

Training Needs for Field Placements in Mental Health Settings: Perceptions of Social Work Students

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BACKGROUND

Social workers are the largest body of mental health service providers in the United States. They provide approximately 60% of all mental health services among the allied health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses. The University of Michigan is a major contributor to this workforce. Specifically, more than 320 students enroll each fall, with approximately 70% declaring interpersonal practice as their method area. Currently, 123 social work students have a mental health services concentration. These students will be part of delivering mental health services in some fashion, either in a specialty or non-specialty setting.

The rapid growth of new knowledge on the treatment of mental disorders and deep change to the public system of care continually place new demands on social workers launching careers in mental health. At the University of Michigan, social work students receive a broad-based education in mental health treatment and policy. One of the major challenges is knowing how to structure course work in order to maximize student learning and outcomes. Field placements represent a key area of social work training, and it is important to ensure that students are adequately prepared to receive advanced training in these settings. The purpose of this study was to elicit student perceptions of training needs in order to help inform the structure and content of the training curriculum.

METHODS

This study used an established evaluation and planning methodology referred to as concept mapping. This is a structured process that involves input from one or more participants that produces an interpretable pictorial view (concept map) of their ideas and concepts and how they are interrelated. The steps involved gathering qualitative data about a topic of interest using a guided brainstorming session. Then, quantitative procedures are used to analyze the sorting and rating data using multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis.

Using an online data collection system, 11 MSW students with at least 3 months of field experience brainstormed ideas in response to the following stimulus question: "What skills, knowledge and competencies do you believe are most critical for being effective in a mental field placement?" Then, 16 MSW students with at least 3 months of field experience individually sorted the statements into groups they considered to be conceptually similar. After all the items were sorted, students ordered the statements within each group based on their relative importance.

RESULTS

The brainstorming phase resulted in 85 skills and competencies. After excluding redundancies from this overall list, 72 unique skills and competencies were further examined through sorting and importance ratings. Multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis revealed 6 different clusters. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of this analysis, with the numbers representing the specific skills and competencies. Each cluster was named based on the items contained within the clusters.

FIGURE 1: CLUSTER SOLUTION

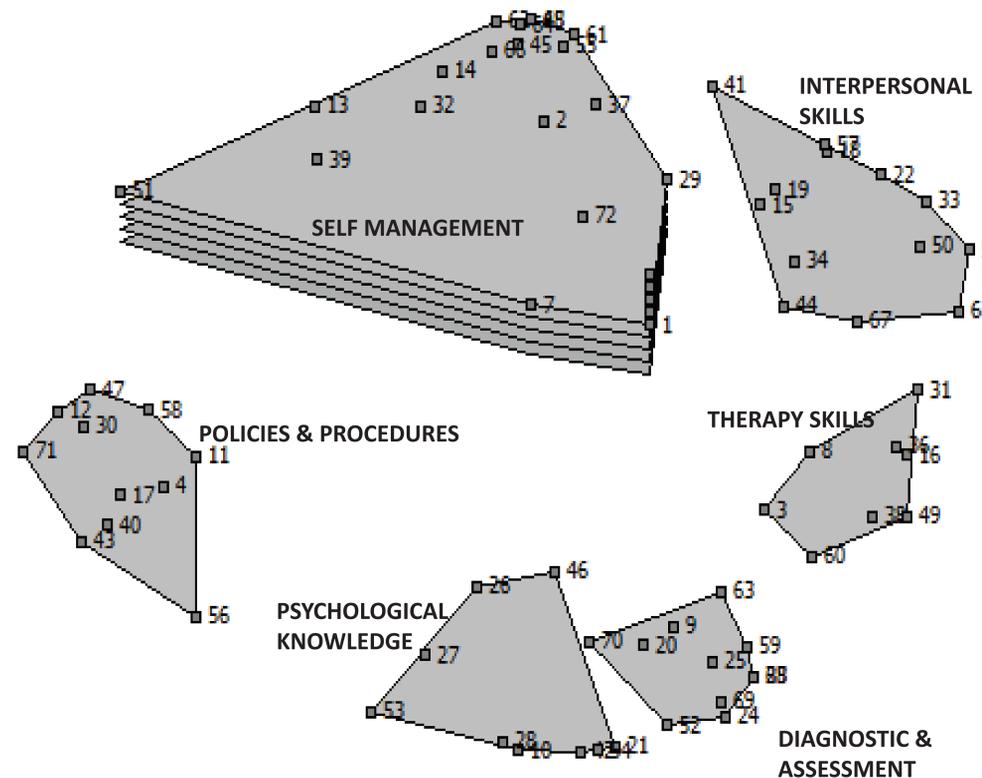


Table 1 provides example skills, knowledge, and competencies for each cluster. The examples represent the items that received the highest ratings.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, & COMPETENCIES

Self Management

1. Ability to work effectively on a treatment team
72. Understanding you are not client's friend
62. Willingness to explore outside comfort zone

Therapy Skills

8. General counseling skills
60. Therapeutic skills that align with modality of field site
31. Ability to confront clients

Interpersonal Skills

44. Handle crisis situations
18. Comfortable with silence
34. Work effectively with different people

Diagnostic & Assessment

59. Suicide assessment
25. Assessment of psychosocial factors
52. Understanding of DSM

Policies & Procedures

30. Reporting skills
43. Knowledge of barriers and community resources
12. Field site policies and protocols

Psychological Knowledge

53. History of psychiatry
46. Understanding of environmental factors on mental health
27. Knowledge of history of psychotherapy

CONCLUSION

This study will serve as a guide to faculty concerning how curriculum is organized in order to maximize student learning. While many of the items elicited in the brainstorming phase are covered in the current course content, not all are being addressed prior to starting a field placement. Moreover, it was surprising to find that the concept "evidence-based practice" received a relatively low level of importance, as expertise in this area is arguably fundamental to effective practice. Skills in self-management were a major content area that appears to be appropriately addressed through the existing curriculum structure. Further research is needed in order to better understand how these content areas should be integrated throughout the curriculum and whether some should be targeted as standalone courses. It is also unclear how these content areas map on to other concentrations within the curriculum.