

Reflections of a Field Director: An Opportunity to Look into the Past and See the Future

Elizabeth Harbeck Voshel

The following narrative describes how the author's curiosity led her to appreciate the role and impact that opportunity plays in life. She describes her journey in social work and how the transformative power of opportunity set her free from previous constraints. She discusses how opportunity widely influenced her personal and professional choices and how she came to realize that opportunity does indeed impact the student experience.

*"To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness."
- John Dewey*

I most likely found my roots as a social worker growing up as the oldest of 5 siblings, and the only girl, in a large family. My mother was a 1950s "stay-at-home mom" and very active in our small town, serving on many boards and contributing on multiple levels across our small provincial community. My father worked in business and later the banking industry and was a philanthropist at heart. We enjoyed the support of my paternal grandparents on a regular basis – as they were very generous in their care of my family – as well as that of my aunt and uncle and cousins who lived in the same town for many years. We also looked forward to the annual visits from our maternal grandparents who lived in another state and the raucous holidays spent with cousins galore.

My family experiences and expectations taught me the importance of developing a solid work ethic, as we were all expected to pitch in at home and to establish our own source of income at an early age, even if it was only spending money. As the oldest, I naturally became responsible for helping with my four younger siblings by tending to them, entertaining them, and – as they got older – ensuring that their youthful enthusiasm didn't transgress the "getting in trouble" boundaries. For the most part, we all got along quite well into our teen-age years and continue to enjoy very close relationships today,

in spite of the distance that separates us. This has always been the case but particularly since our parents passed on.

My curiosity about how others lived, and my unquenchable thirst for knowledge about how and why things worked or didn't work in the "interpersonal realm," were natural inclinations given my upbringing and life experiences. Looking back with wisdom and maturity, I can easily conclude now that my life was one of extreme privilege in many regards, but most importantly with regard to the concept of opportunity. Our family's basic needs were always met; we attended good schools and colleges, which was considered an "automatic step" after high school. To better envision my environment: I vaguely remember one or two African American families living in our town with whom we socialized during school hours or at church-related activities. I don't remember seeing these families outside of those two venues and they were not in my parents' circle of friends.

I didn't truly appreciate or understand this concept called opportunity until I accompanied a local youth group from my friend's church to Chicago, where we stayed at the YMCA and spent the weekend learning about the inner city. Needless to say, I came home with my eyes wide open after that experience. I became aware of all kinds of disparities whether they were financial, racial, or otherwise. I became insistent in focusing conversations at the dinner table on how the world

had suddenly become unequal in my eyes, relentlessly asking why everyone isn't responsible to ensure that all people, a.k.a. human beings, have enough to eat and a place to lay their heads at night.

Opportunity continued to raise its head more and more as I traipsed off to my small liberal arts college as a person intent on fixing the world. During my time in college, the Vietnam War was raging, and the opportunity to serve was relegated to those who were in the lower socioeconomic brackets, those who didn't get a draft deferral due to college attendance, or those who didn't become conscientious objectors. This would have been what Morris (2006, p. 22) called a "defining characteristic of opportunity" in an undesirable situation; this proved true as there were not a lot of veterans in the ranks of college attendees during the time.

Politically, I moved farther and farther to the left as a result of this war and my studies, where I learned about the roots of social work in sociology courses. I became fascinated with people's individual life circumstances and the opportunities they had or had not been afforded. I learned more and more about life's challenges and the barriers people faced in our society. By participating in two full field placements in my junior and senior years and by volunteering for the local Junior League as a babysitter for families in distress due to job loss and other factors, I became acutely aware of the inequities all around me.

I remember one such occasion when I was caring for a new baby and a toddler while their mother was assisted in attending medical appointments by a Junior League woman. I thought I would be helpful and clean the kitchen, do the dishes, etc. About half way into this venture, the kitchen sink leaked all over the floor because the pipes were not hooked up and the kitchen sink was set up to drain into a bucket that had overflowed due to my lack of attentiveness. From this experience, I learned that when minimal attempts to "help" are extended, they usually only alleviate the symptoms of a sometimes larger problem, but this may be nevertheless gratifying for the helper. In this case, what I learned as a young college student, was that what I saw on the surface in this home didn't fit with the family's reality, and that possibly helping them access resources to fix their pipes was more likely a lost

opportunity which could have resulted in a more meaningful outcome. It seems that most of us in the beginning stages of our careers focus on what Morris (2006, p. 23) perceived as "missed opportunities." Upon further exploration, it became clear to me that people in distress were not only unable to perceive an opportunity but that they were indeed actually deprived of equal access to opportunities that others may take for granted. In this great country of ours, it seems elementary and relatively simple that we should all agree and adhere to several basic principles for all our citizens, including having opportunities to enough food, shelter, medical care, and education, as well as a basic means to earn a living and contribute. The debate can ensue about how to meet these goals but it seems that these should be the minimum basic standards for all.

I graduated, got married right out of college to my high school sweetheart (we have been married for 40 years), and relocated to a larger city. My partner/husband had been drafted right after school but had been very fortunate, due to his college degree, to be selected for the medical corps. He spent his two years in a psychiatric hospital in Germany working to get veterans with serious mental health difficulties back to care in the states. We had the traditional 1950s-style wedding, thanks to my parents who provided us this opportunity, and we drove to Washington, DC for our honeymoon, thanks to the loan of my father-in-law's car.

My husband was fortunate enough to have had an opportunity to interview and subsequently land a job in the Veterans Administration (VA) system; this was probably in great part due to his military experience, followed by serendipity stepping in when he found himself on several occasions working with those same vets whom he had helped to "air-vac" home from Germany. At my urging, he returned to school to earn his master of social work (MSW) degree, becoming a first-generation college student pursuing a graduate degree. His work turned into a life-long career of 40 years.

However, my career began with a job in a restaurant because, I soon learned, "Who hires someone with a sociology degree?" During my job search, I was told on many occasions that I was either "over-qualified" or "under-qualified," depending on the

position. All I wanted was an opportunity to show what I was capable of contributing.

In my stint as the day manager in a local restaurant owned by a Chinese family, experience taught me that both hard work and humility play a role in the success of any employee. My boss was a difficult man to work for, but was in many ways a fun loving person who handsomely rewarded any employee who attended his staff meetings, which were usually held late in the evening. These meetings actually turned into celebrations where he cooked for all of us. Despite that generosity, I soon decided I couldn't cope with the hours in this job, and I was also getting pressure from my parents to apply my talents in a position that was closer to my field of interest and college preparation.

I subsequently landed a job as a head teacher, and later worked my way into the executive director position of a very large daycare corporation. The center's goal was to provide care for children so their parents had time to hone their job skills and find employment, without neglecting their children to do so. Looking back, I realize that at the tender age of 23, I really didn't know much despite having been in the role of director and in charge of a center that hosted about 75 children daily, with a \$250,000 budget funded by the state's welfare agency. This job did allow me many opportunities, including the ability to save up to go to graduate school. I decided to pursue my MSW. The decision to study social work seemed like a good fit given the complex situations that I was facing on a daily basis with the children and their families. Deciding to focus on the clinical versus the management curriculum track in graduate school was a tough decision for me, but I really wanted to understand why individuals and families were struggling, and I wanted to learn how to positively intervene. At the time, I remember being convinced that opportunity was in this equation somewhere. John Dewey refers to securing opportunity in the opening quote. I have often wondered about how one secures opportunity and truthfully thought that one had to be offered opportunities. I found out at a young age that it is a little of both.

Graduate school provided me ample opportunities to improve my knowledge, skills and abilities. I had great professors, several of whom became mentors,

and great field placements. As the doors (opportunities?) kept opening for me, I became increasingly committed to figuring out how to not only assist the families with whom I worked, but also to address the inequities in the systems in which we all are a part.

Most likely as a result of my field placement experience, I ended up working for the VA, and was thrilled to finally be making good money. I was able to reflect with pride on my steps toward success at this point in my life, and was slowly starting to be convinced that it was my responsibility to help create opportunities for others. I spent 22 years in the VA system (enough for one soul) and really enjoyed my work there. I soon learned that the system was indeed my client and that those veterans with whom I had the privilege to work were by virtue of their circumstances, the by-products of a very large bureaucracy designed to meet their needs. I spent most of my days creating opportunities for my vets and my team, and focused on receiving promotions so I could increase my earning power. I was rewarded many times over for my efforts, and am proud of the national award my intensive outpatient program won from the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Because my time in the VA system as a student had opened doors (opportunities?) for me, I created an intern coordinator role for social work service, whereby I made student assessments and facilitated placements for MSW students placed at the VA. I was persuaded that the VA was an excellent placement choice and that serving those who had born the battle was a way for future students to give back. Working with students over the years as a field instructor, as well as the intern coordinator, taught me how critical it is to prepare students, not only intellectually but pragmatically, through experiences that would enable them to effectively handle situations and cases that were becoming more and more complex and arduous.

During my time as a field instructor and intern coordinator, I had several very challenging experiences with graduate students. Now, you have to realize that I am talking about experiences that happened in the early 1980s when the federal laws regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act were much less stringent. Also, VA social work service

hosted students from three different universities. So I was dealing with various field curriculums as well as a multitude of diverse expectations. On one such occasion, I was assigned to work with a student who had a major psychotic break and who had to be removed from placement. Fortunately, I knew what I was dealing with, because I was working in a psychiatric hospital! On another occasion, I found out three months after a student had started placement that he had spent time in prison for manslaughter. On several other occasions, I had to manage students who were struggling with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse issues, and were at times unable to perform due in part to their medication regimens. This was challenging for me as the assigned social work field instructor, and was potentially unsafe for the veterans I was charged with serving. It also proved to be traumatic in some cases for the students as well.

It seems that my neat and tidy little world, with my preconceived notions of who could or should be in the helping role, and who should be the recipient of help, was being tossed about on a grand scale. This prompted me to seek closer ties with one of our placing universities. I served on the field advisory committee for one school for a number of years. My goal was to establish a closer relationship with my academic colleagues, so that I could better understand how and why people got into the field of social work and also learn about the kinds of admissions screening tools that were being used by the schools of social work. My experiences had taught me that I needed to figure out a way to protect the vulnerable public and – as it turns out – the vulnerable student. I was constantly challenged with trying to understand how some of these young people were not only attracted to the field of social work, but also how they seemed to end up placed with me in a large mental health system.

Throughout this time, I was also very active in our local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). I served on the local programming committee, which focused on everything from clinical presentations to community activism related to local concerns or elections. I soon gravitated toward another NASW group that was charged with overseeing ethics violations among their social work members. This work fascinated me. I hoped to build a connection

between my concerns about students who had issues in field placement and the universities with which I was working at the time.

It was during an annual NASW conference that I met someone who I consider one of my greatest mentors to this day. She was the director of a school of social work, so in my mind she could address the trepidations I had experienced regarding student performance issues. We would talk for hours about academia and the role of field instruction. This led me to conclude that there was one degree or more of separation between how each of us accessed opportunities and how we put these opportunities into play. Incredibly enough, the position of field director became open, and she recruited me, as she once said, “to the other side.”

This incredible opportunity had felt like it landed in my lap, but it nearly cost me my marriage, as I drove my husband crazy by crunching numbers to determine if we could financially take such a steep step backwards. In the end, it was a good decision. I have been wondering ever since how I got so lucky.

Looking back, I see that I made many contributions in my first academic position. These included bringing aboard new technology, updating the field curriculum, and forging connections with the local field community. As I always told my friends, what better job could someone have than to drive all over town visiting your professional friends and getting paid for it at the same time? I had also given up a longish commute, which improved my day overall. By reinvigorating the field advisory committee and inviting some of my most trusted professional colleagues to join, I hoped to improve the overall field program and identify opportunities that would make a difference in students’ field experiences.

As I got older, I began to realize that life isn’t always about what you make it. Sometimes it is about where you are when opportunities present themselves. It seems that it isn’t about what you know, but who you know as well. Oddly enough, my husband was a field instructor at the VA when a field liaison from a university in another town was doing a routine field site visit with her student. During the visit, she mentioned that the field director position was open at her university, and

encouraged him to invite me to apply. When presented with this suggestion, candidly, I was floored. I wondered how I would ever compete for this position. I was concerned about the ramifications it would have on my family. We had lived in the same house for the last 18 years (it was almost paid off), and I was reminded that I had already taken a significant cut in pay. Now what was I potentially getting us into? Was this another opportunity or a pie-in-the-sky notion? When reflecting on this, I wondered how on earth this girl from a small provincial town would ever fit into a large urban setting let alone learn how to drive the freeways with all those crazed drivers. Again, it was the gentle but persistent prodding of my partner who slowly, but surely, nudged me to once again be my best and grab another ring of opportunity.

The rest is history. I landed on my feet, and realized quickly how wonderful it was to once again be surrounded by a team of consummate professionals who make up my field team (all are licensed professional social workers with a combined total of more than 120 years of post-MSW experience). We spent the first few years fixing things and then focused our efforts on earning the reputation that has been bestowed upon our school many times over the last few years. I once had a visiting scholar from an international university ask me: “What has the field program done to earn the ranking your school has received?” This question remains on the white board in my office as a constant reminder of my responsibility to my students and to the social work profession overall.

Fitting into academia was, and continues to be, a challenge for me due to the fact that the academy is at times an indifferent environment. The academic calendar also required some getting used to, as did people disappearing on sabbatical every so often. I am not afraid of hard work and enjoy a fast pace, most likely a result of my medical center training and upbringing. I have learned that academics work hard but it is at a different pace nevertheless. I also learned early on that sometimes the academic system has to be pushed to become accountable to its clients who are the students. I was very disconcerted when a professor one time approached her field responsibilities with less enthusiasm and eagerness than I expected, and when another didn’t go on a scheduled field site visit because it was

raining. These attitudes were completely foreign to me, as I asked myself: “Who wouldn’t want to prepare the next generation of social workers to enter the work force more than a professor of social work?” Remember, I was the field instructor of old who had experienced some challenging student situations and had relied on my academic colleagues to establish normative educational and behavioral expectations for field placement.

Many times over the years, when I have attempted to push the accountability envelope in academia, my concerns have been stifled. When I worked in the very large and bureaucratic VA system and pushed issues in this environment, time and time again my veterans would become empowered and more able to improve the quality of their lives, in spite of organizational issues resulting from my advocacy with those “in charge.” While intrinsic rewards are not enough to live on, they certainly provided me the momentum that enabled me to continue to strive to do better. Sometimes I imagine myself working at Google and pushing them regarding issues of accountability, etc. I envision that I would most likely be embraced, appreciated, and rewarded, not dismissed.

Confronting the academic environment regarding these attitudes is more than thought-provoking. It can be stressful and has the potential danger of ensnaring you in the ripe old game of politics. The good ol’ boys network amongst those with tenure is a force to be reckoned with; that is for sure. Regardless of the context, however, my focus has always been on the client – and in the academic context, this means the student – in the equation. At the end of the day, my goal and my job is ultimately taking care of the students regardless of a perceived lack of investment in field instruction on the part of some faculty. The students are, after all, why we are here; aren’t they?

Developing means to systematically tie practice to teaching to research to scholarship is an ongoing opportunity. However, I fear that the notion of privilege may indeed be at the center of this triangle. I am not in a tenure-track position, and, therefore, I have declined to be beholden to a system that from time to time hamstrings open frank discussions, deflects accountability, and occasionally is illustrative of the arrogance the system appears at

times to promote. How and why did a title become so important? What happened to applying the basic principles of social work practice and professional comportment? How, in a professional school, has the attention been allowed to shift from a focus on the greater good? How is it that no one appears to have a clue that the silo approach isn't working? What are the signposts of good curriculum stewardship? Why are these ignored? Think about it from an organizational perspective. How comfortable are people allowed to get before they actually become ineffective? Remember, there is a fine line between being irreverent and becoming irrelevant.

Opportunities abound across academia to engage in worthwhile discussions focused on re-engaging faculty; most importantly in professional schools of social work, with a focus on bridging the gap between practice — on-the-ground practice — research, and scholarship. After all, the largest numbers of providers in the mental health systems across the country today are social workers. Opportunities are abundant! The potential reward realized from reinvigorating faculty in fieldwork is enormous, but will not occur without the cost involved in provoking the institutions where the rules regarding the material rewards (tenure, promotions, merit raises, and the like) are dared to be tested.

It is fairly common across schools of social work that field directors are not a part of the tenure system, and with good reason in most cases. The job of a field director is more than full-time when you take into consideration that we are responsible administratively for multiple constituents that include the students, the field community, the faculty, the field curriculum and outcomes, and the university; not to mention teaching and service responsibilities. For most of us, this is more than a full-time job even when spread over 12 months.

Many field directors are still considered professional staff and are non-voting members of their school's curriculum committees. Some are considered clinical faculty and don't have the performance requirement of scholarship, but do teach and have a service requirement. However, the generally low status that field directors contend with in their schools perpetuates and parallels the attitude

that many faculty exhibit regarding the role that field instruction plays in the overall fabric of the educational culture. There is not widespread agreement across schools of social work that 25% of the curriculum (field education) is important, despite what the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) says. According to CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) Standard 2.3 (CSWE, 2008, p. 8), "In social work, the signature pedagogy is field education." If field education is indeed respected as the signature pedagogy of social work education, why isn't 25% of faculty time spent (and rewarded) for work connected to field-related issues such as curriculum development, liaison work, and field-focused grants and research, etc.?

Field directors are isolated by virtue of the nuances of their positions. The number of colleagues they can rely on for candid and honest feedback can probably be counted on one hand. There is no like position or peers who are on the same level. Those whom field directors can rely on are usually found outside of the school, outside the academic environment, or even outside of the social work profession. Field consortiums have become invaluable supporters for field directors and, with the advent of better technology, have proved more and more useful. One of the hallmarks of sound professional practice is recognizing the need to engage in basic consultation on an ongoing basis. Having limited access to consultation, feedback, and even just the ability to vent about stressful situations, can and does create barriers to success, and has incapacitated some field offices over the long haul.

Due to retirements, schools of social work appear to be striving to fill the many soon to be vacant field director positions with newly minted PhD candidates who will hop on the tenure track. This in and of itself raises a commanding concern about the already tenuous bridge between practice and the academy. The recently updated CSWE EPAS has eloquently developed practice behaviors as a means to measure curriculum outcomes. But with more and more newly hired young faculty fresh out of doctoral work, heavily trained in research methods and having little to no experience as a field instructor, and with less pre- and post-MSW practice experience, how will this improve the already

visibly weak investment in field instruction? I like to think of this as another opportunity which can be addressed as follows.

First, it undeniably will take solid leadership on the part of the deans and directors of schools and programs of social work, who must openly embrace professional competency-based social work education, who must kick-start these sorely needed discussions, and who must promise to commit to change. There is no greater goal worth striving for than preparing professional social work practitioners who will be equipped to eagerly embrace our perplexing world.

Second, schools of social work need to actively support and openly partner with professional social work associations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). How many social work faculty are active members of NASW? I suspect it is a very low number. Why? What message does this send to our students?

Third, social work faculty, with the leadership of the deans, need to engage and openly collaborate with their state licensing boards to ensure that professional standards are met and adhered to. This would entail faculty embracing the licensing laws, becoming licensed, and participating in the ongoing important work of their state licensing board.

Last, open discussions using a case-based decision making model that is relevant and focuses on social work values and ethics need to be at the forefront of curriculum efforts, especially given the transgressions post-MSW social workers have been charged with that inevitably have influenced the perceptions and credibility of our profession worldwide. Striving to build social work as a professional vocation with a multifaceted base (knowledge, skills, and ability) should be our mutual goal. Strengthening the bridge between the practice world and the academy is an opportunity that should not be ignored.

Coming full circle, today I realize that I was able to indeed take advantage of what Morris (2006, p. 29) calls “high-end opportunities.” The decisions I made along the way changed my life for the better. Yes, I do want to retire someday and pass the baton, but I also want to ensure that those upon whom we

bestow the title of “helper” are ready and equipped to meet the daily personal and professional challenges they will face. Now that I have been looking at the “readiness to help” situation for many years, I have to admit that my lens has taken on a much wider view from that small-town girl of long ago. I have embraced the concepts of privilege, oppression, diversity, and social justice (what we call our PODS initiative in my school). I have been given the gift of reflection related to my own privilege and the opportunities that have accompanied it. I have slowly but deliberately realized the effect wide-spread oppression has as it relates to educational opportunity. I have concluded that if we don’t appreciate diversity, we won’t recognize the inherent beauty in life. We also won’t understand or appreciate different problem-solving capacities. Should we shy away from issues of social justice, we are also choosing not to promote opportunity for others.

Personally, I also have to add that I am the proud parent of two children who have dedicated their careers to federal service; my daughter, a social worker who has just started her career in the VA system working with homeless veterans, and my son, who works for the Department of Defense in information technology. I would like to think that being raised in a home where opportunities to give back were important had an impact on their respective career choices.

Professionally, I still have to confront situations where students are not healthy enough to participate in their field experience. I still have to deal with the fact that field instruction does not have the 25% focus or support it should have in the school’s curriculum. This has meant coming to terms with my own professional trajectory. Am I getting too old to do this work? Am I too biased? Are my expectations too high?

I also recognize that our student body is getting younger and younger, and that they have limited personal – but also at times very inadequate professional – experience from which to deal successfully with the issues that confound our world. So, we all must learn how to capture youth and capitalize on it as another opportunity to assist these striving eager potential colleagues in their growth as professionals. Simultaneously, we must

ensure that we protect the vulnerable client and that we reduce the cost for our agency partners.

Instruction, University of Michigan School of Social Work (734-647-2543; voshele@umich.edu).

We need to remain true to our roots, maintain a professional social work focus, have fun, and remember where we came from by appreciating our social work history.

Recognizing that someone has the heart, the drive, and the motivation to provide opportunities for those less fortunate has become good enough for me at this point in my life, since I am focused on growing my own; i.e., influencing, impacting, and inspiring the students I work with in order to empower them to leave their individual legacy. Have I settled for second best? Have I lowered my standards? I think not.

Assisting students in meeting their professional goals, while a daunting task at times, is also my goal. Helping students find the path to wellness is important when we understand and recognize that this is once more, just another opportunity that we all need to be able to take advantage of. Assisting social work faculty in re-focusing their efforts on the development of professional social workers who are proficient in becoming licensed, and encouraging faculty to join and contribute to their professional social work associations, are indeed opportunities for us all. The by-products of life will be the result of the opportunities that each of us has been given. How we use these opportunities will be the telling tale. Recognizing the transformative power of opportunity can set you free. Working hard on behalf of others, opening as many doors as possible, and creating opportunities where none existed before, may indeed be where we find our individual happiness.

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About the Author: Elizabeth Harbeck Voshel, M.S.W., LMSW, ACSW is Associate Clinical Professor of Social Work and Director of Field