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## Service Learning for Development of Undergraduate Practitioner Researchers

**Karen Flint Stipp**

**School of Social Work • Illinois State University**



**Dr. Karen Flint Stipp** is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work. She has been at ISU since completing her PhD at the University of Kansas in 2011. She is interested in integrating social work research into the undergraduate field seminar. Her prior research indicates a disconnect between classroom work related to social work research, and the use of data by social work practitioners. Related publications include *Building organizational knowledge and value: Informed decision making in Kansas children's community-based mental health services*. She also has two presentations on the effect of service learning methods on student learning outcomes.

**Kathryn Sheridan**

**School of Social Work • Illinois State University**

**Dr. Kathryn (Kate) Sheridan** is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work. Her current research interests include substance affected families, improving child welfare outcomes, and examining the effectiveness of child protection mediation programs. Her interest in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning focuses on graduate and undergraduate research methods. Dr. Sheridan teaches graduate research and field seminar courses as well as an elective course on substance use disorders and the social work response.

**Ariana E. Postlethwait**

**Department of Social Work • Middle Tennessee State University**

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*Social work has an ongoing challenge to help undergraduates identify as practitioner-researchers. In a one-semester research course for juniors, groups of students completed an agency-based proposal. The assignment used a service learning approach. Students worked with agencies to identify agency questions, and develop a proposal for finding answers to an agency question. The following year each student completed a two-semester practicum. This study asked graduating seniors to report whether elements of their junior year agency-based proposal informed their senior year field practicum work.*

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## Introduction

In social work as in other fields, educators and practitioners are concerned with an intractable practice-research gap. Social work education should prepare students for practice-informed research and research-informed practice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). The competent graduate will understand research constructs and principles, and be able to use research evidence to inform their practice (CSWE). There is little stand-alone value to memorized research constructs as their meaning only becomes clear in the process of reading, interpreting and creating evaluations. The field practicum and seminar are social work's signature pedagogy, a venue in which students apply knowledge and skills introduced in the classroom (CSWE, 2015). The field sequence provides a natural laboratory for students to apply what they know about evaluating practice (Berger, 2013).

Bloom's taxonomy sees lower-order learning as developing constructs and higher-order learning as application (Krathwohl, 2001). Bloom's taxonomy suggests that higher-order learning occurs in breaking a topic into its constituent parts, in evaluating existing research and available data for applicability to agency questions, and in creating research that produces new and locally relevant information. Applied to undergraduates learning social work research, lower order learning includes developing knowledge about research, comprehending research, and applying research to practice scenarios, and higher-order learning includes analysis, evaluation and development of research (Adam, Zosky & Unrau, 2004).

Teaching students to understand and apply others' evaluations, and to create and apply their own evaluations, is the lofty goal of teaching undergraduate research for practice-informed research and research-informed practice. This article examines whether an agency-based research proposal assignment completed by students as second-semester juniors, informed senior field practicum work even though, as was the case for these students, the practicum did not include a research component. The assignment was designed to create a dialectic in which the lower-order remembering, understanding and applying supports the higher-order analyzing, evaluating and creating, which in turn enhance lower-order learning and so on.

It should also be noted that many social service agencies lack resources including accessible data, for agency-based research by front-line workers (Kapp & Stipp, 2010; Stipp & Kapp, 2012). The effective teaching of research methods begins where students are and links assignments to student objectives and concerns (Berger, 2002). Effective teaching also acknowledges the potential lack of agency research supports for front-line workers and prepares students to find needed supports, particularly data for answering agency questions.

## Literature Review

Addressing the practice-research gap is closely linked to the quality of student training for engaging in agency-based research. The literature providing evidence on how undergraduate social work students learn research methods is limited and fragmented (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Cameron & Este, 2008; Moore & Avant, 2008). It is a long-standing question dating back several decades among social work educators (Rubin, Franklin, & Selber, 1992; Plionis, 1993; Cheung, Thyer, & Webb, 2015) and social work practitioners alike (Olsen, 1990; Berger, 2002; Lynch, Zhang, & Korr, 2009; Beddoe, 2011). This is an important line of inquiry because the development of undergraduate research competence is associated with positive outcomes such as improving students' critical thinking and problem solving skills (Moore & Avant, 2008) and has also been linked to higher undergraduate retention rates and graduate school attendance (Council on Undergraduate Research, 2007; Ohio State University, 2006). Further, contribution to the knowledge base of the profession is a tenet of the social work profession's Code of Ethics (National Association of Social

Workers, 2008). Social work practice informed by empirically based research knowledge is hegemonic in the field (Thyer, 2015).

The challenge of closing the practice-research gap has been met with research examining the efficacy of specific pedagogical approaches for teaching social work research courses, and development of research curricula that address the practice-research gap. Hardcastle and Bisman (2003) synthesized the body of research and identified three general stances for teaching social work research methods in professional social work programs in the United States. The three stances are 1) the Educated Consumer of Research stance that focuses on critical thinking skills for analyzing and assessing research literature, 2) the Practitioner Scientist stance that focuses on students seeing themselves as practitioner-researchers with skills to engage in practice as a research endeavor, and 3) the Research as Practice Methodology stance that focuses on teaching critical thinking and methodologies for synthesizing and integrating research into practice. The selection of any particular curricular approach is unique to the educational program. Further, the variety of methods for teaching social work research reflects the need for a variety of research methods in practice contexts. In response Cameron and Este (2008) suggest the integration of practice-based research into research education is lacking and Herie and Martin (2002) suggest that linking research to the wider community in which practice is located is critical.

Research is integral to practice, and research education would ideally emphasize this relationship by integrating research and practice content in the curricula (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Hardcastle & Bisman, 2003; Lorenz, 2003). Examples of teaching practices useful to integrating practice and research content include incorporating readings on practice methodology in research courses and secondary analysis of data in practice courses (Calderwood, 2002), assessing rigor in qualitative and quantitative empirical reports in practice courses (Sar, Yankeelov, Wulff, & Singer, 2003), providing students with experiential data collection and analysis opportunities through university-community partnerships (Knee, 2002), and using large administrative data sets specific to students' practice specialization in practice and research courses (Shaw, Lee, & Wulczyn, 2012).

An approach to teaching research content which addresses these issues integrates practice and research content with service learning research opportunities (Freymond, Morgenshtern, Duffie, Hong, Bugeja-Freitas, & Eulenberg, 2014). A seminal author in social work research methods posits that didactic instructional methods are ineffective in teaching research courses (Rubin, 2008). Service learning may be an effective strategy for teaching research courses because it successfully integrates consumption, production, and integration, which are postulated to be important to students' learning research content (Forte, 1995). Consumption is a student's ability to read research articles and critically appraise the methods and findings; production refers to a student's ability to conduct research; and, integration is conceived as a student's ability to understand the intersection of research, practice, human behavior, and policy. The assignment described in this article is an example of integrating these three hypothesized goals of research courses in social work education, utilizing a service learning approach.

### **Integration of Service In Teaching Research**

Service learning is a pedagogical approach which addresses the practice-research gap in social work and has been identified as a natural fit for social work education (Knee, 2002; Kapp, 2006; Postlethwait, 2012). Further, students in social work research courses may benefit from inductive, experiential approaches to student learning and course content that focuses on the practical rather than the theoretical (Hostetter, Sullenberger, & Wood, 2013). Research indicates that service learning positively impacts academic performance (Fredericksen, 2000) and student-reported research self-efficacy (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Gershenson-Gates, 2012). Service learning in social work research courses may also increase students' motivation to learn research course content (Postlethwait, 2012).

Various contemporary definitions of service learning share three common components, referred to as the “service-learning educational triumvirate” by Lemieux and Allen (2007, p. 310). This triumvirate includes 1) student learning 2) community service and 3) reciprocal engagement. Service learning is “a collaborative relationship between the community and the classroom that equally prioritizes student learning and community service” and therefore differs from the field practicum and volunteer work requirements of the curriculum (Lemieux & Allen). Service learning is further understood in terms of the relationship between curriculum and community service. Service learning can be direct in which students have face-to-face contact with clients, or indirect where students engage in activities such as program evaluation or policy development. Hatcher’s 1996 definition of service learning (cited in Lemieux & Allen, 2007) incorporates these distinctions and is useful to understanding the meaning of service learning,

We view service-learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of service responsibility. (p. 222)

Engagement in service learning among social work research methods students has been shown to increase student understanding of organizational structure as well as barriers to applying knowledge to practice (Jacobsen & Goheen, 2006). In a study of students in an undergraduate research course Knee (2002) found that a majority of students felt the service learning component of an applied research assignment increased understanding of the research process, and helped bridge the practice-research gap.

Another advantage of service learning as an approach to teaching social work research content is that it results in a useful product for the agency-partner. Kvarfordt and colleagues assessed the usefulness of a student-developed research proposal in addressing a real-world problem of the agency in which students were completing their practicum. Findings from their study indicate positive attitudes among student participants about research such as lowered research anxiety, increased confidence, and perceptions of being better prepared to conduct research. Additionally, students reported engaging with the agency at a deeper level and enjoying the opportunity to “give back” to their agency. Students felt their proposal would not be used in any way by the agency (57%) compared to only 17% of supervisors who felt the same. Further, 27% of students felt that some aspect of the proposal would be useful to the agency, whereas 67% of supervisors indicated the proposal was useful in some regard. Utility of the research proposal assignment reported by field supervisors included the provision of necessary information to the agency, ideas for future research, and an impetus for carrying out research in the agency (Kvarfordt, Carter, Park, & Yun, 2014).

While a review of the literature points to current trends and issues in teaching research methods to address the practice-research gap, there remains a dearth of literature that examines the extent to which undergraduate social work students autonomously apply skills and knowledge gained from their research courses to their field practicum work. This article reports on the effectiveness of a research proposal assignment in a junior year social work research methods course, for informing a senior year field practicum even though, as was the case for these students, the practicum did not include a research component. The assignment itself is an example of infusing a research course with practice content and using experiential service learning to teach research methods knowledge and skills. This study examines whether the eight elements of an agency-based research proposal assignment completed by social work juniors informed their field practicum work as seniors, and whether students were able to recognize agency information needs and agency uses of data.

### **Development of a Service Learning Assignment for Undergraduate Research**

Kapp (2006) and Postlethwait (2012) developed a research proposal assignment delivered to social work seniors across two semesters in small-class research seminars. The first semester was devoted to content in foundational research

constructs and methods including introductory statistics. The second semester focused on application and service via the agency-based research proposal. Kapp and Postlethwait both engaged the agency prior to the semester and began developing a research question with an agency representative. Each devoted three class sessions to meetings between students and agency representatives.

### **Adjustment to a One-Semester Research Course**

Authors for the current study adjusted the two-semester assignment from Kapp (2006) and Postlethwait (2012) for delivery to social work juniors at Illinois State University. The ISU course used a one-semester traditional large-class format with introductory statistics prerequisite.

All students in the class had a formal relationship with an area agency. All had completed required volunteer hours; many had already arranged their senior practicum placement with an agency. Volunteer and practicum placements are coordinated through the School of Social Work Field office. Course instructors placed students in groups with similar agency interests. Each group identified one agency as their focus; not all students served that agency. There was a total of 10 agencies involved in year one of this study, and eight agencies involved in year two.

Classes met once a week for three hours with 90 minutes for foundational research topics and 90 minutes for proposal development. Students learned research constructs and methods concurrent with conceptualizing and proposing research for a local agency. There was not class time devoted to meetings between students and agency representatives. Instead, students met with agency representatives outside class to talk about agency questions that might serve as a proposal focus.

**Instructor Roles.** Instructors explained the course was designed to help students become social work practitioner-researchers, and that the major assignment was an agency-based research proposal students designed to answer a local agency's questions. Instructors assigned students to groups of five or six students with attention to diverse ability levels and cultural identities, and similarity of student-identified practice interests. Instructors assisted groups in assigning equitable workgroups and specialized tasks. Workgroup areas included the introduction, program description, literature review, measurement/data collection/data management, sampling design, research method/design, and ethics (Table 1). Some groups also assigned specialized tasks such as project manager and editor, to students especially skilled in organization and writing.

Instructors provided written and verbal instruction, templates, and copies of research proposals from prior years. Instructors provided weekly in-class consultation with each group. Early-semester consultation helped students engage with an agency, develop a research question, develop a logic model, find and synthesize relevant peer-reviewed literature, and identify variables. Later-semester consultation focused on measuring, sampling, design, ethics, and dissemination through written and oral proposal presentation to the agency. The instructor provided timely review of drafts throughout the semester so students were able to edit and rewrite. When problems arose regarding the proposal the instructor asked probing questions, directed students to a textbook section or other resource, and directed students to each other as one section impacted another. Instructors supported group processes by collecting self-report data on the group twice during the semester, and reporting back to the group mid-semester on their self-reported group processes. The instructor asked group members if they agreed with the self-report data and to identify areas in which they could be more supportive of one another and of the process.

**Project Schedule.** In the first three weeks, students identified and engaged with an agency for which they would develop a research proposal. Each group identified an agency representative known to group members. Agencies provided a topic, or groups developed questions from their understanding of the agency's information needs. All students searched peer-reviewed literature related to agency information needs and wrote five annotated bibliographies for individual

grades. The annotated bibliographies followed a template that included research question(s), sample, design and findings. Students forwarded their best annotated bibliographies to the literature review writers (Table 1).

In weeks 4 through 7 students in four workgroups – introduction, program description, literature review and measurement/data collection/data management – began their work in consultation with their entire proposal group, the agency they identified, and the course instructor. The introduction workgroups met with agency representatives to inform writing of an answerable research question. Program description workgroups met with their agency representatives to inform development of a logic model. Literature review workgroups reviewed their groupmates' annotated bibliographies and found additional literature as needed. Measurement/data collection/data management workgroups began identifying relevant variables.

In weeks 8 through 11 students in the measurement/data collection/data management workgroups continued their work by finding or developing a way to measure the variables. Students in three workgroups – research method/design, sampling and ethics – began their work in consultation with their proposal group, the identified agency and the instructor. Research method/design workgroups developed the study, sampling design workgroups identified an appropriate sample, and ethics workgroups developed documentation to guide ethical research implementation.

In weeks 12 through 16 workgroups consulted with their proposal group, agency and instructor, for editing, rewriting, and developing cohesive proposals. Each group made an oral presentation to the class and agency representatives who were able to attend class, and provided electronic documents to the instructor and agency (Table 1).

Table 1. Agency-Based Research Proposal: Timeline for Learning and Service

<b>Weeks Learning</b>	<b>Service Product (by workgroup)</b>
<b>1 - 3</b> Curiosity Literature searches Annotated bibliographies	Agency engagement (all students)
<b>4 - 7</b> Research questions Logic models  Writing: synopsis of the literature Variables	Relevant research question (Introduction workgroup) Graphic of resources; of processes/practices (Program Description workgroup)  Literature synopsis (Literature Review workgroup) Relevant variables (Literature Review workgroup, with the Measurement/Data Collection/Data Management workgroup)
<b>8 - 11</b> Data identification; Measure identification; Measure development Research design development, including needs assessments Sample design development Social work ethics applied to research; IRB requirements	Existing data or relevant measure (Measurement/Data Collection/Data Management workgroup) Design relevant to the question and usable by the agency (Research Method/Design workgroup) Identification of a sample (Sampling Design workgroup) Informed consent and IRB documents developed (Ethics workgroup)
<b>12 - 16</b> Writing and dissemination	Oral report to agencies; electronic report with support documents (all students)

## Research Questions

This study examines two questions. (1) Do each of the eight elements of an agency-based research proposal assignment completed by social work juniors inform students' field practicum work as seniors, and to what extent? (2) Were students able to recognize agency information needs and agency uses of data, and if so what did they observe?

## Methods

### Research Design

Researchers developed a survey (Appendix) to identify whether elements of the agency-based research proposal assignment informed students' field practicum work. Researchers surveyed graduating seniors about whether the assignment they completed as juniors informed their field practicum work.

Student indications of elements of the assignment that informed their field practicum work, and their recognition of agency information needs and uses of data, provided the study's quantitative data. Student responses to follow-up questions asking "what more could you tell us" provided the study's qualitative data.

### Sample

Study participants completed an agency-based research proposal in their undergraduate social work research course as second-semester juniors. At the time of data collection participants had completed their social work field practicums as second-semester seniors. Data were collected from the 2013 and 2014 cohorts of Illinois State University social work seniors. For both cohorts a year had passed between the time students completed the assignment as juniors, and data collection.

Each of two years there were two sections of the course. The first study author taught both sections in 2013, the second study author taught both sections in 2014. The first study author taught 60 students in two sections of Social Work Research for the 2013 graduation cohort. The second author taught 45 students in two sections for the 2014 graduation cohort. From the first cohort 27 students completed the survey (45%). From the second cohort 29 students completed the survey (64%). A combined 56 of 105 students from the two cohorts participated in the survey (53%). Instructor-researchers mitigated undue influence in data collection, by enlisting colleagues who had not taught the course to inform consent and administer the survey. The course instructor was not present before or during data collection, and did not know which students participated in the survey. Respondent identities were unknown to the researchers as data were collected by faculty members who had not instructed the course. What is known is that across the two cohorts a majority of students were White, female, and traditional-age college students. Eighteen percent of the two cohorts self-identified as cultural minorities (11 Mexican/other Latino/Hispanic, 7 African American/other Black non-Hispanic, 1 Asian American), 12% self-identified as male, four students were over age 25.

### Data Collection and Measurement

Study data were generated by a survey of graduating seniors about (1) elements of the research proposal that informed their senior year field practicum work and (2) students' recognition of the practicum agency's information needs and uses of data. The survey was conducted at the conclusion of an optional school of social work program evaluation meeting for graduating seniors. The researchers' faculty colleague read the instructions, invited students to stay after the meeting to complete the brief survey, and collected the completed surveys.

The survey asked students whether elements of the agency-based research proposal assignment informed their field practicum work. The eight elements of the proposal assignment that were named in the survey are (1) developing a research question that reflects agency questions, (2) developing a needs assessment about clients or the community, (3-4) conducting literature reviews about a population or problem and about best/emerging practices, (5-6) logic models for agency resources and agency processes, and (7) identifying existing data and (8) identifying or developing a measure to generate new data (Table 2). The survey probed further by asking students what more they could tell researchers about ways the proposal informed their approach to field practicum work. The survey asked students whether they

recognized agency data and information needs for answering agency questions in their field practicum work and if so, what more student could tell researchers about ways the proposal helped them recognize the agency's information needs and use of data.

Researchers used Microsoft Excel (version 2013) to calculate descriptive statistics. The study reports the mean number of assignment elements students identified as applicable to their field practicum work and percentages of students who applied each of the eight nominal elements in their practicum work. The study reports the number of agency information needs students recognized.

Researchers used Microsoft Word (version 2013) to record, transcribe and code focus group data. Researchers used constant comparative analysis to critically examine the qualitative data (Fram, 2013). The study reports information students added about the assignment informing their field practicum work. Where applicable qualitative data are reported alongside quantitative data. Qualitative data unique in the study is reported separately.

## Results

These results present elements of the agency-based research proposal that informed students' field practicum work (Table 2) and student comments about how the proposal assignment informed their practicum work. Results present student recognition of practicum agency information needs (Table 3) and student comments about how the proposal assignment helped them recognize agency information needs.

### Agency-Based Research Proposal Elements that Informed Students' Field Practicum Work

Developing a research question informed 46% of respondents. Identifying or developing a measure to generate agency data informed 39% of respondents (Table 2).

Table 2. Elements of the Assignment that Informed Students' Field Practicum Work (n = 56)

Proposal Element	Number of Students	Percent of Students	
<b>Research Question</b> that reflects agency questions	26	46%	
<b>Needs Assessment</b> of clients or community	37	66%	
<b>Literature Review</b>	Population or problem	43	77%
	Best or emerging practices	28	50%
<b>Logic Model</b>	Agency resources	31	55%
	Agency processes	27	48%
<b>Agency Data</b>	Identify existing data that measures outcomes	28	50%
	Identify/develop measures to generate new data	22	39%

### Added Benefits of the Agency-Based Research Proposal

Student comments further indicated what they valued about the assignment as a whole. The assignment helped students go into their practicum "actively engaged, involved, informed" and "already having literature the agency needed." Students reported the proposal garnered respect in the agency. The assignment helped a student develop "better understanding of basic terminology for discussing research within an agency" which she was able to use in supervision. A student recalled that the course content was not fun but stated she was pleased by how "the work impressed everyone" at the agency.

Students also believed they were better writers because of their proposal work. It helped a student write her senior thesis, and prepared another for grant writing and “all the writing that will take place in our field.” The assignment helped a student become a “more efficient” consumer of peer-reviewed literature. It helped a student learn “how to read articles and get more out of them” and helped a student understand “the purpose of abstracts and keywords.”

### Student Understanding of Agency Information Needs

Respondents identified agency data as informing their practicum work less frequently than other aspects of the proposal (Table 2) yet most students recognized uses or need for agency data in their practicum work (Table 3). Thirteen students indicated being informed by the proposal to recognize at least one agency data use or information need; 24 students indicated the assignment helped them recognize two data uses or information needs; 14 students selected each of the three data recognition options, indicating the assignment helped them recognize agency uses for data, unmet information need, and unused data. Five respondents selected no options indicating recognition of their agency’s information needs or data uses.

Three-fourths of respondents recognized uses for data in their practicum work, 61% recognized information need for which the agency did not have identified data, and more than a third of respondents recognized data in their agency that was going unused (Table 3). Students further reported going into their practicum prepared to use data, understanding that “data affect clients,” and with “a basic knowledge of how data affect client services.” A student knew “where to look and what to look for” within the agency and from publicly available data sources. A student reported knowing “ways to assess data” for objectivity.

Table 3. Students Understanding of Agency Information Need ( $n = 56$ )

Information Need/Data Utilization	Number of Students	Percent of Students
Uses of data	42	75%
Unmet need for data	34	61%
Unused existing data	21	38%

**Students Recognized Practicum Agency’s Data Uses.** Three respondents gave one or more specific examples of data they saw used in their agencies. These was a consumer satisfaction survey, a problem prevalence measure, a pretest-posttest service measure, a service needs assessment, a logic model, and internal and external databases. A response indicated that students “noticed our agencies don’t do research studies, but they document everything, so if we wanted to do research we would know where to find the information” (Table 3).

**Students Recognized Practicum Agency’s Data Needs.** Students recognized how data could have been used to answer local questions. Students identified a lack of data, barriers to collecting data, data “too disorganized” to be helpful, and data that did not exist “in proportion to client needs.” Students demonstrated research imaginations for ways data could be useful, including to “improve and make changes to service programs,” to “evaluate positive and negative approaches,” and to “understand and best serve diverse populations.” A student said “it would be easy to track the data, but some of our agencies didn’t” (Table 3).

**Students Recognized Practicum Agency’s Unused Data.** A student said their agency collected data but it was “not used to make changes.” Students commented about inefficient data collection and storage, and that the data collected was not related to client need.

Conversely in an agency that did collect and use local data, a student noted that “sometimes it seems that data gathering comes before the clients themselves” (Table 3).

### **Study Strengths & Limitations**

Study strengths include a 53% response, data collection across two cohorts that received the same assignment from two different instructors, and triangulated quantitative and qualitative data. The study is limited by its small, purposive, non-random sample. There may have been selection bias because students who attended the optional program evaluation meeting may have been more invested in their academic program than students who did not attend.

Different instructors in years one and two presented a challenge to the study’s fidelity. Instructors attempted to mitigate the challenge to fidelity by reviewing and planning the assignment together.

### **How beneficial was this assignment in learning about the community?**

Most students reported that this assignment was “somewhat beneficial” in understanding the needs of the community where they attended college. Some who worked on a more community-oriented project appreciated the opportunity to meet and interact with local residents involved in volunteerism or people served by the organizations. One undergraduate student reported, “I remember most meeting some of the people from the group homes and seeing their appreciation towards what we had done for them.” These projects also introduced students to some of the challenges facing this community, and as one first-year student reported, “It was amazing and sad to see that a world existed outside of meal points and essays. I thought my life was beginning to become difficult with homework and what not, but it was an enormous wake-up call.”

The study relies on student self-report nearly a year after completion of the assignment. Though the study was conducted the week after students’ practicums concluded, recall of assignment details from a year prior may have been difficult. It is unlikely, however, that students would have confounded learning sources, as this assignment was unique in the BSW curriculum.

## **Discussion**

The percentage of students informed by elements of the assignment should be interpreted with the understanding that not all students were actively engaged with each assignment element. All students were actively involved in the literature review for instance, but some followed along as other project workgroups developed the research question or identified relevant data. Findings suggest learning that occurred between group members as well as through direct completion.

It seems that students were best positioned to assess need. The literature review is certainly the most familiar of the assignment elements, but half again as many students were informed by the literature review of a population or problem, as by literature review of best or emerging practices. Further, not all students participated in developing a needs assessment, but a high percentage identified that element as informing their field practicum work. Students did recognize agencies’ need for data to assess practices and outcomes, indicating there may have been more agency activity around assessing need than assessing practices and outcomes. Whatever the reason these findings indicate students were better positioned to assess need than practices and outcomes. Further attention should be given to assessing agency practices and outcomes.

Although students reported being able to identify existing data and need for data, the smallest percentage of students identified being informed by identifying or developing measures to generate new data. As with the idea of assessing

agency practices and outcomes, there may have been more agency activity around collecting and using data than around generating new data. Students may need added support for generating data.

Researchers anticipated that developing the research question would have been the least informative assignment element for students' field practicum work. It appeared to researchers that it was the assignment element that created the most angst, coming as it did before students were acclimated to the idea of what agency research is. Apparently the hard work of developing a research question, work directly set upon by only about a quarter of the students, informed student understanding of how to generate agency information.

Students indicated their agencies were receptive and supportive of their identification as practitioner-researchers. Students who graduate prepared as practitioner-researchers may be able to satisfy and expand their own curiosities. Agencies that employ graduates who identify as practitioner-researchers may expand their resources and supports for practitioners to build local agency knowledge, further diminishing the practice-research gap.

Student comments indicated the added value of information they brought to the practicum that was directly related to their agency. "Already having literature the agency needed" paved the way for students to establish themselves in the agency. Learning the language of research, concomitant with experiencing an agency's information and serving the agency through helping them address their information needs, may help fill a practice-research gap in the profession of social work.

Development of undergraduates as practitioner-researchers might be further supported by expanding the assignment across other curriculum content areas. It appears the assignment's linkage between research and field were important. The value of the assignment might be further enhanced by deeper linkage with practice courses for development of research groups with similar practice interests and existing practice curiosities. When contextualized throughout the undergraduate curriculum, students' natural curiosity about identifying when "good" is accomplished, may find further outlet in analyzing, evaluating and creating research that answers local agency questions.

### **Conclusion**

Many students come into social work with a motivation to "do good" in the world but few skills for knowing when "good" has been accomplished. Research methods hold keys for identifying need and effective interventions, but we often fail to help students connect the methods they learned in their research courses to answering questions in their agencies. The goal of the agency-based research proposal assignment was to support student development as practitioner-researchers, as professionals who consume and produce research for building agency knowledge, and who use research in service of their clients and agencies.

The near-simultaneous teaching of research constructs and student development of a research product to serve an area agency was difficult, yet most respondents reported some level of being informed by the project in their field practicum work. They were autonomously informed by the assignment as there was no follow-up by Social Work Research instructors connecting the assignment to students' field work. Of Lemieux and Allen's research triumvirate (student learning, community service and reciprocal engagement) reciprocal engagement is most distal to the project. Study findings indicate the presence of that distal leg of the triumvirate, the reciprocal engagement. The study indicates that the process of student learning about becoming research consumers, while becoming research producers, not only resulted in a research product that could be useful to an area agency but moved students toward engaging outside the classroom as practitioner-researchers.

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## Appendix

### SURVEY

#### **Preparing Social Work Undergraduates for Field Placement and Practice: The Value of an Agency-Based Research Proposal**

Every social service agency has information needs.

- *What kinds of problems are clients seeking help for?*
- *What practices are emerging (or best) for addressing those problems?*
- *How well is the agency meeting client and community needs?*
- *How effective are the agency’s processes?*

A year ago, as a student in SWK 315: Social Work Research, you developed a research proposal suitable for use by an area agency, for addressing their information needs. Since that time, you have spent nearly two semesters in an area agency, perhaps the same agency for which you developed a research proposal.

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey, giving us feedback about the relevance of last year’s agency-based research proposal assignment, for preparing you to work in an area social service agency.

For each question please check all that apply to you. In a group of 3 - 5 students, discuss your answers. Provide written examples from your group that will help us understand your group members’ checked responses.

1a. Check all that apply: Which elements of the agency-based research proposal informed your field placement work?

- Literature review: understanding a client population or problem
- Literature review: finding emerging or best practices
- Research question: developing an answerable question
- Needs assessment
- Data: developing a measurement instrument that will help you find answers to questions the agency is asking
- Data: finding existing data that will help you find answers to questions the agency is asking
- Logic Model: examining agency processes
- Logic Model: identifying agency resources and use of resources

1b. Brainstorm with your group: What more could tell us about ways developing an agency-based research proposal informed your approach to your field placement?

2a. Every social service agency and social work practitioner has information needs. In what ways did the agency-based research proposal help you recognize your agency's information needs and use of data?

Check all that apply: The research proposal helped you recognize the:

- Uses of data within your agency
- Need for data within your agency
- Available data that is not being used
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2b. Brainstorm with your group: What more could tell us about ways your agency-based research proposal helping you recognize your agency's information needs and use of data?

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### ***About GAUISUS***

*Gausius* is the internal, peer-reviewed scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) publication at Illinois State University (ISU). Its purpose is to provide instructors writing about their teaching and learning a local but peer reviewed publication outlet and to offer other instructors and students an accessible publication to read to obtain a sense of, and learn from, some of the scholarly teaching and SoTL projects conducted by their colleagues on our campus. The name, *Gausius* means glad, gladly, or joyful in Latin, as in the Illinois State motto/logo, "Gladly we learn and teach."

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