involved to ensure that all students are successfully placed, not all faculty have chosen to participate. Luckily, an increasing number have, and this has been made all the more valuable by the engagement of junior faculty.

The strategies outlined in this article have strengthened field education in this program and we hope will continue to do so. It is believed that these strategies can also be beneficial for other programs as they attempt to navigate the continuing challenges that social work field education experiences. Fortunately, innovation and creative problem solving in the presence of difficult circumstances and limited resources is what social workers do best.

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