



Volume 16.1 | Spring 2026 | General Scholarship | ©April 2026 | alswe@simmons.edu

Expanding Practicum Pathways: Findings from a National Survey Of Practicum Directors

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Abstract

As social work programs expand, practicum education must adapt to increasing enrollment, changing student needs, and growing interest in community-based and equity-oriented practice. This study explores the use of nontraditional practicum placements through survey responses and interviews with practicum education leaders across US programs. Findings indicate growing reliance on placements in settings without on-site social workers, supported by alternative supervision models. While these placements expand access and exposure to innovative practice contexts, they require intentional coordination, supervision infrastructure, and attention to student–placement fit. Findings offer practical guidance for programs seeking to expand practicum capacity while maintaining educational quality.

Keywords: practicum education, field education, nontraditional placements, supervision models

As social work programs continue to expand—particularly through online and hybrid educational models—the demand for practicum placements has increased substantially. At the same time, a growing number of social work students are balancing their education with full-time employment, caregiving responsibilities, and other personal commitments, leading to growing requests for practicum

experiences that offer greater flexibility in structure and scheduling (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2025; Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, students continue to seek learning environments that are rooted in community contexts and oriented toward racial and social justice, where they can be exposed to unique and innovative practice settings (Pollard, 2014; Todd & Schwartz, 2009). In response to these shifts, social work programs are exploring ways to broaden both the volume and scope of practicum opportunities by developing partnerships with nontraditional placement settings (McLaughlin et al., 2015).

Nontraditional practicum placements are typically defined as settings that do not employ professional social workers and may not provide conventional social work services, yet offer meaningful opportunities for social work learning and practice (Scholar et al., 2014). Examples include eco-justice organizations, community centers, disability advocacy groups, libraries, legal clinics, and food banks. While prior literature acknowledges the growing presence of nontraditional practicum placements, far less is known about how social work programs implement these placements in practice, including processes for site development, supervision, student support, and alignment with accreditation standards. This article addresses this gap by drawing on program-level data to examine how social work programs design, support, and sustain nontraditional practicum partnerships.

Nontraditional practicum settings offer great value for student learners. Within nontraditional placements, students often engage in community-based practice that centers on antioppressive frameworks and key principles of disability justice (Berridge et al., 2023; Wiebe, 2010). These settings frequently prioritize the leadership and expertise of individuals with lived experience and may employ approaches grounded in mutual aid, interdependence, and collective care (Goulden et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2024). In contrast to more traditional, agency-based models, nontraditional placements are often community-driven and collaborative, offering students opportunities to understand social work practice through the lens of community-defined needs rather than institutional mandates that may reproduce existing inequities (Cox & Singh, 2024; Johnson, 2022). By effectively incorporating nontraditional practicum settings into their practicum offerings, social work programs can respond to enrollment growth while expanding students' understanding of social work practice as a vehicle for grassroots, collective, and transformative social change (Scholar et al., 2014).

While nontraditional practicum placements offer significant promise, identifying and implementing these placements presents distinct challenges for social work programs (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019). One primary consideration involves establishing effective supervision structures in settings that do not employ on-site social workers (Wilderman et al., 2025). In these contexts, programs must work collaboratively with

agencies to ensure that students receive both consistent off-site supervision from a qualified social work practicum instructor and meaningful day-to-day guidance from an on-site supervisor who can support learning within the agency's operational context (Crisp & Hoskin, 2016; Zuchowski, 2016). Developing and sustaining these dual supervision models often requires careful coordination and, in some cases, dedicated financial resources to support appropriate supervision capacity (Maynard et al., 2015; Sankar, 2013).

A second challenge involves ensuring that nontraditional placement settings align with social work values and ethics and provide quality, structured learning opportunities that allow students to develop their knowledge and skill sets across all nine domains outlined by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (Bogo, 2015). In agencies where social work roles are not already clearly defined, additional time and intentional planning may be required to align agency activities with curricular goals and accreditation expectations (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015).

Finally, attention to student–placement fit is particularly important in nontraditional settings (Lidell et al., 2025). While some students thrive in environments that offer greater autonomy and flexibility, others benefit from more structured, on-site guidance. Thoughtful matching of students to placements—considering learning styles, support needs, and agency capacity—can help mitigate these challenges (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019). To further examine these considerations, we surveyed practicum education leaders nationwide to explore the use of nontraditional placements, identify common challenges and opportunities, and highlight strategies that have supported effective implementation within social work field education programs.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

This study was conducted between September and November 2024 and was designated as nonhuman subjects research by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board. Practicum education directors from university-based accredited social work programs across the United States were recruited via email to participate in a qualitative survey examining the use of nontraditional practicum placements. A total of 45 directors was contacted, with selection criteria prioritizing programs that offered both BSW and MSW degrees and included a mix of in-person and online instructional modalities. Eighteen directors completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 40%.

The survey consisted of four open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptive and

reflective responses regarding the prevalence, structure, and perceived effectiveness of nontraditional practicum placements. Specifically, participants were asked to describe: (1) the frequency with which students are placed in nontraditional settings; (2) the types of agencies represented within these placements, including settings perceived as more or less effective; (3) supervision models used when on-site MSW supervision is not available, as well as associated barriers and strategies for addressing them; and (4) any additional perspectives related to nontraditional placements or supervision structures.

In addition to the survey, participants were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Nine practicum education directors agreed and participated in key informant interviews, which allowed for more in-depth exploration of themes that emerged from the survey responses.

Data Analysis

Survey responses and interview data were analyzed using a qualitative, inductive coding approach. Participant responses were reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes related to the implementation, benefits, and challenges of nontraditional practicum placements, with particular attention given to supervision structures, student learning outcomes, and programmatic considerations. Coding was conducted based on participants' language and descriptions, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. Findings from the survey and interviews were then synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of how nontraditional practicum models are currently being used across social work education programs.

Findings

Program Characteristics

Eighteen practicum education directors participated, representing a range of national social work programs that varied in size, degree offerings, and program formats. Of the programs surveyed, 5% offered a BSW only; 6% offered an MSW only; 11% offered an MSW and online MSW; 11% offered a BSW, MSW, and online MSW; and 67% offered a BSW and MSW.

Trends in the Use of Nontraditional Practicum Placements

Survey and interview findings indicate that nontraditional practicum placements are an increasingly common component of practicum education across social work programs. Among participating programs, respondents estimated that between approximately 5% and 40% of student placements could be characterized

as nontraditional, with considerable variation across institutions. Many practicum education directors noted a steady increase in the use of nontraditional placements over recent years, reflected in the growing number of off-site supervisors and alternative supervision structures required to support these models.

Participants consistently attributed this growth to several intersecting factors, including rising student enrollment and shifting student needs and interests. Directors described increasing demand for employment-based placements, evening and weekend schedules, and virtual or hybrid practicum opportunities, especially among part-time, working, and online students. Nontraditional placements were also described as particularly critical in rural and underserved regions, where fewer traditional social work agencies are available to accommodate student placements. Across programs, respondents noted a broader student interest in community-based, mezzo-level, and grassroots work with marginalized communities, which has further driven interest in nontraditional practicum models.

Types of Agencies Represented in Nontraditional Placements

Participants described a wide range of agencies serving as nontraditional practicum settings. These placements were most often located in smaller, community-based organizations that do not employ on-site social workers, but whose missions align closely with social work values and the goals of social work education. Directors emphasized that such agencies frequently focus on serving marginalized or underserved populations, including BIPOC communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing poverty or housing instability.

Agencies represented in nontraditional placements spanned multiple sectors, including community-based organizations, policy and advocacy settings, public-sector institutions, higher education programs, and healthcare and disability-related environments. Common placement settings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Common Nontraditional Placement Settings*

Setting type	Organization
Community-based	Grassroots organizations Mutual aid groups Eco-justice and abolitionist nonprofits Domestic violence shelters Food banks Organizations serving unhoused populations
Policy and advocacy	Housing and immigration advocacy organizations Child advocacy programs Guardian ad litem offices Legal clinics
Public sector	Libraries Fire stations Emergency medical services Local or state legislative offices
Higher education	Campus disability services Title IX offices Programs supporting low-income or first-generation students
Healthcare and disability	Vocational rehabilitation programs Dialysis centers Interprofessional medical partnerships

Across programs, common criteria for approving nontraditional placements included alignment between agency mission and social work values, the provision of social work–related services, and the agency’s capacity to support student learning and skill development across the nine CSWE competencies. Respondents emphasized that, regardless of setting, placements must allow students meaningful opportunities to demonstrate professional competencies and integrate theory with practice.

Supervision Models Supporting Nontraditional Placements

Respondents described a range of supervision models used to support students placed in nontraditional settings, often combining agency-based and school-facilitated approaches. Supervision structures varied based on program policies, accreditation requirements, and available agency resources. BSW programs were generally described as having less flexibility, with many requiring on-site supervision by a social worker, which limited the extent to which nontraditional placements could

be utilized at the undergraduate level.

For MSW programs, participants reported greater flexibility and a wider array of supervision strategies. Agency-provided supervision was consistently identified as the preferred model when available. In these cases, MSW-level supervisors were identified through various mechanisms, including partnerships with other agencies, shared supervisors across multiple organizations, board members, former employees, volunteers, or community partners. In many instances, agency-based MSW supervisors worked in conjunction with on-site task supervisors who supported students' day-to-day learning.

When agency-based MSW supervision was not feasible, programs frequently relied on school-provided supervision models. These included faculty-led supervision, supervision seminars integrated into practicum courses, or supervision provided by adjunct faculty or contracted off-site supervisors. Faculty supervisors were often matched to students based on expertise, concentration, or practice focus, and supervised small groups of students as part of their teaching load or with additional stipends. Off-site supervision models varied widely across programs in terms of structure, compensation, student-to-supervisor ratios, and duration, with some schools maintaining a semipermanent pool of supervisors and others contracting supervision on an as-needed basis. Additional supervision sources included university alumni and retired social work faculty.

Implementation Challenges and Promising Practices

Findings highlighted that the successful use of nontraditional practicum placements requires careful coordination among schools of social work, students, agency staff, and off-site supervisors. Participants consistently identified supervision as a central challenge, particularly in placements where social work supervisors were not embedded within the daily operations of the agency. Off-site supervisors were sometimes described as less connected to agency culture, workflows, and evolving practice contexts, which could complicate oversight of students' learning experiences. Communication gaps among off-site supervisors, on-site task supervisors, agency leadership, and faculty liaisons further contributed to logistical challenges. At the same time, respondents emphasized that supervision models were most effective when supervisors had prior familiarity with the agency or the population served, and when programs engaged in ongoing evaluation to ensure continued alignment with educational and practice standards.

Participants identified several characteristics associated with student success in nontraditional practicum settings. Students who demonstrated independence, adaptability, and strong self-advocacy skills were described as particularly well

suited to these placements. Because nontraditional settings often require students to play an active role in shaping their learning experiences, respondents noted that students benefited from prior exposure to social work practice or familiarity with the community or service area. Importantly, respondents emphasized that student readiness should be assessed in tandem with agency capacity. Intentional vetting processes that considered the fit among student learning styles, agency structure, and supervision resources were described as critical to positive outcomes.

From agency and program perspectives, respondents underscored the importance of alignment with social work values and a basic understanding of the profession, even in settings that do not traditionally employ social workers. Nontraditional placements were frequently viewed as opportunities to introduce social work perspectives into new spaces and, in some cases, as pathways for agencies to eventually integrate social work positions. At the school level, successful programs were characterized by proactive communication, sustained agency engagement, and intentional resource allocation. Respondents highlighted the value of regular check-ins with agencies, collaboration among schools to coordinate placements for local and online students, and careful consideration of sustainability when placements were tied to grant-funded partnerships. When alternative supervision models were employed, clarity in expectations, communication, and evaluation processes—particularly when faculty served as supervisors—was identified as essential to maintaining consistency and quality across student experiences.

Discussion

Findings from the survey and key informant interviews affirm the growing value of nontraditional practicum placement settings within social work education. In particular, nontraditional placements appear to play an important role in helping programs respond to enrollment growth while also expanding practicum options for students seeking community-driven learning experiences or greater flexibility in placement structure and scheduling. These findings contribute practice-based evidence to our existing understanding of placement options by illustrating how social work programs are operationalizing nontraditional practicum models and by identifying key implementation challenges and considerations from the perspective of practicum education leaders.

A central theme emerging from the findings is the complexity of supervision structures required to support nontraditional placements. Practicum directors described relying on a range of supervision models, most commonly those that connect students with off-site social work supervisors affiliated with the university through faculty appointments, adjunct roles, or contracted supervision arrangements. While these models increase the feasibility of placing students in

settings without on-site social workers, they often require substantial coordination, administrative oversight, and, in some cases, additional financial resources. These findings highlight an ongoing tension between expanding access to practicum placements and maintaining high-quality educational experiences that support students' development across all nine CSWE competencies.

Equally important, the findings underscore the need for careful attention to student–placement fit in nontraditional settings. Practicum directors emphasized that students who demonstrate independence, adaptability, and strong communication and self-advocacy skills are often best positioned to succeed in placements with less formal structure or on-site guidance. This suggests that nontraditional placements may require more intentional assessment of student readiness and learning needs, as well as proactive matching processes that consider both student characteristics and agency capacity. Attending to these factors is essential to ensuring that nontraditional placements function as high-quality learning environments rather than merely as flexible alternatives to traditional agency-based models.

Conclusion

The increasing use of nontraditional practicum placements reflects broader shifts within social work education, including enrollment growth, changing student needs, and heightened interest in community-based and equity-oriented practice. Findings from this study suggest that nontraditional placements can meaningfully expand students' understanding of social work practice and create opportunities for engagement in grassroots, policy, and community-driven work. At the same time, these models require intentional infrastructure, particularly related to supervision, coordination, and student readiness, to ensure educational quality and alignment with accreditation standards.

By drawing on the experiences of practicum education leaders across programs, this study highlights promising practices and key considerations for implementing nontraditional practicum placements in ways that support both access and learning outcomes. As social work education evolves, social work programs must remain attentive to issues of supervision quality, equity, and sustainability. Continued research examining student outcomes, supervision models, and long-term program impacts will be critical to strengthening the role of nontraditional practicum placements in preparing future social workers for community-engaged and transformative practice.

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