

Challenges to Leadership in a Transitioning Environment

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This narrative reflects on the role of the authors in the leadership of an undergraduate social work field education program transitioning to a competency-based curriculum while seeking reaffirmation under the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) and incorporating a master of social work (MSW) program under the 2001 EPAS. Drawing on contingency theories of leadership, the process described required continuous communication and negotiation with administrators, field agencies, instructors, faculty, and students. Frequently these stakeholders held vested interests, conflicting priorities, and differing decision-making styles that demanded attention. We had to maximize opportunities for the field program to guide and assist field instructors and students on a path to achieve curriculum competencies while meeting college expectations for faculty performance. Budget parameters and CSWE standards for field education and administrative leadership also demanded attention. Contingency theory provided a guide and framework to navigate the transition. This narrative describes that experience and discusses strategies employed in light of power, authority, diversity, and decision-making themes.

Introduction

Several years ago, as the coordinator and field coordinator (respectively) of an undergraduate social work program, the authors found ourselves challenged with the transition to a competency-based curriculum. Our program as a whole was pursuing reaffirmation of the undergraduate program under the 2008 *Educational Policy and Curriculum Standards* (EPAS), and was also in the process of incorporating a new MSW program that had begun under the 2001 EPAS (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008, 2001). It was important for us to act with immediacy and intentionality. The 2008 EPAS created a change in the academic environment. Under the 2008 EPAS, field became the “signature pedagogy,” playing a pivotal role in the curriculum – the center stage where students would refine practice behaviors (knowledge, values, and skills) and show mastery of program competencies. In such a curriculum, the integration and application of the competencies in practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities would be the core. Conversely, in the 2001 EPAS the curriculum design centered on program objectives, with field playing an important role, but not as “signature pedagogy.” Hence the implementation of an outcome performance approach to curriculum design was essential in order for us to address the new EPAS (CSWE, 2008) in our undergraduate program while maintaining an objectives curriculum design to address the 2001 EPAS (CSWE, 2001) in the MSW

program. This narrative will discuss challenges to our leadership in the process of implementing a new field education structure relevant to the 2008 EPAS and the 2001 EPAS, how contingency theories of leadership facilitated the process, challenges for fieldwork, and lessons we learned.

As discussed by Lyter & Smith (2005), field education is an arena rich in opportunity for the advancement of curriculum objectives. However, few opportunities are realized because of ambiguities about leadership, power, authority, and influence. Participant discussion at the June 11, 2004 Bryn Mawr Symposium on Leadership and Empowerment in Field Education (part of the East Coast consortium) noted that power and authority issues tended to interfere with the integration of theory and practice – a basic curriculum objective of most social work programs. Since the institution of the 2008 EPAS many social work programs have needed to reassess the viability of their systematic approaches to effective curriculum goals and the role of field educators. Field educators potentially bring to educational dialogues the most comprehensive understanding of the need for integration of curriculum content with competencies of students, and the needs of the wider practice community. However, often field programs do not have the power to achieve the level of integration required among all stakeholders (i.e., administrators, faculty, students, and field instructors) to affect the quality of education identified in curriculum goals (Knight, 2001; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Rhodes,

Ward, Ligon & Priddy, 1999).

Situation

At the time, we were the coordinator and field coordinator of the undergraduate social work program in a mid-size northeastern state college, consisting of nine faculty members, with three on tenure-track lines (including one of us, the field coordinator.) Undergraduate social work majors totaled approximately 175 students with 65-70 in field placements at any given time. The program had been consistently accredited since 1975 and it was preparing for reaffirmation under the 2008 EPAS, which required a complete revamping of the curriculum to accommodate the competency-based approach with attention to the field component as the “signature pedagogy.” Additionally, the program was preparing to offer a new MSW program under the 2001 EPAS and receive its first class of 25 students by Fall 2009.

At the beginning of the process, practice faculty (those faculty who taught practice courses) and the field coordinator were responsible for visiting field agencies, monitoring students’ progress, and supporting field instructors in exchange for a course release. These were difficult tasks to accomplish given teaching schedules, students’ and field instructors’ schedules, and the need to visit students in a geographical area that included nine counties. Upper-level administrators, including the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences dean, college provost, and president, were supportive of our program efforts during the transition but hesitant to change the field structure. This hesitancy was related to faculty concerns regarding loss of teaching credit hours if field supervision responsibilities were transferred to field liaisons during the transition. In our continuous assessment of field since 2005 we found that having faculty who teach practice courses monitor the field experience led to inconsistencies in quality.

Therefore, we encouraged program faculty to pay attention to the field assessment data, and to agree to pilot a new liaison model during the transition phase to a competency-based curriculum. The liaison model would require additional administrative responsibilities for the field coordinator in supervising and monitoring the development of field placements, liaison site visits,

evaluation of student performance, facilitation of field seminars, support of field instructors, and consistent field instructor training. However, faculty teaching the practice seminars had reservations and expressed those reservations frequently. Their concerns were that a new model for field would create another tier of faculty/staff with differing agendas, insufficient material to cover practice courses with the institution of field seminars, and reduced communication between field and practice faculty. Practice faculty also wanted to retain authority for assigning student field grades.

Faculty and administrators proposed that the new field structure model be piloted to encompass both the undergraduate and MSW programs. The field coordinator would at least initially administer field with three liaisons hired as adjunct instructors. Liaison responsibilities would include monitoring student performance, support and training of field instructors, grading, problem-solving placement challenges, and bi-monthly field seminars. Students were ambivalent about the new field seminars. They expressed concerns that more was being required of them than was required of previous students. Practice faculty verbalized concern as they adjusted their teaching loads to compensate for the lost four credit hours of field responsibilities; upper-level administrators pondered just how many program coordinators/directors and additional resources would be required with restructuring. Field instructors needed reassurance that no additional demands would be made on their time. The climate was particularly unsettling for one of us, the field coordinator, who was a tenure-track faculty member expected to produce significant scholarship, be an excellent teacher, and compile a record of service to the college and community, while also managing a complex network of field agencies. It was also unsettling for the program coordinator, because she did not have authority to supervise faculty members. Last but not least, the assigned CSWE program specialist at the time repeatedly advised us that having one field director for both undergraduate and MSW would not be acceptable to the Commission on Accreditation, and thus program reaffirmation would be jeopardized if this arrangement continued.

The Role of Contingency Theories

Contingency theories of leadership address concern

for people and concern for production (Weinbach, 2003). Sometimes more concern for production is needed. In transitioning to a competency-based curriculum, we had to maximize opportunity for one of us, the field coordinator, to achieve program goals of guiding and assisting field instructors and students to successfully demonstrate achievement of competencies, while meeting college expectations for tenure and promotion and CSWE standards for determining the field coordinator's assigned time to provide educational and administrative leadership for field education. More importantly, the field education program needed the power to achieve the level of integration required among all stakeholders (i.e., administrators, practice faculty, students, and field instructors) to assure the quality of education identified in curriculum goals (Knight, 2001; Lager & Robbins, 2004; Rhodes, Ward, Ligon & Priddy, 1999).

The following principles of contingency theories led us in the process of changing the field program's structure. First, we allowed the situation to dictate the leadership needed (Fiedler, 1967). Second, we understood (Morgan, 1997) that "there is no best way of organizing. The appropriate form depends on the kind of task or environment with which one is dealing," and that "...organizations are open systems that need careful management to satisfy and balance internal needs and to adapt to environmental circumstances" (p. 44).

Field Organizational Structure

The old field structure in our program identified a field coordinator position as a 33% time commitment from a full-time, in this case tenure-track, faculty member responsible for negotiating field placements, internship contracts with agencies, and initial student placements.

The assigned practice course instructor monitored the field experience with the support of the field coordinator as needed. No regularly scheduled training of field instructors was in place. No field advisory board existed. The faculty during the spring semester, prior to student placements, reviewed placement decisions. Hence changes were needed.

One of us, the field coordinator, immediately organized a field advisory board. Members of the

new board were oriented to new EPAS standards. The board then reviewed assessment data and field seminar syllabi for compliance with those standards. Other stakeholders could not ignore the board's input and enthusiastic participation since many served as field instructors, were alumni, and/or had longstanding relationships with program faculty in general. The advisory board also assisted in identifying placements that would expose students to diverse clients, and discussed how community agencies could provide opportunities for students to master program competencies.

Both of us, the field coordinator and program coordinator, served on the curriculum and assessment committees to ensure that field objectives and issues were voiced in committee efforts to revise program curriculum and structure. The field coordinator was now also included in meetings with the MSW director and the program coordinator. Written descriptions of the new field education model, including the liaison roles and budgetary concerns, were discussed with program faculty, the dean, and the provost. Students, agency representatives, field instructors, and field liaisons completed assessment tools to evaluate the field experience and context. The president of the social work club attended program meetings, and the club nominated and selected a Field Instructor of the Year – measures that integrated students more fully into the transition process. The field coordinator also provided Seminar in Field Instruction (SIFI) trainings and field instructor orientations on the new competency-based student assessment instrument to field instructors. Gradually field instructors became more accepting of the competency-based assessment instrument, which had initially been experienced as demanding on their time and resources. This acceptance was facilitated by the fact that other competing social work programs in our geographic area came under the new EPAS (CSWE, 2008) during this transitional period as well. Field instructors began to understand that the competency-based model was a broad-based accreditation requirement.

Challenges for Fieldwork

One of the biggest challenges was to move forward with needed changes without losing the support of stakeholders. While feedback was solicited from all parties, it was still necessary to institute changes to

meet self-study timeframes and deadlines. Stakeholders came to agree that change was needed but held varied ideas as to the nature, extent, and pace of those changes. Field instructors and students reported increased satisfaction with the more frequent contact and support provided by field liaisons. However, field instructors continued to struggle with assessment of student practice behaviors across individual, group, and community contexts. This doubled the time field staff had to invest in helping field instructors apply the new assessment instrument and plan internship experiences for students inclusive of diversity, individual, group, and community practice.

Students initially felt that field seminars duplicated the practice seminar experience. These concerns seemed to diminish but not totally disappear. Providing learning opportunities with diverse populations within field agencies also continued to pose a formidable challenge, as many agencies frequently targeted very homogeneous client groups and/or only offered very specific types of services (i.e., case management, individual counseling, or community direct practice).

We both continued to struggle; the field coordinator struggled with the quest for tenure and issues related to establishing field as an equal partner with other program components. Permitting a junior faculty member to have an equal say in program decision-making was a new and sometimes uncomfortable experience for senior members and risky for the field coordinator. The program coordinator struggled with lack of authority to supervise faculty at a time when such authority would have eased the field restructuring process.

Lessons Learned

In this instance our relationship as the program coordinator and field coordinator was key in moving structural changes forward. However, the non-tenured status of a field coordinator or staff status of coordinators and/or liaisons may foster power differentials that could compromise the elevation of the field program. Being willing to battle for field education may be a prerequisite for acquisition of the resources and recognition to elevate field to “signature pedagogy” status.

The situation of our social work program was not

favorable, but our task-oriented leadership performed well to revamp the field structure in existence for more than 30 years (Fiedler, 1967). Ongoing assessment and communication among all stakeholders were essential in the process, but more important was our sense of responsibility for the integrity of the field education program, the successful reaffirmation of the undergraduate program, and the anticipated success of the new MSW Program. To any program leaders in similar circumstances, our advice is to have a vision for the change sought and be intentional. Involve all relevant parties and work tirelessly—our students and community partners deserve no less. Last but not least, remember that sometimes “the end justifies the means.”

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