

Navigating Field Education in a Politically Evolved America

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Abstract: Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work, connecting classroom learning to professional practice. At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), field education is closely centered on social justice, advocacy, and equity. However, the current political climate has made field placements more difficult, especially because of laws and policy changes affecting LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, reproductive rights, and communities of color. These challenges can make it harder for students to find placements that match their values and may also create concerns about their safety. Because many HBCU students come from marginalized communities, these challenges can limit their opportunities to gain meaningful learning and advocacy experience. In response, social work programs are strengthening oversight, implementing safety protocols, and exploring innovative placement models. This reflective essay examines how politics shape field education at HBCUs and highlights the need for flexibility, innovation, and continued commitment to social work values.

Keywords: social work programs, political climate, historically Black colleges and universities, placement challenges, safety

Field education is widely recognized as the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) in social work education, which practically connects the classroom or virtual learning experience to real-world practice. Traditionally, students enrolled in Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited programs learn professional skills that serve as a foundation for professional social work practice in micro, mezzo, and/or macro level settings. Many of these field education programs have been significantly impacted by the political climate in the United States as it relates to social workers serving vulnerable populations and their level of preparedness to serve these communities through an equitable and inclusive approach. Additionally, at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), many of their institutions' missions are aligned with a foundation driven by social justice, equality, advocacy, and inclusivity among other issues. Students at these institutions engaged in field education must often balance their interest in serving vulnerable and marginalized communities with potential political, institutional, and agency-related challenges associated with such placements. This reflective essay captures a glimpse of the political environment in field education at HBCUs and its impact on field placement opportunities, student supervision, and the student learning experience. Given the current shortage in the profession, there is also an inherent need to ensure the expansion of the social work workforce through the contribution of equity-centered social work graduates.

The HBCU Experience & Field Education

HBCUs have historically served as a safe space for Civil Rights leaders to meet and an educational setting that provided ongoing nurturing leadership, stressed the importance of building community, and promoted leadership and social responsibility (Jones, 2025). Similarly,

the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics requires social workers to act against injustices that affect vulnerable populations. To support this mandate, field education must take a bold stance in creating meaningful and impactful learning experiences. Most of the CSWE-accredited HBCU programs envision the required 400-hour field practicum for BSW programs and the 900-hour field practicum for MSW programs merely as an extension of their institution's mission statement, as students select field placement sites that serve marginalized and less fortunate individuals (CSWE, 2022). As some political decisions are made, it creates an escalation of fear for our students, particularly at agencies that may have a similar focus to address various populations. This experience puts tremendous pressure on social work programs, especially field education directors and staff, with regard to placing students at agencies and ensuring that they are safe.

Challenging Times in Placing Students in DEI-Related Settings

We have observed that HBCUs are facing incredibly challenging times in identifying, securing, and placing students at field placement sites that are aligned with their institutional missions, particularly those that exist in politically regressive states. We have found that social work programs in states that have passed or are considering legislation targeting LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, reproductive rights, and people of color have experienced a decrease in available agency placement opportunities that align with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2022). Due to these political decisions, many of these agencies have chosen to rid themselves of potential controversy, retaliation, or even loss of agency funding. This type of experience negatively impacts the number of field placement sites that are available and willing to serve as training opportunities, especially those students who have an interest in working in these types of settings. Reducing these professional development opportunities not only affects student learning but also deprives communities of valuable experiences that help build stronger connections among members.

Supported Student Supervision at Field Placements

As we place students in field agencies, safety is one of our primary ongoing concerns, especially in potentially hostile environments. Many field education programs have included more dialogue on student safety and effectively balancing student/client/agency roles to prevent potentially conflicting or aggravated engagement during field instructor training and student field placement orientation. Additionally, field instructors are informed that agencies, as well as institutions of higher learning, must provide additional support, include contingency plans for unsafe matters, and check in more regularly with students while onsite. Social work programs are encouraged to add another layer of oversight for students as they may engage in hostile conditions to ensure student well-being is also centered as they navigate the terrain to become professional social workers. After gaining experience in agency settings, the students are purposefully given time during the seminar classes to reflect on experiences at the field placement site, which allows them to engage in politically related matters at the field placement site. Reflecting on safety and real-world experiences within the classroom allows students to deepen their understanding of the profession and its influence on the political climate.

The Political Divide: Student Advocacy & Field Placement Experience

Upon entry, many students at HBCUs are introduced or reintroduced to the institution's mission and goals, with a strong emphasis on embracing their role as change agents. During the student's matriculation at these institutions, these symbolic forms of advocacy take place through the actions of the Student Government Association, department-level student associations, as a member of or in collaboration with a sorority or fraternity. Many social work students at HBCUs bring personal experiences of coming from marginalized communities or being directly or indirectly associated with a disproportionately represented group. In essence, social work students at HBCUs, in many cases, begin the field education experience passionately to effect change. Although students often bring personal experiences or have been exposed to some level of advocacy before or during attending college, certain agencies may have policies that restrict external advocacy efforts. These policies may prohibit support for specific client populations or discourage public engagement that could risk the agency's funding, reputation, or lead to potential retaliation. This type of experience may minimize the student's learning experience while at the field placement site. In support of the student, as an agenda item during the student orientation, the field education director or field education staff should inform students of potential limitations when selecting or being placed at a field placement site. In addition, considering today's political climate, it is paramount to purposefully incorporate time within the seminar course to allow students to reflect on challenges and identify ethical strategies consistent with the social work values without endangering their field placement experience.

Intercepting Politically Driven Placements with Innovative Field & Community Partnerships

Traditionally, HBCUs have always engaged in community partnerships. HBCU social work programs can continue this engagement in seeking and creating advocacy-related field education at the local, regional, national, and international levels. These potential placements can be a grassroots-related field education opportunity or an interdisciplinary collaboration, in-person or remote. Non-traditional placements that meet the practice behaviors associated with CSWE's core competencies help expand the reach of the profession by fostering diverse and inclusive pathways. Supporting multiple streams of learning strengthens the push for innovative and collaborative partnerships. Some field education programs have developed their own placement experience for students, which protects the student, minimizes political conflicts, and allows students educational opportunities to explore their interests.

Remaining Enthusiastic & Safely Engaging Students in this Political Climate

Field education, as the signature pedagogy, is the central part of the curriculum in social work education, as it connects theory and practice to real-world experiences for students. As HBCUs continue to promote their mission as evolving agents of social justice, social work programs will work to remain vigilant, courageous, innovative, and practically relevant to ensure that students are safe, exposed, and educated in effective field settings. Therefore, we believe that as social work educators, we must continue to be willing learners, adaptable, and always prepared to

confront political structures and issues that may threaten the safety and learning environment of our students and impact the expansion of the social work workforce.

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