



A Look in the Mirror: Unveiling Human Rights Issues Within Social Work Education

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Accepted: 1 November 2020 / Published online: 24 November 2020
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Abstract

Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, this study explored the financial effect of the field practicum requirement on BSW students. This project was conducted at a mid-sized university in the Southwest region of the United States where current and recent field students responded to surveys and social work field instructors and faculty participated in interviews. The study describes financial burdens and reveals human rights issues affecting nontraditional and underserved students that have answered the call to a career of serving the most vulnerable in society. This study fills a gap in the literature and provides recommendations for further research and anti-oppressive approaches for the academy to employ in the education of future social work professionals.

Keywords Field practicum · Mixed-methods · BSW education · Human rights · Implicit curriculum · Financial costs

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), social work is a growing profession with job prospects for social workers expected to increase at a faster average than all other occupations. Social workers specializing in healthcare, mental health, substance abuse, child, family, and school settings will be in demand in the next decade (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Traditionally, social workers serve disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in society, confronting significant social challenges, for which they receive modest salaries (Barth 2003). Social workers require special qualities as well as good organization, communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. As the demand for social services increases, more trained and skilled social workers are required to meet social needs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). In addition, appropriately addressing the social needs of multi-ethnic and multicultural communities requires educating future social workers who represent the diversity of those communities (Bouye et al. 2016).

Social work education has made strides in preparing students to work with special populations by completing a required field practicum component in community agencies

(Hemy et al. 2016). Through these field placements, students gain hands-on knowledge and experience with marginalized populations and the systems that affect them as part of the preparation to become licensed social workers. While the students benefit from the experiential learning gained in the field, this learning comes at a high cost. Significant time and energy commitments along with the “juggling [of] multiple roles and responsibilities with field placement” are just a few of the costs and challenges experienced by students (Hemy et al. 2016, p. 215). Costs that have received less attention in the literature are the financial hardships connected to the completion of a field practicum. Financial costs include parking fees, professional attire, childcare, car maintenance, and lost wages due to decreased employment to accommodate the field experience. In addition, fieldwork is typically unpaid, perpetuating the oppression that nontraditional and underserved students often experience. A student who meets one or more of certain characteristics (e.g., delayed enrollment into college, part-time college student, works full time, does not hold a traditional high school diploma, single parent) is often described as “non-traditional” (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.), and underserved students are typically women, first-generation, low-income, and/or students of color (Taylor and Jain 2017). The aforementioned issues have an amplified effect on a student’s ability to complete their required field practicum hours while adding to the costs of attending college in general.

The average student loan debt for college graduates in 2018 was \$29,200 (Friedman 2020). Financial costs related to field

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practicum coupled with standard educational expenditures place a high financial burden on social work students, who themselves may be of low income. Subsequently, after graduation, many social workers face paying off debts with their salaries that are often meager. This seems to be unfair when we consider a person's right to an education, which should mean that it is accessible, unencumbered by financial barriers. In fact, according to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' Article 13(c) (1976), "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education." Based on this article of the multilateral treaty to which the USA has been a signatory since 1977, the costs previously described represent a violation of the rights of many students choosing to pursue a social work degree.

Philosophical and Practical Underpinnings

The interest theory of rights (ITR), a human rights theory defined by philosopher Jeremy Bentham, explains that when person "A" has a right to something that is to their benefit and person "B" has the responsibility to provide it but fails to do so, person A's rights have been violated (Kramer 2010). There are several tenets that are central to this philosophy. One tenet is the existence of an authoritative norm such as a contract, moral standard, or constitutional specification that grants the right to individual A. A second tenet is the idea that one must be able to identify whom the individual is that holds a particular right. A third tenet is that it is critical to understand what the specific responsibilities are for person B and what is required to meet those responsibilities (Kramer 2010). While an examination of this philosophical theory helps one understand how to determine who has rights, what constitutes a violation of those rights, and who is responsible for upholding the rights, a practice theory, namely systems theory, provides an understanding of how one might actually carry out the process of supporting others' rights within a complex system.

Systems theory, which focuses on the study of complex entities such as communities or organizations, reminds us that open systems are important for the exchange of information that can lead to change (Fitch 2004; Katz 1980). Goins (2018) states that the education system (in particular) has to change and adjust to accommodate student needs. To accomplish this, the systems theory intervention of systemic approaches, as described by Walker (2012), can be employed to foster change on an ongoing basis. Systemic approaches call for all members of the system to identify practices and principles that support dysfunction for the purpose of working to promote change. Thus, the philosophical perspective of ITR coupled with an understanding of systems and systemic interventions can serve in a complementary fashion to identify and protect

human rights. In concert with these theoretical underpinnings, a review of the literature revealed the social work profession's declared responsibility to teach, uphold, and advocate for human rights in education. It also revealed systemic issues associated with required field practica among several professional disciplines.

Literature Review

Human Rights and Social Work Education

According to the preamble of the National Association of Social Workers' (2017) *Code of Ethics*, the main mission of the profession is to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (para. 1). It also mentions that social workers push for the elimination of social injustices like oppression, discrimination, and poverty. While the Code does not explicitly state that human rights are a central focus, it is inferred throughout the document. In keeping with this same professional focus, over the years, there have been calls for social work curricula to elevate the profession's tradition of social justice by building on it with an emphasis on human rights (Steen et al. 2017; Reisch 2011; Wronka 2007). In the 2008 and 2015 Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the topic of human rights was included, creating a requirement for social work programs to include human rights content in their competency-based curricula. On a global level, the International Federation of Social Workers (2020) includes human rights as a key tenet in its global definition of the profession and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) has been embraced by many professional social work organizations (McPherson and Cheatham 2015). In 2013, the Katherine A. Kendall Institute of the CSWE published a book focused on teaching human rights in social work education and others have authored books heavily focused on helping with the inclusion of human rights content in the classroom (McPherson & Cheatham). In addition, there are online training manuals for human rights offered by the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner (2000), the Austrian Development Agency (2010), the Advocates for Human Rights (2017), and the European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (Benedek 2012). These open-access training manuals and books put valuable information in the hands of social work educators, promoting student exposure to a human rights perspective and to human rights actions and strategies. While there is an unsettled debate on whether social work education in academic settings is a form of social work practice, there is consensus on social work faculty modeling social work values and adhering to the profession's ethics (Teater and Lopez-

Humphreys 2019). Thus, faculty can exhibit their commitment to values and ethics of the profession by advocating for the academy at large to demonstrate a commitment to human rights by tackling issues in education at the structural level (Rozas and Garran 2016). This can be done by addressing inequities in the design and subsequent hardships experienced by students engaged in field practica.

Hardships Associated with Undergraduate Field Experiences

According to Bhuyan et al. (2017), the implicit curriculum in higher education reinforces social inequities. An example of this would be the conflict that nontraditional and underserved students often experience when deciding how to accomplish a required academic field practicum while maintaining paid employment. It is no secret that college students frequently need to work while in school to cover personal and family expenses (Hemy et al. 2016; Gair and Baglow 2018a; Johnstone et al. 2016; King and Bannon 2002; Raskin et al. 2008; Wray and McCall 2007) which can negatively affect their academic performance including performance in a field experience (Johnstone et al. 2016). According to Hemy et al. (2016), social work students often have difficulties trying to balance multiple responsibilities (e.g., school assignments, family obligations, paid employment) while engaged in a field practicum experience, and Baglow and Gair (2019) discuss the challenges of social work students who are experiencing poverty and are of a mature age. Johnstone et al. (2016) state that social work and human services students experience considerable stress financially because of unpaid field practica, and Gair and Baglow (2018b) discuss that required social work field practica leads to financial strain. In addition, Wray and McCall (2007) found that financial hardships were made worse by the lack of financially subsidized field placements of health professional students. These examples demonstrate that the field practicum requirement results in hardships for many, especially students that can be described as nontraditional or underserved. Because working while pursuing a college degree is a necessity for many students, expecting them to quit their jobs or reduce work hours to complete required fieldwork is an oppressive expectation on students and their families.

The review of the literature revealed a handful of articles on the topic of personal challenges related to field practicum requirements. Of those articles, the majority focused on higher education in Australia, highlighting burdens (including financial burdens) of students engaged in social work, medical, nursing, and allied health field experiences. A reoccurring theme among the studies was that professional accrediting bodies need to address the challenges and systemic inequities of the field practicum component of academic programs (Baglow and Gair 2019; Hemy et al. 2016; Johnstone et al.

2016; Raskin et al. 2008). With this in mind and because of the paucity of research on the topic, this study aims to identify the financial effects of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) field practicum requirement on nontraditional and underserved students and to examine whether the field requirement in any way violates the human rights of students.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to collect and analyze data from quantitative surveys and from qualitative interviews that both focused on the financial effects of the social work field practicum requirement. The data collection processes aimed to capture an account of student experiences from the viewpoints of students, agency field instructors, and field practicum faculty in response to the research questions. The quantitative data were collected from field practicum students, and the qualitative data were simultaneously collected from agency field instructors and field practicum faculty. The collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data were essential for the purpose of triangulating findings with multiple perspectives. This mixed-methods approach accomplished the objective of validating the research findings.

BSW Program Context

The BSW program is comprised of approximately 150 BSW majors, eight full-time faculty members, and seven adjunct faculty members. Our university is located in the Southwest region of the United States, and we work closely with approximately 45 community agencies with social workers that supervise our field practicum students. Knowing that the majority of our students are nontraditional, Pell-grant¹ eligible, first-time-in-college, and/or first-generation students and many work to help support their families, we implement internal support systems whenever possible to mitigate the cost of their undergraduate social work education. For example, our BSW program offers online and hybrid modes of instruction to facilitate greater accessibility to our courses, we have eliminated textbooks and implemented a fully open-access curriculum, and we maintain a clothing closet and food pantry within the social work offices as an additional means of offsetting students' expenses.

¹ Pell-grant is a program of the US Government that provides need-based funding to low-income students pursuing undergraduate and, in some cases, postbaccalaureate education. For more information, go to <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html>.

Sampling

Convenience sampling was employed in the collection of data via quantitative surveys that included five open-ended questions allowing the respondent to include any additional thoughts to a particular quantitative item. Links to the surveys were emailed to 50 potential participants of whom 16 were recent BSW graduates and 34 were current BSW field practicum students. The goal was to recruit at least 25 (50%) of the 50 students and former students to whom the invitations were sent. That goal was exceeded as 37 (74%) individuals responded to the survey. Convenience sampling was also employed in the collection of data via qualitative interviews with current agency field instructors and with faculty who had field practicum responsibilities or who otherwise worked closely with the population of students and alumni targeted for this study. The first four agency field instructors that agreed to participate were interviewed, and the four faculty members that worked closely with the target population all agreed to be interviewed.

Participants

There were 37 student and alumni participants surveyed, of which 31 (83.78%) were current field practicum students at the time of data collection and six (16.22%) were BSW alumni that had graduated at the close of the immediate past semester. One participant identified as male and 34 as female, one did not list gender, and one preferred not to respond to the question. Almost half (45.95%; $n = 17$) of the participants were between the ages of 25 and 34. Eight (21.62%) participants were between the ages of 18 and 24; eight (21.62%) of them were between the ages of 45 and 54, and four (10.81%) fell in the age range of 35 to 44. Sixteen (48.48%) identified as Black/African American, 12 (36.36%) as White, 3 (9.09%) as other, 1 (3.03%) as Asian, and 1 (3.03%) as American Indian/Alaska Native. Of those participants, 16 (43.24%) were of Hispanic/Latino origin. When asked about household income, more than half (54.05%; $n = 20$) of respondents indicated that their income was less than \$30,000 annually, 15 (40.54%) had annual income between \$30,000 and \$60,000, and only two (5.41%) listed their household income for the year as more than \$60,000. Thus, greater than half of the students' household incomes were less than half of the median income of \$60,146, in the county where they attended college (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Twenty-four (64.86%) reported their marital status as single, nine (24.32%) as being married or in a domestic partnership, two (5.41%) as divorced, and two (5.41%) as separated.

Eight social work professionals participated in qualitative interviews. Four (50%) of them were faculty members of the university and had worked closely with the target population. The other four (50%) of them were agency field instructors

currently engaged in supervising students of the university and had supervised students in the past. The sample of social work professionals represented diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Instruments

A 19-item Web-based survey was used to collect data from current and recent field practicum students. The survey included ten demographic items (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and income). The remaining nine items included four primary questions: (1) As a result of participating in field practicum, which of the following increased in cost or became an additional expense for you?; (2) As a result of participating in field practicum, which of the following losses occurred?; (3) As a result of participating in field practicum, which of the following non-financial experiences have you had (or did you have)?; and (4) Are you receiving (or did you receive) a stipend (money) while in field practicum? The first three of the four primary questions allowed participants to “mark all that apply” from a listing of potential financial and nonfinancial costs. Below each of the first three questions, there was an item that invited the participant to include “other” costs not shown in the lists provided. For primary question 4, the respondent was able to indicate yes or no and the second part of number 4 allowed the participant to elaborate on how they did or would have used a stipend. Lastly, a general open-ended question invited participants to provide any additional thoughts on the topic.

An interview guide was used to collect data from social work faculty who worked with field students and social workers that served as field instructors at community agencies. The guide provided a script for the interviewer to follow for consistency among interviews. It included three primary questions: (1) Have you encountered field students that have expressed concerns about increased financial costs incurred because of the field requirement?; (2) While working with field students, what costs/struggles have students expressed that are NOT financial in nature?; and (3) If a stipend were offered to field students, what do you believe students would primarily use the stipend for? There were prompts under questions 1 and 2 for the interviewer to use to inquire about specific financial costs (e.g., food, childcare, fuel).

Data Collection Process

Upon approval from the university's institutional review board, the Web-based survey was launched and the link to the survey was sent to current field practicum students through the university's online learning platform. Links to the survey were also sent to the personal email addresses of all BSW alumni that graduated at the end of the immediate past semester. The email that contained the link had an IRB-approved

message inviting the recipient to participate in the study, and it included the informed consent document. The informed consent contained the typically required elements including voluntariness, no penalty for withdrawal, no impact on course grades, and confidentiality of responses. It also stated that clicking on the link and responding to the survey would serve as one's consent to participate in the study and that it would take 5 to 7 min to complete. The Web-based survey remained open for 1 month, after which the data collected were analyzed.

In addition to the launching of the quantitative student survey, two researchers collected qualitative data by interviewing a total of eight social work professionals. An invitation was emailed to social workers, at field practicum agencies, that have served as BSW field instructors, and the first four to respond were interviewed. The interviews took place in person and were recorded. An invitation was also emailed to four social work faculty members with recent responsibilities for field practicum activities, and all four participated in recorded interviews via videoconferencing. The recorded interviews ranged in time from 30 to 90 min and upon completion were transcribed in preparation for analysis.

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the group of participants based on their demographic responses. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the 19 survey items that focused on the financial effect of the field practicum requirement including financial costs, financial losses, and financial assistance (i.e., stipends). Responses to the open-ended questions that corresponded with each of the quantitative items (asking participants to list any additional costs, losses, or financial assistance) were categorized, and frequencies were determined.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis was performed on the interview transcripts. The following research questions were used to guide the analyses: (1) What financial effect does the BSW field practicum requirement have on nontraditional and underserved students? and (2) Does the BSW field practicum requirement in any way violate the human rights of students? Informed by the research questions, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes, develop codes, and identify emerging concepts. Two independent researchers coded the interviews and discussed discrepancies until they agreed on the coding of the content, establishing intercoder reliability.

Results

Quantitative Surveys

In an effort to answer the research questions, the survey instrument included items on financial costs, financial losses, and financial assistance such as stipends. Respondents identified all seven items listed in the survey as causing increased financial costs or additional expenses for them when participating in the field practicum experience (see Table 1). More than any other, *food/lunch* was identified as a cost with 28 (75.68%) participants selecting it. The second most selected item was *fuel/tolls* with 27 (72.97%) participants identifying it as an increased cost. *Clothing/shoes* was the third most selected cost with 25 (67.57%) respondents identifying it as an increased expense. Approximately half of the survey participants ($n = 19$; 51.35%) marked *vehicle maintenance*, eight (21.62%) marked *dry cleaning/laundry*, four (11.76%) marked *childcare*, and two (5.41%) marked *mental health counseling*. Three (8.11%) respondents indicated that they had not experienced any increased costs as a result of the field practicum experience. When given the opportunity to identify any costs not provided as choices on the survey, *health-related costs* was listed by one (2.7%) participant.

Table 1 also includes losses that occurred as a result of participating in the field practicum requirement with nearly two-thirds ($n = 27$; 72.97%) of former and current field student respondents, indicating that they experienced *lost wages* as a result of participation in their field practicum. Nearly one-third ($n = 11$; 29.73%) marked *loss of health insurance*, and just over a tenth ($n = 4$; 10.81%) indicated a *loss of employment* in order to participate in the field experience. Eight (21.62%) participants marked *none of these occurred*, indicating that they did not have any of the losses listed as choices on the survey. When given the opportunity to identify any losses not provided as choices on the survey, *loss of paid time off* (PTO) was listed by two (5.41%) respondents, *loss of death insurance* was listed by two (5.41%) respondents, *loss of food* was listed by one (2.7%) respondent, and *loss of a leadership position* was listed by one (2.7%) respondent. Lastly, Table 1 shows that two (5.41) respondents stated that they received a financial stipend while 35 (94.59%) indicated that they did not. One of the respondents that received a stipend listed *gas, clothing, and groceries* as items paid for with the money, and the other respondent listed *bills*. There were numerous items listed, by the remaining 35 participants, to indicate how they would have used a stipend. In the order of frequency, the list included *car expenses* (including tolls and fuel), *household expenses* (including rent and utilities), *food, childcare, replacement of lost wages, future graduate school expenses, clothing, medical insurance/healthcare, work uniform, self-care activities, school supplies, and tuition* as shown in Table 2.

Table 1 Survey respondents' financial costs, financial losses, and financial assistance related to the field practicum experience

	Samples	Percent
Items that increased in cost or became an additional expense as a result of the field practicum requirement ($N = 37$)		
Food/lunch	28	75.68
Fuel/tolls	27	72.97
Clothing/shoes	25	67.57
Vehicle maintenance	19	51.35
Dry cleaning/laundry care	8	21.62
Childcare	4	11.76
Mental health counseling	2	5.41
I did not have any increased costs or additional expenses	3	8.11
Losses that occurred as a result of participating in the field practicum requirement ($N = 37$)		
Lost wages	27	72.97
Loss of health insurance	11	29.73
Loss of employment	4	10.81
None of these occurred	8	21.62
Students that received a financial stipend while in field practicum ($N = 37$)		
Yes	2	5.41
No	35	94.59

Qualitative Interviews

All interviews with social work faculty and field instructors were transcribed and coded manually by two researchers. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the researchers read the transcripts several times, developed codes, and noted emerging concepts. These concepts were codified and then collated into the following main themes: *increased expenses and material costs*, *decreased assets*, and *academy creating barriers*. The results that follow provide a nuanced account of the themes along with direct quotes as is customary with thematic analysis reporting.

Table 2 How respondents would have used stipends ($N = 37$)

Item/expense	Samples	Percent
Car (e.g., gas, tolls, maintenance)	16	43.24
Home (e.g., rent, utilities)	11	29.73
Food	11	29.73
Childcare	3	8.11
Loss of wages	3	8.11
Future graduate school	2	5.41
Clothing	2	5.41
Medical insurance/healthcare	2	5.41
Uniform for work	1	2.70
Self-care activities	1	2.70
School supplies	1	2.70
Tuition	1	2.70

Increased Expenses and Material Costs

All participants ($N = 8$) spoke about increased expenses and material costs incurred by students engaged in field practica. These included transportation costs, gas and tolls, and wear and tear on their vehicles. In addition, they discussed that the cost of fuel, related to going back and forth from the various field events, has created a significant financial burden for some. They also mentioned that students often live in affordable areas away from town and have to travel to get to field agencies, adding to the commute and the costs. One participant reported,

...I have heard them say, 'I took the toll road to get here', so that is an additional cost. Some places charge for parking. Like if a student is maybe in the medical center, then they have had to pay for parking and some students have expressed like, 'I chose not to get a field placement within the medical center because I would have to pay for parking.' You know at \$9 a day—that can be expensive for a student (field instructor 3).

Also, a few participants mentioned that some field sites require background checks on interns for which students have to pay in addition to occasionally buying supplies and other items needed for them to complete field-related assignments.

Decreased Assets

All participants ($N = 8$) agreed that the 400-h field practicum requirement utilizes a large portion of students' time and

resources, and in trying to accommodate this requirement, students ask employers for a lot of flexibility. Participants expressed that the significant burden of employment, fieldwork, and financial responsibilities results in an inability to work normal hours and a loss of wages and benefits. One participant stated,

...they seemed at times to be having a hard time managing the school responsibilities, sometimes-financial needs and...before you know it, ...they are not coming [to the field agency] or feeling that they need to make a decision [about whether to quit the practicum] (field instructor 2).

Another participant said, “We ask them to do something [field practicum] that takes up a large piece of their pie [time and money] and that has to be made up somewhere” (social work faculty 2). In addition to comments made about the significant use of personal resources, several field instructors discussed that with students having to work reduced hours in paid employment, there is elevated financial stress on other family members. They discussed that there is less time that a student with children spends at home, consequently increasing the financial burden of childcare on the household. In addition, it was mentioned that this burden is sometimes demonstrated through the actual or potential loss of wages of a family member who steps in to provide childcare. One participant stated, “There is a drain on the entire family system, people are trying to cover for the person doing fieldwork and there are...financial losses [when] doing an unpaid job” (field instructor 1).

All participants ($N = 8$) spoke about the significant amount of time that the field practicum requires of students. Participants stated that most students they have encountered in the program have been nontraditional students who have to maintain full time or part time work in addition to going to school. One interviewee stated,

Field placement is a lot of hours in one semester and it is difficult. I remember one individual was sharing that... I want to say she had to quit her job or she had to take less hours because of the hours that she was having to do more at school, doing field and working and also being at the same time with her family (field instructor 4).

One interviewee described the case of a student that could not maintain her housing and basic expenses without working long hours at her job. In this case, the student’s school work, fieldwork, and paid employment amounted to a significant time burden but it was necessary due to her financial situation. Another participant provided an even more extreme case of a student whose home went into foreclosure due to cutting back on her

employment hours for the purpose of completing her field practicum.

Academy Creating Barriers

A few of the interviewees ($N = 3$) pointed out that the emphasis on and the structure of the field practicum create barriers for students. One participant stated,

In all my experience as a [former] field director, ...we put all this pressure on students because it [field practicum] is the signature pedagogy. Our entire [didactic] program is to prepare them for the substantial responsibility at the end [field practicum] and I feel like we owe them some financial support. [This program is] working to get them [community-based] work-study which is needed, they [would] get paid the entire time that they are in field which takes so much pressure off students, we need that for every student and we [administration and faculty] need to move in that direction because it is a social justice issue (social work faculty 2).

Another interviewee talked about greater options at the MSW level for paid internships as a result of CSWE advocacy being geared toward MSW programs rather than BSW programs. The participant stated,

There are more options for field at the MSW level, night shifts, and stipends in clinical settings, which are not readily available to BSW students. Our professional bodies reinforce the message of the MSW degree being needed, rather than engaging in dialog with us around the value of the BSW. They are not helping us break down those barriers in the face of competing professions in the helping professions. [And] our own profession participates in... [the minimizing of the BSW] by not highlighting the crown jewel that the bachelors of social work really is. BSW students are better suited for jobs upon graduation than psychology and sociology students at the bachelors level [and] you do not need an MSW to do generalist practice, but the message to the public and to employers is not supportive of BSWs (social work faculty 3).

It is important to note that all interviewees ($N = 8$) expressed the belief that stipends or any other means of undergirding students’ financially while in field practicum would be significantly helpful. Three of the four field instructors expressed empathy for students and a strong desire to find innovative solutions to the problems students faced. They all discussed the types of support they had offered to try to mitigate financial challenges and other barriers experienced by

students, and they acknowledged that more support and greater solutions are needed.

In summary, quantitative results from student data were consistent with the qualitative results from faculty and field instructor data as both highlighted added financial expenses, financial/asset losses, and similar sentiments regarding the use and value of stipends to offset costs related to the field practicum requirement. However, two qualitative themes (derived from interviews with social work faculty) were not present in the quantitative findings produced from student surveys. One was a concern about inequities of field experiences among students, and the other was about barriers that the academy appears to create. It is understandable that these additional themes would come from interviews with members of the academy who are regularly grappling with such challenges as they work to support and educate students.

Discussion

Competency 3 of the CSWE's 2015 EPAS states that every person has fundamental human rights. These rights include education, safety, healthcare, and an adequate standard of living. The results of this study highlight areas of concern within the field practicum requirement that demonstrate failure to promote basic human rights according to our own standards within social work education. This study found inherent inequities in the design of the field experience component of the social work curriculum, especially in its financial effect on nontraditional and underserved students. There is a lack of consideration for students managing jobs and supporting households and families while in school. In effect, the CSWE and its Commission on Accreditation (COA) have not kept pace with the changing demographics of the US college student. For many years, there has been a steady increase in the number of students classified as nontraditional or underserved. Yet, the COA has maintained a policy since 1982 that is based on an arbitrary number of field hours that BSW students are required to complete and there is no evidence that 400 field practicum hours is a gold standard for desired educational outcomes (Raskin et al. 2008).

In order to comply with the field practicum requirement, students often face the need to reduce paid job hours or quit jobs altogether. Some lose health insurance or exhaust paid time off, all while specific field-related expenses (e.g., car maintenance, fuel, tolls, childcare, counseling) are being added to their budgets. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA magnified the inequities caused by the field practicum requirement, prompting requests from accredited social work programs for a reduction in field hours for students. The initial response from the COA on 19 March was an emphatic *no*, stating, "field hours cannot be waived" (CSWE 2020a). A second announcement on 20 March stated, "no changes will

be made at this time regarding the minimum number of required field hours" (CSWE 2020a). In keeping with the professional value of advocacy, field instructors across the country made requests while students signed a petition imploring the COA to make a concession in the face of a worldwide public health crisis. Eventually, a temporary policy was created to address this need and field hours were reduced to 85% of the standard requirement for students that would complete their field practice experiences by December of 2020 (CSWE 2020b). Also to their credit, the COA ultimately allowed field seminar class hours to be counted as field practicum hours under the temporary COVID-19 provisions.

The initial reluctance of the COA to act in a time of crisis suggests an overall lack of concern or understanding of the difficulties the field requirement causes in general. According to international social work scholar Katherine Kendall, in the late 1800s, it was common for fieldwork to take place 2 days or 3 days weekly, and this was doable for the mostly female social work students who could financially afford to dedicate this amount of time without needing monetary support (as cited in Raskin et al. 2008). Today's circumstances are different, and college experiences need to uplift students while preparing them for future endeavors, not create hardships, especially financial hardships that gnaw away at one's ability to afford and maintain basic needs. The current design of the field practicum requirement often puts students at risk, many of whom are already marginalized in some way. These human rights issues place students in a position where they have to choose between completing a BSW degree and safeguarding their personal welfare and the welfare of their families. In addition, the negative financial effects of the field practicum requirement demonstrate a violation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which decrees accessibility of higher education as a right to be maintained and progressively moved toward becoming cost-free. Based on the premise of Bentham's interest theory of rights, the Council on Accreditation and the social work academy at large are responsible for ensuring that this right is upheld for all social work students, something the academy has failed to do.

In social work education, we pride ourselves on teaching students to disrupt injustice, fight against discrimination, and work to eliminate harmful biases. Yet, this study reveals that we have not done this, on their behalf, where the field education component is concerned. For programs like ours with many students of color, largely female and often from low-income situations, the field practicum requirement (as it is currently structured) represents the very things we teach students to rise up against. It frequently hinders a student's ability to maintain an adequate standard of living and that, by our profession's values and standards, is a human rights issue (CSWE-EPAS 2015). In addition, it is clearly a human rights violation of the ICESCR.

There are micro and macro solutions for the human rights issues described. At the micro level, greater access to stipends that supplement a student's income would be helpful. The results of this study show that students would use stipends to take care of their very basic needs, which most agree are vital for student learning and academic success. At the macro level, systemic change is required so that the structure of the field practicum requirement is made fair and equitable for all students seeking a social work degree. In the end, these changes need to occur because (1) students deserve an educational experience free from injustice, bias, and oppression; (2) maintaining the status quo in social work field education not only hinders a student's human right to an adequate standard of living (as described in the 2015 EPAS), it is categorically unjust, discriminatory, and oppressive; and (3) it is unacceptable to knowingly continue to stand in violation of the ICESCR for which the USA is a signatory.

Recommendations

Additional research with students, faculty, and field instructors throughout the USA and the world is needed to address the concerns outlined in this study and to determine generalizability. Future empirical analysis centered on whether fewer field practicum hours could yield successful achievement of social work competencies is crucial. Pilot studies need to be conducted to explore effective ways to accomplish field practicum goals for students that are already employed by various social service agencies. Future research focusing on poverty-informed educational practices and research exploring strategies to help BSW programs lessen financial as well as nonfinancial burdens of the field requirement is especially relevant at this time. In addition to empirical research, the social work academy and profession need to increase awareness of the tremendous value that the BSW degree offers the workforce and push for more BSW field practicum agencies to offer stipends.

At the program level, we recommend seeking private funding to work toward the establishment of endowments within institutions to supplement or replace students' income while in field practicum. In addition to offsetting the financial costs of fieldwork, private and public grant funding should be sought to supplement the cost of textbooks or fund a program's transition to becoming all open-access and to transition more classes to online and/or hybrid modes of instruction as a means of additional cost reduction, increasing accessibility to higher education. We recommend that programs work closely with financial aid offices to ensure that eligible students access work-study funds for the hours they engage in fieldwork. In addition, programs should foster supportive environments, which can be accomplished by engaging in poverty-informed

educational practices. Such environments could include financial coaching along with the formation of solidarity practice (McCarty 2019) peer groups focused on ways to address financial concerns to help students as they move through the field experience.

Conclusion

This study highlights human rights issues in social work education from the perspective of BSW students, faculty, and field instructors. It also highlights the Commission on Accreditation's failure to recognize and address human rights issues inherent in the required field practicum. With its limited scope, the study focused only on one social work program with a small number of individuals participating. The surveys utilized to collect data did not include Likert-type scales that would have allowed participants to indicate to what degree they experienced increased expenses or decreased assets. Nevertheless, the study provides insight into struggles students faced while fulfilling the field practicum requirement. Another limitation is that the research protocol did not include follow-up interviews with student participants. However, survey data was triangulated with interview data from field instructors and faculty, for cross verification of findings.

The researchers found that students, faculty, and field instructors were readily able to identify the financial effect of the required field experience. The results exposed barriers and hardships that are more pronounced among nontraditional and underserved students which make up more than half of college students today (EDUCATIONDATA.ORG 2019). In closing, the findings of this study demonstrate that an examination of the experience of field practicum students through a human rights lens, unveiled human rights issues embedded in the social work education curriculum. As such, it is vital for social work education to take a look in the mirror.

Acknowledgments We thank Marisol Orozco, Elizabeth Patterson, and Melissa Trejo for their useful discussions and ideas on this research project.

Authors' Contributions DS and AG conceived the research study idea and carried out the data collection phase. DS, AG, and SS performed the data analysis. DS took the lead on writing the manuscript with written contributions from AG and SS. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the manuscript.

Data Availability All data collected for this study are original and were obtained from participants via surveys and interviews. The data are securely stored per IRB protocols and can be made available upon request.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval The research protocol and data collection tools for this study were approved by the University of Houston-Downtown's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection (approval number: CPHS#27-18). The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards described in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Consent to Publish Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, and the document informed participants of our intent to publish.

Code Availability There was no code software or custom coding used.

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