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A Program Evaluation of Block and Concurrent Practicum Formats

Author(s)

*Angela Curl, PhD
University of Missouri*

Author(s)

*Suzanne Cary, MSW
University of Missouri*

Abstract

This study investigates issues related to block versus concurrent formats for the advanced MSW field placement. Quantitative and qualitative survey data were collected from current MSW students (N = 103) and field instructors (N = 84). Each group identified the advantages of both block and concurrent formats for field education. Educational outcomes, the needs and preferences of students and field placement sites, and institutional perspectives should be taken into account when developing field curriculum and policies. Offering both types of practicum formats may be one way to maximize student choice and field placement options.

Introduction

Our social work program, like most others, is being faced with the realities of changing demands in field education. Students in higher education are now considered to be consumers, and thus they feel they can expect and even demand curriculum content and field placements specific to their individual needs (Buck, Bradley, Robb, & Kirzner, 2012). Many students now demand placements congruent with their individual desires for experiences and opportunities, the population they wish to work with following graduation, and the work hours that fit into their current financial and living situations. In addition, due to the economic climate and the cost of tuition, many students need paid employment while in practicum, or they require a paid practicum. In 2009, the employment rate among part-time undergraduate college students was 76%, and the rate increases to 88% for part-time graduate students (Aud et al., 2011). More and more students are asking for weekend and evening practicum placements in order to retain paid employment (Buck et al.). Many of these students also desire fewer hours in practicum per week than is required by the program to maintain employment and attend to childcare and household tasks.

The MSW curriculum at the University of Missouri School of Social Work currently includes one 400-hour concurrent foundational practicum in semester two and one 680 block practicum in semester four. The block format has been the only format utilized since the founding of the school

in 1906. The concurrent practicum is taken in conjunction with three 3-credit courses, and the block practicum is taken in conjunction with one 3-credit seminar course. The field education format does allow for students to extend their block placement beyond one semester if needed. However, students continue to struggle with the demands of attempting to work full-time while completing practicum and are interested in exploring solutions. Therefore, the program elected to evaluate the disadvantages and advantages of block and concurrent practicum formats to determine which would meet the students' needs while retaining the integrity of the field learning experience. As research was reviewed for guidance, it was found that research comparing concurrent and block field placements is limited. In addition, there is little research evaluating student learning and outcomes as related to field format. Typically a field education format is chosen because of its fit with overall institutional needs and curriculum rather than specific empirical evidence (Henton, 1995; Hunter & Hollis, 2013; Navari, 1991).

Literature Search

Three studies were found that explicitly evaluate field education formats (Hunter & Hollis, 2013; Rock & Ring, 2010; Theriot, Johnson, Mulvaney, & Kretzschmar, 2006). Theriot and colleagues evaluated block versus concurrent field placement formats and found "no differences in measures of professional competence, assertiveness, depression, or self-esteem for students completing block field placements versus those completing concurrent field," (p. 212) and that "neither model negatively affects students" (p. 214). They also found that students in both concurrent and block placements achieved the same level of competency. Rock and Ring evaluated outcomes of a block practicum that consisted of two semesters of fieldwork; semester 1 in a micro setting and semester 2 in a macro setting. Both semesters required 32 hours per week of practicum work. It was found that this block format gave sufficient time for the application of skills and theory, as well as adequate time for "client termination, planning and follow-up," and following cases "from start to finish" (p. 179). Additionally, block placement afforded students the opportunity to learn how to manage time, function as a part of the agency team, and feel a sense of "purpose and pride" (p. 180). Rock and Ring stated that the most common negative aspect of this format was the financial constraints this placed on the student. Hunter and Hollis (2013) studied international internships and found advantages of the one-semester block placement to include "flexibility, a fit with the current program model, full immersion within the agency," (para. 19) and international block placements were found to be less of a financial burden due to the decreased length of time needed to complete hours. They caution, though, that when the student has the added element of acclimating to a new culture, this introduces additional time constraints. Hunter and Hollis also identified advantages of the concurrent format for international placements, including opportunities to connect with the campus through on-line required courses and to seek support from campus when needed. Disadvantages of the concurrent format included time management, as two semesters was thought to be too long for placement due to the need for additional support and advisement.

Discussion of Concurrent Placements

Although research comparing concurrent and block placements is limited, advantages and disadvantages of each model have been addressed in multiple publications. Concurrent placements are typically completed over two semesters. Agencies where “long-term counseling is done on a traditional once-a-week basis” may prefer a concurrent format so that students have longer to work with clients and for the field instructor to observe progress (Wilson, 1981, p. 9). Another advantage of a concurrent placement is a greater integration of classroom and practice, because the student can immediately apply classroom learning in a practice setting and can, in turn, also bring learning from the field into the classroom (Wilson, 1981). Also, because of the part-time status in the agency, the student is seen as a learner, and there is less of a chance the student will be treated as an employee (Hamilton & Else, 1983).

Disadvantages of a concurrent format include fewer placement sites available to students, especially in rural areas with fewer agencies available in a concentrated area (Hamilton & Else, 1983). Additionally, concurrent placements can be less flexible, especially for part-time students. This seems contradictory, but many programs are designed for courses to be taken after normal work hours are completed until the student begins fieldwork, and then work hours are typically interrupted or changed, so it is easier for students to interrupt or change their work time for only one semester of block placement, as opposed to the two semesters required in the concurrent format. Related to this is the fact that finances can also be strained over a two-semester period (Hamilton & Else).

It is sometimes the field instructor that experiences the most disadvantages of a concurrent placement, especially in a fast-paced setting, such as medical, crisis, or inpatient settings (Wilson, 1981). Particularly in these types of settings, on days when the student is absent from the practicum site, the field instructor has to cover the student’s caseload, and the client has to work with two different providers. This can fragment work for the field instructor, learning for the student, and services for the client.

Discussion of Block Placements

Advantages of block placement include a total-immersion learning experience with excellent continuity with clients and exposure to learning opportunities. There is no distraction of coursework, missed experiences, or other classroom responsibilities interrupting the field experience (Wilson, 1981). Thus, learning is rapid and intense (Hamilton & Else, 1983; Henton, 1995; Wilson, 1981). Additional advantages include more time in the agency to develop a mentorship relationship between the field instructor and student and an increased ability for students to complete practicums in locations away from the school and even internationally. This is especially important for more rural programs, where there might be fewer local professional agencies available to offer practicum experiences (Wilson, 1981). The major disadvantages of the block model include less opportunity for integration of classroom learning and practice and less time to develop relationships with clients (Henton, 1995). The disconnection between classroom and theory can be substantial and difficult to overcome, although assign-

ments and faculty interactions can help. Because of the separation of field- and coursework, students have fewer interactions with faculty and, thus, less opportunity for support and advisement.

Methodology

According to Patton (2008),

Basic scientific research is undertaken to discover new knowledge, test theories, establish truth, and generalize across time and space. [In contrast] Program evaluation is undertaken to inform decisions, clarify options, identify improvements, and provide information about programs and policies within contextual boundaries of time, place, values, and politics. (p. 40)

In light of the research and literature about the disadvantages and advantages of block and concurrent field formats, we created an evaluation study to examine issues related to block versus concurrent formats for the second field placement of our MSW program. Specifically, we designed this study to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceived advantages of block versus concurrent placement formats from the perspectives of our students and field instructors?
2. Would our field instructors be willing to accept students completing field in a concurrent format rather than block placement?

Sample

Data for this evaluation study were collected during August 2013 using Qualtrics (an online survey program). Two groups were sampled for this study:

- Current University of Missouri MSW students (N = 103; 67% response rate)
- University of Missouri School of Social Work field instructors (N = 84; 55% response rate)

Instrumentation

Quantitative data were collected from all respondents using different survey instruments for the two samples. Students were asked their student status (e.g., part-time or full-time, regular or advanced standing), how many hours they worked each week outside of their practicum, whether they planned to extend their second (block) placement beyond one semester, and whether they preferred concurrent or block format for their second field placement. Field instructors were asked to identify what type of agency they worked in, which field format they believed better prepared students for social work practice, whether taking classes during field or completing all courses prior to field was better for helping students develop and practice skills, and whether they would be willing to supervise students for concurrent and/or block placements. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. As this study was conducted for program evaluation purposes rather than research (as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under 45 CFR 46.102[d]), institutional review board approval was not required.

Both samples were asked open-ended questions about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of block and concurrent placement formats. Qualitative data can reveal important information about perceptions and preferences related to block and concurrent formats. These data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarizing ourselves with the data by reviewing all open-ended responses (phase 1), generating initial codes (phase 2), identifying from the codes (phase 3), reviewing and refining themes (phase 4), defining and naming themes (phase 5), and writing up the results (phase 6).

Results

First, we summarize the characteristics of the two groups surveyed for this study. Most of the University of Missouri MSW student respondents attend school part-time (68%), are enrolled in the on-campus program (62%), are regular-standing students (72%), and half work 30 or more hours per week (50%). Our field instructor respondents work in medical settings (19%), mental health settings (19%), child welfare (15%), schools (8%), disability services (8%), drug/alcohol treatment (5%), and a variety of other settings (26%).

Quantitative Findings

While the University of Missouri School of Social Work currently only officially offers block placements for the second field placement, about 40% of MSW students have (or plan to) extended their second placement to two semesters. In addition, 16 (16%) students said that the block placement format favorably influenced their choice to apply to our school. Regardless of student status (full-time, part-time, on-campus, off-campus, regular standing, advanced standing), about 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred the block placement format.

The vast majority of our field instructors agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that "Students are better prepared for social work practice if they are in the agency full-time over the course of one semester" (N=71; 77%) and that "For the second, advanced field placement, students are better prepared to develop and practice skills if they have completed all coursework prior to field" (N=70; 74%) rather than being in an agency part-time over the course of two-semester, while still taking classes. Fifty-four (77%) field instructors said that they would be willing to take block placement students, and 38 (54%) said that they would be willing to take concurrent placement students. Thirty-six (51%) have supervised at least one student who has extended their block placement beyond one semester.

Qualitative Findings

Analysis of responses to the open-ended questions identified a number of distinct themes related to perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of block and concurrent placements.

Perceived advantages of the block placement format. The two most frequently mentioned advantages

of block placements by MSW students were that practicums were completed more quickly and that they better represent the typical full-time work environment. Students also said that block placement allowed them to focus on the practicum without juggling classes; block placement offered immersion and a greater intensity of experience, as well as a quicker development of skills and responsibilities. From the field instructors' perspective, the block placement format was advantageous because it enabled students to follow clients ("It is very difficult to develop and maintain continuity of care in a medical setting if the student isn't here every day"). They also reported that block placements acclimated students to the full-time employment context ("Students develop a schedule similar to what they may encounter after graduation"; "better feel of how the agency manages time") and that the student's attention was not divided by competing coursework. Field instructors wrote about the advantages of continuity of presence and learning ("There are certain things the student misses by only being at the organization certain days of the week"; "able to be a consistent part of the health care team"), and that the block placement format allowed students greater involvement in team meetings (they were able to "develop leadership in multidisciplinary team"; to "develop relationships with other important team members").

Similar to students, field instructors mentioned the benefits of immersion for enrichment of experience and in aiding skill development. Unlike students, field instructors mentioned that the block placement format meant that students have already mastered basic knowledge and skills ("Students have already acquired the basic knowledge and are able to apply the knowledge while developing a good skill set"; "being in field soon after completing coursework helps them relate the work to social work principles and philosophy learned in class"). Finally, field instructors say that the advantages of block placement include the following: "students are perceived as professionals rather than students," "better client outcomes," and "more time to complete larger projects."

Perceived Advantages of the Concurrent Placement Format. MSW students most often cited the ability to work full-time/part-time and/or multiple jobs during placement as an advantage of concurrent placements. Other perceived advantages mentioned by students included more time to get experience and to know the agency, the ability to practice what was being learned in classes, a greater breadth and diversity of experiences, and schedule flexibility.

As in the student responses, the most frequently mentioned advantage of concurrent placements by field instructors was that concurrent placements accommodate other work commitments. Other advantages included the integration of class learning and field ("students can take real life scenarios to the classroom"), seeing long-term client outcomes, having more time to process or reflect on experiences and develop a long-term relationship with the practicum placement, greater flexibility in deadlines, and the development of more roles and duties within the agency ("able to carry a busier case load during second semester"; "field instructors may be more likely to give students more duties if they know that they will be at the agency longer"). Two additional themes were the ability to

develop a broader perspective on the agency over time (“some times/seasons of the year are busier than others”) and the ability to allow students to have placements in some settings (e.g., higher education). One respondent mentioned that concurrent placements allow the field instructor time to do things while the student is not present.

Discussion

Consistent with findings by Buck et al. (2012), economic considerations influenced student preferences and perspectives related to field placement format. Specifically, the most commonly reported advantage of block placement identified by students was the ability to finish their practicums more quickly. Student-identified advantages of concurrent placements included the ability to engage in full- or part-time work, schedule flexibility, and a better balance of responsibilities between work and practicum. Likewise, the most commonly identified advantage of concurrent placements that field instructors identified was that it accommodated other work commitments. However, while the number of practicum hours for concurrent placements is spread out over two semesters, the time commitment for courses is increased by having to take two or three classes during field, which could be just as difficult as having the additional practicum hours. At the University of Missouri School of Social Work, students are allowed to spread out their block placement hours over two semesters, with only seminar as an additional course in one semester, which does reduce the time commitment.

In terms of educational outcomes, both students and field instructors perceive concurrent placements as facilitating the integration of class learning and field (as suggested by Wilson, 1981) and allowing students more time to develop a long-term relationship with the agency. Field instructors also said that concurrent placements gave students more time to process or reflect and to see long-term client outcomes. In contrast, students perceived that immersion in field and the intensity of the block format facilitated quicker development of skills and responsibilities, which is consistent with previous literature (e.g., Hamilton & Else, 1983; Henton, 1995; Wilson, 1981). Both students and field instructors indicated that block placements better represent the typical full-time work environment. From an agency/field instructor perspective, the block placement allows students greater continuity of contact with clients and integration into the agency. The majority of our field instructors believed that block format better prepared students for social work practice. As most of our field instructors have graduated from our MSW program, they have experienced both concurrent placement (for their foundational practicum) and block placement (for their advanced field placement) formats. According to Wilson (1981), the “block plan seems to be preferred by many instructors and students who have experienced both kinds of schedules” (p. 8).

From an institutional perspective, the decision of which practicum format to offer (or whether to offer both formats) has many implications. For example, the availability of field placements (e.g., hospitals, schools, counseling agencies) and field instructors may vary depending on type of format. For workload purposes, does being a field liaison and following students for field in concurrent place-

ments over two semesters count as teaching one class or two? Finally, field placement format can also facilitate or prevent long-distance (including international) placements.

This study was conducted in order to help inform possible changes in field format—from block to concurrent format. Evaluating possible consequences of this change was important, as the field placement format would impact our community and the agencies providing services within the community, as well as the practice and research relationships we have developed with the social workers (field instructors) within the agencies. We also needed to consider how the change might impact the level of preparation of students entering into the field who are providing services to a wide variety of vulnerable clients. In addition, it was important for us to take into consideration how to best meet the needs of today's students. Also important is the financial stability of our program. Our graduates provide skilled social work services to clients throughout our rural state, and changing field formats cannot decrease our student enrollment to the point that our program is threatened. Our field instructors are a necessary component of our student learning; thus, it is important to consult with them and keep them engaged and involved when considering such a major programmatic change.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This evaluation study has a number of strengths. First, our study collected responses from multiple stakeholders: students and field instructors. Second, we collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Third, we asked questions about the perceived advantages of both block and concurrent field placement formats. Fourth, students in our program have the opportunity to experience both formats, as their first placement uses the concurrent format and their second placement uses the block format. Fifth, this study can serve as a model of data-driven decision making for students and field instructors.

While this evaluation study was informative for our program, caution should be taken when generalizing the findings to other programs. Program size, financial resources, number of faculty, and location can have implications for the most appropriate practicum format choice. Another limitation of our study is that we used separate questions to ask about perceptions and preferences regarding block and concurrent formats, so respondents could indicate a preference for both practicum formats. There could be a self-selection bias in our sampling. For example, we have students in the study who said they applied to our MSW program because of block placement availability and then said that they preferred the block format. Also, since many of the field instructors in the sample graduated from our program, these respondents personally experienced the block format for their second field placement. However, for the purposes of this program evaluation, it is important to know what our field instructors think about both format types and how these perceptions might influence their future availability as field instructors. In addition, many field instructors have had students from both first (concurrent) and second (block) practicums, while also serving as field instructors for students

from other schools that use concurrent placements.

Future research is needed to examine the challenges presented by offering both format options. Programs that do offer both formats are in a unique position to conduct evaluations on outcomes such as student satisfaction, student stress, development of student skills, ability to make linkages between classroom learning and field experience, and client outcomes. In addition, future research could also explore the utility and outcomes of other field structures (e.g., rotation models, remote supervision of distance placements).

Conclusion

This study investigated issues related to block versus concurrent formats for the advanced MSW field placement. We found that most of our MSW students preferred the block placement format over the concurrent format, and more of our field instructors were willing to supervise students in block placements than in concurrent placements. That being said, both groups of respondents (students and field instructors) were able to identify advantages of both block and concurrent formats for field education.

The needs and preferences of students, field placement sites, and academic units should be taken into account when developing field curriculum and policies. These needs and preferences are constantly shifting, which presents a great challenge for academic units. For programs with sufficient resources, offering both types of practicum formats may be one way to maximize student choice and field placement options.

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