

Examining the Role of Doctoral Students in Enhancing Social Work Field Education

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Background

Field education is an integral part of the social work curriculum at Indiana University, as well as all other schools accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The field experience provides students with opportunities to connect classroom theory with actual practice. The field placement allows students an arena to develop and expand core practice skills and develop professional competence and identity. Students are given opportunities to grapple with professional ethics and critique agency policy. The overall objective of this experience is to cultivate reflective, flexible, self-evaluating, and competent practitioners who understand the role of social workers as integral members of an interdisciplinary team.

At Indiana University School of Social Work (IUSSW), students are required to fulfill a minimum of 512 hours of field experience in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program and 960 in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program. These requirements exceed the CSWE requirements of 400 hours for BSW students and 900 for MSW students. The goals of field placement are to enhance:

- 1) professional growth and development,
- 2) knowledge of the organizational and community context of practice, and
- 3) application of direct service practice knowledge and skills.

Students also participate in a field seminar which provides a forum for discussion, structured assignments aimed at integrating field experiences with theoretical knowledge, and leadership from a knowledgeable faculty member who can address questions about work in the community.

The faculty field liaison is the crucial link between the University and the community. The field liaison serves as the contact person between the student and the community placement agency. The field liaison is responsible for:

- providing consultation to the field instructors about curriculum and course objectives;
- arranging two visits per semester with the field instructor and the student, at least one of which will be in the field agency office, to discuss student progress and assess learning objectives;
- being available to both the field instructor and student for problem-solving as needed;
- communicating with the field instruction coordinator and program director about developments, progress, or problems experienced by the field instructors and students;
- consulting with the field instructors concerning evaluation of student performance;
- reviewing and approving the student's written Learning Plan;
- monitoring students' hours in the field;
- assessing the quality and effectiveness of field instruction in the agency; and
- recommending a final grade to the field instruction coordinator.

Through carrying out these functions, field liaisons have an important role in the professional socialization process of social work students. Field liaisons serve as a representative of the University and a vital link with our community partners across Indiana.

Project Overview

The overall aim of this assessment project was to investigate the value of using doctoral students in the field liaison role. Despite the importance of the field liaison role, many faculty members are challenged with devoting the time necessary to successfully fill this role. A premise of this project is that having doctoral students serve as field liaisons would prepare them for becoming effective field liaisons in their future faculty roles, and would also lighten the load of current faculty. Specifically, this project aimed to identify the training needs of social work doctoral students in the supervision of BSW and MSW internships in community settings. This is an area in which most doctoral students do not receive training or experience, yet CSWE accredited programs expect that incoming faculty members will function as successful field liaisons as part of their academic responsibilities. There have been four doctoral students who have served as field liaisons at IUSSW. We plan to recruit and train more doctoral students to serve as field liaisons as a result of this project.

Phase I: Aims and Objectives

- To better understand the nature and difficulties of the field liaison role at IUSSW
- To identify established training opportunities for field liaisons at IUSSW
- To explore the advantages and disadvantages of using doctoral students as field liaisons at IUSSW

In preparation for this project, a survey was distributed to current faculty and field staff with either direct involvement or declared interest in the field component of social work education at IUSSW. In Phase I of the project, the following questions were asked:

1. What have been the challenges or difficulties associated with field liaisons?
2. What do you think might be the potential advantages and disadvantages of having qualified doctoral students serve as field liaisons?
3. What training opportunities/resources are available to prepare liaisons for the role?
4. What have field students shared about their perceptions of field liaisons?
5. How can the field liaison role be strengthened?

Illustrative comments of respondents included:

“I think it would be a great way for doctoral students to get some ‘instructional experience’ and understand the importance of working from established course objectives, evaluating progress and learning about the wide range of social work practice.”

“...doctoral students would have to do considerable training so that they were knowledgeable about the BSW and MSW curriculum and expectations.”

“They [doctoral students] may project an enthusiasm and involvement which, if accompanied by knowledge and skills, could serve students and IUSSW well if they do the job conscientiously and consistently.”

“I think the doctoral liaisons would need to attend the Field Instructor Orientation, as well as a liaison orientation at two or three points during the semester.”

“They [doctoral students] may become a new generation of trained, effective field educators and implement the role effectively as faculty members and can advocate for field education in the future.”

“For those of us interested and committed to helping students link theory to practice in the practicum, it [the role of field liaison] is an interesting and enjoyable role. It is multi-faceted and uses all of my social work skills.”

Summary of Responses:

Overall, responses were positive with regard to involving doctoral students as field liaisons with five out of the nine participants surveyed providing input. Training was noted as an area of great importance. Respondents also noted the need for ongoing support and consultation. Concern was expressed about doctoral students’ understanding of the curriculum and course objectives as related to the field experience. Respondents shared that the quarterly field liaison meetings would be an important resource for doctoral students in preparing for the field liaison role. In sum, the advantages to doctoral students serving in the field liaison role far outweighed the disadvantages according to respondents.

Phase II: Aims and Objectives

The objectives of Phase II of the project were:

- To enhance the field component of BSW and MSW education
- To identify training needs of doctoral students serving as field liaisons
- To enrich the preparation of doctoral students for the field liaison role
- To learn about the interest in and obstacles to doctoral student field liaisons, as perceived by the wider doctoral social work education community

Phase II: Methods

During the second phase of this project and with the help of PRAC funding, we hired a part-time project coordinator. The project coordinator’s activities have included: 1) assessing the current system of training for field liaisons at IUSSW through gathering preliminary data from field instructors, field liaisons, and students, 2) examining the literature on field education in social work, 3) gathering current information by attending field education sessions at the *Council on*

Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, 4) investigating existing social work programs (N = 78) in which doctoral students may be serving as field liaisons, and 5) developing an outline of a training protocol.

Assessment of the Current System

Faculty members and PhD students who served as field liaisons were asked: “In your role as field liaison, what do you need to do your job better?” Several key themes were identified in the responses:

- Better communication is needed from the field staff
- Training is not adequate for new faculty and PhD students
- Documentation is not clear or efficient (ie., which forms need to be completed and when)
- Training for Liaisons is sporadic and assumes a base knowledge of what is expected
- There are major differences among faculty in the amount of time spent and the quality of supervision
- The field education staff is in a state of transition due to a vacancy and re-organization of the department. (Several years ago, the position of Field Director was eliminated. The Director of BSW and MSW programs have the responsibility of directing field education).

Illustrative comments from faculty and doctoral students include:

“What would help me is to have a contact sheet with the emails, address, and telephone number of the supervisor and the student in one place. This needs to clearly state which office/s the supervisor and the student is working out of (esp. important when there are multiple sites and off site supervisors).”

“It would also help if students also received reminders from field about the due dates for materials - esp the learning plans and evaluations. There has been a challenging lag re learning plans in the past - some come so late in the semester (despite my follow-ups) that the practicum has moved forward before the arrangements are approved by me. I view them very seriously and do not accept generic statements copied from the model learning plan - they must be specific, personalized, and clearly articulate the products. For some reason, students often have mixed messages about this.”

“I need good communication between the field personnel and the agency. I need a good file system that helps guide me through the semester with visits, learning plan and evals. I need to know if a student is struggling with courses.”

“I need a better differential model of need so the liaison only goes out on high-risk placement issues. The liaison pool of students and instructors for the liaison on an Oncourse template with needed forms generically loaded.”

“Another barrier would be lack of direction from IUPUI field faculty related to my duties. Two meetings were scheduled for this semester and neither occurred. This left me digging for answers to my student’s questions.”

Drawing from the problems identified and recommendations offered, we developed a *Doctoral Student Field Liaison Training Manual*. This is a comprehensive reference that includes sections about the Doctoral Student Field Liaison Project, the BSW and MSW curriculum, all of the field forms for the BSW and MSW programs (a section for each), a section with relevant readings about mentorship, how to handle dual-roles, how to teach theory application in a practice setting, BSW and MSW students’ perception of Field liaisons (a research study), and common reasons why Field Instructors choose to take on this task. The training for next fall will include an orientation just for doctoral students who are interested in taking on the role of Field liaison, in addition to the regular orientations for all faculty.

Examination of the Field Literature

During the past year, a thorough search of the field literature was conducted. Although there is some research about field instruction and education, there are no articles which document the evidence-based best practices for field education or the practice of using doctoral students in the field liaison role. Many of the articles about social work field education lack experimental designs (Sinicrope & Cournoyer, 1990), have small samples, are based on convenience sampling, have little or no diversity (Knight, 1996), lack sufficient detail about the method of analysis (Collins & Kayser, 1994; Sinicrope & Cournoyer, 1990). In a review of graduate social work education over the past 20 years, Wodarski, Feit, and Green (1995) determined that the evidence of best teaching practice was severely lacking in field education, as well as other areas of the curriculum. Regarding field education, they outlined three methods of instruction (apprenticeship, academic, and articulation models) and went on to recommend the articulation model as a promising method of instruction (Wodarski, Feit & Green, 1995). This model is based on carefully sequenced learning objectives in the field placement and classroom seminar, so that students are given opportunities for integrating and practicing concepts learned in class while in the field. As the semester progresses, the complexity of concepts and practice experiences increases with this model. Wodarski and colleagues also recommend allowing students to design their learning objectives, under the supervision of the field instructor and field liaison. Learning plans with this flexibility have demonstrated higher acquisition of student practice skills (Wodarski, Feit, & Green, 1995). As a side note, both of these recommended practices are used in field education at IUSSW.

Other articles reviewed include descriptions of models for field education that combine one or more parts of the curriculum (i.e. research, practice, policy, human behavior in the social environment) with the field education courses and practicum (Collins & Kayser, 1994). For example, one educational practice, used by Boston College’s School of Social Work, included integration of research, practice, and field components of the curriculum (Collins & Kayser, 1994). The *Interdependent Model* involves a student-conducted program evaluation in the field setting. The activity satisfies the requirements for the clinical practice class and the research methods class, which are taken concurrently. The instructors for the clinical and research courses collaborate with the student and field instructor to design a single-system evaluation that teaches applicable

practice and practice evaluation skills simultaneously. Unfortunately, the model was presented without sufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of the model. Field instructor and student satisfaction with the activity were reported without adequate description of the sample, methods of analysis, or results (Collins & Kayser, 1994). Replication of the study with student learning outcome measures could provide useful information about the model's success and could offer guidelines for implementation in the university setting, like IUSW. Despite some promising advances in social work field education, the practice of using doctoral students as field liaisons has not been systematically addressed. To remedy this gap, we designed a survey to distribute to doctoral program directors at schools of social work.

Doctoral Program Survey

Surveys were distributed at the annual meeting of the *Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE)*—a professional membership organization consisting of all the PhD Program Directors in Schools of Social Work. We obtained IRB approval before collecting any data and we informed all respondents about the voluntary nature of the project. We also made a statement about confidentiality and assured each program director that no individual school would be identified by name in presentations or publications. A seven-item survey was given to the program directors in attendance (see Appendix A). We received 45 completed surveys at the meeting and decided to follow-up by mailing surveys to those who did not attend the GADE meeting. We received an additional 14 responses from program directors in the second, targeted mailing of the survey. We followed this with an email message to non-respondents and included the survey in the body of the email. We received four more responses from this third attempt.

Our overall response rate was excellent: 88% (N=63). We decided to eliminate four of those respondents, however, because they provided only minimal data. For example, two of the email respondents replied, "This survey does not apply to our program." Two of the survey respondents in the first batch answered either "D/K" or "unfamiliar with this function" in response to the item about using doctoral students as field liaisons. Consequently, those four respondents were eliminated from the sample. Our useable sample had a response rate of 76% (N=59) which is still excellent.

Since our focus was on the practice of using doctoral students as field liaisons, rather than on the program directors themselves, we did not collect descriptive or demographic data about the respondents. Most of the programs represented are large, research-driven institutions by definition, because they all have doctoral programs in social work. There was not a significant gender difference for the non-respondents. Both male and female program directors (20%) chose not to respond to the survey. While there were more women in the sample, 61% (n=36), there was not a significant difference between the gender grouping of the respondents ($p=.117$).

Over two-thirds (67.8%, n=40) of the programs have used doctoral students as field liaisons. Approximately one-quarter (25.4%) of the sample (n=15) have not used PhD students in this way and 6.8 percent were unsure whether their school has ever done this. Most of the respondents (95%, n=56) could see advantages to using doctoral students as field liaisons and only 3 respondents did not list any advantages. The number of advantages listed ranged from zero to five with an average of 2.07 (s.d.= 1.096). Most doctoral program directors (93.2%, n=55) could think of at least one disadvantage to using doctoral students as field liaisons, although there were generally fewer disadvantages given than advantages. The average number of disadvantages given was 1.46 with a range of zero to four. There was not a significant gender difference in either the number of advantages (N=59, $F=1.859$, $p=.178$) or disadvantages (N=59, $F=.233$, $p=.631$) given.

Doctoral program directors noted many advantages to using doctoral students as field liaisons. Twenty different advantages were discovered through the content analysis of the responses. Responses were categorized as “advantages for students” and “advantages for the university” (see Table 1). Advantages centered around the opportunity to gain experience and develop skills while the disadvantages had to do with the time commitment required to serve as a field liaison.

Another item captured “qualities of doctoral students” that would make them good field liaisons. Respondents listed the following qualities in doctoral students that would make them good field liaisons:

1. Recent practice experience
2. Available
3. Reliable
4. Enthusiastic
5. Good at solving problems
6. Are high-quality employees (conscientious)
7. Have state-of-the-art knowledge

Although some disadvantages to using doctoral students in the field liaison role were noted, there seemed to be stronger support in favor of continuing this practice and making improvements in the training and support for doctoral students. Although there was not a direct question about support for the idea of using doctoral students as field liaison, a variable “support of the idea” was derived from responses to several questions on the survey. The variable was coded as follows:

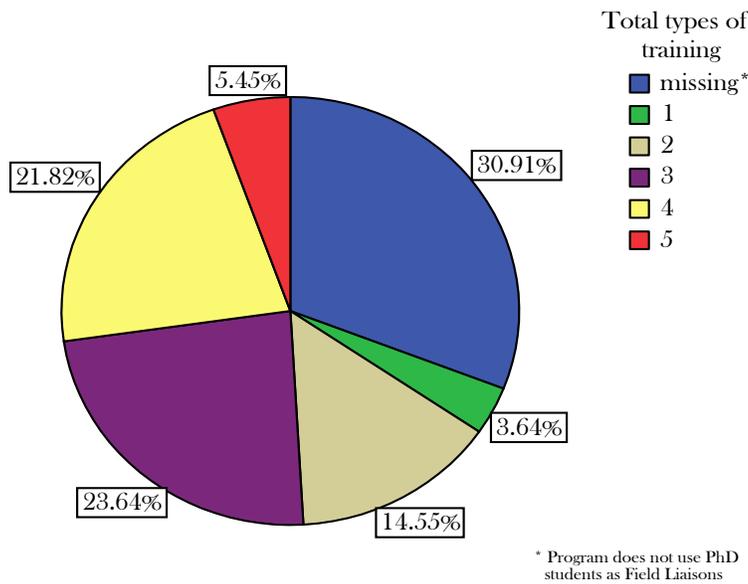
(code=1) “Supportive” (PD supported the idea of doc student field liaison)
 (code=2) “Unsupportive” (PD did not support the idea) and

A program was rated “1” if the following criteria were met: more advantages were given than disadvantages (questions 1&2), if the program had used doctoral students in the field liaison role before (question 3) and if the suggestions for improvement of this practice were generally supportive. A program was rated “2” or unsupportive if the disadvantages outweighed the advantages (questions 1& 2), if the program did not use doctoral students as field liaison before (question 3) and if the comments were generally unsupportive of the idea. As shown in Table 2, three-quarters of doctoral program directors were supportive of having doctoral students serve as field liaisons. Female program directors (94%) were more likely to be supportive of the idea than male program directors (54%). Directors emphasized that training is crucial for doctoral students serving as field liaisons.

TABLE 2. DOCTORAL PROGRAM DIRECTORS SUPPORT OF USING PHD STUDENTS AS FIELD LIAISONS			
	Gender		TOTAL
	Female	Male	
Supportive	29	13	42 (76%)
Unsupportive	2	11	13 (24%)
TOTALS	31	24	55

There were some interesting findings with regard to training and number of interns supervised by doctoral students who serve in this role. Of those who have used doctoral students as field liaisons (n=40) the average number of field students supervised was 10.6 (s.d.= 5.5). There was a wide range in number of field students supervised (2.5 - 27.5). Most programs have some type of training for their doctoral students serving in this role. The average was 3.2 (s.d.=1.09) different types of training, which speaks to the diverse range of training available to doctoral students. As shown in Figure 1, most programs have at least 2 different types of training (n=26, 65.5%).

Training of Doctoral Field Liaisons



Conclusions and Recommendations

With funding from the IUPUI Program Review and Assessment Committee, this project aimed to enrich the preparation of doctoral students for the field liaison role by assessing their training needs in fulfilling this role. Project activities included surveying IUSW faculty and field staff with direct involvement in field education to explore the advantages and disadvantages of using doctoral students as liaisons; interviewing doctoral students who served as liaisons; reviewing the literature on the liaison role, training needs, and best practices; surveying doctoral program directors, and developing a training protocol outline and field liaison manual for doctoral students.

The majority of schools of social work with doctoral programs use doctoral students as field liaisons in their BSW and MSW field programs. Despite the extent of this practice nationally, it has never been systematically analyzed or addressed in the literature. Our PRAC-funded project identified many potential advantages to using doctoral students as field liaisons as well as some potential disadvantages. A variety of training opportunities are recommended to address the instructional needs of doctoral students filling these roles. A mentorship model where

doctoral students new to the field liaison role are mentored by experienced faculty is strongly recommended, especially for doctoral students who themselves hope to become future faculty. Partnering with university *Preparing Future Faculty* programs is recommended as a strategy for enhancing doctoral students' preparation for serving as field liaisons.

This assessment project demonstrated that having doctoral students serve as field liaisons is a common practice in schools of social work. However, there is a great deal of variability in the training, compensation, and workload of doctoral students serving in this role. We plan to further analyze the data we have collected and submit an abstract for presentation at the annual program meeting of the *Council of Social Work Education*. We also plan to submit our findings and recommendations for publication. This project has laid the groundwork for presenting guidelines to enhance social work field education by having well-prepared doctoral students serve as field liaisons.

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TABLE 1. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING PHD STUDENTS AS FIELD LIAISONS		
	Advantages	Disadvantages
PhD Students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gain experience: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. General b. Teaching c. Future job skills d. SW education/curriculum e. Leadership/small group facilitation 2. Develop marketable skills 3. Identify research opportunities in the field 4. Receive financial help 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poor use of time 2. Role conflicts/power imbalances 3. Progress toward dissertation could be slowed 4. This would distract PhD students from their studies or research 5. Labor-intensive job (may feel like exploitation)
University and/or Field Department	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cost-effective field liaison services 2. Recruitment of potential PhD students by meeting w/ MSW practitioners in the field 3. Reduce faculty load 4. Cross-fertilization of knowledge with MSW students & community partners by PhD students 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students not being qualified <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Inexperience b. Unfamiliarity with curriculum c. Unfamiliarity with community d. Lack of preparation 2. Students not being equipped <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Having no car b. Having no time c. Lack of commitment 3. High costs <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Poor return for training investment b. High turnover c. Interrupted relationships with field students & community partners

Appendix A

Assessing the Role of Doctoral Students in Field Education

Name of your school _____

1. What do you think are the potential advantages of having doctoral students serve as field liaisons?

2. What might be the disadvantages?

3. Has your school ever used doctoral students as field liaisons?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Not sure

4. How are they compensated?

5. What is the typical load (# of field students)?

6. How are doctoral students prepared to serve as field liaisons? *(Please check all that apply)*

_____ Formal Orientation

_____ Field Handbook

_____ Informal Mentoring

_____ Shadowing

_____ Ongoing Training

_____ No Formal Training

_____ Other

7. What suggestions do you have for enhancing doctoral student's opportunities to learn about field education?

