

Needs assessment for enhanced field supervisor engagement within the Human Ecology Practicum Program

Key Words:

practicum, field supervisor, collaboration, needs assessment

Abstract:

This study aims to address a gap identified through a previous study of the human ecology practicum program (HEPP). The previous findings indicated that program stakeholders perceived a lack of engagement by field supervisors in the practicum process but the exact nature of the lack of engagement was not well articulated. In the proposed study, the perspectives and engagement needs of HEPP field supervisors will be explored using focus group interviews and a survey. In addition to fostering enhanced collaboration between program partners, the study should provide guidance on ways to develop mechanisms and tools that increase supervisor engagement, enrich the overall supervisory experience, and improve the learning experience for students. The findings should be relevant to other post-secondary programs seeking ways to improve experiential learning programs.

Project/ Research Description

Introduction

This TLEF study will explore the perspectives and needs of field supervisors in terms of types and levels of engagement in the human ecology practicum program (HEPP). In an earlier TLEF-funded study that explicated the theory of the HEPP¹ program stakeholders (faculty, recent graduates, and field supervisors) identified a gap between actual and desired engagement of field supervisors in the HEPP, suggesting that field supervisors could be more actively engaged throughout the entire practicum process. Stakeholders offered some general ideas on ways in which they would like to see supervisors more engaged in the practicum process; however, they did not provide rationale for this enhanced supervisor engagement, nor did they detail specific engagement strategies.

Practicum placements have been part of the human ecology undergraduate degree requirements at the University of Alberta for over 43 years. The HEPP comprises two components. The central component is a mandatory 200-hour (*6) field placement in the community. The second component is a mandatory preparatory course (*3) that students complete in the academic term prior to placement.

In terms of engagement in the practicum process, field supervisors are currently involved in selecting and orienting students to the placement site, helping students develop learning goals during the preparatory course, and participating in the annual practicum orientation meeting, during which the operation and expectations of the HEPP are discussed. During the 200-hour placement field supervisors are actively engaged in mentoring students and helping them develop the competencies required for practice. All field supervisors are supported in this mentoring process through on-going contact and a site visit by the HEPP practicum coordinator. After completion of the field placement a letter of thanks is sent to each field supervisor by the practicum coordinator, in recognition of their contributions to student learning and growth.

The previous study suggested that more engagement by field supervisors was desired¹. At this point, though, we do not know what this specifically means in terms of type and level of engagement and, in fact, we do not know if supervisors in general actually want to be more engaged in the entire practicum process. As such, the *objectives* for the proposed project are to:

- 1) Explore supervisor perceptions of their role and goals as field supervisors,
- 2) Explore experiences with supervision, particularly in relation to engagement in the practicum program,
- 3) Identify and describe the engagement needs of supervisors, and
- 4) Explore facilitative factors and barriers to engagement.

Background

In this proposal the term *supervisor* will be used to refer to the experienced person who trains, guides and mentors pre-professional learners in clinical or field settings. Different terms are used in different disciplines, however, to refer to this role. The term *preceptor* is commonly used in health disciplines such as nursing, pharmacy and dietetics;^(e.g., 2-6) *co-operating teacher* or *mentor teacher* are used in education/school settings;^(e.g. 7-8) *field supervisor* tends to be used in fields such as social work and human ecology;^(e.g. 1, 9-10) and *community partner* is generally used in community service learning settings.^(e.g. 11-13)

When supervisors partner with educational institutions through experiential learning programs they agree to take on what various authors have acknowledged is an important and demanding role requiring commitment and a unique skill set.^{10,14-18} Researchers have also noted that the role of supervisor presents particular needs in terms of role support and recognition. Speers, Strzyzewski, and Ziolkowski¹⁷ indicated that supervisors often need and benefit from training for their role as teachers/mentors, support in the form of on-going communication with faculty, and recognition for their hard work.

Some experiential learning programs have been researching and attending to the support and engagement needs of supervisors for many years. In the health disciplines for example, a variety of preceptor training and development programs, as well as recognition and reward systems have been common for some time.^{2, 3, 16,17,19-21} Such development and support programs have been shown to be effective in helping preceptors feel more confident in their role,^{2,17} and efforts to enhance preceptor development programs continues.^{4,15,22,23}

In the disciplines of education, social work, and dietetics there is recognition of the importance of the supervisory role and the value of support and training for the role.^{5-8,21, 24-26} Scholars in these disciplines, however, note that little is known about the supervisors' experiences of the supervisory process.¹⁰ In addition, few models to train supervisors have been developed and tested^{5,27} and there is a lack of research that links supervisor development with student learning.²⁷

Research related to the experiences and needs of supervisors in human ecology and community service learning (CSL) programs is even more limited. There is recognition that the community voice has been missing from CSL research and that more communication and relationship-building with community partners is needed to enhance CSL programs.^{12,13,28, 29} Despite this recognition, there is a dearth of studies that specifically address the support and engagement needs of supervisors in CSL programs. The same is true for human ecology literature, which suggests that we do not have a clear understanding of the engagement and support needs of practicum field supervisors. The proposed study should help address this gap.

Innovation

We know that engaging in relationships with communities is central to the higher education agenda¹¹ and that many scholars have advocated for more intentional collaboration with program partners in the on-going development of experiential learning programs.^{12,24,28,30} While there is substantial research that documents the perspectives and impacts of experiential learning on faculty and students, much less is known about the perspectives and needs of supervisors in non-health related fields.^{28,29} The proposed study is innovative in that it explores the engagement and support needs of supervisors in experiential learning programs in human ecology, an area not well studied to this point.

Sustainability

The HEPP's successful operation requires cooperation and collaboration with the community and it is understood that any campus-community partnership, just like a friendship or romantic relationship, requires work and attention in order to maintain and enhance it.³⁰ Findings from the proposed study will allow us to better integrate the perspectives of supervisors in the on-going development of the HEPP - a practice that scholars from many disciplines emphasize is

integral to sound programs,^{24, 28,30- 32} and a practice that supports the University of Alberta's pledge to strengthen community connections and better serve our community partners. Greater collaboration with our field supervisors will help us show recognition, prevent potential problems (such as turnover and burn-out), and provide mechanisms that help sustain and add value to our community partnerships.

Methods

This study will be a needs assessment for field supervisors who have been cooperating partners with the HEPP during the past ten years. The study will have three components: focus groups, an online survey, and a member-checking forum.

The focus groups will be conducted to help design the survey. One to two focus groups with six to eight field supervisors will be conducted. Purposive sampling will be used to recruit participants who represent a range of supervisory experiences (novice to experienced) and a variety of HEPP placement sites (e.g., non-profit community organizations, small businesses, government departments). During the interviews, participants will be provided with a brief synopsis of the study and then asked questions that explore the study objectives and provide direction for the development of the survey questions. The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. A content analysis of interview transcripts will be conducted. The categories guiding the content analysis will coincide with the study objectives.

For the survey, the general framework will be based on the objectives of the study. Specific questions will be informed by the results of the focus group interviews as well as by findings from relevant research on the perceptions, experiences, and support needs of supervisors.^{e.g.,5,26,33} The survey is expected to include demographic questions, along with a variety of ranking, categorical, and open-ended questions. The survey will be pilot tested with two to four supervisors and necessary revisions will be made prior to distributing it to all supervisors for completion.

Once finalized, the survey will be distributed using Fluidsurveys.com, a Canadian-based online survey service. An email invitation, including a link to the online survey, will be sent to all HEPP supervisors who have been active supervisors within the past ten years (including those supervisors who participated in the focus groups) (n=150). Participants will be given three weeks to complete the survey, and reminder emails will be sent one week after the initial email and three days before the final deadline. Descriptive univariate analyses (frequencies, distributions, measures of central tendency) will be used to identify and describe supervisors' perceptions of their roles and goals, their engagement experiences and needs, and facilitative factors and barriers to engagement. In addition, some bivariate analyses (correlations, t-tests, cross-tabs) will be used to determine patterns, similarities, and differences by supervisors' years of experience working with the HEPP, supervisors' demographic characteristics such as educational background, the type of placement site, and the major being pursued by students with whom supervisors have worked (Family Ecology or Clothing, Textiles, and Material Culture).

Once survey data are analyzed, a member-checking forum will be convened. Specifically, we will meet with eight to ten supervisors who completed the survey to discuss the survey findings and what the findings mean in relation to field supervisors' participation in the HEPP. Through the forum supervisors will contribute to the interpretation of survey findings and

discuss next steps, such as the development of specific strategies to engage and support field supervisors.

Research team roles and responsibilities.

Kathryn Chandler, the principal applicant, is the coordinator of the human ecology practicum. She has recognized expertise in effective teaching and learning practice, as well as experience conducting studies employing focus group and member-checking strategies. *Deanna Williamson* is an associate professor and Chair in the Department of Human Ecology. She has teaching and research experience in program evaluation, and has conducted studies employing focus group interviews, surveys, and stakeholder forums.

Both applicants will participate in the intellectual, ethical, and administrative conduct of the study. That is, they will both be involved in decisions regarding data collection, data analyses, hiring, training, and supervision of a graduate student, financial management, and dissemination and communication of the findings. A graduate research assistant with research and program evaluation experience will be employed to assist with the study. The research assistant will play a role in the focus groups, the design of the survey, the collection and analysis of survey data and the write-up of key findings. In addition, the research assistant will assist with the member-checking forum.

Given Kathryn Chandler's knowledge and experience with the practicum program, she will be involved in drafting the survey, co-facilitating the member-checking forum, and overseeing the organizational aspects of the research assistant's work. She will remain arms-length from the focus group interviews and data analyses, however, to avoid the possibility of biasing the findings. Deanna Williamson will have primary responsibility for overseeing data collection and analyses.

Dissemination of Findings

The findings from this research will be valuable to instructors, administrators, and community partners with an interest in experiential learning. At the University of Alberta, the results will be shared with CSL and used by the Department of Human Ecology to enhance undergraduate programming. The findings will also be shared with other academic audiences through conference presentations and journal articles (e.g., Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC), the Association for Experiential Education, and the *Journal for Experiential Learning*). Finally, our community partners will have an opportunity to learn about the findings through an e-newsletter and an on-campus seminar.

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