Meeting Complex Challenges of Field Education: Preliminary Evaluation of the Field Unit Model

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Overview

• Introductions
• Background: the need for innovation
• Structure of the field unit models
• Process evaluation
  – Methods
  – Results
• Conclusions and next steps
• Discussion
Historical Perspective and Rationale

• Since the 1970’s, changing political and economic developments have affected the context of social work practice.

• Beginning in 2008, the downturn of the USA economy further affected social work programs and therefore, field education.
• Faculty-headed field units were used most frequently in the 1960’s and 1970’s and were often funded by federal training grants.

• Field units were phased out in the late 1970’s and 1980’s towards a model of agency based field instruction due to lack of fiscal support.

• “Units” or “Training Centers” were sometimes defined as three or more students placed in the same agency who worked closely together and shared resources including supervision.

• Motivation was two fold:
  - Benefited agencies by serving under-served populations (increased provider resources)
  - Benefited students by providing innovative, collaborative field placements
• Agencies employed MSW’s who coordinated the program and supervised other MSW’s who were the field instructors

• School’s hired adjunct faculty to be field instructors and were “in-residence” at the agency

• Adelphi Model: Five public and private social services agencies in close proximity to each other. Students assigned to two or more agencies with a teaching team (multiple field instructors).
Structure of the UNC-CH Field Unit Model

- Agency Based Model and Project Based Model
- Prior relationship with agencies
- Field Instructors were employed faculty of the School
- Task supervisors were on-site
- Three students/unit – individual and group supervision
- All Field Units assigned a field faculty member
- Faculty Field Instructors received one course buy-out
• Research questions:
  1. Did students, task supervisors, and field instructors have enough information about the new model?
  2. What was the nature and structure of the supportive relationships between students, task supervisors, field instructors and field advisors?
  3. What did the participants see as the benefits and challenges with implementing and participating in this type of field unit model?
Methods

• Sample: 25 participants
  – 10 students
  – 4 task supervisors
  – 3 agency leaders
  – 6 field instructors
  – 2 field advisors*
Data Collection

• Focus groups
  – Students
  – Task supervisors
  – Field instructors

• Interviews
  – Field advisor
  – Agency leaders

• Measures
  – Semi-structured interview guides created for each group
• Two research assistants reviewed transcripts from a sample of interviews and focus groups then used an open coding process to develop an initial codebook*

• The codebooks were compared and iteratively revised into a single coding scheme

• The final codebook consisted of five themes each with multiple subcategories
Results

- Orientation to field education and field placement
- Communication and support
- The structure of the field unit model
- Field placements-general*
- Overall impressions*
In general, students would have liked more information about the field unit model and how it is different from a standard placement. Agency leaders, task supervisors, field instructors, and field advisors reported having adequate information but recognized that it may have been due to their prior relationship with the school. Nearly all participants noted confusion or lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities.
Orientation to field education

- Recommendations:
  - Develop and implement an orientation for students, agency staff, field instructors, and field advisors that describes:
    - Purpose and structure of the field unit model
    - Roles and expectations
    - Process for seeking support
    - Documentation and database support
  - Create policies and procedures manual specifically for field units
Communication and Support

- Field instructors were the primary source of support for students
- Frequency and nature of support and communication between task supervisors and students was specific to the placement
- Task supervisors and agency staff reported being more reliant on field instructors and had little interaction with field advisors
- Communication and support for field instructors from the field office and field advisors varied based on experience
- Support and communication needs changed over time
Communication and Support

• Recommendations
  – Require field instructors to be present at the agency 4+ hours/wk
  – Establish a schedule of field instructors’ weekly supervision with students
  – Establish regular check-in times between field instructor and agency staff
  – Provide greater clarity about who provides what type of support
  – Create a supervision guide for new field instructors that provides useful prompts to stimulate discussion during supervision
  – Create more opportunities for task supervisors to get to know students
The Field Unit Model

• Benefits of faculty field instruction
  – Guarantees supervision
  – Provides an outsiders’ perspective
  – Provides safe space for students to ask questions
  – Integrates theory and practice
  – Increases agency capacity
  – Enhances faculty’s relationships with students and community
The Field Unit Model

• Challenges of faculty field instruction
  – Lack of field instructors’ contextual information; conflicting guidance
  – Potential lack of student integration into the agency
  – Challenge of dual relationships- professor and supervisor
  – Cost to the school
  – Faculty balancing workload
The Field Unit Model

• Benefits of multiple students in a placement
  – Increases capacity of the school to meet the field placement demands
  – Increases capacity of agency (time and talents)
  – Student-student support and enhanced learning
  – Provides additional context for faculty to understand agency
The Field Unit Model

• Challenges of multiple students in a placement
  – Ensuring that there is enough work for students
  – Coordinating tasks among multiple students
  – Balancing supervision and support needs among students
The Field Unit Model

• Benefits of the project-based model
  – Students were involved in both research and service provision
  – Students experienced intervention development and implementation
  – Students felt invested

• Challenges of the project-based model
  – Lack of a task supervisor
  – Lack of contact with community-based agency
    • Not developing contacts in the community
    • Not experiencing agency culture and challenges
The Field Unit Model

• Recommendations
  – Ensure agency can accommodate multiple students
  – Establish regular meetings between the task supervisor and field instructor to promote agency integration and reduce potential for conflicting guidance
  – Address the potential for dual relationship between faculty and students
  – Create a task supervisor position for project-based field units
Conclusions and Next Steps

• How do we continue to strengthen our current field units and design new units that reflect what we have learned from this research?

• Future tasks
  – Develop policies and procedures specific to field units, perhaps a field unit manual
  – Design a structured orientation for agencies, students and faculty participating in field units
Discussion Questions

- What are your initial reactions to the field unit model and evaluation results?
- Has your School experimented with field units? If so, what model did you utilize and what was your experience?
- What might be some pros and cons of implementing field units at your School?
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http://ssw.unc.edu/files/pdf/field_unit_cswe_presentation_.pdf
Bibliography


