

## **inSocialWork Podcast Series**

### **Episode 284 - Laura Lewis, PhD; Daniel Fischer, LMSW: COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities in Social Work Field Education during a Global Pandemic**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:36] Hello again from Buffalo. On behalf of the UB School of Social Work and the inSocialWork Podcast Committee, we're so happy to have you join us again during these difficult times and hope you are doing well and staying safe. This is Louanne Bakk, your host for this episode. In our discussion about returning to our podcast series. We thought it would be important to highlight and acknowledge the disruption of field education that so many of our social work students and agency partners faced during this global pandemic. And to discuss not only the difficulties faced but opportunities schools of social work have had to rethink how we've historically approached field education. While managing students field placements can be a monumental task during a normal academic year, the onset of the pandemic and move to a distance learning model in higher education created unprecedented challenges. In this episode, our guests, Dr. Laura Lewis, who is director of Field Education here at the UB School of Social Work, and Daniel Fisher, Assistant Dean and director of Field Education at the University of Michigan School Social Work, are here to discuss how COVID-19 has impacted field education. They described challenges in social work education from a field perspective and uncertainties they faced at the onset of the pandemic and continue to grapple with as we move into the fall semester. They detail how the pandemic tested not only their ability to be collaborative problem solvers, but also to be nimble and willing to change how field has been historically approached. While the pandemic was without a doubt tremendously disruptive on multiple levels, they highlight some of the creative partnerships, new models of learning and innovative instructional paradigms that were developed. In closing, they consider the importance of working collaboratively and creatively to meet social work competencies and of sharing good ideas with one another to help foster student learning and success. In addition to serving as director of field education, Dr. Laura Lewis is a clinical associate professor and assistant dean for Global Partnerships here at the U.B. School of Social Work. Daniel Fisher, MSW is a clinical assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work and Clinical Assistant Professor at Michigan Medicine Department of Psychiatry. They were interviewed in June 2020 by Michael Lynch LMSW and clinical assistant professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:03:36] Hello, I'm Michael Lynch, and today we're going to talk about field education in a pandemic. I'm also with Dan Fisher and Laura Lewis. With the intensification of the global pandemic in March to 2020, most higher education programs in the United States quickly switch all their courses to a distance learning model. This disruption has taught social work instructors to think creatively about how to deliver content and experiences in new ways for social work field education programs. This transition poses additional difficulty due to its client facing experiential nature. For example, students in field education typically are intervening directly with clients in settings like schools, mental health clinics, prisons and hospitals, all of which were equally affected by the pandemic.

So, Dan, could you talk a little bit about some of the challenges from a field education perspective?

[00:04:19] Thank you, Michael. COVID-19 really created unprecedented challenges that very few of us had ever confronted and probably in reality we weren't really prepared for. I think especially in the beginning, we were dealing with a situation that was rapidly changing in communication overload. That was, to say the least, overwhelming and almost impossible to keep up with. Even now, we still face the uncertainty about what the fall term will look like and well beyond that. And so I think that ever changing uncertainty that we face now is really what I think is the biggest challenge. I think all schools of social work in the confines of civic education recognize the impact that COVID-19, has had on constituents and learners across all social work, education mission areas. Most specifically, I think, field education because of the things that you articulated. We've all had to make. Visions on the fly and continue to gather information and data every day in an effort to make the most informed decisions regarding not only the educational components of our program, but also, most importantly, the health and safety of our students, our faculty, our field instructors and the clients and communities are serving in many ways. I think that one of the great challenges with this also really test that all of our skills and traits is social workers. This really was the ultimate crisis to test our ability to be collaborative problem solvers, as well as our ability to be flexible, nimble and adaptable to any situation. We preach that often to our students. And this was certainly a test of all of that for us as social workers. I think we benefited greatly from having these professional traits, but also from having the established structure that's helped us build the relationships and connections with one another. I can only imagine what responding to the pandemic would have been like if we didn't have the connections with our field education colleagues, our regional consortiums and the Council on Social Work Education.

[00:06:02] And if all of us had not been willing to share resources with one another from across programs, I know I've benefited greatly from things that I heard about from other field directors. And I tried to share things from our program as well, too. And I think it would have been really impossible to address this. So in many ways, I think that challenge has also illuminated some of the strengths that we have in social work field education kind of going forward. And I think as we talk about some of the responses, I think you'll see that even more.

[00:06:26] I really concur, Dan, and it was tremendously disruptive. And we had real concern for our students and for our colleagues, our social workers and the communities who are really working on the front lines during the crisis. But the crisis also helped shed light on a tremendous goodwill that there is among our colleagues across the country and our construction partners in the community and the students, too. There was a lot of goodwill and real spirit of collaboration really brought out the best in people, I think. And one of the things that we really focused on caring in being one, students safety and student rights really should be first and foremost during the crisis. I think they really appreciated that we established a protocol for students to follow if they wanted to be released in person feel. And, you know, we had some 300 students who transitioned to promote work plans, a tremendous amount of work and timeline in to collaborating with students, their field educators, instructors and their liaison to develop plans that would allow them to continue to accrue hours and field plans that made sense for the agency placements. They were in plans for supervision. And then we were really faced on top of all of that disruption and making sure that students were situated. We had a number of students that were completely displaced, and we'll talk a little bit about what our innovative response was to those students, too.

[00:07:49] Yes. So we're dealing with this ever changing crisis that we're learning about new revelations and new new data on a daily basis. So can you talk a little bit, Dan, about your response and your school's response? How were you able to finish the semester starting in March? What type of things? And what was your school's response?

[00:08:05] It's a great question, Mike. I think to piggyback on what Laura said. We've benefited greatly from the relationships that we had with our field agencies. I think the response from our field partners was extraordinary. We're also looking at the University of Michigan that we have a very solid faculty team. So I have really eight or nine folks that are fully dedicated to field education. And I think we really benefited from that structure in this time. Partly, they had really well-established relationships, not only with their students, but also with the field agencies. So some of the things that we were able to do was we really were I don't want to say that we were ahead of the game, but we certainly were planning for moving to remote activities before we were required to do so. And so one of the things that our team was able to do is we actually had a meeting the day before our universities declared that they wanted students to go home and be remote. More we worked with a list of potential activities we could create that would allow students to work toward competency development and be able to do them remotely with supervision from their field educators and their field instructors. Some of the things that we were able to do was to look at the use of simulations that we have fortunately available through our program. We were able to look at a lot of self reflection activities and we tried to really tie it into the coded response as well about how agencies were responding to the crisis in the pandemic. We had a lot of our students had an interpersonal practice, these things related to exploring information and telehealth and telemedicine and how to be able to provide those kinds of services. So when the time came, they were prepared for that. And we did a lot around policy related to situations like this, such as pandemic and things like that. We're often missing in many of the agencies that we were working with. So we were able to pivot, I think, relatively quickly, like Laura mentioned. I think one of the big challenges that we faced were those students that got displaced from their field placements because agencies, close field instructors, were no longer able to be available. And so we had to come up with new and creative ideas to create field placements for them out of thin air to some degree. One of the things that we were able to do that was. Really beneficial to, ah, students is that we have a community engagement team that partners around community engagement with many organizations in southeastern Michigan. And we were able to work collaboratively with the community engagement team to identify what would be normally volunteer experiences during the crisis that our students could get involved with. It would help them meet social work competency and they could use toward field hours. And we had a number of students that needed to have these supplemental experiences to be able to keep our spelling and we're able to get our students through in the fall and the winter term. Those that were graduating graduated. And we have enough students that are also in field over the summer, the continued initially with remote activities. But now we're starting to get that in the in-person thing. I've been extraordinarily impressed with our agencies and how they were also able to adapt ways to continue to provide services to the community, but also to incorporate students into those learner roles. I've been struck by how many field instructors we've had have really embraced field instruction during this time. I would have thought it would've been really easy to say we've got too much going on, but most of our organizations kind of hung in there with our students and we were grateful for that.

[00:11:11] You know, Dan, some real parallels here at Buffalo to like you're describing. One is in a week or two leading up to the crisis we weren't already putting together when

our communication plan with being a student. So I could really relate to that. And also what you're saying about your team. I feel the same way about our team here. We're really uniquely positioned and their knowledge about teaching to develop activities with an understanding about what good instruction is good remote activities would be informed by their years of social work practice. So I can really relate to that. I call for our students that weren't displaced once to find activities that would be meaningful during the crisis and also help them meet their field course requirements. So we had about 17 students that were completely displaced from the field. We're not able to do activities remotely. We're not able to return. And we came up with a couple of innovative ideas. One unit of students and outreach with a local assisted living facility reaching out to residents, family members of those residents and staff to provide support. And they received specialized training to be able to do that. And then another one, which is still in place in a mutual aid group. We developed students got specialized training about how to provide online peer led mutual aid and support. And our former dean, Dr. Larry Shulman, provided that training on how to do that. What skills are needed to do online, mutually support group? And now the students are deployed and they're providing online mutual aid to the rest of their classmates, and that will continue through summer. So the crisis really forced us to be innovative in response to student circumstances. And Mike, actually, Mike, you might want to say a word about some of the creative partnerships that you developed and the way that technology is being used.

[00:13:01] Sure. When the credit crisis hit, we really relied on our partners and we tried to create some new partnerships where that was relevant. So one partner was the Career Services Office, which does professional development around resonators, interviews, how to conduct yourself in a professional environment. So we partnered with them where they were able to provide workshops for our students and then our students would complete assignments about how they're going to incorporate what they learned into their social work career. So that sort of touches on the professionalism competency. We also partnered with UVA Wellness, which provides wellness supports generally to students on a mindfulness meditation group where the students learn a specific kind of mindfulness practice called CORU after they feel like they've successfully learned that the students then go back to their field educator and train them on how they can use mindfulness either with clients or as a form of self care. We were also lucky enough to be able to partner with some agencies doing really important work in the community with field education. We wanted to provide meaningful opportunities to students, but we also knew that there were a lot of people who are really struggling in the community. So we wanted to be able to help. So we formed a series of groups reaching out to local public high school students about online learning how to take care of yourself in a pandemic. So providing direct support to students in the Buffalo public schools. We also partnered with a local voting rights organization to provide a framework and opportunities for our students to do some phone banking in high minority zip codes where voter turnout is typically low and voter outreach really centered around voter education. Since there is some election law changes in New York. So, yeah, you know, we scrambled. But I also feel really grateful to our partners that we were able to not just provide some meaningful learning experiences to students, but also to have some positive impact on the community.

[00:14:49] I love that ability to make a difference in the communities. We did the same and I really appreciate it. We hadn't thought about the ideas, sort of the peer support groups, but it's definitely something that we'll consider going forward. Couple of other things that we did is we partnered not only with school systems like. In some of our faculty that provided the support for our students to be able to reach out to students and families to find out needs, that they might have wellness checks, especially a lot of those kids in

special education that really needed those additional services. We partnered with one of our local agencies that were initiated, depression screening initiatives and suicide screening initiatives. Part of the Detroit area, which was very hard hit by COVID-19 in our students, helped to participate and complete those depression screens and suicide screens, having gotten additional training, which I think they appreciated tremendously. And we also partnered with a local church community that one of our students is the pastor of developed a chain for a wellness checks and wellness calls and things along that line in some of our field faculty were able to provide support to students that were involved in those activities. So the creativity, I think, is something that good to be able to see. It really helps us think about field education going forward. And can we use some of these strategies not only during this crisis, but also to benefit field education down the road?

[00:16:02] It's true. You're actually giving me some more ideas right now and we're talking down. I don't know about a couple on the models that you just mentioned. But we've been talking for years about some of the contradictions and challenges that exist around. See, health, education, for example. Field is their signature pedagogy. It's a major part of our social work curriculum, but we rely so heavily on community agencies to accommodate our students and authors. Marion Boco and others have called for new instructional paradigms and new models that work better, support students and respond to organizational environments that are sometimes difficult in terms of providing learning opportunities for students. For example, I think it's problematic that our traditional model, the apprenticeship model, is still the primary model and field education and our students experiences are so tied to particular agencies that they may not get the opportunity to really respond more organically to what needs are in the community and work outside of those traditional parameters. And you're talking about creativity being a major theme of what's come out of this for us when our learning has been maybe there's potential for us to be able to focus on what quality learning might be versus so much focused on just our particular agencies, or are there ways that our field offices can play a bigger role? Are there models that invite more creative responses to community problems? So there's opportunity for innovation, I think is something that we can focus on in this next part of our discussion.

[00:17:31] Yeah, Laura, I couldn't agree with you more. I think what I found within our field education, the way it's currently structured, you mentioned many authors that have written about a need for us to think about different ways to respond to the changing landscape in organizations. I know Stella Williamson just wrote an editorial in *The Field Educator* this spring around again our need to rethink about field education because of the busyness, a field instructors changes in agency landscape. I think there's a greater need that field agencies are telling us that they need students to be able to sort of hit the ground running, that they don't have time to teach them as much as they need them to be able to step right in and do work, which sort of I think is the opposite of sort of the educational mission of what we're all trying to create. I also have found this focus on ours is something that both students and field instructors kind of get caught up in thinking more about our requirement rather than the competency development. I think about it more of a performance outcome based approach as opposed to a learning outcome based approach. And really, as social work educators are focuses on learning outcomes. We want them to know that they have the skills and the competencies to move forward, to be helpful, the clients and communities in the number of hours that they do. I don't know whether we have good research to tell us the right amount. And so really, we have to find ways to continue to focus in on competency development. I also wonder who that one of the benefits that some of our students have said to us is they've appreciated the opportunity to connect across agencies that one of the things that might also be a chance for us to take a look at is how can we help to build some agency partnerships where they may be able to be more

supportive of one another in helping to train our students. But the students also help to bridge those connections from agency to agency. Oftentimes, if you're a public nonprofit organization, you may or may not have relationships with like organizations, especially around support. And yet those support, shared ideas would be extremely beneficial. Are Detroit areas created what they call the Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Initiative, which are a variety of community agencies, a partner together in? One of the things that we've been able to do with them is really build a training model for MSW students and help to build the workforce, but also provide shared training opportunities across multiple sites. I guess one of the things that that was modeled after prior to me coming to my current role, I led the social work intern training at our health system in Michigan medicine, and we created a similar model where students that were in various field placements throughout our health system participated in trainings together to be able to learn together with one another, but also, more importantly, to learn more broadly about the system in general. And I wonder whether this doesn't give us an opportunity to think. How to create partnerships between agencies as well, too. So even if students stay in one agency, they may be able to get some experiences in other organizations. I think what would be beneficial to them as they start their career?

[00:20:15] I agree. And I think, you know, you mentioned research. And one of the things that I think I'd like to end when is just how important it's going to be to look at what works and maybe what hasn't worked so well over time. What are best practices and continue to share with each other. There is such an administrative burden around field education currently. We have to decrease some of that burden so that people can be more involved in creating opportunities and a more innovative. For students writing and publishing about the work that they're doing in the field. And I know for me a lesson is if something's working well for us, chances are it's something that someone can borrow from. And I think the reason we've been so successful and navigating through this period of time is, like I said earlier, the tremendous goodwill in sharing. But we don't want to lose this after the crisis. We want to be able to really put some new structures in place and disseminate all of the good work that we've done.

[00:21:15] I would agree. I know the Manford Consortium, an organization, has worked to create a repository of resources that field directors and field educators can have access to and things along that line. I would highly encourage all of our colleagues to be part of that so we can share those mutual resources. Dick, research is an important thing as well. I also wanted to highlight something that I think is also an opportunity going forward in many ways in our world. Right now we're facing two pandemics, COVID-19, and I think having now illuminated what we've all known for a long time. But I think the rest of the world is catching up with this systemic racism and what impact that that has. And one of the things that we've been able to pivot recently with our students since the George Ford murder was really having them to be able to incorporate anti-racism activities and actions also in the field, education, that ability to think about some of the things that they're doing around activism right now and how that maybe fits into the work that they're doing, their agencies or social work competency development. And I think our students have been greatly appreciative of that. I think it's really letting them know that one of the things that we highly value as an anti-racist approach is what we're trying to do and improve in our school, but also in what we can do to help our community in the world in general. We have many students that have appreciated that chance to kind of add those kinds of activities kind of going forward. And I really do agree with that. I couldn't agree more about the importance of us trying to make sure that we write and publish and do research. I think that's hard because we're all really busy. But I think we need to find the time. What I would say is maybe not urgent, but very important work. We always find more urgent things to do when

we walk into the office in the morning. And yet there probably is nothing more important than our ability to share good ideas and innovations with one another.

[00:22:53] Good point, Dan. I think that the onus is on us. But perhaps something that social work education should be looking at. In general, how to invest in field education departments to make this possible. I know. I appreciate what you're saying about systemic racism and the students who are part of that mutual aid field unit that was so focused on supporting students through a pandemic have really let me know that the focus has shifted to some degree. And we know that students are really grappling with how to manage during this and what can they do? What efforts can they be engaged in to make things better? So I think that if we allow room for students to be involved in those kinds of things, we have to get away from the idea that we have to always connect them to an agency to be able to have a structure for these things that sometimes when a little bit of room for creativity, they have the better ideas.

[00:23:46] I completely agree with what you're saying. It's almost like this pandemic has really shaken up field education and social work. And we have the opportunity now to re-prioritize and revamp things in a way that better fits this time period and better. That's our cultural moment.

[00:24:00] I have to say, I've really been grateful for your time today. Dan. And, you know, we were on a call earlier with our larger consortium group talking about what's around the corner for all of us. All three of us and our colleagues across the country. And again, I'm really grateful for your willingness to share.

[00:24:17] I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this, for I know you and I had contact a little bit earlier this spring, and Michael and I have had a chance to meet each other quite a bit over the North Central Field Directors Consortium meetings the last few years that I really love these podcasts. Again, you all have taken what we've discussed today, this idea of disseminating and sharing information and done that through these podcasts. So I greatly appreciate the chance to be part of that and benefited greatly from the conversation today. And I hope our colleagues around the country you get a chance to hear this as well. Also find some value, what we talked about.

[00:24:48] So what I'm hearing is that this is part one of a multipart series potentially that's potentially healthy for you.

[00:24:54] I think we could talk more and we don't know what's around the corner yet. So, yeah, maybe now we'll be a part to stay tuned.

[00:25:00] Well, thank you both for letting me have this conversation with you. And I echo. Sentiments that I hope other people are able to benefit from some of the collaboration's that we've been lucky enough to have.

[00:25:10] You've been listening to Dr. Laura Lewis and Daniel Fisher discuss challenges and opportunities for social work field education during a global pandemic. Be safe and stay well.

[00:25:30] Hi, I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the seires. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degreed and continuing education programs we invite you to visit

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