



Key Contributing Factors to Field Placement Effectiveness in Online and Applied Programs

Jackson de Carvalho, PhD^{1*}, MSW, Felix O. Chima, PhD², MSW, MBA, and Beverly Spears, PhD³, MSW

^{1*}Professor & MSW Program Director, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas 77446, United States.

²Department Head, Professor & BSW Director, Department of Social Work, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas 77446, United States.

³Assistant Professor & MSW Program Director, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas 77446, United States.

Article Details

Article Type: Review Article

Received date: 31st December, 2024

Accepted date: 17th March, 2025

Published date: 19th March, 2025

***Corresponding Author:** Jackson de Carvalho, PhD, MSW, Professor & MSW Program Director, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas 77446, United States.

Citation: Carvalho, J., Chima, F. O., & Spears, B., (2025). Key Contributing Factors to Field Placement Effectiveness in Online and Applied Programs. *J Soci Work Welf Policy*, 3(1): 137. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100137>.

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Abstract

The landscape of field education in social work has undergone significant changes over the past two decades, largely due to the rise of online education programs. Field education is a vital component of social work training, enabling students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world client settings. This practical experience is crucial for integrating theoretical concepts and fostering reflective practices. This systematic review paper explores the historical evolution of field education to better understand its role in social work education. The development of social work as a recognized profession necessitates adherence to specific criteria to ensure legitimacy and impact. This paper highlights the processes through which students acquire the skills needed to contribute effectively to society. Most experiential learning in social work occurs outside traditional classroom environments, with guidance from field instructors. The mentorship provided by these instructors is essential for building student confidence. However, there is a recognized need to improve the recruitment and retention of high-quality field instructors, as their role is critical in preparing students for professional practice. Overall, this article presents the key factors that influence the effectiveness of field instructors, considers alternative educational delivery systems, and the broader implications for social work programs. The paper provides insights for program and field directors, focusing on refining instructional models and enhancing student outcomes in online and applied educational settings.

Keywords: Field Education, Factors, Barriers, Satisfaction, Outcomes, and Research.

Introduction

As competition for student recruitment among higher education institutions intensifies, the role of field placements in enhancing student satisfaction with online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs has drawn increasing attention in recent years [1]. Several individual and institutional factors influence students' satisfaction

with their graduate academic experiences, especially regarding online programs across all disciplines. It is well-established that customer satisfaction—across all sectors—correlates strongly with the quality of services provided; higher quality services led to greater customer satisfaction [2]. An essential aspect of evaluating the effectiveness of social work field instructors is ensuring that educational outcomes align with students' needs. Positive field placement experiences can be achieved by offering personalized learning practices, providing comprehensive support services, and, most importantly, fostering a culture of academic excellence, essential for any successful educational institution. This must be done while remaining committed to institutional missions and fulfilling program objectives [3, 4].

In higher education, customer satisfaction is a primary objective and an essential instrument for boosting enrollment figures. Research conducted by Baber [5], along with findings from a meta-analysis study conducted by de Oliveira Santini et al. [6], underscores this importance. Additionally, studies by Gavrilis, et al. [7] demonstrate a positive correlation between students' propensity to recommend their institutions and overall satisfaction. Furthermore, student satisfaction has long been acknowledged as a critical factor influencing retention and attrition [8] within graduate programs—issues many institutions currently grappling with. The long-term effects of student satisfaction with online field instruction greatly influence an institution's reputation and the overall effectiveness of its social work program. It is crucial to address these concerns to ensure the sustainability and growth of social work education within the institution [5, 7].

Field placements are considered one of the most vital components of the educational process in the social work discipline [9]. These experiences are essential for social work training, as they enable students to apply their academic knowledge in real-life situations with clients. As a result, field experiences allow students to implement theoretical concepts, understand the complexities of interpersonal interactions, and assess the effectiveness of their practice for further

improvement [10]. Notably, this crucial learning experience primarily takes place outside the classroom environment, with the guidance of qualified social work field instructors. Their support significantly boosts students' confidence [4]. Field placements give social work students the opportunity to use the concepts, theories, and skills they have developed throughout their academic programs in a professional environment with real clients. Additionally, classroom simulations and graded assignments enhance these experiences. Many social work scholars believe that the essential aspects of social work practice are best learned in these field settings, making them key components of the social work education curriculum [1, 11].

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) defines field education as the core pedagogical approach for social work training. It describes field education as "the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of the practitioner" [12]. Additionally, CSWE [13] explains that field placements include instructional, and socialization elements aimed at preparing future practitioners for the essential aspects of professional performance in their field. This characterization of field education as the core pedagogical method aligns with the competency model outlined in the 2008-2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) established by CSWE. It is crucial for students to engage in observable practice during their field placements, and this process is guided by a skilled field instructor who plays a vital role in providing feedback. Field education is not merely a component of the social work education curriculum; it represents an enriching journey that fosters a sense of community among students. This experience immerses students in real-world practice, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in dynamic environments. Through hands-on involvement, students grapple with the complexities of human behavior, develop essential skills, and gain profound insights that shape their professional identities in social work [3, 12].

Social work educators and practitioners, who are instrumental in facilitating field placements, widely acknowledge the importance of these experiences in cultivating a deep understanding of the core elements of professional practice. Their guidance and mentorship during these real-world experiences not only enhance students' skills but also inspire optimism about the future of the social work profession [1]. Moreover, when combined with the unique aspects of online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, field education offers valuable insights into overall student satisfaction and engagement. The Council on Social Work Education [13] emphasizes that "field education is designed to integrate the theoretical concepts taught in the classroom with the practical realities of the practice setting" (p. 12), underscoring the essential connection between students and practical application, which is crucial for developing competent social work professionals.

Literature Review

The relevant literature underscores a pressing need for further research into the recruitment and retention of Master of Social Work (MSW) practitioners who are committed to providing high-quality field placements. These practitioners play a crucial role in social work education programs, forming the backbone of field education and representing an essential aspect of social work pedagogy [14]. Social work programs must acknowledge and understand the various motivations that drive instructors in their teaching roles and the personal and professional rewards they derive from their work. Recognizing these factors not only enhances the educational experience but also contributes to the overall effectiveness of the curriculum. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify the specific forms of support instructors require to thrive in their teaching positions [13, 14].

The pressing demand for skilled social work practitioners across all field levels underscores the significance of everyone's contribution to

the profession. This demand is not merely a reflection of the current challenges faced by society but also highlights the essential role that highly trained professionals play in addressing complex social issues. As noted by Olson-Morrison [15], the effectiveness of social work practice relies heavily on the expertise and dedication of its practitioners. Therefore, it is imperative for educational institutions to foster a supportive environment for their instructors, ensuring their well-being and, in turn, leading to better training outcomes and a stronger future for the social work profession [1, 8].

Social work field education programs face many challenges that significantly impact their effectiveness. It is crucial to recognize and address these challenges, as they are key to ensuring the continuous improvement of social work education. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has outlined specific requirements and expectations to guide student field placements, yet various contextual issues arise both within the diverse environments where fieldwork takes place and among the students aspiring to enter the profession. These issues can include factors such as varying levels of support from field instructors, the availability of quality placement sites, and students' different backgrounds and preparedness. All these elements conspire to influence not only the successful execution of field education but also its long-term viability and the overall quality of training that students receive [2, 3].

This study aims to offer in-depth insights that can significantly strengthen social work programs in their efforts to attract and retain vital field educators. By examining the distinctive challenges and opportunities faced by field instructors in both traditional in-person environments and modern online settings, the findings will highlight how these dynamics influence their roles. The present study underscores the positive implications of these insights, focusing on how they can enhance the overall educational experience for both students and instructors alike. Lewis et al. [16] identified four primary areas of concern in the current literature: a) the gap between the supply and demand for suitable field sites, b) the needs of students, c) the recruitment and retention of effective field liaison, and d) the timely establishment of contracts with reputable field sites. Similarly, Zuckerman et al. [8] highlighted the need for quality field sites and skilled, committed instructors as key challenges in social work education. This issue significantly affects the training of new social workers and underscores the importance of recruiting and retaining experienced field instructors. Additionally, McCarthy et al. [17] noted that economic trends impact social work education, influencing teaching methods and creating a need for adaptability—an essential skill for maintaining quality in the field.

Field instructors play an essential role in providing supervision and guidance to students, which is critical for effective learning [8]. Their participation is vital, yet the demand for qualified supervisors continues to rise. It is important to note that many field instructors are volunteers who work without compensation, highlighting the need to focus on the recruitment and support of these instructors to ensure a positive educational experience for future social workers [17]. Alongside the challenges previously pinpointed, there are several other obstacles that demand our attention and consideration. The growth of online education programs in social work has significantly affected field education, adding to the previously identified challenges [18, 19].

In recent years, the availability and diversity of online education programs in social work have significantly increased. This expansion has enhanced access for a growing number of students and heightened the demand for skilled field instructors. Field instructors play a crucial role in shaping the practical learning experiences of aspiring social workers [17]. As the need for qualified field instructors rises, it becomes increasingly important to prioritize high-quality training and supervision for students. This comprehensive mentoring is essential for career development and the evolution and integrity of

the social work profession. It ensures that future practitioners are well-prepared to address the complex challenges they will encounter in their careers. Additionally, this trend creates an opportunity to enhance the retention of existing instructors, who supervise students from a broader range of communities beyond the immediate area served by the social work school [20]. Field directors offering online degree are aware of the distinct challenges that come with the field placement delivery models [21]. These challenges, such as the necessity for remote supervision and the possible unfamiliarity of field instructors with the program, can be addressed through strategic training and support initiatives. This proactive approach can foster a more cohesive and effective educational experience for students and instructors [18, 22].

The current research on field education urgently needs to be updated to better reflect contemporary practices regarding signature pedagogy and the shift towards competency-based social work education [15]. Agencies providing social work field placements and their supervisors are increasingly encountering complex challenges, including staffing shortages, heightened productivity demands, and intensified regulatory pressures [1]. This scenario highlights the pressing need for research focused on the experiences, rewards, motivations, training requirements, and challenges faced by field instructors at both the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and MSW levels [1, 23].

As the number of online education programs continues to expand, it is crucial to conduct studies that compare field instructors' practices in online social work programs with those in traditional site-based programs [21]. This study has the potential to significantly impact the field of social work by identifying the specific needs of field instructors and informing the development of effective strategies for recruitment, retention, and training. Additionally, further investigation is warranted to explore the different experience between field instructors for BSW and MSW programs.

Difficulties Faced in Online Learning

Online training programs are increasingly popular in the field of social work. E-learning boasts benefits like increased reach and enrollment, yet it also poses challenges to students and faculty. Hill [24] found that online learning faces unique challenges impacting student engagement, specifically feelings of isolation and lack of connection with instructors and peers, problems that require solutions. Students' academic progress was further hindered by technological problems, a lack of digital skills training, and difficulties with practical work.

Key challenges faced by students and faculty were highlighted by Richards et al. [25]. Challenges faced include stressed faculty, increased workloads, and inadequate online teaching readiness. Many instructors, according to Richards et al. [25], reported difficulties adapting their courses because of limited time and insufficient technical skills in online teaching. Uncertainty regarding course delivery and decreased interaction with faculty and peers causes academic difficulties and stress for students. According to Richard's study, student engagement is vital for successful online learning, encompassing interactions with course materials and communication among students and instructors. Successful online learning hinges on faculty embracing new teaching methods, leveraging technology, and creating interactive learning spaces. Additionally, effective course management, student interaction, and content delivery depend on faculty training, better online communication and collaboration, and interactive course elements to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

Gioia [26] found that using a variety of online tools improved peer interaction and learning experiences of online students. These tools included live videoconferences, virtual office hours, recordings, readings, spontaneous video chats, social media, role-playing, and structured classroom spaces. It is noteworthy, however, that online learning limits direct practice experience, especially fieldwork

with clients, often leaving students less prepared for real-world engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of vulnerable populations. Optimal learning for students requires in-person field placements. However, this can be difficult for students in remote areas with limited social work program support for securing quality placements.

Historical Framework of Social Work Field Education

To fully appreciate the critical importance of field placements in the education of social work students, it is essential to examine the historical development of this educational framework. Such an exploration not only uncovers the foundational principles and practices that have shaped the current model but also sheds light on the origins of this vital component of social work education. This understanding emphasizes its significance in adequately preparing students for the complexities of real-world social work practice [27]. In 1915, a notable educational reformer, Abraham Flexner, delivered a speech at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in Baltimore, Maryland [28]. This speech marked a pivotal moment in the history of social work education, as Flexner argued that the field of social work must meet specific criteria to be recognized as a legitimate profession. One of his key recommendations was the emphasis on field education. He highlighted the necessity for social work professionals to possess a strong foundational knowledge that supports their practice. Flexner believed this knowledge should be both theoretical and applicable to real-world situations. This principle continues to be central to social work education today, with practical application best facilitated under the guidance of a qualified instructor who can provide mentorship within work settings [27, 28].

One of Flexner's most important recommendations emphasized the necessity for social work students to possess a robust foundation in human behavior and an understanding of social environments. This foundational knowledge is crucial for their professional roles and should be a fundamental element of their training. Furthermore, students ought to have numerous opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical, real-world contexts. Ideally, this experiential learning process should take place under the mentorship and supervision of a qualified practitioner who can provide valuable guidance and support within the practice setting [28, 29].

Field placement, closely associated with the apprenticeship model, is a traditional approach emphasizing the master-student dynamic. As Bogo [1] eloquently describes, this model fosters the next generation of skilled artisans through immersive, hands-on learning experiences in real-world settings. Bogo [30] notes that "the master coached, facilitated learning in the workplace, and supervised the novice" (p. 16), underscoring the essential role of guidance and mentorship in this educational process. This integration of knowledge deepens the understanding of social work practice and ensures that aspiring professionals are both competent and well-prepared to apply their knowledge effectively in practical situations [3]. In social work, a practical educational model has emerged that highlights the significance of experiential learning. This model appoints seasoned professionals as field instructors who mentor students in various field agencies, providing them with invaluable hands-on experience. This approach directly responds to Flexner's advocacy for practical learning opportunities in professional settings [1, 30].

Social work education has traditionally blended classroom instruction with community practice, and field placements within agencies are a well-established component of this process. Although social service delivery systems have evolved over the years, the expectations for students and field instructors have remained mainly consistent [29]. The standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) emphasize the vital role of field education. These field requirements, first developed in 1969, have adapted to meet the changing needs of the profession and the communities it serves [27, 30].

History of Social Work Program Accreditation

Accreditation is a vital process that evaluates colleges, universities, and academic programs to ensure they adhere to specific standards. This process has been a fundamental component of the U.S. education system since 1885. By 1919, it had developed into six regional accreditation organizations, highlighting its significance and influence [29]. The accreditation process places a strong emphasis on the quality and effectiveness of field education programs, guided by the expertise and dedication of seasoned social work professionals who establish the benchmark standards for excellence in this discipline [31]. During the accreditation process, universities typically engage in a comprehensive self-assessment, carefully preparing a detailed self-study report that outlines their programs, resources, and outcomes. This report is then submitted to the accrediting body for evaluation. Subsequently, a site visit is conducted, allowing the accrediting team to assess the institution's compliance with the established standards through direct observation and interviews, ensuring a thorough evaluation of the educational practices in place [29, 31].

Subsequently, the accrediting body, composed of social work academicians, assesses whether the program aligns with the established standards [29]. In the United States, social work programs obtain their accreditation from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), a distinguished entity recognized by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) [10]. As the authoritative body for accrediting social work programs, CSWE sets forth specific standards and criteria for obtaining accreditation status. CHEA, with its broad representation of institutions within the higher education landscape, serves as the sole organization responsible for the accreditation process in social work education, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach [29, 31].

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) follows a thorough three-step process for granting accreditation to educational programs. This process begins with self-study, during which the institution evaluates its practices, strengths, and areas for improvement [29]. The next step is peer review, a critical phase in which a group of qualified evaluators assesses the quality and reliability of the evidence presented to ensure it meets established standards. Finally, based on the findings from both the self-study and the peer review, a conclusive decision is made regarding the program's accreditation status [31]. This decision determines whether the program meets CHEA's rigorous criteria for educational quality and effectiveness. The outcomes of this process can include full accreditation, conditional accreditation, or denial. Additionally, CHEA emphasizes the link between accreditation and quality assurance in relation to Congress, the Department of Education, and the public. The Department of Education oversees the accreditation process to ensure that accrediting bodies effectively promote desired educational outcomes for various professions.

Accreditation standards are essential in ensuring that graduates are intellectually prepared for their careers. They highlight the importance of incorporating public expectations for the profession while maintaining a strong commitment to quality. This commitment to quality is a cornerstone of the accreditation process, ensuring consistently high educational standards. In 2014, CHEA conducted a comprehensive review of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation. Following this evaluation, CHEA recognized CSWE as the official accrediting institution for social work programs in the United States for the next decade. This acknowledgment solidified CSWE's authority in accreditation while maintaining high standards in social work education [13, 31].

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was established in 1952 and serves as the sole accrediting body for social work education programs across the United States. It plays a crucial role in maintaining educational standards by providing a rigorous

accreditation process, setting curriculum benchmarks, and ensuring that social work education remains relevant and responsive to the changing societal needs [32]. The formation of CSWE resulted from the merger of the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) and the National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA) [29].

The AASSW has its roots in 1919 when it was initially named the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Workers. It created an essential network of training institutions located in major urban centers, including New York, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Philadelphia [33]. In a pioneering move in 1932, the AASSW became the first organization to establish formal accreditation standards for social work programs, marking a significant advancement in the professionalization of social work education [34]. However, in 1937, the AASSW limited its membership to graduate programs, prompting several higher education programs to dissociate and form NASSA. While this split aimed to foster a more inclusive and diverse curriculum for social work education, it also resulted in both organizations losing their accreditation authority, highlighting the challenges within the evolving landscape of social work education [33, 34].

In 1945, representatives from the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) and the National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA) convened to address their differences. This dialogue ultimately led to the formation of the National Council on Social Work Education in 1946 [35]. The new organization was established to resolve the issues that had caused the split and to set unified standards, particularly regarding the differentiation between undergraduate and graduate social work courses. This endeavor culminated in the decision to dissolve AASSW and NASSA, marking a significant step towards the creation of a consolidated entity now known as the Council on Social Work Education [29, 35].

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) supports and enhances social work education programs throughout the United States. The CSWE's commitment is demonstrated through various initiatives, including accreditation, consultation services, research efforts, and comprehensive publications, all aimed at improving "the quality and effectiveness of social work education" [34]. The governance of CSWE is managed by a dedicated Board of Directors, whose commitment and oversight of various programs and initiatives instill confidence in the organization's leadership. Additionally, six specialized commissions support the Board, each comprised of passionate volunteers focusing on specific areas within social work education. Notably, the Commission on Accreditation and the Commission on Educational Policy make significant contributions to the field [29]. The Commission on Educational Policy is crucial in developing curriculum policies that shape the educational landscape of social work. These carefully crafted policies are integrated into the accreditation standards, playing an essential role in guiding the future direction of social work education. Within this commission, the Council on Field Education serves as an important subgroup, highlighting collaborative efforts to enhance educational practices in the field. This inclusive approach ensures that all stakeholders are involved in developing their profession [34].

Development of Field Education Standards

The field education landscape in social work, guided by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), has seen remarkable growth and transformation since the early 1900s [3]. This evolution presents an exciting opportunity to enhance the preparation of future social workers and adapt to the changing needs of the communities they serve. The evolution of the educational model for social work reflects a commitment to enhancing professional training. Initially, the model relied on an apprenticeship format without standardized hour requirements. However, a significant change occurred in 1969

with the introduction of formal policies that underscored the importance of a field practicum component focused on direct service [29]. This development not only standardized the training process but also greatly improved the quality of social work practice. Prior to 1982, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) encouraged individual programs to establish their own hour standards, which resulted in a diverse range of educational experiences [3, 29].

The establishment of the Commission on Accreditation in 1981 marked a crucial milestone in social work education. This initiative, which highlighted the necessity of field practicums to meet educational objectives, significantly raised the standards for agency sites and instructors, thereby enhancing the overall quality of training [30]. As of July 1, 1983, the CSWE mandated a minimum of 400 hours of field education for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students and 900 hours for graduate students, laying a strong foundation that remains effective to this day [36]. This transition has sparked ongoing discussions about the vital role of field education in social work training, setting the stage for the continuous enhancement of the educational framework [36, 37].

Social work field education has seen remarkable advancements over the years, largely driven by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and its groundbreaking 1988 Curriculum Policy Statement (CPS). This pivotal document recognized field placements as indispensable elements of social work programs, significantly enriching students' educational journeys [3]. The 1991 CSWE statement was another transformative moment, as it championed cultural diversity and the significance of women's roles, thereby fostering inclusivity within the field [29]. Furthermore, in 1994, the CSWE delineated specific learning outcomes that helped clarify the objectives of social work education while ensuring that the required number of field hours was retained. This framework mandated that field instructors, who must possess a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, play a crucial role in upholding the quality of field education. Accredited programs were also required to maintain comprehensive field manuals and implement rigorous evaluation procedures. By adhering to these standards, social work programs can continue to deliver high-quality education that prepares students for the diverse challenges they will encounter in the field [3, 29].

Field education, which is a key component of social work training, is currently facing a major challenge: the lack of quantitative research to support its effectiveness. A comprehensive review by Holden et al. [38] highlighted a significant deficiency in quantitative studies related to field instruction, emphasizing the urgent need for additional research to validate the standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). This situation also presents an exciting opportunity for us to influence the future of field education. Although the CSWE's accreditation standards have mostly remained constant, Raskin et al. [36] noted that the existing requirements regarding field hours and placements have not been updated to address contemporary educational needs. Moreover, the recommended number of field hours is not backed by empirical evidence, suggesting that field education relies more on tradition than on evidence-based practices [36, 37].

Online Social Work Education

The landscape of online delivery in Master of Social Work (MSW) programs is diverse and increasingly reliant on advanced technology [21]. This reliance on technology is not just a trend; it is a significant factor shaping the future of education. Online education can take various forms, including hybrid models that combine in-person and online learning and entirely web-based instruction [39]. The growing trend of hybrid programs necessitates the inclusion of on-campus classes or intensive week-long residencies. These in-person components enrich the learning experience, allowing students to engage directly with faculty and peers, participate in hands-on

activities, and immerse themselves in the academic environment. A survey conducted by the Council on Social Work Education in 2006 revealed that 40% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs and 50% of MSW programs incorporated online education [40]. Online formats not only enhance accessibility but also create new educational opportunities for underserved communities [5]. Additionally, virtual delivery is vital in addressing the growing demand for social workers with culturally specific expertise, particularly insights into the unique challenges Indigenous communities face and the cultural nuances relevant to immigrant populations. This approach is critical during challenging economic times, as it offers hope in adversity [5, 21].

As highlighted by Cummings et al. [41], virtual education is a potent tool that can significantly expand the reach of social work education. It offers a promising avenue for individuals who are unable to participate in traditional classes due to geographical or personal constraints. A study by Cummings et al. [21] suggested that online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs have the potential to further develop essential practice skills while enhancing educational accessibility. However, the potential benefits of online education in social work, particularly regarding accessibility, are substantial. While online MSW programs offer significant advantages, it's crucial to remember that some aspects of traditional education cannot be fully replicated. The value of face-to-face interactions is paramount for professional socialization. This emphasis on the importance of traditional methods should reassure students, educators, and professionals about the enduring value of in-person interactions in social work education [39]. The Clinical Social Work Association [42] has raised concerns about the adequacy of technical skills training in online education programs. Consequently, the CSWA advocates for more evident accreditation standards for field components to ensure that online MSW programs maintain the same high training quality as traditional programs [41, 42].

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) plays a crucial role in supporting both traditional face-to-face and online Master of Social Work (MSW) programs [18]. CSWE offers a comprehensive list of accredited online programs on its website, ensuring they meet the same high accreditation standards as traditional ones. The rigorous accreditation process is designed to maintain the quality and integrity of online MSW programs, eliminating the need for separate criteria for online education. This commitment reinforces confidence in the academic rigor of online social work education [18, 39].

Field Education Challenges

The framework guiding field experience in social work education highlights the essential role of field placements within accredited programs [9]. This experiential component is crucial for developing practical competencies among future social workers. Several enhancement opportunities have emerged as social work education evolves to meet societal needs and challenges [8]. A promising improvement area is addressing the diverse practices adopted by various agencies and the preparedness levels of students entering these dynamic environments. Strengthening the gatekeeping role is vital to ensure that students meet the necessary practice standards before participating in fieldwork [18, 43].

Moreover, agencies often encounter limitations such as restricted resources and high demands for service delivery, which can affect the quality of training experiences. By fostering robust collaboration between educational institutions and agencies, we can inspire a collective effort to develop more effective training opportunities [43]. Investing in ongoing professional development for field instructors is also essential, as their mentorship and support are key to enriching student learning experiences [44]. Recognizing and addressing the incentives necessary to retain these experienced instructors will be critical to enhancing the overall effectiveness of field training in social work education. Focusing on these areas can build a stronger foundation for future social work professionals [18, 45].

Circumstantial Challenges

Social work field education programs, whether in-person or online, offer valuable hands-on experiences for students at approved social service agencies or institutions [39]. Experienced field instructors typically supervise this practical component, who provide essential mentorship and guidance. Despite the challenges that can affect the effectiveness of these placements, the significance of this practical experience in shaping future social workers cannot be overstated [39, 46].

The landscape of social work education has undergone significant changes, influenced by diverse and shifting student demographics and backgrounds [47]. These changes present new opportunities for both students and their agencies, encouraging innovative approaches to learning and engagement [1]. Although many social service agencies encounter financial constraints and issues in service delivery [1], the focus on collaboration between educational institutions and these agencies offers hope. This collaborative approach addresses the ongoing shortage of qualified supervisors, allowing for the creative use of resources and expertise in the field. By viewing these challenges as opportunities for growth, we can better integrate theoretical education with practical experience in the social work profession, fostering a more enriching learning environment for all involved [1, 46].

Students with Unique Learning Needs

In the initial stages of social work education, the profession was predominantly influenced by affluent women who acquired practical experience through the apprenticeship model [48]. These early practitioners and field instructors typically devoted two to three days each week to teaching field practicum, offering direct services to clients, and enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of the intricacies of social work [1]. However, as time progressed, the demographics of the student population underwent significant changes, which impacted their ability to participate in these essential field experiences [49, 50].

Recent data from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) indicates that 83.51% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) graduates and 80.25% of Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates are women. Additionally, part-time students tend to be older and increasingly represent historically underrepresented groups within the profession [51]. These non-traditional students often balance work, family responsibilities, and educational commitments, which creates significant challenges and frustrations in navigating their field experiences. Educators and policymakers must understand and support these students' unique journeys [52, 53].

Zosky et al. [54] observed that non-traditional students frequently excel in skill-based assessments, achieving higher evaluations for their competencies than their peers. These learners often benefit from more enriching and positive field experiences [52] due to their extensive life and work backgrounds. This approach to field practicums highlights the potential advantages of innovative academic programs that create more flexible field options [55]. Recommendations include implementing extended field placements or block placements to accommodate non-traditional students' unique needs better. Such changes would not only enhance student performance but also improve the experiences of field instructors, ultimately fostering a more supportive and effective learning environment [51, 55].

Academic Preparedness and Gatekeeping

Bogo [1] and Engelbrecht [49] have provided valuable insights into the changing demographics of social work students and the personal challenges they encounter throughout their professional journeys. Their research indicates that many of these students enter the field with backgrounds characterized by trauma and ongoing mental

health issues, including anxiety and depression. Nevertheless, their remarkable resilience plays a crucial role in fostering emotional stability and reveals their strong potential for success in social work careers [49].

Moreover, a significant study by Tam and Coleman [56] identified twelve essential dimensions for assessing students' readiness for effective social work practice. These dimensions encompass a range of personal and professional attributes, such as the ability to manage personal issues, heightened self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, a strong sense of integrity, and a thoughtful reflection on one's values. The study also emphasizes the importance of commitment to personal growth, critical thinking skills, emotional maturity, relationship-building abilities, awareness of power dynamics in social contexts, professional dedication, and a resolute drive to promote social change. To aid in assessing these dimensions, Tam and Coleman [56] developed a comprehensive 50-item Likert-scale instrument designed to evaluate students' readiness for field placement. They advocated for ongoing research to refine and enhance the effectiveness of evaluation tools in this crucial phase of social work education, highlighting the importance and urgency of this endeavor [56, 39].

Furthermore, the relevant literature highlights the crucial role of gatekeeping within field education. This process is essential for delivering high-quality services to clients and upholding the standards of the social work profession [45]. While challenges are often anticipated during the admissions process and in classroom environments, specific issues may only emerge during actual field experiences when students encounter real-world scenarios [18]. In these instances, collaboration between field instructors and the social work school's liaison becomes especially important. This partnership is vital and transformative, enabling us to address challenges effectively and tackle emerging difficulties. By emphasizing proactive problem-solving, we ensure that we are adequately prepared to foster student development and achieve positive outcomes for students and clients [8, 57].

The Need for Preapproved Field Instructors Training

The relevant literature emphasizes the critical importance of high-quality supervision in developing competent practitioners [58]. Having a dedicated field supervisor during placement experiences is essential for student success and advancing the social work profession. Effective "communication and guidance from field supervisors can significantly enhance students' learning experiences" [59]. These supervisors help students connect their field experiences with theoretical knowledge, making learning more practical and relevant. Students with accessible supervisors providing consistent support and feedback often report improved learning outcomes and greater satisfaction with their field experiences [4, 60].

Furthermore, several studies on social work education [14, 27, 49, 61] highlight various challenges in providing adequate supervision, particularly regarding the preparation and ongoing professional development of field instructors. These instructors play a vital role in equipping students with essential assessment and intervention skills, linking theoretical frameworks to real-world applications, and fostering reflective practices. The urgency of addressing these challenges is evident, as effective field instruction encourages students to critically assess their experiences, identify their strengths and areas for improvement, and apply their learning to future situations [62, 63].

The literature also indicates a growing need for comprehensive and standardized training programs to support field instructors transitioning from practitioners to effective educators [63]. Training methods for these instructors can vary significantly across educational settings, making it essential to address these inconsistencies. Raskin et al. [36] noted variability in how field directors interpret the Council

on Social Work Education (CSWE) training mandates. Some field instructors have not received formal training, while others participate in necessary workshops and seminars. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms for these mandates could enhance the quality of supervision, especially given the reliance on agency field instructors without standardized oversight. It is vital to address these inconsistencies to ensure quality field instruction and, consequently, the success of social work education [3, 11].

Moreover, many supervisors desire more preparation in their roles, a sentiment echoed by Munson's [64] findings from 1993. This need for preparation is further highlighted by the observation that most field instructors do not follow a specific pedagogical model in their teaching practices [3]. Student perceptions underscore the importance of field instructors' teaching abilities, reinforcing that these instructors enhance learning experiences [65]. Another research conducted by Makhubele et al. [50] indicated that students benefit more from instructors who have undergone supervisory training, suggesting that increasing the number of trained instructors can lead to improved educational outcomes. Makhubele et al. [50] demonstrated that seminar training for new field instructors significantly enhanced their supervisory methods and interactions with students. Instructors who underwent the training established a more structured learning environment by setting clear learning objectives, providing regular feedback, and employing a variety of teaching strategies. This training emphasized the importance of feedback and incorporated diverse educational approaches to boost student engagement. Furthermore, Matthieu et al. [58] highlighted that integrating evidence-based practices into the training process of field liaisons could further elevate the quality of supervision and, consequently, improve student learning outcomes [50, 58].

In 2008, Homonoff interviewed ten esteemed recipients of the Heart of Social Work award the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) granted. This qualitative study explored the various challenges social work professionals face while supervising interns. A key finding from these interviews emphasized the critical need for effective "guiding methods and models" [62] to enhance the learning experience of interns in social work practice. The field instructors strongly indicated that social work education programs should provide evidence-based models during supervision seminars, complete with clear evaluation indicators. These models should focus on essential areas such as assessment techniques, intervention strategies, reflective practices, and integrating relevant theories into the supervisory process [58, 62].

Moreover, the interviewees in Homonoff's study highlighted the importance of fostering stronger collaborative relationships between field instructors—experienced social work professionals responsible for supervising and mentoring interns in real-world settings—and educational institutions. They advocated for ongoing and engaging dialogue to enhance the support and resources available to supervisors, ultimately benefiting the interns they oversee [66]. A notable example referenced in Homonoff's [62] study is the national credentialing system established in Great Britain for field instructors. This system includes a rigorous framework of 150 hours of training and certification to ensure that field instructors are well-prepared to guide and mentor social work interns effectively. This model is an inspiring benchmark for improving the quality of field instruction in social work education [52, 67].

Reward and Instructors Retention Strategies

Once field instructors complete their training and acquire the essential skills for teaching and supervising, it is crucial for social work programs to implement effective strategies to ensure their long-term retention. A comprehensive study by Buck [68] highlights the significant demands that social work schools typically place on field instructors. These demands often come with minimal financial

compensation, raising concerns about the sustainability of their commitment [49]. The authors suggest offering meaningful rewards such as access to a wide range of library resources and opportunities for professional development through continuing education as ways to express gratitude for the valuable contributions made by field instructors. They also emphasize the need for further research to explore additional benefits and incentives that could enhance field instructors' dedication to their roles, ultimately improving the overall educational experience for social work students. These findings are particularly relevant for social work program directors, as they provide actionable strategies for retaining field instructors in their programs [66, 68].

In another influential study, Bogo and Sewell [3] investigated the motivations driving social workers to take on the responsibilities of field instructors. Their findings highlight several vital factors contributing to job satisfaction and retention in this critical role. A significant aspect emphasized in their research is the inspiration and motivation that comes from shaping the next generation of social work practitioners. The level of support from agency organizations for students and recognition of the contributions these students make to the organizations emerged as crucial factors. Furthermore, professional growth is essential; field instructors often report that mentoring students enhance their practice through critical self-reflection and acquiring new insights [1]. Personal motivation also plays an integral role, as many field instructors find great satisfaction in making a meaningful impact in the field of social work and nurturing the development of future practitioners [69]. These insights are invaluable for field directors striving to design and implement effective retention strategies for effective field liaisons and suitable field sites and [3, 70].

The caliber of social work students and the collaborative relationship with faculty from the affiliated school significantly affect the retention rates of field instructors. Providing meaningful teaching and mentoring opportunities is crucial to this process [8]. Moreover, in-depth research by Makhubele et al. [50] found that Master of Social Work (MSW) field instructors highly value access to additional no-cost training, identifying it as the most important incentive their programs offer. Despite these insights, there is still a notable gap in research specifically addressing the training and preparedness of field instructors who work with students enrolled in online social work education programs [58]. This gap presents a unique opportunity for social work programs to innovate and improve the support and training of field instructors in online learning environments. These online education programs must adhere to the same rigorous standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as traditional on-campus programs [1, 58].

While navigating challenges such as agency restrictions, the need for meaningful motivations, training opportunities, student-related concerns, and quality assurance issues [8]. Although research focused on field education in the context of online learning is limited, it can be reasonably inferred that field liaisons face additional obstacles, particularly in effectively collaborating with program faculty and receiving quality training [49]. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that field instructors are adequately prepared and supported, leading to a more robust learning experience for social work students [8, 50].

Conclusion

This study uncovered major obstacles affecting the success of social work field education programs. Addressing these challenges is key to improving social work education. Richards et al. [25] identified key challenges for students and faculty, such as faculty stress, heavier workloads, and insufficient online teaching preparation. Richards et al. [25] found that many instructors struggled to adapt their courses online due to time constraints and a lack of technical skills. Students

experience academic challenges and stress due to unpredictable course delivery and reduced interaction with professors and classmates. Richard's study shows that for online learning to succeed, student engagement, including interactions with materials and communication with others—is critical. For successful online learning, faculty must use new teaching methods, technology, and create interactive learning spaces. Effective course management, student interaction, and content delivery hinge on faculty training, improved online communication and collaboration, and interactive course elements for better student engagement and learning outcomes.

Manoff's (2008) study strongly suggested that social work field education programs integrate evidence-based models and clear evaluation measures into their supervision seminars. Key areas for these models include assessment techniques, intervention strategies, reflective practices, and integrating relevant theories into supervision. Furthermore, Manoff (2008) stressed the value of stronger partnerships between field instructors (experienced social workers supervising interns) and academic settings leading to quality field sites and skilled, committed instructors to provide Field Placement Effectiveness in Online and Applied Programs, and overcoming key challenges in social work education.

Implications for Social Work Field Education

The landscape of agency-based practice and social work education is rapidly changing, mainly due to the growing popularity of online education programs. While this shift presents innovative learning opportunities and offers benefits such as flexibility and accessibility, it also emphasizes the pressing need to improve the recruitment and retention of skilled field instructors. These instructors are vital in guiding social work students through their educational journeys [3].

This paper provides valuable insights into the factors influencing field instructors' strengths and limitations regarding their supervision of students, particularly those enrolled in online social work and other applied programs [65]. Field instructors supervising online social work students often face unique challenges, including a lack of physical presence, difficulty assessing non-verbal cues, and limited opportunities for hands-on learning. These challenges set them apart from their counterparts supervising traditional, site-based students. Notably, many field instructors report lower satisfaction with the support they receive from social work programs, which can affect their overall engagement and effectiveness [58].

Furthermore, this review paper highlights significant opportunities for growth and improvement within social work education and other applied programs. It identifies several key areas that require urgent attention, including more comprehensive and targeted training that addresses the complexities of field education processes. Establishing more straightforward and transparent policies and assignments related to field programs and defining students' boundaries and expectations while expressing benchmarks for competencies with greater clarity is essential. Additionally, there is an opportunity to refine supervision methods and models to meet online learners' needs better. Lastly, a stronger integration of theoretical concepts with practical applications would enhance the educational experience for students, making it more relevant and impactful [19, 50]. Addressing these critical areas is a collaborative effort that can create a more supportive and effective environment for field instructors and social work students engaged in online learning.

According to McCarthy et al. [71], the relationships between field instructors and online field education programs present valuable opportunities for improvement. Field directors have identified several areas for enhancement, including the need for more frequent communication with field liaisons, improved responsiveness from these liaisons, and greater familiarity with individual students. Field liaisons play a crucial role in facilitating effective communication and support. Addressing these areas can help cultivate a more supportive

and collaborative environment. To enhance the experiences of social work field liaisons, field education programs can adopt several proactive strategies. Institutions can increase retention rates by customizing training and support programs to meet instructors' specific needs [8, 70].

Additionally, understanding field instructors' motivations and rewards in their roles can benefit both site-based and online programs. Recognizing their valuable contributions to the profession, their pivotal role in shaping the next generation of social workers, and the transformative nature of field experiences can be decisive in attracting, motivating, and retaining field instructors [18].

To further support field instructors, field education departments can create opportunities for these professionals to reflect on and recognize their intrinsic rewards. This approach enhances job satisfaction and reinforces their sense of contribution [2]. Such recognition can increase the appeal of field supervision roles, ultimately fostering a more profound commitment to the profession and a stronger sense of belonging among field instructors [14, 17].

As social work departments at universities across the nation develop and implement comprehensive training programs for field instructors, it is crucial to identify and evaluate the various factors that influence these initiatives' effectiveness and overall impact [8]. By strategically investing time and resources into research and program assessment, institutions can significantly enhance the signature pedagogy inherent in social work education [72]. This enhancement improves the quality of training for social work field liaisons and equips future practitioners with the essential skills and knowledge needed to engage with and support some of society's most vulnerable populations. Moreover, it is essential to note that this process should be ongoing, with regular evaluations and feedback loops, to ensure continuous improvement of these programs. Ultimately, this collaborative effort aims to build a more competent and compassionate workforce capable of addressing complex social issues and promoting the well-being of diverse communities.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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