



**Parallel Process in Final Field Education: A Continuing Education Workshop to Promote Best Practices in Social Work**

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<b>Author(s):</b>	<i>Smith</i>
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## A Case Study for Students with Disabilities in Field Education

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*Smith*

The study reviews federal legislation that guides placement of students with disabilities and the experience in placing students with disabilities in field education at a state university in Western Pennsylvania. The study provides insight into lessons learned by the BSW Field Director in placing students with disabilities in field internships and recommendations for supporting students with disabilities in field.

### **Federal Legislation and Field Education**

According to Pardeck (1999), Section 504 has been applicable to social work programs since the 1970's. Federal legislation Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADA-AA) of 2008 were enacted to provide for the integration of persons with a disability into society (Henderson, 2001). The federal law, Section 504, was designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance from the U. S. Department of Education (U. S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights 2011; Pardeck, 1999). Both Section 504 and the ADA provide the definition of disability as "one must have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of life activities or have a record of such an impairment or be regarded as having such an impairment (U. S. Department of Justice, 2008; Wright's Law, 2016). The ADA-Amendments Act of 2008 (PL 110-325) was also enacted to restore the intent and protection of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to guaranteed a national mandate for the elimination of discrimination for persons with disabilities (U. S. Department of Justice, 2008).

Disabilities can be visible and invisible as well as or chronic or acute. Visible disabilities generally relate to student physicality, vision, hearing, and language impairment; invisible

disabilities generally relate to learning and comprehending material; sensory impairment and mental illness disorders; and chronic illness such as HIV/AIDS, Asthma, and Diabetes (House with No Steps, 2015). Persons with invisible disabilities and visible disabilities may experience a sense of stigma and lack of belonging; while, persons with physical disabilities may also experience negative evaluation based on perceived limitations and stigma (Shaw, 2012).

### **Social Work and Field Education**

Field education is a component of the post-secondary social work educational experience and the law is clear "a public entity shall furnish appropriate aids and services where necessary to afford an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of a service, program or activity conducted by a public entity" (U. S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011 p. 3). However, the University is not required to provide a student with course substitution nor allow a student to skip that requirement, if it would result in a substantial change to an essential element of the school's curriculum. Schools are allowed to set their academic standards and are not required to lower their standard as a reasonable accommodation (U. S. Department of Justice, 2008). Students with disabilities can be required to experience the benefits of field education under both ADA and Section 504.

The Educational Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS) identifies field education as the "signature pedagogy in social work and reflects the central form of instruction and learning to socialize students into the role of practitioner" (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010; CSWE, 2008, p. 8) and prepares them for social work practice. Students with disabilities enrolled in social work programs are guaranteed the same

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*Margaret L. Smith, PhD, is a Professor of Social Work at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.*

opportunity to participate in field education as students without disabilities. However, the traditional support services offered through the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) typically include services related to the academic performance of students within the classroom, for example note takers, readers, and audio recordings of texts, as well as testing accommodations, qualified interpreters, and assistive listening (Sharpe & Johnson, 2001; Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001), but may not prepare students to seek accommodations outside the classroom.

Social work students with disabilities have typically not received any instructions regarding how to seek accommodations within their field internships by the Field Education Office or the Office of Students with Disabilities. Flanagan, Benson, and Fovet (2014) found that students with disabilities largely feel unprepared for their professional field placements, experiences, or expect to be experiencing barriers in their field placements and then in the world of employment upon graduation. Therefore, the field education experience is critical for their professional development and provides entry into the real world of work and living. However, living on a campus that provides insulation from the barriers and challenges one may experience in the larger society may place students at a disadvantage in understanding the realities of field education as a student with disabilities.

Edinboro University of Pennsylvania is one of 14 state institutions in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) and is the most accessible of the PASSHE institutions based on its terrain, primarily flat. The University received “wheelchair-campus” designation from the Pennsylvania Department of Education in 1974. More than 40 years later, the university continues to offer nationally recognized access and services for students with disabilities (Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2013). Through EU’s Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD), students have access to a cademic aides, assistive technology, attendant-care programs, homework and meal aides, occupational therapy, and van transportation.

Every building on campus is accessible to students, and the physical grounds are maintained to accommodate the mobility of the students with disabilities. In addition, the Edinboro community by extension is also accessible for students with disabilities through van transportation to class and the local markets. Faculty and staff respond to students with disabilities with the recognition that accommodations and modifications are codified in OSD policies and procedures. Students in a sense are insulated from the realities of not having services provided for them while receiving their education.

### **Field Education Process**

Edinboro University provided field education through a two-semester structure, pre-field in which students complete a minimum of 45 hours during Social Work Practice III in the fall semester and a block field internship practicum in the spring term in which a student completes a minimum of 450 field hours. (Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2013). The BSW Field Director, in consultation with the candidate, pairs the candidate with a community-based agency that aligns with the candidate’s criteria. The agency does not receive any advance information regarding the student’s physical or emotional status. Candidates have equal access to interview at agencies that have approved articulation agreements to provide field education to EU students.

The following cases are examples that have shaped the learning about field education and students with disabilities.

CASE 1: Intern A is living with the disability of cerebral palsy and is mobile via a motorized wheel chair. Intern A utilized a personal computer (PC) and a cell phone for communication. Intern A had limited upper torso mobility. She requested and was referred to an educational setting due to her desire to work with children. According to the intern and resource specialist, she shared medical information about seizures and sleep apnea during her pre-field interview. A plan was developed with the nurse, principal’ and resource specialist

to support the intern should a medical emergency arise. She was accepted without reservations.

According to the resource specialist, the first day of the pre-field placement the intern was uncomfortable to engage students that entered the resource room and so she was given a task to enter data for the students' activities. Intern A was provided a quiet space to complete the task, while the Intern B completed class observations. Checking in with Intern A regarding progress of the assigned task, the resource specialist discerned that the intern's laptop powered down and she was unable to complete the assignment, but remained silent in the room for over an hour. Intern A was observed to be lethargic and seemly unresponsive to the inquiry about the assignment by the staff. There was some concern about the intern being able to participate with the students and concerns about leaving the intern with students unsupervised. The task supervisor felt the intern could not be left alone given her inability to request assistance or notify the staff that she had encountered a problem. After a case conference, the intern self-disclosed that she could not complete the placement expectations and was overwhelmed.

CASE II: Intern C was a 30-year-old non-traditional student living with cerebral palsy and mobility was via a wheel chair. He had a speech and language disorder; however, he had access to an augmented speech device for communication. However, he often tried to speak without the use of his device and had challenges in communicating. The Occupational Vocation Rehabilitation (OVR) office in his state would not provide an updated telecommunication device to Intern C reportedly because he had depleted his funding for new equipment. Nonetheless, he completed the academic work with assistance from the OSD office. The speech and language department also provided him with assessment and therapy to ameliorate his speech disorder.

Upon candidacy for the field internship, he was referred to an agency that serves persons with disabilities because of his interest in advocacy with persons with disabilities. He interviewed and was accepted for pre-field. Fifty-one percent of

employees at Voices for Independence are persons with disabilities, and the agency is recognized by the Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council as a Center for Independent Living (Mountz, 2016). He was assigned a housebound client and conducted engagement with the client via computer and telephone. The agency was able to adapt the computer speed to accommodate his typing and provided the intern with an updated telecommunication device to communicate with clients over the telephone. A case manager visited the clients and collaborated with the intern in providing additional services.

The most significant aspect of the placement was the mentoring provided to the intern by staff who were persons living with disabilities. He received instruction from his mentor regarding public policy, advocacy, disability rights and responsibilities as well as employment rights. The staff felt that he demonstrated initiative in engaging the clients that came to the agency for service, and he was eager to learn about programs and services offered at the agency. In addition, he was able to utilize his social work education to demonstrate emerging skills in interviewing, providing social and emotional conversational support to clients via telephone, and investigating and identifying services that support client independence.

CASE III: Intern D is a student living with a disability acquired through an automobile accident, which resulted in her becoming paraplegic. As her disability occurred while on active duty with the army reserve, she received extensive rehabilitation services to support her recovery. She retained her driving skills and lived independently while attending the university. The student at no time requested services from the OSD Office but was a member of the ROTC department. As a student, she participated in wheel-chair basketball as well as other activities on campus that contributed, I suspect, to her positive self-image. The intern requested an educational setting for her pre-field, completed the interview, and completed the internship in a middle school. An elevator

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facilitated her mobility in the school, and she became integrated into the school community. Engagement with students required her to provide group and individual counseling, administer social skills worksheets, and collaborate with staff to help students meet their goals. Although she was a person living with a disability, she did not perceive herself as disabled and engaged in the full range of campus activities.

**CASE IV:** Intern E is a student living with a disability of cerebral palsy whose mobility is facilitated by a motorized wheel chair. He evidenced limited upper torso mobility and was eligible for an aide, but did not use one in the classroom nor did he use any accommodations in the classroom such as a note taker or in the field internship. The student requested an educational setting for pre-field as his mother was a teacher in special education and he was comfortable in the school. He reported that he had participated with the Boys Scout Camp for ten years and was comfortable working with children. He was much more articulate and affable with people, so he had a different expectation with regard to others' response to his presence and abilities. Upon his referral to the charter school, the principal, mental health specialist, intern E and BSW Field Director met to discuss how the student could benefit from the charter school experience.

The principal, a former teacher, was able to integrate the student into the resource room where he was present to provide conversational support to students. There were challenges with mobility in the school and his limited ability to engage students other than in the resource room was frustrating to him. After completion of the pre-field placement in the charter school, he was insistent to be placed in another educational setting against the field director's judgement.

Intern E interviewed at two additional educational settings; one referral declined to host the student due to the health status and medical leave of the field instructor, while the other educational setting staff deemed him inappropriate for the site though the field instructor did not convey the reasons for the declined. It was speculated by the Field Director

that the decline was based on the physicality responsibilities of the intern. In addition, a previous student with disabilities had been terminated during the fall semester based on the same assessment. Intern E was angry at the decision, because he believed that he was being judged based on the agency's experience with the previous student, since each student was living with cerebral palsy and had similar limitations.

I met with the intern and presented the idea of a referral to an established agency that served persons with disabilities for the spring internship. He stated that he did not want to work with persons with disabilities and that was an agency to "dump" students with disabilities. He would not entertain the idea of the agency and instead was referred to a campus-based placement. The campus-based placement did not provide the academic and socialization experience for professional social work activities due to a limited client base.

With five weeks left in the semester and having limited social work engagement with clients in the campus-based site, he acquiesced to consider the Center for Independent Living as a placement site and completed an interview at the agency. The mentor, too, was a staff member living with a disability, cerebral palsy, and shared with Intern E and myself how the agency helped her to feel confident about her skills and gain knowledge about living independently, even though she was a staff member. The mentor went on to say that she was introducing Intern E to technology and services that would help him when he seeks employment. In the end, his experience at the Center, though short, helped him to face the realities of working in the larger society and challenges he might experience.

### **Lessons Learned: Field Education and Students with Disabilities**

The four cases presented were students with physical disabilities. A student with a physical disability may encounter negative evaluations of their abilities based on perceived limitation, stigma and discrimination. Students with developmental disabilities have experienced the

world differently than students who acquired a disability. In particular, the student who acquired a disability has used technology to regain a level of her former physical skills and could articulate how her disability would influence and impact her role as an intern. The students with developmental disabilities often lack insight into how their disability will influence their capabilities to meet the expectations of the roles and responsibilities of an intern.

Students must be helped to be realistic about identifying their skill set for field education and how to engage the OSD office for accommodations (other than transportation and academic support) to meet field experience requirements. Social and emotional dynamics often ungird the self-image of students with disabilities based on the historical discrimination persons with disabilities have experienced in the larger society. Helping students to identify their apprehension or concerns about field education as students with disabilities can better prepare them to engage in self-awareness and self-advocacy in seeking assistance/modifications in the field.

Agencies that provide services to persons with disabilities and employ staff that represents persons with disabilities have provided substantial social, emotional, and technological benefits to students with disabilities in field education. Voices for Independence (VFI) as a Center for Independent Living provides access to current resources and benefits about which the social work department and OSD may not be knowledgeable with regard to work enforcement. In VFI, accommodations/modifications for students with disabilities occur in a natural and integrated process. In addition, students are introduced to the challenges that persons with disabilities living independently encounter in the "real" world. In their role to serve the clients, the intern becomes knowledgeable about policy, services, and benefits that support clients as well as themselves. Mentoring of students with disabilities in the field by persons with disabilities is socially and emotionally empowering.

In agencies that do not serve persons with disabilities, it will be critical for the Field Education Office department to help students

with disabilities interview the prospective site about the tasks and activities that are required to complete field education so that they can make an informed decision regarding their abilities and assessment of accommodations needed within that site. In addition, field instructors may need training related about disability policy, and students with disabilities' legal rights regarding field education, as well as how to create and implement accommodations/modifications of field tasks and activities to provide students with disabilities a meaningful field experience.

Research in the field of special education reflects that self-advocacy and self-determination skills have an impact on improved post-school outcomes in education and employment (Getzel, 2014; Summers, White, Zhand, & Gordan, 2014 ). Self-determination reflects the capacity for one to know and accept whom they are, where they are going in life, and how they are going to get there, while self-advocacy reflects the ability to understand and explain ones' disability, strengths, and challenges (Nebraska, Department of Education n.d).

The field education department can help students develop self-advocacy and self-determination skills through a universal design assessment form that helps all students identify their skills and knowledge that promote self-awareness and insight.

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