

BETWEEN THE AGENCY AND THE UNIVERSITY

An interdependent relationship must exist between the university and the agency in providing field education. The behaviors and interactions of each partner are inexplicably related; one individual's disregard for the partnership may result in unsuccessful learning experiences and disruption of service and education.

By Janet Black

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As I read the narrative recounting Ms Houston's experience as a student in a corrections field work placement, along with the strategy she chose to deal with her concerns, I became more and more uncomfortable and concerned. By the end of the article, I was distressed and alarmed about what had occurred. Questions began coming forward faster than I could write them down: Where was the field instructor(agency staff) during this period? Was adequate supervision being provided to the student? Where was the university faculty field liaison(employed by the university as liaison between the agency and the university) during this period? Was adequate consultation and support being provided to both the student and the agency field instructor? What might be the consequences of the student's actions on the agency, on the individual field instructor, on the university, on the student, on the director of field education? Can the previously crafted university/agency agreement withstand the potential negative consequences of such an experience?

As a Director of Field Education at a large, public university, placing approximately 600 BASW and MSW students each year, I am intimately aware of the interdependent relationship that must exist between the university and its participating field work agencies. The behaviors and interac-

tions of each partner are inexplicably related to each other; any one individual's disregard for the whole partnership system will result in unsatisfying and unsuccessful teaching and learning experiences, or worse, in disruption of partnerships that were developed to provide service and education to both parties.

I can't help but wonder if the field instructor was aware of the student's observations and concerns, or aware of the potential consequences of the actions Ms Houston took. What guidance might have been provided to enable a planful intervention that included all levels of the agency system. The field instructor's role as a supervisor and teacher requires assisting students with dilemmas such as this one, and maintaining communication with the student and university partners. The university field department's responsibility to provide consultation and support to both student and field instructor is most critical. I am concerned that these opportunities were overlooked or ignored by all partners.

I believe that our role in field education is to educate both our students and our agency field instructors to a range of intervention strategies, and be "open to learning new systems" ourselves, to become aware of current needs and issues, and incorporate that knowledge in our teaching and curriculum materials.

Avenues for new learning for field directors present themselves in this article. When placing students in the corrections system, what issues should we anticipate will confront the student early in their experience; how can we help the student prepare to meet these issues with thoughtful inquiry and responsive interventions that reflect an understanding of the systems perspective and professional responsibilities? An important step in negotiating an affiliation agreement with a potential field agency is my (Director of Field Education) visit to the agency, to talk with the agency executive and prospective field instructor, and to identify the potential learning experiences, and the potential difficulties or challenges that each setting poses. This allows for mutual expectations and needs to be clearly stated; and an agreement to work together that is consciously designed to achieve the goals and objectives we have set out.

How might a university field liaison have been involved in this student's situation? My experience (and my expectation) has been that field liaisons pay careful attention to concerns about agency policy and service delivery issues raised by students. How exciting to have the opportunity to provide a framework for looking at these issues with the student, and assist them in learning the skills of assessing and planning an intervention to respond to the issues, perhaps gaining a new perspective or vantage point ourselves.

A final series of questions. How might this agency and the

university revisit their agreement to work together for future educational activities? What can they learn from this experience to enable both partners to be more conscious of potential issue areas, to jointly prepare students for the experience, to prepare the agency for the experience of having students (some of whom will have strong conflicts with the system's perspective of service delivery), and to assure that communication channels are open and available. How can universities and agencies extend their mutual participation in social work education and service delivery to identify system delivery policies that must become a part of the educational experience?

I am hopeful that these issues, critical to the field work curriculum, continue to be addressed to provide students with a challenging learning experience with educational integrity, and to provide clients with the most appropriate interventions and services.

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