



## TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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# Addressing Class in Field: Economic Justice and Unpaid Social Work Practicums

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Social work students, while serving on the front lines addressing the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout their practicums, have also been affected by it. The economic impact of the crisis has highlighted the disparate experiences between social groups, and students are part of these groups. As a profession, we can no longer ignore the impact that unpaid practicums have on our students, especially those from systemically oppressed communities. Moving forward from this crisis, we cannot go back to “how it used to be” in many ways, including the practice of unpaid practicums being the norm for the most vulnerable social work students. Our “new normal” should include a safety net of paid internships for low-income students, much as the pandemic has underscored the need for social safety nets in many areas of our society. This is an ethically and socially just way to proceed that would also increase the representation of marginalized groups in the professional field of social work.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) declared field the signature pedagogy of social work education in 2008 (Boitel & Fromm, 2014), and field practicums undoubtedly play a critical role in allowing

students the opportunity to link theory to practice and to learn by doing (Caldararu, 2019). While field is highly regarded for its educational value, what is rarely addressed is the economic context in which it takes place. However, in one study that does demonstrate this context, 80% of students reported that their practicum had a negative impact on their financial situation (Johnstone et al., 2016). Especially for students from economically oppressed communities, the resulting practice of unpaid practicums runs counter to the profession's belief in economic justice. This is the idea that inequalities in economic opportunities should be addressed by giving more to those with fewer native assets and those born into less favorable social positions (Reisch, 2002). The cost of unpaid internships should be a matter of concern for the entire social work community, not just those who are currently students (Johnstone et al., 2016). Our values and practice need to better align within the profession moving forward.

## History

The profession of social work started out voluntary and unpaid, as future social workers would learn directly within the agencies, instead of within an organized learning context, such as post-secondary education programs (Lager & Hamann, 2010). As they ventured into academic settings before developing their own discipline, social science-focused faculty instructed early social work students to study rather than to intervene with the clients at their agencies. However, this was not in accord with what the agencies desired, which was direct help with the work at hand (Royse et al., 2016). The early tension between the academic and direct service demands of the social work practicum is still apparent today. Furthermore, this tension reflects the ongoing reality whereby agencies have historically capitalized on student labour. This continues to manifest today as students are required, typically, to complete unpaid field placements to meet graduation requirements.

Many early social workers (usually women) were viewed as “well-intentioned, committed volunteers who would soon get married” and therefore seen as not deserving more than a modest stipend (Austin, 1983, p. 361). This demonstrates that compensation for work has always been an issue for social workers, even those practicing professionally after completing their education. Additionally, this early social work context indicates that

the professional field of social work itself has had to grapple with inequity in the past. Funding for professional social work arose through laws and government support for specific programs, causes, and settings (Lager & Hamann, 2010). However, this did not extend to internships: in 1947 the United States Supreme Court had ruled that trainees were not employees and did not have to be paid (Bacon, 2011; Waxman, 2018). This tradition carries on in social work education today. Though CSWE establishes current standards for many aspects of social work education, they may also situate themselves more on tradition than on the evidence of what is most beneficial to students (Hemy et al., 2016).

Students and professors contend with social work's professional history throughout the entirety of social work education programs. Investigating the power imbalances that are inherent to how social work was originally created, such as women's devalued labour as discussed above, is a valuable exercise in the foundation of social work education. A tenet of social work practice includes alleviating power imbalances within both the profession and those which negatively impact our client populations. Therefore, being familiar with the origins of the profession informs the path forward for current students as they prepare to enter the professional field. As stated in the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* preamble, it is imperative to have a "dual focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, para. 1), as work is done to create a more just and equitable world. That work should, and does, begin by looking inward at certain aspects of social work education which uphold harmful societal norms regarding unpaid internships that perpetuate inequality among students.

## Currently

Higher education systems today replicate and reflect inequality and oppression, even though the social work departments within them teach students to fight against these social issues. Although the profession of social work espouses anti-oppressive practice, aspects of the implicit curriculum of social work, such as the structure of field practicums, replicate systems of dominance (Bhuyan et al., 2017). A characteristic that distinguishes social work practicums from internships in many other disciplines is

that practicums are tied to specific learning outcomes and are, therefore, required components of the educational program. Mandating mostly unpaid internships as a condition for graduation reinforces preexisting class divides among students, benefitting those who can afford to independently finance their studies or who are supported by others while pursuing their education.

Students who must work to support themselves (and sometimes their families) must do so in addition to their practicum, not to mention other classes they may be taking or personal caregiving responsibilities. The need to work a paid job while in practicum not surprisingly leads to substantial levels of additional stress and fatigue for students in this situation (Hemy et al., 2016). Students may also be forced to take on extra debt to cover living expenses incurred during their practicum, in addition to the debt they are acquiring to enroll in the practicum course itself (Caldararu, 2019) and any other courses they are taking. Furthermore, when they must start repaying their loans, students are often in low-paying jobs (Smith et al., 2021). Though education is supposed to be the great equalizer, preexisting class divides are replicated within and beyond college (Bacon, 2011).

Research demonstrates that juggling these multiple competing responsibilities can severely impact not only students' finances, but also family responsibilities, employment stability, health, and attrition rates (Hodge et al., 2020). The stress associated with unpaid internships and financial hardship has even been found to compromise the learning experience (Hodge et al., 2020). This demonstrates that, at times, unpaid internships are self-defeating, as the learning which is the ultimate purpose of the practicum is negatively impacted by the financial situation created. While having academic discussions about how to serve economically oppressed people in the field, some social work students themselves are simultaneously experiencing economic oppression, which is then exacerbated by practicum requirements. This experience can be harmful in several ways beyond the obvious financial impact, such as potentially leading to feelings of isolation or alienation from classmates, decreased time to study and prepare for exams, and higher levels of physical exhaustion due to added labour as the student navigates both paid and unpaid work to complete their degree.

In working directly with oppressed populations, students gain a better understanding of discrimination and oppression. However, because they serve marginalized populations, the agencies in which social work students practice are often marginalized themselves, usually operating on shoestring budgets with poorly paid staff (Wiebe, 2010). This leaves little room in the budget to pay interns for their time and labour, which negatively impacts not only the students, but also other employees. As entry-level positions are converted to unpaid ones, employees are essentially pushed out (Bacon, 2011). Therefore, the consequences of unpaid practicums are complex, with significant outcomes affecting not only the student, but also current and prospective employees, and the agencies themselves.

The ways that social work practicums currently operate have been argued to meet the requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA; Council on Social Work Education, 2014; Slaymaker, 2014), but that makes the practice codified, not ethical. Also, the FLSA does not apply to non-profit and governmental organizations, where most social work practicums take place. In these settings, students are not considered employees but volunteers, and therefore, under the FLSA, they are not legally protected against harassment and discrimination in the workplace. This leads to social work interns working in the lowest-status positions at their organizations to gain educational experience, and the recommendations of their field instructors, without compensation (Bacon, 2011). This situation is rife with inequity.

## Case Study

Sam is a senior BSW student entering her field internship placement. As a first-generation student from a single parent family, she has seen the amount of hard work and dedication it takes to support a family. She has been placed at a local non-profit organization supporting the needs of families like hers through case management and group work. Along with her internship, Sam is taking a full class load as well as working part-time as a server at a local restaurant.

Prior to the beginning of the semester, Sam attends a meeting where the field director explains the policies and procedures of the internship. During this meeting, the field director stresses that it is not recommended that practicum students work during their internship and that their

internship should take priority. Knowing that her job has always been flexible and happy to work around her school schedule in the past, Sam does not worry too much about it.

Sam starts her internship and quickly falls in love with it. She is helping people, learning new things, and finally putting the information she has gained in her classes to use. Sam's field supervisor, Helen, notices the way that Sam has excelled at every task given to her and decides that she should take on more responsibility. Helen assigns Sam to co-facilitate a support group for newly single mothers as well as taking on more case-work clients. Sam is excited to be part of the group until she realized that it is scheduled for the same time that she is normally scheduled to work at the restaurant.

Sam goes to her manager at the restaurant and tells her that she needs to change her availability due to the growing demands at her internship. Her manager tells her she has wanted to have this conversation with Sam for a while now. She has noticed Sam's performance slipping and that she seems distracted at work, making easily avoidable mistakes. She tells Sam that this will be her last week at the restaurant to allow her to focus on whatever is distracting her. Sam is at a crossroads. She does not know what to do. This internship, so far, has been a great learning opportunity for her, and she does not want to let the team at the internship down, but without a job she will not be able to pay for her car, gas, phone, food, or to help her family with bills.

Sam goes to her field director to explain her dilemma. Her field director reminds Sam of the policy that the internship takes priority. Sam tells her field director that she needs to work to be able to afford attending her internship and that if she starts working more, she is afraid that she will not be able to get enough hours for her internship. The field director tells her if she is worried about not getting enough hours, then she needs to work on her time management skills.

Feeling dejected after that conversation, Sam talks to her field supervisor. Her field supervisor seems empathetic at first, listening to Sam about her struggles through the internship. She suggests that Sam can do some of the aspects of her internship remotely, but she will still need to be in person for the bulk of it. She suggests to Sam that if she is unable to complete the internship for financial reasons, she can try again next semester

and they would happily take her back as an intern. Sam does not like this idea. She has already put a lot of time and effort into this internship and does not want to quit now, but at the same time if she is unable to afford food, transportation, and other necessities, how can she afford to work for this organization for free?

Sam talks to others in her intern cohort. Most of them express that they are also struggling with finding a balance between internship and work. They brainstorm ways to support themselves financially through their internships, including student loans, moving in with their parents, and using public transportation, but ended up with more questions than answers. Why do we have to pay so much to work for free? What programs or policies should be put in place to assist students during their internships and why are they not already in place? What programs are in place at other schools? Other states? Other countries? In other fields? There must be a different way of doing things.

## What Can Be Done

If our primary mission is to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, Preamble section, para. 1), we need to start with our own students, like Sam. A safety net needs to be established to support those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the United States, Federal Work-Study is designed to provide such a safety net for college students, and purportedly “encourages community service work and work related to the student’s course of study” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 3), which is exactly what the social work practicum entails. However, a stipulation in the Federal Work-Study regulations states that if a student is receiving academic credit for their work, they may not be paid unless an employer would normally pay a person for that job (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Therefore, it is argued that because it is legal and common not to pay practicum students, they can be excluded from Federal Work-Study benefits. Even though they may not be replacing a paid employee, interns are still providing unremunerated labour for the benefit of the agency. If a student receives an



internship opportunity that follows Work-Study guidelines, they should then be eligible to use their Work-Study benefits for that internship.

The Fair Labor Standards Act, on which the Federal Work-Study guidelines rely, operates on the “primary beneficiary test,” which reduces the relationship between an intern and their practicum site to a transaction, and puts into question who benefits the most from it (U.S. Department of Labor & Wage and Hour Division, 2018, The Test section, para. 1). This leaves no room for the mutually beneficial nature of the social work practicum to exist. Viewing the relationship as inherently more beneficial to one party than the other and determining that the intern is the one that benefits more than the agency, is certainly not indisputable. Social workers need to make it a priority to advocate for the Federal Work-Study guidelines to be amended to allow this already-existing safety net of paid employment to easily and consistently be extended to low-income students in social work practicums.

The Interns Rights movement in Québec, led by students in female-majority “helping professions” such as social work, contended that student labour is exploited even more in fields where women represent the majority (Caldararu, 2019). Notably, majority does not translate to power in this case, as female social work students are essentially expected to care for others at their own expense (Hodge et al., 2020; Lewis, 2018). In 2019, this movement achieved a safety net in another way by successfully advocating for the provincial-level government to pay a wage for students completing their practicums (Ministère de l’Éducation, n.d.). In this way, the government systems that will directly benefit from well-trained social workers are also actively investing in their future. This model could potentially be replicated locally, as calls grow for municipalities to decrease police budgets and hire more social workers as an alternative approach to public safety. This could create room for cities and counties to invest in the support and expansion of the social work profession. For example, the city of Austin, Texas voted to redirect 45.1 million dollars from the police budget to create a fund to reimagine public safety (City of Austin, 2020). By spending \$100,000, that is, less than 0.25% of that fund to create a stipend program for social work students, the city could pay for 20 semester-long internships at a rate of \$5,000 per student. Social workers already work closely with all levels of government and they need to use

their influence to enact programs such as these. These efforts can also be moved forward through community organizing, as was seen in the Intern's Rights movement.

Though paid practicums are rare, they are not nonexistent. Currently, some practicums are funded to promote interest in specific populations, like the Title IV-E stipend for work in the child welfare system. These programs acknowledge that funding students leads to better quality practitioners in the field. But since they are limited to specialty populations rather than needs-based, students may feel limited in their choice of practicum experience; they may even opt for paid placements out of necessity, rather than being able to pursue their personal interests (Hodge et al., 2021). Allowing social work students to explore their areas of passion will undoubtedly benefit our profession as well as society as a whole, and establishing a safety net would support this.

Students in paid practicums can benefit from their employment contributing to their education, thereby creating a synergy between work and learning (Hemy et al., 2016). Some agencies can offer stipends or full pay to practicum students. This shows that agencies can find room in their budgets if it is a priority. Additionally, disruptions to field education during the COVID-19 pandemic have led social work program administrators to rethink previous prohibitions against interning in places of employment. This is another tradition that should be reconsidered through an equity lens. Prohibiting students from being able to complete their practicum at their place of employment creates a barrier for students who have no choice but to continue working as they complete their practicum. Additionally, it adds to the stress of transportation and limited time within the student's schedule to move from location to location: students travel to campus for classes, to their place of employment, and to their field agency. This is an unnecessary stressor that could be easily eliminated should students be permitted to complete their field placement at their place of work.

Universities also need to step up and contribute to funding social work practicums. Through reallocation of current funds or seeking out new streams, schools need to ensure that their students have the support they need to successfully complete the requirements in their course of study. As the cost of tuition is increasing steadily, and far above the inflation rate, the economic barriers for students from low income families only become

higher (Sherman, 2020). Universities themselves may be more reluctant to create funding avenues from within for social work students specifically. However, social work departments have the opportunity and ethical responsibility to push for change from within and to create avenues of compensation for their students. This could be done by evaluating the university budget and advocating for funds to be reallocated specifically for practicum students, assessing the budget within social work departments themselves to see where adjustments could be made to provide stipends, creating independent fundraising efforts to raise money to be distributed to practicum students, and so much more. In social work departments, collaboration between professors, administrators, and students presents the opportunity for vast creativity in finding an equitable and sustainable solution.

Providing an economic safety net for students will also increase diversity in the social work field, as students from underrepresented groups who previously could not afford an unpaid practicum will be able to pursue the profession. As social workers, we are currently less diverse than the general labour force and the populations we serve (Lewis, 2018); therefore, we need to make strides to live up to our commitment to promote equity and diversity within our own profession and to better represent and address the needs of the populations we work with (Warde, 2009). We can do this by adapting to the changing face of college students and addressing barriers that underserved students experience (Smith et al., 2021). With practicum remaining unpaid, the implication is that social work students, and thus social workers, do not come from economically oppressed communities. Through the amendment of the Federal Work-Study guidelines, collaboration with state or local government, agency and university investment, and other creative solutions, we need to demonstrate that we value the contribution of practicum students to organizations and to the profession by compensating them for their time and talent.

## Conclusion

Across undergraduate and graduate students' experience, practicum is generally considered to be "the single most useful, significant, and powerful learning experience of their formal social work education" (Garthwait, 2005, p. 2). Notably, despite all that is stacked against them, students continue

to demonstrate persistence and ingenuity in completing their practicums (Johnstone et al., 2016). As the signature pedagogy of social work education, field education has both an obligation to our students and a unique opportunity to demonstrate social justice values in action (Bhuyan et al., 2017). By addressing the oft-overlooked implications of requiring unpaid internships as a requirement for graduation, we can help level the playing field and promote inclusiveness in social work.

There is a need to adopt more innovative and sustainable models in social work field education, as the historical model that continues today has proven to only benefit those with economic means. Additionally, the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to realities that need new understanding and approaches. Economic justice starts with us confronting our own critical issues within social work field education. As demonstrated, supporting students' material needs is imperative to their educational and professional success. There is an urgent need for social work education programs to reimagine how the profession prepares the next generation of social workers beyond what is learned in the classroom alone. As we aim to address an issue that has been overlooked for too long, we must welcome the opportunity to strengthen the field of social work by providing a more just experience to social work students and expanding the number of students who could potentially enter the field.

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