

Social Work Field Education in Canada:

Learnings from Three National Studies

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Field education is an essential component of social work education in which students extend their professional knowledge by applying theoretical learnings to real-life practice situations under the supervision of experienced social worker practitioners. However, despite its importance, social work programs in Canada are experiencing significant multi-layered challenges in delivering field education to students. Researchers have been calling for an urgent need to better understand the current landscape of social work field education. To answer this call, the Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) partnership project was launched in 2019. This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded partnership project brings together a diverse team of more than 100 social work field educators, researchers, students, and partners. Identifying the significant gaps, concerns, and challenges to address in field education and supporting development of new innovative and sustainable field education models constitute the major objectives of the TFEL project. To this end, TFEL conducted several nation-wide research studies, including a national survey on the state of social work field education, a national survey on the most significant challenges in social work field education, and virtual dialogue circles to capture student perspectives on social work field education.

The *State of Social Work Field Education Survey* was designed to provide an assessment of the current state of social work field education in Canada by examining the structure and delivery of field education programs, field resources, and staffing at the Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association Canadienne Pour La Formation En Travail Social (CASWE-ACFTS) accredited institutions. Thirty-nine out of a total 43 accredited institutions participated in the survey conducted between June and July 2020. Here are some of the highlights from the survey:

- In general, field education programs struggle with heavy workloads and a lack of resources. On average, institutions employed only two personnel in their field education program. One-fifth of all institutions did

not have any administrative office support for field education.

- More institutions had full-time faculty members as field liaisons than part-time sessional faculty members. Interestingly, institutions with higher student enrollments had more part-time sessional faculty members in the role of field liaisons. MSW programs had more full-time staff for fewer students.



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- Most institutions (97%) offered urban placements while only 51% of all institutions offered placements on reserve. One-fifth of all institutions reported that more than 10% of their students need unique placements adding to the workload and complexities for the field program.
- Most community organizations and social services agencies are committed to providing quality field instruction; however, they struggle to do so on an ongoing basis due to budget reductions in the past five years.
- Out of necessity and due to higher student enrollments, the majority of institutions (75%) sometimes place

students in field education settings that they would otherwise not select, for instance, utilizing non-BSW and non-MSW practitioners to supervise students.

- More than half (58%) of all institutions did not offer students content about field instruction awareness and knowledge.

The *Field Challenge Survey* was another noteworthy national study conducted by the TFEL's team of student researchers in the first quarter of 2021. This online survey was designed to capture the perceptions of students, field education coordinators/directors, and field instructors on the most significant challenges experienced in social work field education. A total of 155 participants from CASWE-ACFTS accredited institutions across Canada indicated that:

- Their field education setting allows for flexibility in strengthening personal learning development (81%)
- Students were provided with training that makes them feel more prepared for their role in the field setting (58%) and that their field education adequately prepares students for social work practice after graduation (70%)
- They are satisfied with their field supervision experience (72%)
- Wellness and self-care are prioritized in their field education (62%)
- They should be financially compensated for their role in field education (74%) and that the financial compensation, or lack of it, impacts the field education experience (65%)

The survey invited the respondents to further elaborate on field education challenges from their perspective. Areas of concern include (1) lack of preparation, support, and training provided by their institution and field agency; (2) balancing multiple responsibilities/roles at home, at school, and at work; (3) lack of, or ineffective, communication between students and their supervisors; (4) competition for placements among students that could offer a better chance to secure future employment; and (5) challenges related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and access.

The *Virtual Dialogue Circles* project was designed to capture student perspectives on social work field education in Canada. Between July and November 2020, eight dialogue circles were facilitated with 28 students registered in CASWE-ACFTS accredited undergraduate and graduate programs across Canada. Overall, participants acknowledged the value of field placements as a significant part of their social work education and identified the resources and supports that contribute towards a positive field education experience, such as faculty liaisons, university

counselling services, learning agreements to track students' progress, supervision with field instructors, and integrative seminars.

Participants also acknowledged several challenges which broadly relate to the process of securing a practicum, challenges arising during placements, and detrimental experiences of stress and burnout due to lack of financial support for students and heavy workloads on field instructors. The impact of COVID-19 on field education and the related uncertainties were discussed but the participants demonstrated how the pandemic created new opportunities and innovative ways to engage in field education and transform it going forward. Participants offered recommendations to address the challenges in field education which mostly focused on changes to be implemented at the institutional level through programming. The need for policy reform within regulatory bodies and legislation was discussed and a general sentiment was expressed about the need to foster more collaboration among those involved in social work field education to collectively address the crisis as a community. [P](#)

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Editor's note: Information about this project and acknowledgements of contributors can be found on the TFEL project website.

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