

# Field Instruction Units: Collaboration in Practice

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December 1994

*The author is on the staff of the Maine Department of Human Services Training Institute, under whose auspices the activities described here were conducted. The Institute is a collaborative program of the Muskie Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Southern Maine and the Department of Human Services.*

# Acknowledgements

A collaborative project such as this would not be possible without the commitment and support of many individuals in both the public agency and the university. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following:

To the members of the Professional Development Committee who first encouraged the concept of Field Instruction Units, and especially to Harmon Harvey, Barbara Churchill, Mary Dionne and Vincent Faherty who drew upon their own experience to promote it.

To Patti Coleman of the University of Maine School of Social Work who helped draft the first conceptual plan.

To the members of the Task Force who worked so hard during the planning phase, especially to Nancy Kelly, Shawn Yardley, and Leslie Richfield. Special thanks to Karen Westburg, whose leadership skills and commitment to the project were an inspiration throughout this process.

To the Field Instructors, Kay Davis and Karen Repasky, who have been so effective in turning the dream of the units into reality and have nurtured them through their first year growing pains.

To Wendy Bessey who provided such effective staffing to the project, by helping to administer both the planning and implementation, and by providing the basis for the evaluation.

To Miriam Clasby, Carol Hayden and Anne Bernard for their expert assistance in producing this report.

To Freda Plumley, Director of the Bureau of Child and Family Services, and Jane Sheehan, Commissioner of the Department of Human Services, whose leadership and support for the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute have made possible initiatives such as the Field Instruction Units.

## Field Instruction Units

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1994 - 1995

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# I. Background

In 1990, two Maine organizations launched a partnership to improve the delivery of services to children and their families. The two partners—the Bureau of Child and Family Services of the Maine Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Muskie Institute of the University of Southern Maine—were linked by a common commitment to public service.

Drawing on broad professional experience, the partners designed the Maine Child Welfare Training Institute. This collaborative effort has several distinctive features: (1) Institute offices are located in the state capital and activities are integrated into agency operations; (2) several committees, representing the various **units** and managerial levels of the agency, hold responsibility for decision making; and (3) the training model emphasizes a holistic, competency-based approach to on-going professional development.

As a university-agency partnership, the Training Institute functions through several standing and ad hoc committees. Committees are staffed by the Institute and guided by policies and procedures for program planning, design, oversight, and evaluation. Under the aegis of the overarching Systems Operations Committee, for example, the Professional Development Committee is charged with providing an on-going professional development program to acquire, promote and develop new knowledge, skills and academic credentials.

As its first major initiative, the Institute designed a 25-day preservice program that is offered five times each year for newly hired child welfare workers. In addition, more than one hundred prospective adoptive and foster parents have already participated in an eight-session orientation program, offered at regular intervals in the five regions of the state. Additional programs for continuing professional development address needs identified by managers and supervisors.

## **Field Instruction Units: The Concept**

In discussing issues of staff recruitment and retention, the Professional Development Committee identified the need for a pool of candidates with experience and knowledge of child welfare work, and the need to incorporate into the practice of child welfare an emphasis on social work theory, practice and values. One approach to addressing staff recruitment is the field instruction unit—a joint effort linking academics who provide graduate and undergraduate social work education with practitioners to improve the quality of practice and the availability of skilled workers. In their mission statements, the social work programs of the University of Maine system include a commitment to preparing professionals for public agencies. Since 1989, however, constraints on state budgets have reduced opportunities for field placements in public agencies. While coping with escalating case loads, hiring freezes, furlough days, and a general decrease in resources, agency staff could not allocate time and resources to supervise students in field placement. Yet the need persisted for aggressive efforts to recruit well-prepared staff.

Because recruiting and retaining competent staff is a problem common to public child welfare agencies throughout the country, Title IV-E of the Social Security Act provides funding to encourage public agencies and schools of social work to collaborate on the professional preparation of public child welfare staff. The Committee recommended that Title IV-E funding be used to establish Field Instruction Units and in 1992 the initiative was underway.

This overview of the Maine model for field instruction covers a two-year period: the design stage (1992-93) and first-year implementation (1993-94). Section II focuses on the organization, describing the collaborative structure for planning, decision making, and general administration. Section III describes the instructional program and linkages with competency-based agency training. Section IV presents features of program operation, including procedures for staffing and for student recruitment, selection, and participation. Section V outlines approaches to various levels of evaluation. As a progress report, the presentation concludes with Section VI, a summary of systemic issues.

Collaborative ventures are always complex and demanding. To assure a common base of information for multiple groups of participants, the Institute staff has developed a *Child Welfare Field Instruction Unit Manual* which is a compilation of policy and procedures for administering the units. In this report, the Manual is cited as a reference for more detailed discussion of specific topics and for examples of documents and protocols designed for the project. (For example, the Manual includes the job descriptions and hiring process for the field instructors.)

## **II. Organizational Structure and General Administration**

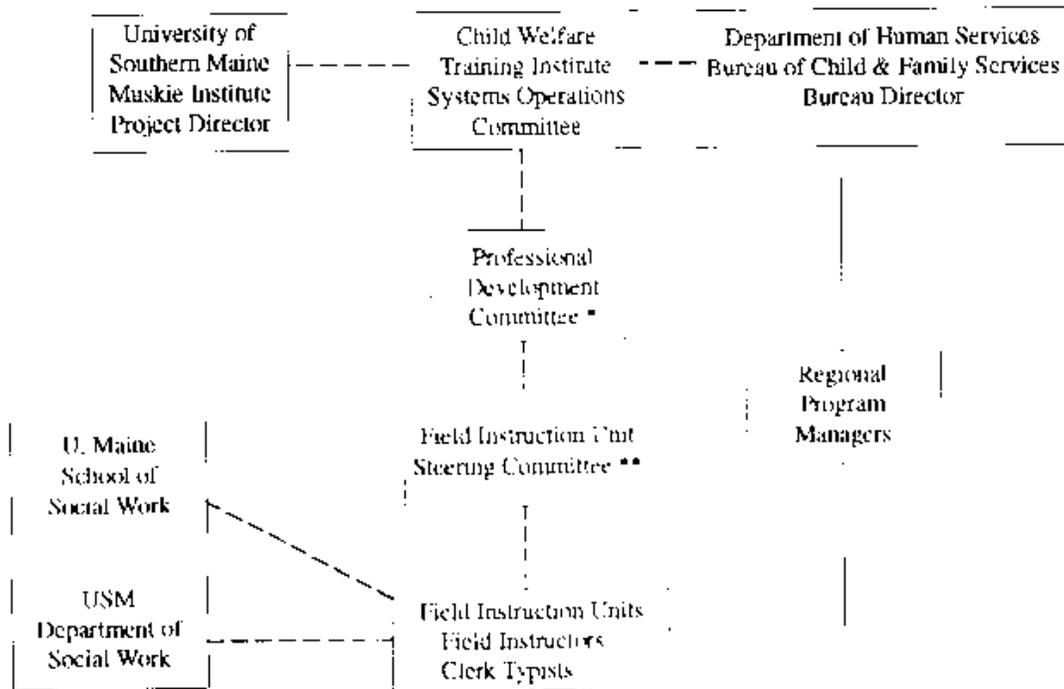
In August 1992, with formal university and agency approval for a planning year, a Field Instruction Unit Task Force was established to design the program. Supported by an Institute staff member, the Task Force included two field coordinators from the University of Maine system (one from the University of Maine at Orono, and one from the University of Southern Maine at Portland) and two representatives from the Bureau of Child and Family Services (BCFS) of the Department of Human Services. The group began the planning year with a two-day retreat and then met monthly, with regular feedback and guidance from the Professional Development Committee.

A major product of the planning year was the design for a permanent structure. To provide continuing collaborative oversight for the program, the Task Force outlined the roles and responsibilities of a Field Instruction Steering Committee. As the organizational chart on the following page indicates, the Field Instruction Unit is a component within the existing Institute partnership. The Steering Committee reports to the Professional Development Committee of the Institute, which in turn reports to the Systems Operation Committee. Although lines of authority and communication are inevitably intricate (even complicated), both the network and the time required to nurture it are essential for full collaboration—for ensuring that those affected by decisions have a voice in shaping those decisions.

One early and significant decision defined the character of the partnership. Typically in such programs, field instructors are university employees. In Maine, it was recognized that there are advantages to having field instructors with formal authority to carry cases and thus to strengthen the integration of instruction and practice. During this planning year, agency staff took steps to secure appropriate authorization from the State legislature for two new agency positions for field unit supervisors and two for clerical support staff.

In these initial months, the Task Force also focused on developing procedures for site selection. The Maine Department of Human Services (DHS) operates in five regions with distinctive populations, and BCFS Regional Program Managers play a key role in implementing policies and procedures. To further extend the concept of partnership and to avoid one more experience of a "mandate from above," a memorandum from the Bureau Director invited all five regions to apply for designation as one of the two initial field sites. Three regions submitted applications outlining regional staffing needs, plans for housing and equipping the field unit, and arrangements for integrating the field unit into on-going operations. After reviewing applications, the Task Force selected DHS regional offices in Bangor and in Portland. Early evidence suggests that the competitive process triggered intensive internal discussions in the regions. This served the intended purpose of building a broad sense of ownership of a commitment to the new venture.

## Field Instruction Units



\* Members: Regional Program Manager, Casework Supervisor, Program Specialist, University of Maine Chair of Social Work, University of Southern Maine Chair of Social Work, University of Maine at Presque Isle Chair of Social Work, Child Welfare Training Institute Manager, Field Instruction Unit Project Director

\*\* Members: Field Instructors, Faculty Liaisons, Field Coordinators, Regional Program Managers, Field Instruction Unit Project Director, Student Representatives

The organizational collaboration required by the Field Instruction Units inevitably leads to complications. The agency provides space, the project purchases furniture and supplies. While policy and procedures for the units are developed by the project, the field instructor and clerk typist are agency employees under the authority of the regional program manager. In the regional office where clerk typists function as members of a pool under a clerk supervisor, both the field instructor and the clerk supervisor could make the case that they should supervise the field unit clerk typist. With no line authority, project staff can offer advice, but cannot intervene in such disputes.

To avert such tensions, the practical tasks of setting up the site offices required special attention to the organizational climate. With a separate project budget, the Task Force gave long consideration to apparently simple decisions that carried heavy symbolic weight. The group wrestled with questions such as: What quality of new or used desks and chairs? Who gets the new items—field unit personnel or agency staff? Should supplies—such as pens—be standard agency stock? Is travel reimbursed at the university rate of 23 cents a mile or the agency rate of 22 cents a mile? For agency staff conditioned to drastic and protracted cost-cutting measures, even the installation of field unit phones required careful thought.

The Task Force was rewarded for such meticulous attention to detail when the Portland and Bangor sites began operations quite smoothly in September 1993.

### **III. The Field Unit Experience**

All Institute training is based on a holistic view of the competencies needed for effective performance. As in many competency-based programs, task analysis is used to identify the functional skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to carry out job requirements. However, to capture the full range of competencies needed for job performance, these data are supplemented with information on the underlying personal characteristics that distinguish effective performers, as well as the context skills and knowledge needed in a specific setting.

Both agency and Institute staff had worked collaboratively to refine a competency model for child welfare workers that currently provides the base for preservice training and continued professional development activities. (See Section VII of the Manual.)

To design policies and procedures for the student field unit experience, the Task Force assigned major roles to the two members serving as university liaisons. As a first step, faculty of the two academic departments reviewed available child welfare curriculum, including that of the Institute's twenty-day, competency-based preservice training program. When university liaisons reported that faculty judged the curriculum as 'one of the best they had seen, the groundwork was in place for integrating the field instruction with the Institute's on-going professional training. This decision to make the educational component of the field experience competency-based and to require that all students cover the content included in the preservice curriculum meant that students would be allowed to begin carrying cases immediately upon hire without having to attend preservice.

The field unit experience has four components: (a) preservice and continuing training, (b) experiential learning, (c) campus seminar, and (d) peer group experience. Following is a description of each component.

#### **Preservice and Continuing Training**

Prior to the beginning of academic classes in the fall semester, students participate in the first week of the Institute's preservice training. This basic orientation not only establishes key themes, values, and priorities for the training, it also provides an opportunity for students to establish relationships with each other. Throughout the semester one day each week is set aside for continued instruction in the unit. (Section II of the Manual includes instructional objectives, the schedule for presentation of curriculum units, a bibliography, and a list of local resource people for lectures and workshops.)

## **Experiential Learning**

The field unit work experience has three goals: (1) to provide a depth of experience in one program area of public child welfare; (2) to expose students to a continuum of service provided in public child welfare; and (3) to provide a progression of responsibility and an opportunity to work independently in professional practice.

To launch students on this new experience, Institute trainers utilized a 41 page "Self-Help Guide to Job Shadowing." Drawing on staff experience in the pre-service program, this guide, which is included in the *Manual*, first presents a basic orientation to the Institute and some strategies for productive job shadowing. It also offers general guidelines to key situations that students encounter on the job, from intake through administrative case reviews and court hearings. It concludes with hints for informal approaches to capitalizing on the office experience.

The *Manual* also provides general guidelines for field instructors as they allocate cases to students, supervise their performance, and coach them in specific tasks such as locating case files in the regional office and preparing case documentation.

Student work experience also includes an hour's session each week with the field instructor to discuss practice issues, theories and concepts, or any topic pertinent to the student.

## **Campus Seminar**

Social work programs in the Maine university system require students to attend a weekly campus seminar focused on their placement experience and designed to integrate class instruction and field practice. Students in the Field Instruction Units participate with other social work students in these seminars on the Portland and Orono campuses.

## **Peer Group Experience**

Every two weeks, students in the Field Instruction Units meet for an hour without instructor supervision or observation. Intended as blending of peer supervision and peer support group, the sessions provide students with an opportunity to share experiences, address common concerns, give each other feedback in a supportive environment, and establish a group identity. There is also a Field Journal component, which is used by the faculty liaison and the student to communicate and dialogue regarding issues.

These four components of the field experience introduce students to the full range of competencies incorporated in the Institute competency model—work management skills, conceptual skills, interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and technical knowledge.

## **IV. Program Operations**

In the planning year, the Task Force produced several sets of documents related to staffing and to student selection and placement. To ensure strong linkage with the academic programs, the Task Force specified the duties of two faculty representatives and two field coordinators from the cooperating institutions. Each faculty representative serves as a consultant to staff and students at the field site, as an information channel between site and academic program, and as a facilitator integrating campus and field instruction. (Various university roles are described in Section IV of the Manual.)

For both the field instructor and the field unit clerk typist, the Task Force prepared a job description in the format prescribed by the state's Department of Personnel. Materials prepared for the hiring process included guidelines for forming the hiring committee, and for conducting and rating interviews and reference checks.

### **Student Selection and Placement**

For the first phase of the field units, the Task Force planned for ten students enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work programs. (In the future, when appropriate revisions are made in the curriculum, the field experience may be extended to students in Master's of Social Work programs.) Five students from the University of Southern Maine were assigned to the Portland site and five students from the University of Maine at Orono were assigned to the Bangor site.

Announcements describing the Field Instruction Units were posted on campuses and in the agency; application packages, with an explanatory cover letter and an application form, were made available to interested students. In the selection process, the field coordinator at each campus first reviewed the applications, consulting with faculty who would know the applicants, and then submitted recommendations to the field instructor. After checking three references provided by the applicant, the field coordinators completed reviewer rating sheets for each applicant. All applicants were notified by mail of their acceptance status. (There is an appeals process for those not accepted.) Successful applicants received additional materials describing their placement.

The most formal document is the "Child Welfare Field Instruction Unit Agreement" signed by the student, by the President of the University, and by the Director of the Bureau of Child and Family Service. This agreement spells out student responsibilities such as satisfactory performance and an obligation for at least one year of employment in the agency following graduation. It also specifies agency obligations such as the provision of a \$5,000 stipend and an opportunity for employment in the agency after receipt of a degree. Finally, the agreement delineates university responsibilities for instructional services. (Copies of these documents are included in the Manual, Section IV.)

As a final piece in the student selection process, the planning committee had to address the issue of making sure that students could be considered for employment and that their names would appear on the state-maintained register. To accomplish this, project and agency staff worked with the Department of Personnel to assure that FIU students would receive ten additional points for their field placement experience.

## **V. Evaluation**

Months of energetic planning, problem solving, negotiation, and revision bore fruit in August 1993 when ten students began their field experience by participating in the first week of the Institute's preservice program. Most startup operations meet unexpected hurdles and this project was no exception facing, for example, an unforeseen delay in hiring the field instructor for the Bangor site. Both university and agency participants rallied to handle the situation until the instructor joined the staff in November. The situation tested individual resolve to ensure smooth functioning and it offered a concrete demonstration of teamwork to meet unanticipated demands.

The pilot year of operation served as a field test for the evaluation design prepared by a special evaluation sub-committee of the Task Force. The evaluation design addresses three levels of operation: student performance, the field instruction program, and institutional impact.

### **Evaluation of Student Performance**

Because the Field Instruction Units in the Department of Human Services are a component of a larger pattern for field instruction in university social work programs, each social work program had established protocols for evaluating student performance. Using these as resources, staff adapted them to the child welfare field unit experience.

The field instructor has responsibility for completing the evaluation of student performance. At the end of each semester, the field instructor reviews the report document with each student. Both instructor and student sign the document, which is then forwarded to the faculty of the social work program.

To underscore project commitment to self-directed learning, a student self-assessment form using the child welfare caseworker competencies was developed. Students were asked to rate their performance (from 1=low to 5=high) on twenty competencies and thirteen areas of technical knowledge.

The mean scores on self-assessments by seven students revealed a common and almost predictable pattern. Students rated themselves highest (with a mean of 4.71) on job commitment, interpersonal sensitivity, and self-awareness. They rated themselves lowest on specific items of technical knowledge such as adoption and preparation for adulthood. Primarily descriptive, such data can corroborate or challenge other evaluation findings.

## **Field Unit Program Evaluation**

The design for program evaluation calls for data from four groups: students, field instructors, agency personnel at the sites, and university personnel. To document student responses to the field unit experience, an evaluation form asked them to rate (from 1=low to 5=high) six specific features of the program, to comment on what they found most and least helpful, and to make recommendations for improvement.

All students assigned the highest rating possible (5) to the case experience and field instructor supervision. Other items ranged from a rating of 4.2 for the instruction component (because of information overload) to 4.8 for job shadowing. Year One of Field Instruction Units clearly met student expectations.

Asked for an overall evaluation of the program, students gave the field instruction experience a rating of 4.6. Their recommendations for improvement focused primarily on operating procedures, suggesting, for example, earlier assignment to cases, prompt payment of stipends, and reduction of paperwork.

At the end of the first year, agency personnel provided feedback on the Field Instruction Units. Professionals at each site were asked for suggestions for improving the program next year and for both the positive experiences and the challenges they met in interacting with the unit. Responses from twelve agency staff members were consistently positive, with helpful suggestions for streamlining work assignments and information flow. Institute staff continue work on designing and field testing evaluation instruments for program and impact evaluation.

## **Institutional Impact Evaluation**

The evaluation also contains a longitudinal study of the impact of the Field Instruction Unit project on the institutions involved. Study of the effects of the project on both the agency and the universities will be included. For the agency component, students who are hired will be tracked over time and compared to a cohort group of caseworkers to assess differences in adaptability and retention of the two groups. For the university component, the project will assess the extent of infusion of child welfare content into the social work curriculum.

An assessment of the level of shared activities between the universities and the agency will also occur, as it is hoped that the collaborative efforts of this project have increased the quantity and quality of interactions between these two institutions. For example, in Year One of the project each university planned a child welfare conference attended by FIU students, agency staff and university faculty. Also, the field instructors have participated as guest speakers in courses at each of the social work programs.

## VI. Systemic Issues

Every partnership is a learning experience that requires constant vigilance to build and strengthen relationships. The Field Instruction Units link two distinct types of organizations, and for each there are distinctive priorities, orientations, and styles—variations in perspective that Peter Senge (1992) labels "mental models."

Joined in a common enterprise, university and agency personnel have developed a strong and productive working relationship. But organizational differences filter into activities in ways that are sometimes overt and discussable, sometimes subtle and elusive.

The fundamental fact is that the two organizations have different goals. Universities educate, social agencies *deliver services*. University participants, for example, aim to introduce students to current theory and state-of-the-art practice in social work. Agency participants aim to prepare students to handle the real-life situations they will experience as professionals in the public sector. There are inevitable tensions between what is taught in an academic program and what can be done in the real world. The concept of "re-professionalizing" public child welfare, which is one of the philosophical underpinnings of the Title IV-E funding of educational programs, in itself presents a barrier to collaboration. Public child welfare staff who believe themselves to be committed professionals find the concept insulting and demeaning.

Such tensions can become particularly acute in a setting where budget restrictions, furlough days, and escalating caseloads make it extremely difficult for staff to do the job that they see needs to get done. The high standards and expectations of university "mental models" can constantly remind practitioners of their daily struggles and frustrations.

Another ongoing difference is that DHS assumes the students to be more "workers" than learners; the Universities assume they are there to "learn" and secondarily to perform work-related services. (This is a fundamental difference which continues to haunt us.)

Some principles can be derived from this experience which can assist others in similar enterprises: look under the surface for underlying problems, plan ahead, recognize the multiple stakeholders, respect the reality of others, be constantly vigilant of the relationship.

### Look Under the Surface

There is a Sufi story quoted by Peter Senge (1992) about a rug dealer who is trying to sell a rug when a lump appears in one corner. He jumps on the lump and it goes away, only to reappear in another place. Eventually he picks up the rug and finds a large snake. In a complex, collaborative relationship such as this, there is a danger in accepting surface reality, in closing one's eyes to underlying problems because of the need to get the immediate job done.

Paying the student stipend turned out to be a situation involving many snakes under many layers of rugs. The University of Maine had for many years administered Title 426 training funds under which stipends are paid to students in field placement. In designing this project, it was the assumption of the Task Force, that the same procedures could be used. This assumption proved to be wrong. First, the written student stipend agreement raised a multitude of issues resulting in a three-month review process between the university attorney and the agency attorney. Consequently, an important fact surfaced—the university had been operating without adequate agency agreements addressing issues such as liability and indemnity for malpractice, negligence or workplace injuries. As a result of the delay, the students were unable to sign the stipend agreement until after their field placement had begun.

Paying the stipends to the students also appeared to be a straightforward process on the surface, but this too raised a veritable nest of snakes. New IRS rulings related to payments to students have made university financial administrators very nervous and a stipend with a payback obligation apparently straddles the categories. The decision-making buck was passed from one financial office to another and students were not paid until well into the fall semester.

## **Plan Ahead**

On one level ten students in field placement is a very minor project, but the interface with systems requires a level of detailed planning which often seems like that needed for the invasion of Normandy. All the elements need to be in place at the same time so that when the ten students begin placement in September, the whole unit is operational. For some components, this involves planning as much as two years ahead.

For example, the timetable for having the field instructors ready when the students walk in the door begins with a request to the legislature to approve a position which is submitted as part of the legislative package in September

(Month One). Approval is granted in June along with other programs (Month Ten). Then a request must be made to the governor's office for a waiver of the freeze on hiring. Such waivers can take up to two months to be approved (Month Twelve). Only then can the position be posted for hiring (Month 13). The hiring and selection process typically takes four months, since the applicants must first be screened and rated by the state's Department of Personnel and then names sent to the hiring officer for interview (Month 17). For employees new to the system, an orientation period is then needed to acquaint them with the specific policy and procedures. Therefore, to assure that the field instructor is available in September 1996, the process must begin September 1994.

## **Recognize Multiple Stakeholders**

A collaborative project derives strength through involving many participants. But, as power is shared among many stakeholders, so the number of people who can obstruct the process increases and the number of interfaces with other systems are multiplied. The skills of boundary-spanning, of recognizing the constraints and requirements of all constituents and

searching for a win-win resolution become critical to the success of the project. Again, an example from dealing with the personnel issues will illustrate this concept.

The job description of the field instructor was written to be equivalent to that of a casework supervisor since the level of responsibility is similar. However, in rating the position, the Department of Personnel did not award it as many points because there was more emphasis on instruction than supervision. This emphasis is appropriate for funding reasons—to be reimbursable at the 75 percent instructional rate rather than the 50 percent administrative rate under Title IV-E. Further, there was a perception and underlying resentment on the part of other supervisors that this was a less demanding job than the regular casework supervisor position.

To address these concerns, the job description was revised to include a 20 percent time commitment for the field instructor to act as a relief supervisor during the summer when other supervisors are on vacation and when there are no students in the unit. This resolution has multiple benefits: the agency will have additional staff to cover during vacations, the field instructor will be able to keep up with current case practice and procedures, and the other supervisors in the office will have a reduced workload, therefore feeling more positive towards the field unit.

## **Respect the Reality of Others**

The issue of understanding different "mental models" is particularly important in this collaboration. From the perspective of the State, this means understanding the reality of a work environment where people feel undervalued and under siege, where even small privileges take on large symbolic significance. To address this reality, constant efforts need to be made to ensure that the Field Instruction Unit is perceived as a resource rather than another demand. Activities such as lunchtime pizza parties (bringing in guest speakers and having the students serve the staff), having the field instructor play a lead role in designing a regional follow-up to preservice training for caseworkers, making the field unit clerk available to provide back-up services, these are all ways in which the Unit can be perceived as an asset rather than a drain on precious time and resources.

From the university perspective, issues such as the status of child welfare as a field of study, the difference between in-service training and professional education, the tension between academic scholarship and field practice, all need to be recognized. The faculty perspective on time is another reality. Faculty have a schedule of classes, office appointments, committee assignments, but do not work a 9:00 to 5:00 day and cannot take vacations by choice. Thus, there is a different "work culture" at universities which can be misunderstood at times. Another issue involves decision-making—universities are more collegial in many areas which means issues are processed as a group.

## **Work Constantly on the Relationship**

In the effort to implement a new concept, the collaboration itself can become overlooked or taken for granted. Constant attention needs to be paid to process issues: the Steering Committee

needs to meet frequently and problems and issues identified and addressed. A two-day retreat was held at the beginning to initiate the planning process; a one-day retreat was held at the beginning of Year Two to review progress and to make sure the project is on track. To assure that the Field Units continue to receive administrative support from both the university and the agency, regular meetings with chairs of the academic departments, regional program managers from the agency, and the project director are planned. These meetings will attempt to address yet another systemic issue, that of differences between the cultures of the two university and regional office sites. These require attention to the need for common policy and procedures and flexibility to accommodate specific differences.

Building a strong partnership, therefore, requires continued efforts to admit some incompatibilities, to recognize that each needs the contribution of the other. For academics, knowing principles of theory and practice is not knowing everything; for practitioners, knowing the specific policies and procedures of a state agency is not knowing everything. Acknowledging this reality is a continuing and basic theme in the partnership, which is ultimately about people, not organizations, collaborating together.

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