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Introduction

Distance education in professional social work programs has grown substantially over the past decade (Petracchi & Morgenbesser, 1995). In 1995, CSWE conducted a survey to determine the usage of distance education technology among social work programs. Lockhart and Wilson (1997) reported that 17.4% (of the 126 programs responding) indicated that they offered distance education courses and 42.9% indicated a moderate to high probability of offering distance education courses in the future. In a 1996 national survey of 259 social work programs, it was reported that 15.8% of the programs used distance education, a 5% increase from their previous survey in 1994 (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Napoletano-Flynn, 1998).

Empirical data indicate that the academic achievements of distance education students are equivalent to those of traditional students (Forster, 1997; Haagenstad & Kraft, 1998; Haga & Heitkamp, 1995; Hollister & McGee, 1998; Petracchi & Patchner, 1998; Raymond, 1988; Sheafor, 1994). Distance education enables universities to reach underserved student populations in remote locations, thus significantly effecting social service delivery systems, especially in rural communities.

The literature describes several models of distance education (Blakely, 1992; Conkin, Jennings, & Siegel, 1994; Haga & Heitkamp, 1995). However, little discussion has concerned the role of the local site coordinator.

In this article is a description of the critical role of site coordination for a large urban MSW program that links to two rural sites using interactive television. The initial 3-year cycle of the program was helpful in identifying the role of the site coor-

dinator. The role and tasks have remained the same; however, the program is now in its second cycle, and includes four off-campus sites. The experiences described here are primarily from the first 3-year cycle.

The site coordinator is a vital link in this model of distance education. The site coordinators interact closely with the program's Distance Education Coordinator, course instructors, students, and the local university personnel. Together they establish a working relationship that enables them to be assured that the day-to-day operations of each course offered runs smoothly and appears seamless in its presentation. Along with administrative duties, the site coordinator is also an advocate for the students and provides socialization of students into the values of the social work profession.

In this program model, a site coordinator was employed at each off-campus site 40% of the time. Each had previous experience as a field instructor, as well as many years of practice experience. One coordinator had worked in the community for several years as a clinician and as a clinical supervisor. The other had worked equally as long in his community in macro practice. They were uniquely suited for the many hats they wore as site coordinators. Their roles include serving as teaching assistants, field placement coordinators, student advisors, and community liaisons.

Site Coordinators as Teaching Assistants

Blakely (1992) proposed a model for distance education delivery in social work education. He indicated that educators would need to deliver the content in a different format in distance education programs, including the use of discussion leaders in the classroom. He further identified the role of the

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discussion leader as one of conducting discussions about course content, assisting students in clarifying and integrating the concepts presented, and acting as an intermediary between the faculty and distance education students concerning students' needs and progress.

Blakely and Schoeherr (1995) expanded the role of the "on site instructors" to include distributing handouts, collecting written assignments, monitoring exams, and acting as discussion leader in facilitating experiential activities. These authors concluded that "this method of education, particularly the use of compressed video, can provide a learning experience that is equal to that of a program presented in the traditional face to face classroom" (p. 10).

In the present program model, the site coordinators were used in the distance classrooms as teaching assistants. In this capacity, they provided valuable support to faculty teaching over compressed video technology. Faculty members varied in the way that the site coordinators were used to accomplish educational goals, depending on the course objectives and their teaching style.

In the human behavior and social policy courses, most of the course content is presented in lecture format. The role of the site coordinator in those classes was mostly to provide oversight to classroom discussion. Few small group exercises were used, as most of the discussion took place over interactive television. The primary role of the coordinator was to manage the learning environment, including enforcement of the classroom rules, handing out written materials, and proctoring exams. Additionally, the site coordinators arranged professional socialization events and office hours when instructors made site visits to the distant campuses.

In contrast, in the practice methods courses and community project courses, the site coordinators took an active teaching role. For example, in practice methods courses, the site coordinators facilitated experiential exercises to practice interviewing

skills and monitored the development of the distant students' skills. In the community projects course, the site coordinators assisted greatly in identifying community needs and resources necessary to complete a community intervention. Additionally, the site coordinators monitored and assisted students in the group process involved in implementation of the projects. Often, these student groups need assistance in resolving group dynamics and staying focused. The site coordinators were instrumental in translating lecture content into structured goals, which were carried out in each small group, according to the demands of each community intervention. Student groups meet weekly off-camera and the feedback that the site coordinators provided to the primary instructor was crucial to the success of the course.

In all courses, the site coordinator acted as an intermediary between faculty and the distance students. At times, faculty needed feedback as to how the course content was being received. Site coordinators provided information regarding books and materials that were used in the undergraduate programs at the distant sites, from which many of the students had graduated. In this manner, redundancy at the graduate level could be avoided. Additionally, at times practice content needed to be adjusted to address rural service delivery and referral sources available at the distant sites. Due to differences in demographics at each site, the coordinators recommended guest speakers who were expert on cultural groups at the distant sites.

Technological failure presented special challenges for the coordinators. Course instructors provided a "backup lesson plan" that was to be used in case of equipment failure. Sometimes the failure would include the entire day, and the site coordinator solely presented the course materials at each off-campus site. Many times, the equipment failure was temporary, and the site coordinator and course instructor could plan together an alternative schedule (e.g., showing a film until the equipment was working, then go forward with a planned lecture

from the host campus). Additionally, site coordinators worked with technicians at the off-campus sites to make alternative plans to deliver the content (e.g., move students to a different room and use speaker phones instead of interactive television). In such cases, site coordinators worked closely with technicians, course instructors, and students to find the best option for that situation. They served as the major link between the technology at the distance sites and course instructor at the home site, providing information about audio-video quality. Course instructors could then modify lectures in order to accommodate technical difficulties and ensure that students were receiving the information.

Finally, site coordinators provide valuable feedback and assistance in problem-solving regarding the communication between the distance sites. For example, a student in one site may make a comment that is offensive to members of another site. When this occurs, the students are often reluctant to discuss such feelings over the interactive television. Many times, site coordinators are used as mediators in the resolution of communication difficulties between the sites. Additionally, they are the primary informants of the course instructor regarding the perceptions of students at their sites. Many conflicts are resolved with the site coordinators and course instructor acting as a team.

Thus, the role of the site coordinator as a teaching assistant in the distance classroom is essential to the success of curriculum delivery. They act as the "eyes and ears" for course instructors at the distant sites. Without their valuable input and participation, the quality of distance education would be compromised.

Site Coordinators as Field Coordinators

The crucial role that field experience plays in social work education is well documented (Bogo & Vayda, 1987; Schneck, Grossman, & Glassman, 1991). The role of field work in a distance education program is equally important. The development and delivery of a quality field education program are integral to social work distance programs and present challenges that field faculty must address. Black and Cohen (1997) emphasized the importance of the role of the site coordinator in distance education field work including: the development of field placement sites, negotiation with prospective field instructors, assignment of students to placements, and monitoring the overall operation of the field work courses.

In the present program model, site coordinators served these important functions. The employment of site coordinators who were well connected social workers in the local community was essential to the development of high quality field placements.

For example, the site coordinators brought to the program vital information regarding the local social service community. The coordinators quickly identified prospective field instructors who met the criteria for the program. The site coordinators frequently had an established, trusting relationship with prospective field instructors, which allowed for a spontaneous, open dialogue regarding the field placement process from the initial stage and, in turn, decreased the time necessary to develop the placement. The coordinators had knowledge of the type of social services the agency provided and the values that the agency employed prior to the initial contact. They acted as a liaison between the host site and prospective field placements to ensure that guidelines, policies, and procedures were consistently applied to all students, regardless of their geographic location. At times, the site coordinators needed to relate particular concerns that were unique to the local community, and also assist the host site to develop adaptive strategies to maintain the integrity of the field experience and address the needs of the local social service community and students.

The site coordinators worked collaboratively with the local social service community. This collaboration included the development of a community advisory committee, consisting of local social work faculty, field instructors, distance education

students, and community representatives who helped the local site coordinator identify potential field instructors, field agencies, and potential problem areas. The community advisory committee supported the development of Masters' level placements in the local community, which in turn assisted the site coordinators in the development of quality placements.

The involvement of these local community experts was an integral component in the development of local placements. Field placements are not readily established in most rural areas due to lack of appropriate Master's level supervision. The networking that occurred assisted in the development of the field placements by fostering the local social service community's interest in the distance education field program.

Further coordination with the local social work field faculty was necessary to avoid competition for placement sites. Originally, a summer block model was employed that intrinsically did not compete with academic year placements employed by the local undergraduate social work program, as the students were in placements at different times of the year. With a change of program model came a new challenge, the development of coexistent field placements, for the local undergraduate program as well as the distance education graduate program during the academic year. The local site coordinators and the local field faculty met to review all of the field placements utilized between both universities. The goal of this meeting was to ensure the successful coordination of the field placements to meet the field education needs of both programs. The process promoted collaboration and decreased competition for placements.

The experience of the host site has been that where a BSW program exists at the off-site campus, close coordination with agencies can and does provide quality field instruction for both MSW and BSW students at the same time. First, BSW students need to be supervised by individuals with at least a BSW, while MSW students require an MSW

with two years of experience. The second component to review included the learning experiences that various agencies can provide. For example, BSW students might focus on case management skills, while MSW students might do more advanced social work, including counseling.

Another primary function of the site coordinators was the assignment of students to field placements. A mandatory field work orientation meeting initially was held to explain placement procedures and field work guidelines. Following the orientation, the distance students completed a field work information form. The site coordinators interviewed each student. The interview included a review of the student's background experiences and geographical and educational needs. Following the interview, the site coordinators analyzed the interview and agency data to determine an appropriate fieldwork site for the student, in consultation with the host university field faculty.

The site coordinators had established a positive rapport with each student prior to assigning a placement. The site coordinators had the opportunity to evaluate and build a relationship with the students from the onset of the program. The site coordinators are in class with the student on a regular basis and have the opportunity to review each student's progress in the program through discussion with teaching faculty and by weekly observation of the student in the classroom setting. This assessment information, along with the field interview, was crucial to the designation of a field placement to meet the educational needs of each student.

The site coordinators faced some unique issues in assigning field placements in their rural communities. Many students had previous personal or professional relationships with prospective field instructors. This situation called for special consideration during the interview process and a careful review of professional boundaries prior to placement. At times, it was necessary to use preceptors, or other adaptations, to address the learning needs of particular students. In contrast to the host site,

most of the students in the distance site were adult learners, many of whom were long-standing professionals in the community. Some students had difficulty taking on the role of a student in the field setting. The site coordinators provided support and suggestions to students, field instructors, and field liaisons to address this issue.

With the support of the host university field faculty, site coordinators provided an orientation, follow-up training, and ongoing supportive contacts to field instructors. The orientation covered a field program overview, and included the use of process recordings, the learning contract, and the purpose of the weekly seminar and field visits.

Additionally, the role of the site coordinators was to identify and train appropriate local field seminar instructors. The site coordinators served as a resource by orienting local seminar instructors regarding host site policies and procedures. The site coordinators were responsible for assigning students to the appropriate field seminar. The site coordinators made the assignment after careful review of each individual student with emphasis on creating a diverse learning environment. Thus, students who were assigned to the same agency were placed in separate field seminars whenever possible. The site coordinators provided weekly support to the field liaisons following each field seminar and provided direct and indirect intervention with student problems related to field placement. The intervention included suggestions or a problem-solving meeting at the field agency with the field liaison, field instructor, and student. Site coordinators monitored the student's progress continually throughout the field experience.

Finally, site coordinators provided oversight of all aspects of the field work program at the off-site locations. They received assistance and support from the host site on a continual basis. They coordinated the field appreciation luncheon for all local field instructors at the end of the field work experience.

The role of the site coordinator as a field work coordinator in distance education is of utmost importance. They coordinate all aspects of the field program, under the guidance of the host university field faculty, while providing ongoing support to the student. Most importantly, the site coordinator allows the distance program to exist collaboratively with local communities. The site coordinator is an educator to the host site regarding the norms and culture of the local community.

Site Coordinators as Advisors

Site coordinators advise students at the off-campus sites regarding administrative tasks, including registration, financial aid, and graduation requirements. Therefore, they must be familiar with all of the policies and procedures of the MSW program and of the host university. Additionally, because the program was partially funded by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), they had to be well versed in the CalSWEC requirements and competencies.

A primary function of the site coordinators was to provide assistance to students who were having difficulties. At times, students were placed on academic probation due to poor grades. In these cases, the site coordinators acted as faculty advisors in providing tutoring or linking the students with resources in order to improve academic performance. In some cases, students had personal difficulties that interfered with classroom performance. In those cases, the site coordinators assisted students in requesting incomplete grades from the course instructor and acted as an advocate on the student's behalf.

Advising and counseling often require attention to issues that are unique to distance learners. The obligations that compel students to take distance courses might involve job or family related pressures such that students may require special counseling for help with managing time and coping with various responsibilities. Site coordinators are the first lines of defense in dealing with student issues. They meet face-to-face with the students on

a weekly basis and are often on the telephone with them during the week. They filter problems and questions to the Distance Education Coordinator who provides consultation to them regarding student issues.

Site Coordinators as Community Liaisons

Early and sustained community support at the receiving site of a distance education initiative is an important factor contributing to the program's success. While most agree that it is desirable to have local support for any effort that has its origins outside of the local community so as to avoid accusations of empire building, the involvement of the local professional community goes well beyond this concern. From our distance education perspective, the professional community is composed of three subgroups: (a) social work professionals; (b) university-based social work educators; and (c) other, non-social worker, health and human service professionals.

The local community is essential for ensuring the relevance of the distance MSW program to the local community. An advisory committee for the distance education program was formed at each site, composed of social work faculty from the university, social work community practitioners, and an enrolled MSW student representative. At one site, the decision was made to meld the advisory committee with an active NASW chapter so as not to create another structure that would be composed of the same active professionals. At the other site, the advisory committee meetings were held at the local university campus and met monthly.

The advisory committee proved to be an important resource in several areas. Advisory committee members were helpful in identifying appropriate field placement sites, identifying adjunct faculty, assisting the site coordinators in planning events for socialization of students to the profession, and providing formative feedback on all facets of the program.

The advisory committees also helped to estab-lish a visible and viable local presence in both communities for Master's level social work education. With the awareness of local issues and its support of social work education, they proved to be a strong voice for the development of an MSW program in each community. Indeed, both universities are currently considering the development of an MSW program, urged on, in part, by the advisory committee and the constituency of professionals from the community that it has come to represent.

Supportive working relationships with the non-social work professional community was also an important dynamic. In many instances they proved to be the gatekeepers to agencies for field placements and for release time of employees to complete their field assignments. Without social workers in most of these key positions or for that matter, Master's degree holders, there was a risk that a MSW degree would not be valued. Although this concern was on the whole not borne out, site coordinators at both sites did what they could to ensure strong and supportive relationships.

Finally, site coordinators are responsible for maintaining alumni relations with our graduates. The first cohort of distance education graduates was forty, adding to the number of child welfare specialists needed in a rural region of the state that previously listed very few MSWs. These graduates were instrumental in recruiting students for the next cohort of students who began the distance MSW program in September 1998. They will be a resource as field instructors and preceptors in the coming years.

Discussion

This program model describes the roles that site coordinators had during the first three years of a new distance education program. Other distance education programs have addressed many of these tasks using other models. The common finding is that there are important tasks to be accomplished in social work distance education programs regardless of how each program may choose to address these

tasks.

For example, Freddolino (1995) described a practitioner/educator model in which an adjunct faculty member is employed to assist the learning process in the classroom directly, to act as a link to the school, and to take over the instructional process completely during a technical failure. In that model, a different adjunct faculty member is hired for each course and a field coordinator is also employed.

Limitations to the present model include the financial cost and the weaknesses that each site coordinator may bring to the position. In the present program, each course was taught using an instructor and two site coordinators (one per site). Most courses had only 40 students, providing a high faculty to student ratio. The student tuition at the State University did not cover the costs of the program; therefore, the grant monies provided by CalSWEC were essential to the offering of this distance education program.

Each site coordinator is likely to have both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses that each site coordinator may bring to the position can limit his or her effectiveness in a particular role. By combining several roles into one position, site coordinators tend to excel in one or the other of their roles. For example, one may be excellent in the classroom as an assistant instructor in practice classes and another may excel in policy classes. Additionally, a site coordinator may excel in the role of field coordinator but may not be as effective in the area of advising.

One strength of the present model is the continuity of using the same individual as a link with the off-campus site. In this manner, the site coordinator understands how a particular student is performing across the courses and can provide faculty with comprehensive feedback on both academic and behavioral observations. Likewise, the coordinator works with all aspects of the program and can be a representative of the program at the remote sites. This knowledge and commitment to the host

program are essential to the tasks of developing the site advisory committee and providing a link to the remote university.

Implications of this model are that site coordinators need ongoing communication and training from the home campus, due to their comprehensive role. Likewise, faculty need training in the use of site coordinators as assistant instructors in their classrooms. Future recommendations include visits to the home campus by off-site coordinators as well as visits to off-site locations by academic, field, and administrative faculty. The site coordinator is perhaps the most vital link in any distance education program. Well-organized, communicative, and proactive site coordinators are essential to the smooth operation of a distance education program.

The program described here is now in its second cycle of offering the MSW degree using distance technology. The program now links four remote sites to the host university and the second cohort includes nearly 80 students. Four site coordinators are employed, and the time for those positions has been increased to 60% time. Site coordinators have the additional assistance of part-time clerical support. Site coordinators are trained in a formal orientation program at the host university, and faculty at the host university have provided guidelines for the site advisory committees. Site coordinators receive administrative support from the Director of Distance Education, Director of Field Education, the Project Coordinator of the CalSWEC Grant, and the Graduate Program Coordinator. All program area administrators and the Director of the Distance Education Program report directly to the Director of the Social Work Department.

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