

FROM A SERIES OF HURRICANES, A FIELD EDUCATION COORDINATOR EVOLVES

Harvey Heckes, MSW, Florida Gulf Coast University

This narrative describes the author's transformation from a licensed clinical social worker to a field education coordinator in Southwest Florida, following the devastation of four hurricanes.



Setting

My journey began in August 2004 when I changed jobs from a medical social worker at Health Park Medical Center to a Field Education Coordinator at Florida Gulf Coast University after four separate hurricanes (Charley, Francis, Ivan, and Jeanne) hit Florida. Changing jobs provided a wonderful opportunity to change the direction of my career. By this time, I had over 30 years experience in the profession. The medical social work position provided a diversity of work experiences, but did not provide challenges that would enable me to grow. In further considering a job change, I reviewed my thoughts and experiences about teaching as an adjunct professor. The experiences had been positive and fulfilling. It was a good feeling to contribute to the social work profession by educating the next generation of social workers. The opportunity seemed perfect since a Ph.D. was not required. Past experiences and the MSW degree would satisfy the job requirements.

Destruction from the hurricanes was widespread. People in my Southwest Florida community had lost their homes. Loss of electricity and non-working phone lines created

communication challenges. As a social worker, I understood the impact these traumatic events were having on the community; daily functioning and coping with relationships were affected by the hurricanes which brought new losses to grieve.

Academic Experience

Prior to becoming the undergraduate field education coordinator, I served as an adjunct and visiting professor at Florida Gulf Coast University. During 2002-2003, I was a visiting professor. I taught three courses per semester (a traditional assignment) in academia. In addition, it provided me with the experience of teaching full-time. Indirectly, it affirmed that my past social work experiences contributed to my development as a social worker. I experienced some apprehension about moving from direct practice experience to academia. As I thought about this change, I wondered if I were up to the challenge.

Through teaching, I had enjoyed interactions with students, faculty, and staff. Although my experiences in the classroom were positive, I sought a new challenge, and the coordinator position fit the bill. I could help students get the practical experiences necessary to becoming social workers. I had some previous experience with internships and field placement agencies. One genuine asset was living in Ft. Myers for several years and having an active role in the local social work community. It was up to me to shake off the disorientation from the hurricane activity and figure out a path forward.

I learned quickly that there was no guidebook for me to follow as a field education

coordinator. Because of major hurricane damages to her home, my predecessor was generally unavailable to train me or answer questions. A cursory search of other programs yielded a few ideas, but nothing resembling a road map.

My mental challenge involved identifying what past knowledge and experiences I brought to the new position. The world of full-time, permanent academia was still new to me. Social work practice was my focus for many years. I was anxious and overwhelmed about making this change because of the contrast in the work setting. For example, in social work practice, I had a good understanding of my responsibility to the agency and clients. At the university, I needed to develop a better understanding of my responsibilities to the Division of Social Work and students.

What Is a Faculty Liaison?

The role of faculty liaison was not familiar to me. Placement involves matching a student's learning needs with an agency and field instructor. The faculty liaison interprets university policy and procedures, understands the expectations of the agency and assesses the best fit for the student. Field education evaluations are used to evaluate the progress of the student and used as feedback to the student about his/her field placement experience.

Field Instruction: A Guide for Social Work Students states: "The primary job of the faculty liaison is to see that students' practicum experiences are educational. The faculty liaison functions are: 1) Practicum placement, 2) Linkage, 3) Administration, and 4) Evaluation" (Royce, Dhooper, & Rompf 1996, p.3).

Figuring Out the Puzzle

The social work profession had taught me the importance of first assessing a problem. This involves gathering appropriate information, talking to others, and developing a plan of action.

One immediate question was this: How many students were waiting to be placed in social service agencies? How were the students and the agencies functioning in the

aftermath of the hurricanes? Would agencies continue to be receptive to students? Naturally, social service agencies were also profoundly affected by the natural disasters. Many agencies were without power for seven days or more. Phone service was disrupted. Extensive physical damage to homes made living in them unhealthy and risky. For example, roofs, walls, pool cages were blown apart. Some interns were living with relatives or in hotels/motels temporarily. Since agency buildings had windows blown out, water damaged equipment in the agency needed to be replaced. My previous experience, and network of social workers and agencies in the community, made exploring these questions much easier. When phone service was restored, I contacted field instructors by phone.

Next, I contacted students and shared the information that I had gathered. To prepare for the phone calls, I reflected on how the hurricanes may have affected the students. I was aware that the university had been closed during the height of the hurricane activity, and now they were working with a new faculty member after experiencing back-to-back hurricanes and the subsequent changes. Making phone calls was challenging because university phone service was interrupted by the hurricanes. The phone in my office was not operational, so I used my own cell phone to make the calls. Thankfully, I managed to contact everyone and provide students with support and encouragement.

Garthwait talks about the community as a context of practice. The term "community" refers to a group of people brought together by physical proximity or by a common identity based on their shared experiences, interests, or culture. Two major types are: 1) Communities of place or location and 2) Communities of interest and identification (Garthwait, 2005, p.94).

I recognized the value of providing the context of community for my students. I was providing community to the social work students by reaching out and assisting in placements in social service agencies in the community. The hurricane activity united the community because of location.

During the initial stage of placement, students attend orientation, read and review agency policy manuals, develop their learning contracts with their field instructor, and shadow the professional staff. After the orientation stage, they have the opportunity to conduct assessments. This is often the first time the students have interviewed a client, so they typically find their own values and ethics challenged. In field seminar classes, students talk about the challenge of asking questions that assist in gathering information and report their reactions to client experiences during the interview. Some students feel angry or like crying depending on the information being shared. During this time, the concepts of "transference" and "counter transference" becomes better understood. Students are encouraged to journal about the field placement experience because it provides an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and their own personal feelings about the agency experience. Some are surprised to learn about the social problems that exist in the community; others become aware of the contrast between their lives and the client's. Class assignments focus on the application of ethics to experiences in the agency, reading journal articles and case presentations, and classroom discussions. Classroom discussions provide opportunities to share experiences with other students, discuss the issue of boundaries, learn to deal with feelings in reaction to the client's situation, and the issue of confidentiality when a neighbor/friend seeks services from the field placement agency where the student is doing his/her field placement. Students also discuss agency meetings and what they learn from them as well as the impact of dealing with needy clients.

When students talk about their first-time experiences, I find myself reviewing my own student field placement experiences. I attended a graduate school in Ontario, Canada, so I learned how to adapt to a different social service system. I recall feeling dependent on my field instructor to help me learn the skills I needed to be a social worker. In many ways, my experiences were not any different. There is another aspect indicating the difference between a field education coordinator as

opposed to a social worker in direct practice. In direct practice, you selected what to share with your clients and evaluated the purpose for the disclosure. In the world of academia, this sharing is less complex. Sharing my own past experiences can serve as an example of the learning process social workers experience. It is important to realize that students may have different or similar challenges and need assistance in dealing with them as they conduct psychosocial assessments, make referrals to community agencies, counsel individual clients, and conduct group sessions. They also participate in weekly supervision and in-service agency trainings. Through these experiences, students develop an appreciation for supervision, as the field instructor provides support and guidance. These activities allow interns to experience the role of a social worker, which is exciting for them when they come to realize how their work impacts a client and his/her family. Students often report that this is the best time in the field placement experience, so it's not surprising that they often have a hard time when the end of field placement arrives. It's hard for them to say good-bye to their clients, field instructors, and agency staff, but unfortunately, termination issues need to be addressed. At the end of the field seminar class, the coordinator helps students to recognize their own thoughts and feelings about the termination process, and evaluations are filled out.

The field seminar class taught concurrently with the field placement also focuses on the termination process. In the classroom, it is important to have student participation in learning about this process, with the challenge to integrate theory and practice. Many students were working with clients for the first time so they were not aware of the attachment that develops between themselves and the client. When it's time to end the relationship, students may experience intense feelings and perceive their leaving as a type of abandonment which may cause problems for the client. In classroom discussions, we discussed how to deal with these feelings within themselves and with clients, and how to reconnect the clients with staff in the agency. Termination is a type

of ending and sometimes students have not had positive endings in their lives; therefore, the students may not understand that the emotions they're experiencing are left over from past events.

Ending discussions continued during agency visits with the final evaluation providing an opportunity for the student to evaluate his/her own field placement experience. Some students reported that previous courses prepared them for direct practice, while others experienced difficulty connecting knowledge from previous courses to direct practice. This was a time to recognize the support and encouragement the field instructor had provided the student. Listening to the students reminded me of an earlier struggle I'd had with termination.

In addition to the hurricanes, I was coping with a loss that had me thinking too often about the termination process. In November 2004, I lost my brother to skin cancer. This experience heightened my sensitivity and awareness to the importance of endings. "Termination means the ending, limiting, or concluding of services" (Royce et al, 1996, p. 127). Many students were completing their degrees and graduating. Graduation is a ritual for saying "good-bye."

Danowski states: "This is a time when students often reflect on their social work internship and ask themselves: as a social worker am I good enough? Do I like what I am doing? Is there a place for me in the field? Where is my niche?" (Danowski, 2005, p. 97). At the university, endings were exciting because another group of educated social work professionals would be entering the field. It was a time of joy and sadness.

As I continued my journey, I began to see that assessing the learning needs of students and assessing the service needs of clients were similar. However, student learning needs were not always obvious and had to be individualized. For example, there was one student who was constantly questioning an agency procedure despite having had several supervisory sessions on the issue. It took time and further experience for the student to better understand the agency procedure. In direct practice, symptoms would help identify the client's problem. In this case, it seemed appropriate to consider the constant

questioning as a means to identify the student's problem.

An important aspect of being a field education coordinator is interacting with students. Frequently, students are seeking information about the field placement process via email, phone, or office visits. I created a log for tracking daily activities with students and to assure a timely and appropriate response. Similarly, in direct practice, an appointment book was used to schedule client appointments, while case notes recorded the specific activity. Best practices indicate that learning is the major task of the field education placement experience. Benjamin and Ward state: "Field practicum is where the classroom comes alive. It is important that students understand the role of class work in the field practicum. Students become adult learners who become invested and responsible for their own learning. The field instructor is the guide and mentor in this process" (Benjamin & Ward, 2005, pp.6-7).

The second semester ended with students completing their degrees and graduating, and new students were placed in agencies for the summer.

Developing the Administrative Role

As my journey continued, it became apparent that being a field education coordinator involved several administrative responsibilities. At first, the terminology was very confusing; it took time to learn that "practicum," "field education," and "field placement" all described the same educational experience. "Field education" was the term I chose to convey the idea that students were being educated in the setting of a community social service agency. It was important to understand the most crucial administrative aspect of field education: identifying tasks that were absolutely essential. Students completed forms such as their applications for field placement and submitted them to the field education office, which were to be kept on file during the field placement experience. Therefore, it seemed obvious that comprehensive student files needed to be developed for the purpose of storing information on field placement activity. These

files included: 1) application for field placement, 2) the unofficial transcript, 3) confirmation of placement form, 4) learning contract, 5) field placement evaluations, 6) notes, and 7) copies of emails. The evaluation could be used to write a reference letter to an employer or to a graduate program. Similarly, in direct practice, a new client would require a comprehensive file. This would include the initial assessment, a service plan, and case notes recording activity with the client.

Poulin (2005) refers to three types of macro-level social work interventions: 1) Education and Training, 2) Program Planning, and 3) Community Development. Another administrative task is planning Field Instructors Training Workshops for new field instructors and those who want to update their certification. This involves planning, preparation, and facilitation by the field coordinator. In the process of preparing to implement a plan for Field Instructor Training, I identified a resource for educational materials. The Consortium for Field Placement Coordinators/Directors had developed training modules for field instructors. Implementing the modules involved requesting assistance from faculty to teach a module. Because of the newness of my role, my anxiety level was high. I had never done this before, and I felt uncomfortable asking faculty to participate. In reflecting on past social work experiences, I realized there had been many times that I had presented professional workshops both locally and nationally. Therefore, I could take the learning from workshop presentations and apply it to the field instructor training. This realization helped to decrease my anxiety level.

As the journey continued, I identified a major administrative task. The Division of Social Work at Florida Gulf Coast University planned to implement the BSW program in Fall 2005. There were many tasks to complete in order to prepare for this new program, including developing a BSW Field Education Manual, revising field education forms, and developing BSW course syllabi. I was able to review manuals from existing programs via the internet, which made the task less complicated since the current Human Service Program had a social work focus.

During the informational meetings, students were given appropriate field education forms and encouraged to ask questions. There some changes were required, such as the educational background of the field instructor (BSW or MSW). Previously, this had not been a requirement. It involved educating students and clarifying whether or not they were transferring to the BSW program from Human Services.

The BSW program places students at the beginning of the fall semester, which was different from the Human Service program where placement of students was a year-round process. When I started my position in August 2004, I found that there were students waiting to be placed; therefore, finding placements quickly was a priority. To avoid repetition of this experience, I wanted to plan the placement process differently. My goal was to prepare students to start their placements at the beginning of the fall 2005 semester. I thought it would make this task easier.

Community Educational Resources

Community education resources on field education helped enormously. Faculty colleagues had informed me about the Florida Field Placement Consortium, the Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors Conference, and the Annual Conference of the Council on Social Work Education.

Participating in these three groups created the feeling that I was a part of the world of higher education. Meeting other professors from various universities was distressing. I wondered how people in academia interacted with one another. I wanted to make a good impression, but I knew that, for me, this was uncharted territory.

Personal Reflections on the Evolving Process

Leaving direct social work practice and entering the academic world was an anxiety producing experience. Direct practice provided a variety of challenges which were familiar to me. The full-time academic world had challenges unknown to me. The adjunct professor experiences were very different. Since I had several years experience, I had

achieved a level of respect from my peers. Being a new faculty member, I felt the majority of faculty had more education and experience, and would therefore be better teachers. I wondered if I could find my own place here.

Teaching was a major challenge. Although I had some awareness of learning processes, I had not understood students learn at different paces in different ways. Starting where the student is at and starting where the client is at present similar challenges. One challenge was to schedule classes that provided students with a variety of learning opportunities. It also involved being flexible, taking a chance on different approaches, and consulting with faculty colleagues on different teaching methods. For example, each course has course objectives. So it is imperative that textbook readings, class projects, and assigned papers fulfill the course objectives.

Although I participated in faculty meetings, the acronyms used were unknown to me and therefore confusing (i.e., CSWE, BPD, FAR, PDP, etc.). One professor asked me about my "strategy" for a project. It was unclear to me what this meant. If I had been asked what my "plans" were, I could have responded more confidently. In meetings, I would be afraid to ask questions because I wasn't sure how to phrase them. Although I knew curriculum was important, I did not know there were standards to follow or who or what developed the standards. I later learned to evaluate curriculum from other members of the curriculum review committee. I was aware of the importance of accreditation from my experience with the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) when I worked for a medical hospital, but I had no experience with a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) site visit. Fortunately, faculty educated me about the process and my role in the site visit.

A lesson learned from this experience is that familiarity with direct practice helps in teaching social work knowledge and skills. Sometimes in academia, it is easy to lose sight of the challenges social work practitioners face every day. The academic material taught should be transferable to direct practice. Internship is about the application of knowledge

to client situations. Being a field education coordinator and working with students during their internship enables me to remain up-to-date on current practice and knowledge.

It is important in BSW education to remember the beginning days of your social work career. The students share their excitement and anxiety about field placement in the field seminar course just as I shared my excitement with faculty about the new job, but not my anxieties. In order to prepare the students, it is important to remember these moments in our careers.

Closing Summary

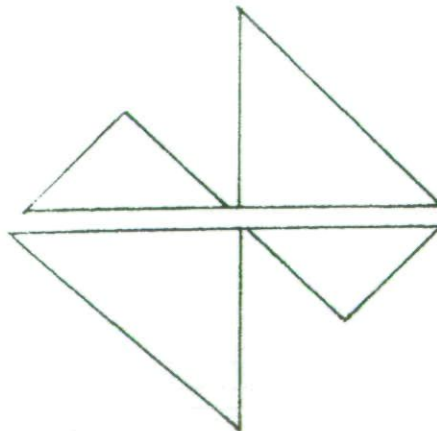
In making this career change, I had to be willing to take a risk. The risk was in changing work environments and becoming more deeply involved in higher education and the learning process. It required changing the focus from clients' service needs to students' learning needs. It also involved learning how to transfer knowledge and experiences from one setting to another. I found myself needing to learn the language used in academia and the thinking process involved in teaching. It meant learning how to write articles for publication and utilizing results from research completed in the social work field. Having made the change in positions, the reward is hearing from students about their own experiences and realizing the

student has used something that I taught in class. That makes it all worthwhile.

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Harvey Heckes, MSW, is the BSW Field Coordinator and instructor at the College of Professional Studies, Division of Social Work, Florida Gulf Coast University. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: hheckes@fgcu.edu.



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