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# **What Comes After New Practicum Instructor Training? Enhancing Student Social Work Education Through Practicum Instructor Consultation and Support**

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Field education is widely recognized as the cornerstone of social work training, serving as the essential bridge between classroom coursework and professional practice. As Kadushin (1991) aptly noted, "There is a general consensus that field instruction is the most significant, most productive, most memorable component of social work education" (p. 1). Central to this experiential learning model are practicum instructors, who play a pivotal role in guiding students' professional development and shaping their emerging identities as social workers. The relationship between students and their practicum instructors is not only instrumental in facilitating learning but also strongly influences students' overall satisfaction with their field education experience (Deal & Clements, 2006). This, in turn, affects how students perceive the value of their social work education and their readiness to enter the profession. Therefore, sustained support and ongoing training for practicum instructors are critical for enhancing the quality of supervision and ensuring that students are well prepared for the complex realities of social work practice.

Despite practicums' central role in social work education, several significant challenges hinder its effectiveness in preparing students for professional practice.

Foremost among these are the limited availability of practicum opportunities and a shortage of qualified practicum instructors (Bogo et al., 2022). These issues are exacerbated by rising caseloads and organizational demands, which strain the capacity of practitioners to take on instructional roles. Compounding these pressures, the ongoing global behavioral health workforce shortage has intensified stress and moral injury among social workers, in turn reducing their willingness and ability to mentor students (Levine et al., 2023).

Although social work practitioners are often expected to draw on their practice experience when serving as practicum instructors, the role requires a distinct set of educational skills. These include structuring supervision, providing constructive feedback, designing meaningful learning activities, teaching to the core social work competencies, and supporting students in developing their professional identities (Deal & Clements, 2006). Beyond technical teaching skills, effective instruction also relies on the ability to build trusting relationships that encourage students to take risks, reflect critically, and engage deeply in the learning process.

While the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates both orientation and ongoing training for practicum instructors, it does not provide specific guidelines or a standardized framework (CSWE, 2022). As a result, training practices vary widely across social work programs (DeJesus et al., 2022). Additionally, competing institutional priorities can further limit investment in practicum instructor development, potentially leaving many instructors without the sustained support they need. This raises a critical question: Once practicum instructors complete their initial orientation, how are they sustained in their role? What structured resources exist to ensure their continued growth and effectiveness as educators?

There is a pressing need for social work programs to prioritize the development of robust, ongoing training and support mechanisms for practicum instructors beyond the initial onboarding process. This paper explores one such model: a structured approach to ongoing consultation and support that emphasizes relational learning and community-building through monthly practicum instructor groups. By examining the current landscape of field education and identifying key areas for improvement in practicum instructor development, this paper aims to contribute to the broader conversation about best practices in social work education.

### **Significance of Practicum Instruction**

Practicum instructors are central to social work education, serving as the practitioners to whom the academy “necessarily abdicate[s] significant teaching responsibilities” (DeJesus et al., 2022, p. 4). Master of Social Work (MSW) students spend a minimum of 900 hours in practice-based learning, as required by the CSWE’s

*2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (CSWE, 2022). As educators in the field, practicum instructors are an essential extension of social work programs. Programs must ensure that all master's students receive field supervision from an individual who holds a master's degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program and has at least two years of post-MSW practice experience in social work (CSWE, 2022). As a result, students spend a significant amount of time learning from and engaging with their practicum instructors and, potentially, task supervisors, who may provide additional on-site day-to-day task assignments and supervision without the required MSW.

Central to students' practice-based learning, practicum instructors are responsible for assessing student competencies as they engage with real-world client systems, as well as translating classroom knowledge into practice and helping students demonstrate the skills, values, attitudes, and ethics of the social work profession. Research underscores that the quality of the practicum instructor–student relationship directly influences student learning and satisfaction with field education (Deal & Clements, 2006). Additionally, the supervisory relationship shapes how students and supervisors approach the overall field experience, quality of learning, and skill development, which ultimately impacts clients (Pehrson et al., 2009). This evidence highlights not only the importance of the instructor role but also the need to equip instructors with sustained support.

### **Practicum Instructor Training Needs**

Multiple surveys have been conducted to better understand the needs of practicum instructors. According to a recent report that surveyed student and practicum instructors, the following were identified as current challenges in field education: lack of preparation, support and training; lack of equity, diversity, inclusion and access; lack of financial compensation; communication and supervision skills; competition for practicum placements; multiple roles and responsibilities; and changes due to online learning and practice (Drolet et al., 2023). Based on this feedback, and considering the issues regarding lack of preparation for students and support and training, potential practicum instructors might not feel prepared to take on the multiple roles necessary, which include practitioner, teacher, mentor, and supervisor,

A national survey of field directors on field instructor training demonstrates some agreement on the training needs for practicum instructors by noting similar content themes, such as school-specific policies and curriculum, general field instruction and supervisory skills, and knowledge of core social work concepts, as all being necessary training areas (DeJesus et al., 2022). The field directors surveyed also identified resources needed to achieve these training goals, including instructional methods and materials, process identification, and resources from their university,

peer field directors, and CSWE. The authors noted that perspectives on how to approach training still diverge, and examples were given of suggested training content areas that were not broadly consistent (DeJesus et al., 2022).

Although programs offer orientations, courses such as Seminar in Field Instruction (SIFI), and workshops, there is no national standard to ensure consistency or accountability across institutions. This lack of structure risks uneven preparation for instructors and, by extension, for students. Additionally, there is limited research on identifying effective training methods and content to improve the quality of practicum instruction. Specifics and recommendations for supervision, particularly clinical supervision, exist, but not as a comprehensive training approach for practicum instructors (Parga & Doyle, 2020).

Nevertheless, training opportunities have consistently been identified as one of the most meaningful incentives for retaining practicum instructors. In particular, “free” social work trainings tailored specifically for field instructors are highly valued (Zuckerman et al., 2017). Continuing education is required for licensed social work professionals, and it can be costly to maintain the required units for renewal. Therefore, no-cost opportunities allow practicum instructors to obtain relevant continuing education credits and sustain their roles, especially in organizations with less funding for professional development. These training offerings not only help instructors build practical skills relevant to their dual roles as practitioners and educators, but can also serve as important venues for relationship-building and networking with university field staff. Relational support, including mentorship and ongoing communication, has been highlighted as a key strength in field education (Zuckerman et al., 2017). This opportunity to connect with peers and faculty fosters a sense of community and shared purpose, which is critical for sustaining engagement in the role.

Beyond training, in a survey examining incentives and factors impacting retention of field instructors at their university, the authors found that the most influential factors affecting the decision to continue as field instructors was the quality of the students, followed by the relationship with the field faculty and with the school of social work (Zuckerman et al., 2017). Instructors are more likely to remain engaged when they feel their contributions are valued and when they experience a collaborative, supportive environment. Together, access to tailored training and a sense of professional community emerge as the strongest predictors of practicum instructor satisfaction and retention.

### **Use of Ongoing Consultation and Support**

By examining the challenges reported by practicum instructors and their students,

the field directors' identified training needs, and the recognized strengths of existing training programs—particularly in skill development and relationship-building—we gain valuable insight into the most effective and salient strategies for supporting and retaining practicum instructors. While orientation and initial training are essential, ongoing support is equally critical. Practicum instructors regularly encounter evolving challenges, including changes in field settings and curricular expectations, which directly influence their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, each student brings unique learning needs, strengths, and interests, making every practicum experience distinct. This dynamic nature of field education underscores the importance of continuous training and support to help instructors adapt and thrive in their educational roles.

In 2023, the Office of Field Education at the University of Washington School of Social Work (UWSSW) in Seattle developed an ongoing monthly virtual consultation and support group for practicum instructors and task supervisors. UWSSW has robust full-time, part-time, and advanced-standing MSW and BASW programs, with over 500 students in practicum at a time and hundreds of active practicum instructors. This specific consultation and support group was created to meet needs identified by practicum instructors who were part of a field education advisory council to the social work program. The expressed request was for a space intended for consultation, collaboration, mentorship, and support. This ask aligns with the implications of previous research noting both the desire for skill-building and relational connection.

The field faculty worked alongside these practicum instructors to develop a consultation and support group open to all practicum instructors and task supervisors, with monthly themes and continuing education opportunities. The monthly groups began in October 2023 and have continued consistently, often with a two-month break over the summer. They are held virtually to accommodate practicum instructors across the state and provide an accessible remote option that allows instructors to participate for an hour with minimal disruption to their day. As social work education continues to develop online programs and virtual practicums, programs that have an in-person model of support and training need to consider how to shift these to a virtual format in order for many agencies and practicum instructors to maintain relationships and increase accessibility (Schwartz et al., 2024). Each group session is facilitated by a field faculty member or practicum instructor who is a member of the advisory council. To safeguard confidentiality and encourage candid discussion, sessions begin with a review of FERPA and HIPAA, and they are intentionally not recorded. Then, depending on the number of attendees, the group disperses into smaller breakout rooms to allow for greater discussion and connection.

The themes were identified for each month based on field faculty input and

practicum instructor recommendations through the advisory council, as well as the monthly evaluations for continuing education credits, which ask for suggestions on content and structure.

**Table 1**

*Practicum Instructor Consult and Support Group Monthly Themes*

2023-2024	2024-2025
Orienting students and getting to know your student	Planning for a practicum student
Practicum supervision	Navigating student educational goals and the learning contract
Evaluating student learning	Ways to use the supervision “hour”
Having challenging conversations with students	Connecting theory, research, and practice
Meeting core competencies across practicum settings	Helping students develop their SW professional identity
Creative strategies to assess potential student/agency match	Talking about self-care and community care
Addressing different student learning styles and needs	Navigating various power dynamics in practicum
Practicum wrap-up, transitions, and endings	Modeling lifelong learning habits as an expectation for SW practice
Building agency/employer support of FI dedication to student learning	Engaging in competency-based evaluation
	Celebrating growth and successes with your student

During the first year these groups were held, there was a total of 215 participants over the course of nine groups from October through June. Participants included practicum instructors and field faculty and staff. Out of this number, 166 were instances of practicum instructor attendance, including 84 unique practicum instructors, indicating repeat attendees. Fifteen individual field faculty and staff participated, which is a rotation of every member of our Office of Field Education and field advisors from our Child Welfare Training Advancement Program. UWSSW currently has a total of 13 field faculty and administrative support staff in the Office of Field Education. However, the implementation and facilitation of the monthly group is generally held by four consistently present field faculty. Group sizes have varied from 14 to 42 practicum instructor participants. As the consult group continued into its second, and now third academic year, the size generally fell to between 15 and 20 participants each month.

There is an opportunity to look further into the details of the practicum instructors who attended; for example, those working in certain social work practice settings, or number of years of experience as practicum instructors. Although only anecdotally,

it appears that there was a mix of seasoned and new practicum instructors in attendance, as this comment reflects: “Thanks for providing space for new FIs to hear from those with more experience. It was very informative and supportive.”

While consistent attendance on its own could be an indicator of the benefit of the monthly groups, examining practicum instructor feedback is also critical. An evaluation is offered at the end of each session in order to receive one hour of Continuing Education Credits (CEUs). Most comments were thank-you(s) and appreciation for the space, including, “I really appreciate this group. It is rare to find supervisor/FI support; really grateful.” In addition, some notes reflect learning: “These month sessions have been great in getting ideas and sharing ideas” and relationship-building, “Nice to meet other instructors. Thank you for your efforts on this!”

As mentioned, the evaluations are also a tool to collect theme recommendations for the group and feedback on the structure, for example, “Maybe more room for sharing handouts/templates/docs people use with students to help with their learning” and “I liked the breakout so the discussion can be among smaller group.” Shared folders are created for each month where general notes are held and documents, articles, or templates can be shared and accessed by all attendees.

### **Emerging Training Areas**

In our third year, the modality and structure of the monthly Practicum Instructor Consult and Support Group demonstrates sustainability and meets the initial needs expressed by our practicum instructors for training, support, consultation, and networking. This group can provide space to support our practicum instructors around emerging training needs and curriculum changes. Interprofessional practice is one emergent need, as health care reform and the growth of integrated practice has led to an increase in social workers employed in health and behavioral health settings (Rishell & Hartnett, 2018). Another identified training need is continuing education on evidence-based practices, to increase field educators’ capacities to support students in their application of the evidence-based practice process (Matthieu et al., 2016). Most significantly, with the introduction of CSWE’s 2022 EPAS Competency 3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice (CSWE, 2022), training on antiracist practice is needed. Practicum instructors must be equipped not only to model and advance student antiracist practice, but also to assess and evaluate students’ competency in this domain—a skill set that requires explicit training, tools, and institutional commitment.

Without training and consultation, practicum instructors are likely to uphold white supremacy culture and fail to adequately support students experiencing race-related harm in practicum. Another school of social work has developed the Justice, Equity,

Diversity and Inclusion Professional Learning Community (JEDI PLC) for field faculty and field instructors to discuss topics related to racism, discrimination, oppression, and privilege, as well as provide peer support in discussing scenarios involving students. This was structured as monthly small groups, specific learning objectives, and tiered dialogue activities (Levine et al., 2023). This example demonstrates another way a Practicum Instructor Consult and Support Group can be a model for similar learning and training around antiracist and antioppressive supervision, as well as provide tools that support practicum instructors in assessing a student's competency development, particularly in an evolving political landscape.

## Conclusion

Comprehensive practicum instructor training, paired with ongoing support mechanisms developed and offered by social work institutions, is essential to ensuring that instructors are well equipped to guide students toward becoming competent, ethical practitioners. While an initial orientation lays the foundation, continued engagement through structured, accessible opportunities for learning and connection is critical to sustaining practicum instructors in this demanding role. One promising approach is the implementation of a monthly open virtual groups facilitated by field education offices. These sessions can provide a consistent space for consultation, peer learning, and emotional support, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose among instructors. Investing in relational and educational supports such as consultation groups strengthens both the quality of field education and the long-term commitment of practicum instructors. For programs and accrediting bodies, the implication is clear: Sustaining instructors requires moving beyond orientation toward organized, ongoing development that fosters equity, community, and professional growth.

Other schools of social work could easily implement a similar approach to supporting their practicum instructors. Offering regular consultation groups for practicum instructors is a low-cost, low-barrier and scalable approach to providing ongoing support and investment. Schools of social work could replicate this model and adapt it for different program sizes or areas of specialization.

To ensure the sustainability of the social work profession, particularly its reliance on student practicums and supervision by MSWs in the field, there is a pressing need for increased support and training for practicum instructors, grounded in evidence-based and best practices. Despite the central role practicum instructors play in shaping competent future social work practitioners, research on field instruction remains limited, especially in the areas of training and professional development. Significant gaps in the literature hinder our understanding of how best to prepare and retain practicum instructors, and how their training impacts student outcomes,

including competency development, professional identity formation, and long-term retention in the field. These gaps present important opportunities for further research into the efficacy of practicum instructor training programs and their influence on the next generation of social workers. This is also a call for the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) to consider establishing national standards and competencies for practicum instructors, which could help unify expectations, elevate the quality of supervision, and strengthen practicum experiences

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