

# **A Holistic Continuing Education Approach for Social Services Development: Promoting Partnerships Between Universities and Social Service Agencies**

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**Abstract:** This article proposes that a dynamic, two-way collaboration between social service agencies and universities would advance the cause of social service and its impact on those most at risk. I believe this alliance would provide mutual benefit: student interns gain real-world job skills to prepare them for a career, while social service professionals gain improved access to continuing education. We cannot have graduate students in internships without supervisors, and we cannot become supervisors without continuing our education—education whose access' limiting factors could be mitigated by university resources. This collaboration creates a sustainable healing cycle where the more knowledgeable and capable the practicing social worker or psychotherapist becomes, the more effective they are at treating patients and, by extension, providing productive mentoring for interns. To exemplify success of this idea, I reflect on my own experience creating training programs for an agency with several community clinics in suburban New York.

**Keywords:** education, clinical supervision, program development, continuing education, universities, social service agencies, partnerships, skills development, training

## **Introduction**

Continuing education for social service practitioners is not a linear process; it is, rather, a continual process requiring a lifelong commitment to learning. This process integrates theory and practice, starting at a student's level (as an intern) and continuing through other career phases, including leadership roles. In the social service field, the continuation of education from the classroom into the field can benefit from a partnership between universities and social service agencies, particularly because of the financial limitations social service professionals face paying for continuing education credits (CEUs). Clinical supervisors who are training students in internship programs could be provided CEUs in exchange for their service to universities, resulting in a higher quality of education for their graduates.

To exemplify success in this type of collaboration, I reflect on my own experience creating training programs for an agency with several community clinics in suburban New York. I accomplished this in my former role as an internship coordinator by utilizing training tools provided in my role as an adjunct professor for Fordham University located also in suburban New York. I created two training programs for the "W agency" using my relationship and training with Fordham University: 1) a training program for all fieldwork students in the entire W agency and 2) a specialized training program for bilingual interns implemented with a systemic approach (school-based with a task supervisor and clinic-based with a clinical supervisor). The first program also included a training for clinical supervisors and was developed with the help of my supervisor, who had over 30 years of clinical experience. The

programs proved to be effective in training students for attaining a job. It was also useful for supporting clinical supervisors. However, the only benefits for clinical supervisors were emotional rewards for mentoring students—it did not address their need for continuing education. It would be more gratifying if universities provided CEUs for this contribution.

I believe that a collaboration between universities and social service agencies is beneficial for the field of social services; not only can it increase competencies, it can also decrease financial struggles among service providers. Universities should support social service agencies because social service agencies support universities by training their students and employing their graduates. Continuing education is extremely relevant; due to the high demand in social service professions, universities have lowered their admission requirements. In 2018, admission to a master's program at Fordham University (2019) only required a bachelor's degree from a regionally accredited college; this implies no Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and no Grade Point Average (GPA). In addition, with a larger number of graduates, salaries are lower. With lower salaries, there is less capacity to finance courses for continuing education. Thus exists a perpetual cycle of low-income practitioners delivering services of suboptimal quality.

The agency I had worked for had serious financial challenges, limiting its ability to afford staff development. If more field educators had access to advanced training provided by a university as a benefit for training their students, not only would it improve the quality of internships, it would also improve the quality of social services, potentially increasing the agencies' revenue when more graduate students can join agencies and more clients can be served.

### **Challenges Affecting Social Service Practitioners' Ability to Pay for CEUs**

Access to continuing education is particularly important for the social service field. The demand for occupations in social services has increased. In 2012, there were 2.4 million job openings, with 2.8 million projected by 2022, according to the National Center for Education Statistics [Center] (2018). The Center refers to social services occupations as consisting of two groups: 1) counselors, social workers, and other community and social service specialists and 2) religious workers. Although there are more jobs in occupations that typically require a bachelor's degree, faster growth and more new jobs are projected for occupations that typically require a master's degree (Torpey, 2018).

Since the demand for social service practitioners has increased, universities have increased their number of programs, incorporating online training and even cutting admission requirements such as the GRE, as seen with Fordham University. Therefore, more students graduate each year; in 2010 there were about 700,000 masters-level degrees, and there will be over 900,000 in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics [Center], 2019). This represents a dramatic increase. The Center stated that from 2015 to 2016, nearly 50,000 students graduated in the public administration and social services field.

Continuing education becomes even more relevant when schools decrease their admission requirements. However, there are serious challenges for social service practitioners to attain continuing education because student loans have increased. Between 1999-2000 and 2015-2016,

average student loan balances for graduate school completers increased for all degree types: Average student loan balances increased by 90 percent for those who completed professional doctorate degrees, from \$98,200 to \$186,600, and by 57 percent for those who completed master's degrees, from \$42,100 to \$66,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

There are several professions in the social service field and social work is only one of those professions. Social work is *my* profession, and to illustrate our struggle I will use employment characteristics from this field related to the ability to afford continuing education.

According to the United States Department of Labor [Department] (2018), in 2016, there were more than 680,000 social workers employed in the United States; by 2026, the number of social workers is projected to increase to more than 790,000. Over the decade, the Department states that the occupation of child, family, and school social workers is projected to add about 45,000 more jobs. In 2017, the hourly wage for social workers in the state of New York was \$29.28, and the annual wage was \$61,980; nearly 8,000 social workers were employed (United States Department of Labor, 2018). It is worthy to note that New York requires master's degrees for social workers.

Continuing education credits are required for licensing renewal. In New York, there are two licenses: the Licensed Master of Social Work (LMSW) and the Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW). To gain a LCSW in the state of New York, the requirement per the New York State Department of Labor [NYS Department] (2019) is at least three years of post-MSW supervised experience in diagnosis, psychotherapy, and assessment-based treatment planning, and in most cases one must be licensed and currently registered to practice as a LMSW. In 2016, the NYS Department reported 1,167 licenses issued for this occupation. In 2017, the NYS Department reported 1,357 licenses issued for this occupation. As of July 1, 2018, in the state of New York there were, in total, 27,730 registered licenses for this occupation (NYS Department of Labor, 2019). Social service agencies face the demand of providing clinical supervision and continuing education for their staff to help them become licensed clinicians. However, agencies are constrained by financial limitations. Allard (2009) claimed that in times of economic recessions, sufficient budget for staff development is not common in social service agencies.

Considering all these facts—lower standards to enter graduate programs, large numbers of graduates, large amounts of debt, low salaries, lack of funding in social service agencies for staff development—we can conclude that although continuing education is extremely important, it is difficult to afford.

While I was training students, I was facing challenges affording my own continuing education, which was fundamental to sustaining my role as a clinical supervisor. I had to pay for my student loans, I was (and am) a single mother, and the cost of my living was approximately 80 percent of my income. Typically, CEUs would cost approximately \$2000 every three years.

I was not alone in this struggle; the agency I worked for was facing budget cuts and other clinical supervisors were facing financial difficulty. But what really moved me were the challenges I noticed in my students. They showed up tired and rushed by the hardships of life—a

lot of them were single parents, some with full-time jobs and internships, and they were coming to a field already stressed after, in some cases, commuting long distances.

During the process, I thought it was unfair for me to bear this burden alone while universities were mass-producing a workforce that in some cases was unlikely to be employable. It was a conflicting feeling because I was also an adjunct professor and I was supported by a university. I inevitably thought, “If I am feeling this way in my current situation, which is relatively privileged in comparison to most clinical supervisors, this is a worse scenario for field instructors who are not receiving any benefit from the universities for training students.”

I believe that universities should support field instructors who are training their students; it would increase their motivation and decrease their financial burden. Furthermore, licensing requirements for practitioners include educational targets that require social service agencies to support their practitioners. Social service agencies must provide clinical supervision and staff development to maintain employee motivation, decrease burnout, and sustain best practices. However, most agencies face financial limitations that make it particularly challenging to meet these demands. This was evident in the case of the agency I worked for; the agency had a limited budget of approximately \$18 million dollars to serve more than 30,000 people and pay more than 500 employees (GuideStar, 2018). The vice president mentioned the agency had a very small budget for staff development (F., personal communication, March 27, 2019).

Social service agencies depend on evidence-based practices to serve their clients with quality standards and to be able to survive financially, especially when payments are value-based. But when the resources to provide a valuable necessity are not allocated due to lack of funding, it is difficult for an agency to be healthy and to provide quality services. Therefore, partnerships between universities and social service institutions can help to decrease these limitations by ensuring that social service practitioners have easier access to continuing education.

### **The Training Programs and Their Success**

The training programs I created teach key tasks required for today’s challenges in the mental health field: electronic medical records (EMR) management, electronic documentation, assessment, integrating clinical interviews and assessments, suicide assessment, suicide clinical interviewing, safety plan interviewing, addressing issues of safety and risk within family systems, giving trauma systems therapy (TST), bilingual clinical interviewing, and so on. The main objective of these programs was to make my students employable faster so they could see a return on their educational investment sooner.

The training programs proved to be successful. Most of the students were able to get involved in the required work activities at a faster rate. They learned how to document using the EMR more quickly than in previous years; they learned to integrate clinical interviews with clinical assessments, particularly suicide assessments; they learned TST (a training in implementation process for over five years agency-wide); and they were able to perform TST case presentations during their internship.

Here are some testimonials from students engaged in the training program:

Throughout my experience as a student intern with the internship program Andrea created at [W agency], I got to not only learn and practice clinical skills but also grow as a professional and individual. The program was well organized and facilitated. From the start of the program, we were allowed the tools necessary to begin our journey as interns. Aside from [one-on-one] weekly supervision sessions, interns had weekly group guidance. Each session provided us with knowledge, feedback, and an opportunity to practice skills together guiding the interns through the entire experience. Sessions were facilitated by clinicians with different areas of expertise who provided us with their skills and guidance. As well, these sessions allowed interns to share their experiences with clients and also find some assistance [on] particularly complex cases. Personally, this experience allowed me to discover my strengths and weaknesses. I also discovered my passion for working with the Spanish speaking community and doing family therapy which the program focuses on. Part of the program was to assist interns on how to work with the Spanish speaking community which entailed learning about cultural sensitivity and immigration. Overall, what I found extremely helpful about this internship program was always feeling supported which I am extremely grateful for. I finished the intern program feeling more confident in myself and my skills. (E., personal communication, July 14, 2020)

The Training Program has been one of the most life-changing experiences in terms of self-growth. I had the pleasure of working with Andrea during my last year in the School of Social Service Master Program at [W agency]. Going into the program, Andrea explained that although it would be an arduous process, it would be very rewarding in the end. Andrea was quick to set a safe environment in which we were able to discuss and debrief our experiences in our assigned internships. The program integrated a variety of components. One that sticks out for me in particular, were [*sic*] the guest speakers. These guests taught and shared their knowledge on specific specializations, including: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, Grounding Techniques, Clinical Bilingualism, and many more. Andrea did a wonderful job of including a diverse group of speakers from different backgrounds that we were each able to identify with. The program also encouraged us all to step out of our comfort zones. We role played in order to be in the position of both the clinician and the client. By the end, we knew very well what it was like to be either party. This aided in putting our newly learned techniques into effect. The program also put a much-needed emphasis on minorities, which schools and other programs do not focus on or prioritize. These aspects of the program prepared and provided all of us with tools we would apply to our future professions. The program pushed us past our limits, but Andrea made it so comfortable and inviting that everyone enjoyed participating and wanted to continue to grow. At the start of the program, I was very quiet and shy, however, Andrea and the program led me to allow myself to grow and feel confident in my skills. Andrea's passion and love for her profession can be seen throughout the program and I am very grateful that it helped me bloom into the Social Worker I am today. (V., personal communication, July 21, 2020)

The training program allowed me to flourish as a professional in ways that I did not expect. With an interdisciplinary curriculum, I was able to explore aspects of myself as a professional that I was not aware of and develop a strong sense of self as a therapist. With a multitude of training provided, I have been able to determine both my strengths and weaknesses as a clinician. The strong emphasis on the development and improvement of bilingual clinical services enabled me to cherish a skill that I had yet to use in my career. Since the training program, I have been able to connect with a predominantly Latino population that I was and will continue to serve. Additionally, the hands-on experience in a therapeutic setting enhanced my skills toward family therapy specifically. With a strong foundation provided via varying therapeutic modalities, I feel very well prepared to enter the workforce as a social worker. The emphasis on Trauma Systems Therapy enabled me to develop the skills needed for the current events that we find ourselves in and helped me approach therapy using a respectable theory. The training program incorporates theory, hands-on experience, and a look into the business aspect of careers in the mental health field often not provided by larger institutions. As a recent graduate, I am very grateful for the experiences I have had via the [W university] training program and will forever cherish the memories and relationships I have developed as a result. The [W university] training program changed me. (M., personal communication, July 21, 2020)

### **How a Partnership Between University and Social Service Agency Benefited My Career Development**

I was born in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, raised by my extended African-Latino American family. I migrated to Greenwich, Connecticut, USA, with my one-year-old daughter after my American husband was killed. As anyone could imagine, I faced several struggles to develop my career. But I was able to advance and set quality standards in my clinical practice through the holistic style of education I propose in this article: classroom and field education over the entire path of a practitioner's career.

I currently own a mental health center—"S.P. Center"—with locations in a wealthy town in Connecticut and a new migrant town in New York. Both locations, in a way, integrate together my life path and my service to my communities. One location is predominantly Latino-American while the other is a nearby affluent community, mostly Caucasian. I am not affluent nor Caucasian, but as any other person who migrates knows, I had to learn to join the local system and community. This cultural integration enriched my identity and helped me provide a more inclusive practice.

In the S.P. Center, I continue with the mission of educating psychotherapists that I started at the "W agency." My motivation is a belief that this style of education (classroom and field) can transform the lives of others, just as my life has been transformed. I received substantial training by my professors and my clinical supervisors, and this dynamic education is the cornerstone of my professional development. I strongly believe that a permanent alliance between university and social service institutions would help with the evolution of a new generation of workers. Ultimately, the social service field's success depends on increasing access to a lifelong experience of education in a multisystemic dimension.

My clinical practice has also benefited from this type of education, as most of my clients achieved successful outcomes, such as experiencing a decrease in post-traumatic symptoms, greater self-sufficiency, increased parenting skills, and enhanced emotional regulation. I have been able to educate psychotherapists because of the collaboration with my mentors, in both the field and the classroom. And it is to all of them that I dedicate my career. I hope that my experience can be expanded to benefit other clinical supervisors who could use the support of universities in training students in the field of social service. We cannot have graduate students in internships without supervisors, and we cannot become supervisors without continuing our education.

### **Benefits for a Collaboration between Universities and Social Service Agencies**

#### **Benefits for Universities**

- Strengthens field education
- Supports students' job training
- Markets for educational programs; enhances students' employability
- Helps recruit staff in areas such as: field instruction, teaching, program development, international social program development, research, etc.
- Collects data for research-based initiatives
- Increases content for grant development
- Builds a network with social service agencies for work opportunities for faculty

#### **Benefits for Social Service Agencies**

- Free CEUs for supervisors
- Training support in staff meetings
- Increase in service quality by implementation of evidence-based practices
- Increase in professional development
- Networking with universities, an avenue for staff who is interested in academia
- Increase in supervision knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Increase in future salaries for staff
- Decrease in staff development expense
- Increase in staff motivation
- Stronger transference between student and supervisor

### **Conclusion**

Continuing education is a lifetime enhancement for a practitioner. But it is also a lifetime enhancement for social service institutions and for universities. It is the joint responsibility of all parties in the social service field to promote possibilities for continuing education.

A stronger collaboration between universities and social service institutions is more than a demand—it is a compassionate approach to a growing challenge affecting our field. The field is facing limitations to achieve continual education. Therefore, an internship program is a starting point for a beneficial transaction between universities and social service institutions. On one hand, universities benefit from clinical supervisors training their students and, on the other,

social service institutions benefit from universities educating their staff. It would increase universities' motivation to provide relevant CEUs to field instructors if agencies offered preferential placement of students to schools that provide relevant CEU training.

The truth is this: A value-based arrangement is needed to lift us all from the growing financial challenges in our field.

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