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"Are we getting there? Human Services Community College Students' Experiences with Evidence Based Practice (EBP) in Field Placement".

Anya Y. Spector
Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, City University of New York,
anya.spector@guttman.cuny.edu

Krimili Infante
student, Hunter College, krimiliinfante@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

Abstract

Community college students' experiences with Evidence Based Practice (EBP) in the field placement are not well understood, despite the importance of EBP for students' future social work academic training and job performance. This longitudinal, qualitative, exploratory study examines journal entries of second year community college students at two time points, in the beginning and at the end of the field placement, where students reveal the types of EBP skills and experiences that they engage, as well as their perceptions of their experiences along the way. This study helps to shed light on the experiences with specific interventions and practices that students encounter in their field placements, and how those experiences may shape students' knowledge, attitudes, and intentions to apply EBP. Recommendations for curriculum enhancement, field placement supervisor capacity building, policy development, and future research are discussed.

Key Words: Human Services Majors, Evidence Based Practice, Field Placements, Community College

Are we getting there? Community College Undergraduate Field Placement,

Evidence Based Practice Training and Education

Community college students usually major in human services as a first step in their

academic and professional training toward a career in social work (The George Washington

University Health Workforce Institute & School of Nursing, 2017). While there is no data on the

percentage that actually become social workers, most human services students consider

themselves as helping professionals. Like social work, a key feature of the human services

curriculum is the field placement internship, where students first engage with the skills of social

work practice in a real-world setting. Through shadowing senior staff, receiving formal

supervision, and assisting with basic agency functions students acquire training that complements

their classroom education. For many students this is their first foray into a professional work

environment. This platform can provide insight into initial encounters with Evidence Based

Practice (EBP) (Mullen, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2005) skills among beginning students in the

social work field.

Despite the importance of field placement as a leverage point in helping students to

integrate classroom content with "real-world" professional experience, the experiences of field

placement students and the quality of the field instructors' supervision varies widely. Recent

research has uncovered trends in students' experiences in the field, namely, that students were

not engaging in opportunities to learn, and were instead providing "free labor" to their

internships. As a result, students' sense of professional identities as providers of services and

their feelings of competence suffered (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Smith, Cleak, & Vrengolenhil,

2015).

There has been ample research about field supervision and in particular, students' satisfaction

with their supervision experiences (Fortune, Macarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Kanno & Koeske,

2010) and literature that calls for supervisor training and support (Knight, 2000; Maynard, Mertz, & Fortune, 2015). However, it is not known to what extent students' experiences in field placement impact attitudes, create awareness, knowledge, and teach skills related to EBP, and there is no literature to date, which examines community college students' knowledge of, experiences with, or attitudes toward EBP.

This exploratory study helps to fill this gap in the literature by describing community college students' impressions of EBP, their level of awareness, knowledge and their experiences with EBP at the beginning (first month) and at the end (final month) of their two-semester-long internships. In this study, we identified the skills that students learned, the training that they received to acquire those skills, and the specific psychosocial interventions and professional practices that they observed and/or implemented at their internships. The data from this study may be used to inform future research on educational and pedagogical interventions for EBP advancement. This research is relevant to higher education faculty, as well as those who supervise human services majors in the field placement internship. By identifying gaps in students' knowledge and experiences, best practices for field placement learning and supervision, and curriculum enhancement for community college students, such as developing assessments for EBP learning, we have created a roadmap for future inquiry and pedagogical innovation. This study responds to the urgent need to understand the strategies for preparing our students at this early stage in their academic and professional development.

Background

Community college students' academic path

Earning an Associate degree in Human Services prepares students to transition to either a Human Services Bachelor of Arts (BA), or a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at a four-

year institution. Because the degree provides a foundational education about generalist practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, completion of the four-year BA degree opens the door to a wide range of employment opportunities in education, health care, and behavioral/mental health (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2015). To achieve licensure, most states require graduate-level education fields of study (i.e., Human Services, Professional Counseling, Student Affairs in Higher Education, School Psychology, Social Work) (Kerwin, Walker-Smith, & Kirby, 2006). The Associates program includes courses in behavioral intervention methods, health and social policy, child welfare, and foundations of generalist practice. Human Services programs prioritize experiential learning, an evidence-based pedagogical approach (Kolb, 2014), by following the field placement model, similar to that offered in social work and other service-related degree programs, like counseling and psychology.

Experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) involves the student: 1) having supervised, concrete real world experiences with new skills and practices; 2) reflecting upon those experiences; 3) integrating one's reflective understanding into a conceptualization of that experience and, finally, 4) applying the newly learned skill/practice independently. The field placement internship endeavors to facilitate this process.

The human services curriculum is aimed at preparing students to either advance to four-year degree pathway, and ultimately, graduate level, programs or to enter the service provision workforce by providing students a foundational knowledge of ecological systems theory and micro, mezzo and macro practice. Evidence Based Practice (EBP) is a professional mandate required by the NASW Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 1996), American Psychological Association (Stricker, 2010), the National Organization for Human Services (National Organization for Human Services, 2015), and all major funding institutions (Jacobs, Jones, Gabella, Spring, & Brownson, 2012; National Institute of Health, 2017; U. S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), as well as professional accrediting and licensing bodies (e.g., Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services, Office of Mental Health, State Departments of Education). EBP in in health care, has been shown to improve outcomes for clients (Yeager, 2004), cost effectiveness of services (McHugh & Barlow, 2010) and to improve the quality of services by enhancing professional workers' skills, self-efficacy, and knowledge (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011). EBP is: 1) an ethical standard which stipulates that clients are entitled to a high standard of care from workers who exhibit competence, by using current, scientifically supported interventions; 2) involves applying skills of critical thinking, creativity, and flexibility; 3) a skillful process that is comprised of conceptualizing a client concern or problem, identifying sources of available data about interventions, evaluating the available data for feasibility and alignment with client needs, values, and preferences, and applying the intervention by integrating all of the aforementioned characteristics (Drisko & Grady, 2015).

The Path to EBP

An ability to skillfully apply EBP is a requirement for any mental health practitioner or health service provider in an organization in the United States today (Thornicroft, Deb, & Henderson, 2016). Community college students in the human services major are overwhelmingly concerned with securing employment and acquiring skills that can help them compete in the marketplace (Institute on Education Sciences, 2018) often due to the social and economic hardships that they themselves face (Wood, Harris III, & Delgado, 2016). In order to be most competitive in employment seeking, community college students majoring in human services must be exposed to and training in EBP in both curriculum and supervised field placement to facilitate their transition into roles as professionals in service delivery. The experiential component of the curriculum (i.e., field placement) is an ideal setting in which to learn EBP

because of the opportunity for students to apply theory to real-world practice settings. Students in field placement are faced with complex clients, who present with myriad needs, symptoms, and conditions. Trainees are in a position to assist and observe as treatment plans are developed and behavioral interventions are applied by supervising social workers.

Despite EBP's importance and despite the rich opportunity to introduce EBP to students in the beginning of their academic training, there is a dearth of research examining the degree to which community college students are informed about EBP. Likewise, there is a lack of research on the role of field placement in teaching community college students EBP skills. Not surprisingly, there are also no standardized measures or tools to assess undergraduate students' attitudes and knowledge of EBP (Johnston, Leung, Fielding, Tin, & Ho, 2003).

The literature on social work education has advocated strongly for MSW programs to teach evidence based practice (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003; Mullen et al., 2005; Mullen, Bellamy, Bledsoe, & Francois, 2007) and has suggested that field placement is a crucial element of that effort (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, & Howard, 2006). EBP has likewise been strongly advocated in the literature on advanced human services training (Shlonsky and Gibbs 2004), psychology (Babione, 2010) and child welfare (Horwitz, Hurlburt et al. 2014). Knight (2000) discovered that both BSW and MSW students considered the field placement as crucial training and the field instructor their primary source on how to integrate theory with practice. Psychology students also have been shown to encounter EBP primarily through their internship experiences (McQuaid & Spirito, 2012). This suggests that advanced undergraduate and graduate students' exposure to EBP takes place during the field placement. However, we do not know to what extent this is true for community college students in the human services major. Since human services majors will ultimately occupy seats in a variety of undergraduate and graduate professional service provision training programs, we must fill this gap. This study thus

aims to shed light on the experiences that community college students have over the entire course of their field placement internship with EBP and on the impact that these experiences have on their knowledge and attitudes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by an integrated theoretical framework consisting of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Social Cognitive Theory posits that in order for a behavior to be reproduced, one must observe the behavior (see others use EBP), feel that they are able to perform it (believe that they are capable of finding research evidence) because they have the necessary skills, and actually have the capacity to perform the behavior (in this case, the training and knowledge to use EBP). The study included students' journals detailing these factors. Students describe observation through shadowing senior staff, students reported their level of confidence in their ability to find research evidence, indicated level of knowledge of EBP, and the types of professional training in EBP they received, throughout the field placement.

Experiential Learning Theory informs our hypothesis that field placement education is an ideal setting for assimilating the skills of EBP by stipulating the centrality of experience for the creation of knowledge out of that experience, as well as for the stimulation of reflection upon experience through the creation of knowledge. Field placement provides experiences that students can transform into knowledge and skills that they use in their practice as well as upon which they reflect during integrative seminar classes and during formal supervision sessions. Kolb (1984) identified specific learning styles associated with particular careers that use experiential learning in distinct ways. He suggested that individuals in the social services are most interested in jobs that offer personal connections and that those individuals are characterized by a learning style known as "Diverging". The Diverging style of learning is

aligned with concrete experience (i.e., hands-on) and reflective observation (receiving feedback, remaining open-minded, listening, and generating new ideas). Indeed, these are the very experiences that define the field placement component of the curriculum, which we consider the foundation of EBP awareness (Kolb, 1984; *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles*, 2001).

Methods

This exploratory study was conducted at a public community college in New York City with second year students majoring in human services.

Sample

All human services students completed a two-semester long, 250-hour field placement internship at one of approximately thirty social and health services organizations or agencies in New York City. Organizations included but were not limited to city agencies (e.g., Department of Probation, Department of Education), community-based organizations that provide housing, mental health counseling, HIV services, services for individuals with disabilities, soup kitchens, and residential rehabilitation and assisted living facilities. Out of 34 students, 28 students submitted journal entries at the beginning and 34 at the end. There were 30 female students. Nearly all (N=32) of the students identified as either Latinx or African American. Ages ranged from 19-22 years. According to students' stated interests, most (N=25) planned to go on to bachelor's programs in social work and to ultimately become social workers. Given the overwhelming popularity of social work as an aspiration of the students in the program, this paper focuses much of its attention on the social work profession. A few students expressed interest in education, law enforcement and psychology/counseling. The sample included two sets of qualitative data in the form of structured journal entries in which students were asked to reflect

upon specific questions about their field placement experiences and their perspectives on evidence-based practice.

Data sources

Journal entries were submitted as part of the course entitled "Fieldwork Integrative Seminar". This course is the complement to the field placement and is meant to supplement, and augment, the learning taking place in the field. Students in the course complete process recordings, study ethical practice according to the NASW, and share experiences from the field with their peers through discussion, role-plays, and presentations. Students were aware that their journal entries would be included in research and that all identifying information would be removed from the journals. They were permitted to opt out of the study if they chose with no consequence to their grade in the course. Because we used de-identified data from students' written work, our study was determined to be "exempt" by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Students were asked if their work could be used for research purposes after they had already completed the assignments.

Data collection and protocol

Data were collected at two distinct time points. One set of journal entries was submitted during the first month of the first semester and the second set of journal entries was submitted during the final month of the second semester. The benefit of this longitudinal approach (Christensen, Johnson et al. 2011), collecting data at two time points, is to demonstrate how students' responses may change as they increase their exposure to field placement and to the integrative seminar. Also, this strategy facilitated the identification of any relationship between the experienced exposure and the learning of evidence-based practice skills.

The first set of questions answered in weekly journal submissions, which comprised the entries, was aimed at uncovering students' initial impressions, preliminary knowledge, and

perceptions around implementation of evidence-based practice in their work within the field (see Table 1). The second set of questions was aimed at capturing any changes in awareness of evidence-based practices, changes in attitudes or perceptions, and experiences with training and implementation of evidence-based practice since beginning their internships (see Table 2). All questions were developed through an iterative process (Gonzalez & Trickett, 2014), in collaboration with human services faculty, the director of field placement, and with student research assistants who had already completed the human services program. Thus, the voices of all constituents represented in this study were equitably prioritized. This process of question development is grounded in the principles of power-sharing and shifting the locus of control over research processes away from the researchers and towards the community most impacted by the research, articulated in the approach known as Community Based Participatory Research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Reflection questions were grounded in the integrated theoretical framework described above.

Analysis

Content and thematic analyses were used to code the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to categorize data broadly into themes for journal entry responses that followed identifiable patterns and that were not particularly nuanced or in need of interpretative reasoning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were organized into domains and within each domain into themes. Within each theme, data were collapsed into particular response categories that were either binary (yes/no) or contained categories of response types (example: supervision, observation, formal workshops, online training, etc.). Tables of coded data with examples are included below (table 3 and table 4 respectively). Content analysis was applied to describe the discourse and nuance of the text using interpretative and inductive skills (Mayring, 2000). Content analysis was used for responses that asked for students to reflect upon experiences, share opinions, or give

explanations. Data were coded according to the discourse of the text, relationship of what was being discussed, and the meaning with which text was imbued. While there is some overlap, content and thematic analyses are not identical and there is an advantage of integrating the two in order to either label data according to themes or identify specific categories as they emerge (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The advantage of integrating the two methods is that it allowed the development of codes a priori and to develop codes as they emerged from the analysis. This contributed to the methodological integrity by contextualizing the data in what is already known and augmenting the data or elaborating on the data with new, salient themes. Therefore, fidelity to the subject matter while advancing the research goals was maintained (Levitt et al., 2018).

Three coders included the PI, a faculty member in the Human Services program, who also was a licensed social worker with experience in direct practice and research, and two recent graduates from the Human Services program. Both recent graduates are female, Latinx, and African American, 20 years old, and enrolled in undergraduate social work programs. The expertise of each coder as a current and/or former researcher, student, practitioner, and intern were combined, and brought to bear the unique life experiences, professional training, pedagogical engagement, and academic training to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Thus, the researchers' identities served as a tool for deepening understanding and rigor rather than introducing bias. All three independently coded each journal entry and created a codebook of themes and response categories. Domains were based on initial research questions. Once the codebook was created all entries were coded based on the codebook. Two coders are recently graduated former community college students from the human services major and one coder is the principal investigator. All three coders met weekly for a total of 6 weeks to compare findings and achieved consensus through discussion of each journal entry. Inter-coder reliability was

100%. Where there was a discrepancy, agreement was reached by consensus and negotiated until differences in interpretations were resolved.

Results

This following section first presents the results from the coding of each set of journal entries, beginning with the first journal entry. Second, results from the coding of the second set of journal entries is addressed.

First Journal Entry

Sample 1 included 28 unique journal entries from students in the Fieldwork Integrative Seminar course collected in the first month of their field placement internship. This is the course that complements the field placement component of the curriculum for all second year Human Services majors. Below, we summarize the results for each category gleaned from the qualitative data.

Prior awareness of EBP. Seventy-nine percent (N=22) of students had never heard of EBP before beginning the course and internship. Upon beginning the course, students described their initial impression of EBP as being difficult and/or complicated (29%; N=8), confusing (29%; N=8), burdensome (21%; N=6), or positive and important (29%; N=8). Most students expressed some form of a negative initial viewpoint about EBP. Given students' lack of exposure, trepidation is a common response and often, new terms provoke anxiety among novice students.

Basic research knowledge. Thirty-six percent (N=10) of students stated that they have some awareness about how to locate research using peer-reviewed sources. Most students have taken courses in their first year that have required some basic research literacy, however the standards for research vary by course and instructor, thus most students may not feel adequately prepared to conduct literature reviews independently.

Attitude toward EBP over time. Fifty percent (N=14) of students indicated that since beginning the internship and fieldwork course, their view of EBP has improved. Through exposure, these students developed familiarity, which may lead to elevated levels of comfort with new terminology.

Experiences with EBP in field placement. Students listed a wide variety of interventions that they had experienced, either through observation ("shadowing"), or through "hands-on" practice. The types of interventions that students had had experience with included the following categories: documentation, individual counseling approaches, group counseling approaches, securing material or concrete support for clients, and building skills (i.e., vocational, daily living). Out of the 25 specific interventions students listed, over one half comprised individual approaches, one quarter were group approaches, two were to provide material or concrete support (i.e., housing, food), two were to complete documentation, and three interventions were aimed at enhancing, or developing, skills. Four students reported having had no experience with EBP at all during their field placement. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of interventions were to conduct individual and group counseling.

Training in EBP. Students reported having received some training in EBP through observation (21%; N=6), supervision (14%; N=4), workshop on-site at the internship (11%; N=3), in service by agency staff (3%; N=1), online course (3%; N=1), or professional conference (3%; N=1). Forty percent (40%; N=11) of students reported having received no training at all, formal or informal. Seventy-five percent of students had received no *formal* training in EBP within the first two months of their internships. Without formal training it is difficult to assess the quality of students' experiences and the effect on student knowledge. For example, observation may include detailed explanations of each step, discussion of theory, and demonstration in one agency, while at another

observation entails simply following a staff member from client to client and watching their

interactions with each. See Table 1 below.

Table 1 EBP Experience in the Field: Students' First Semester Field Placement

Intervention (observed and/or practiced)	Type of Intervention[1]
1. Engagement 2. Problem identification/needs assessment 3. Intake 4. Neurocognitive/memory assessment 5. Patient-centered approach 6. Conflict resolution 7. Psychoeducation 8. Stages of Change 9. Mental Health First Aid 10. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 11. Risk assessment 12. Positive reinforcement 13. Culturally informed/LGBT affirming practice	Individual Counseling
1. "Teen talk" (discussion group) 2. Stress management 3. Sexual health education 4. Early Childhood Education 5. Blood Pressure management	Group Counseling
1. Opiate overdose prevention 2. Skills of independent living and job readiness 3. Movement and art	Skills-building
1. Housing 2. Community based supports	Material support
1. Case notes 2. Measuring outcomes	Documentation
Four Students stated that they did not observe any EBP	*None*

Training modality[2] (first semester)	Number of students (%)	Formal Training (yes/no) (%)
Supervision	4 (*14*)	
Observation	6 (*21*)	No[3] (*75*)
Agency staff	1 (*3*)	
Online Course	1 (*3*)	
Workshop (on-site)	3 (*11*)	
Workshop (off-site)	1 (*3*)	Yes (*25*)
Professional Conference	1 (*3*)	
No Training received	**11 (*40*)**	**N/A**

[1] Interventions were categorized based on coders' thematic analysis as: individual counseling, group counseling, material/concrete support, documentation/monitoring, or skills-building

[2] Students were asked how they were trained on the interventions that they had observed and/or practiced.

[3] Includes students who received no training

Second Journal Entry

The second sample included 34 journal entries. In the second journal entry, students' awareness of EBP was assessed again. This time, 44% of students (N=15) demonstrated an understanding of the definition of EBP. They were able to correctly identify an intervention (i.e., Motivational Enhancement Therapy) as an EBP and define why it was considered as such. Eighteen percent (18%; N=6) of students had some limited awareness of EBP, since they were able to identify an intervention as EBP, but not explain why it was considered to be so. This is encouraging and suggests that only one quarter are receiving formal training, nearly one half of students are learning about EBP. Thirty eight percent (N=13) of students were unable to recognize that an intervention was considered an EBP at all and therefore demonstrated low awareness of EBP. See Table 2 below.

Table 2 Second Semester Field Placement students' EBP knowledge

Level of EBP awareness[4]	Number of students (%) N=34
Sufficient	15 (*44*)
Limited	6 (*18*)
Low	13 (*38*)

Students listed an array of tasks, practices, and behaviors that they learned during their internships. These were coded into 10 distinct categories of skills that they practiced in the course of their internship as follows: engagement (88%; N=30), counseling (88%; N=30),

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[4] Level of awareness was determined by students' responses to the question of whether the skill they listed is an EBP, and to explain their response. Students who correctly identified skills as EBP and correctly explained how they came to this understanding, were rated "sufficient". Students who correctly identified skills as EBP but did not know why this was so, were rated "limited" and students who answered both parts incorrectly were labeled "low".

NASW Code of Ethics ethical practice (35%; N=12), professional workplace behavior (85%; N=25), personal growth (62%; N=21), documentation (42%; N=14), conducting intakes (24%; N=8), facilitating groups (35%; N=12), technology use (12%; N=4) and EBP (3%; N=1). These skills provide the basis for all EBP in the human services.

Participants listed the specific interventions that they had observed and/or assisted with, in their placements. The interns included theoretical approaches to practice, specific techniques or strategies, and manualized interventions. Both group and individual modalities were included. Specifically, students identified the following: case management, contingency management, motivational enhancement, supportive counseling, support or therapy groups, supportive housing, Mental Health First Aid, harm reduction, "Teen Talk", sexual health education, recreation and art therapy, job readiness, financial literacy, parenting group support ("Security Circle"), eviction prevention, outreach, and cognitive behavioral treatment. The diversity of interventions is an artifact of the diversity of services provided by the agencies where students are placed in internships. See Table 3 below.

Table 3 Skills and Interventions at Field Placement in the Second Semester

Skill development	Examples of skill	Number of students (%) N=34	Intervention	Number of Students (%) N=34
Engagement	Rapport, building trust, forming alliance	30 (*88*)	Case management	15 (*44*)
Counseling	Active listening, encouragement, problem solving, assessment, positive body language	30 (*88*)	Contingency management	12 (*35*)
Ethical Practice	empathy, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, social justice	12 (*35*)	Motivational enhancement	10 (*29*)
Professional Workplace behavior	Collaborating with colleagues, punctuality, receiving feedback, professional attire and communication style	29 (*85*)	Supportive counseling	10 (*29*)
Personal growth	Critical thinking, confidence, self-awareness, patience	21 (*62*)	Support/therapy groups	9 (*26*)
Documentation	Taking notes, entering data into database, referrals	14 (*42*)	Supportive housing	4 (*12*)
Conducting intakes	Intake procedures	8 (*24*)	Mental Health First Aid	2 (*6*)
Facilitation	Facilitating groups and workshops	12 (*35*)	Harm Reduction	3 (*9*)
Technology use	computers and software	4 (*12*)	Workshops (Teen Talk/Sex Ed.)	2 (*6*)
EBP	integrating research and practice	1 (*3*)	Recreation Therapy/Art	4 (*12*)
			Job readiness	2 (*6*)
			Financial Literacy	1 (*3*)
			Parenting group support	1 (*3*)
			Eviction Prevention	1 (*3*)
			Outreach	1 (*3*)
			Cognitive Behavioral Treatment	1 (*3*)

Students described the training that they received to learn about the skills, interventions, and approaches that they listed. The training that students reported having received in the last month of the second semester of field placement included: learning about the approaches in their course "Fieldwork Integrative Seminar" (79%; N=27), observing other staff or "shadowing" (68%; N=23), supervision, both scheduled and ad hoc, (53%; N=18), workshops (20%; N=7), online training (6%; N=2), or "by doing" (62%; N=21). Just as during the first semester, nearly 75% of students had received no *formal* training in EBP during the final two months of the second semester of their field placements. See Table 4 below.

Table 4 Second Semester Field Placement students' EBP training, and experiences

Training modality[5] (second semester)	Number of students (%)	Formal Training (yes/no) (%)
Supervision	18 (*53*)	
Observation	23 (*68*)	No (*74*)
Participation/assisting staff (hands-on)	21 (*62*)	
In Class (integrative seminar)	27 (*79*)	
Online Course	2 (*6*)	Yes (*26*)
Workshop	7 (*20*)	

First Journal Entry

In this section are quotes, selected by student coders to illustrate the findings. Student coder selection enhanced the face validity of the selections because they were able to identify with the narrators of each quote, given the temporal proximity of their own field placement experiences. Each quote is to provide a voice to complement the data through a rich, descriptive view. Each quote appears verbatim and is only edited for grammar.

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[5] Students were asked how they were trained on the interventions that they had observed and/or practiced.

The majority of the students had not heard of the term "EBP" prior to the course and the internship.

> *"Before starting my placement, I had no idea what EBP was. And when I have finally learned about it, it was very confusing and complicated. To try and figure out ways to use skills because you are a human service worker and you need to know how to use these in cases and with your client."*

As time went by, that changed. Having no prior awareness of EBP is not surprising given that this population is relatively new to college (second year students) and most have not worked in human services or health care where EBP is ubiquitous. Naturally, students' first introduction to EBP may present faculty and field supervisors with an opportunity to create a foundational knowledge base, and it may likewise present a challenge to offer an appropriate amount of information that inspires curiosity, rather than trepidation.

> *"At my placement, I have learned about evidence-based practice. However, evidence-based practice is never or rarely discussed. I learned one evidence-based practice at my placement by coincidence. One time cleaning a closet I found a printed slide presentation on the art of writing case notes. Later on, I learn that this was an evidence based professional practice."*

As students reflected on their initial impressions of EBP after the first month of the first semester, two thirds of the students described EBP as being difficult, confusing, and/or burdensome. This suggests that they are overwhelmed and intimidated. Students may become frustrated when learning about EBP, creating additional barriers to acquiring the skills needed to practice EBP. Only one third expressed a positive initial viewpoint about EBP. This finding is similar to previous research with graduate level students and even with experienced human

services professionals, suggesting that EBP is taught or introduced in ways that are not always effective. These findings are consistent with previous research with advanced social work students (Morgenshtern, Freymond, Agyapong, & Greeson, 2011), however community college students have had much less exposure to professional settings, higher education, and have unique barriers to overcome as articulated in the Introduction.

It is recommended that community college students who have no awareness of EBP need to be exposed to EBP in a scaffolded (Puntambekar and Hübscher, 2005) fashion. Scaffolded learning is based on the premise that students can learn new skills over a process of graduated supports. Initially, students require a great deal of support, such as modeling, intense feedback, repetition, and sometimes technologies. Soon, less support is offered in a graduated process. Perhaps, feedback is reduced, demands for independent work are increased, and students develop their own strategies for managing challenging problems. Over time with adequate time to assimilate new information, ask questions, and practice through assignments that integrate skills with new content knowledge. Incorporating brief, low stakes assignments that focus on the process of EBP and include identifying client needs, creating a searchable question, identifying available sources of knowledge, and critically appraising those sources can help students to understand EBP as a process and skill set that can be applied to any population and adapted to any setting. An emphasis on prioritizing the skills of the worker and preferences of the client cannot be overstated, since students often have the misconception that EBP is prescriptive, rigid and incompatible with clinical judgment and expertise.

"I have not heard of EBP and I have not heard of using research to guide my practice, since I have not done that, I have no opinion of it. But I have done research papers, where I had to look for peer-review literature/ studies to include in my paper. And that was in fact a burdensome, trying to look for background information that fits into your research and having to understand the previous work, so you can work on your paper. I had to look through our school's database and look for useful articles."

Over one third of students (N=10) indicated some awareness about how to locate research using peer-reviewed sources. This is encouraging, given that EBP requires the identification and evaluation of peer-reviewed research. However, we cannot determine from this response the quality of students' skill in this task. We cannot conclude that they use appropriate sources, databases, or that they have any ability to discern quality research from that which is suspect. Therefore, fostering a partnership with the school library is a key leverage point to overcome the gaps in students' literature review skills. Librarians may be brought into the classroom during integrative seminar for instruction on identifying appropriate databases, search terms and on obtaining journal articles from other libraries as needed. This skill may be scaffolded with lessons on creating searchable questions from client needs and evaluating the merits of different types of research. Therefore, once the students have a specific question, and understand that there are different types of studies ranging from experimental, quasi-experimental, and observational, they will be equipped to identify search terms and scan databases for relevant material.

"Since starting my placement, my perspective on evidence based practiced has slightly changed. It has changed simply by just combining, practicing and, learning about

evidence-based practice. I say that it has slightly changed because I've been doing this for

a while, not knowing the term "evidence-based practice".

"Since I started my placement my perspective on Evidence Based Practices have changed

and you do need it. You have to research on how to do these interventions, and when you

apply those researches with the problems with your clients, things will be different."

Over one half of students (50%; N=14) indicated that since beginning the internship and fieldwork course, their view of EBP has changed in a positive direction. Three students (11%) said their view changed but did not indicate how. Eight students (28%) reported no change in view of EBP, and 3 (11%) did not answer. This suggests that new experiences have the capacity to quickly transform students' perceptions, creating a salient opportunity to challenge initial feelings of confusion or rejection toward EBP. Students' openness is a leverage point for supervisors to reinforce the importance of EBP. Students are willing in this early stage to accept the notion that EBP is essential and that they have the self-efficacy to practice this skill, therefore, a concerted effort to point out the benefits of EBP, along with the costs of providing services and interventions for which there is no support, should be undertaken. See Table 5 below.

Table 5 First Journal Entry

Journal Entry Response Category	Student Response	Number of students (%) N=28
Awareness of EBP prior to field placement	Yes	4 (*14*)
"Prior EBP Awareness"	No	22 (*79*)
	No response	2 (*7*)
Initial impression of EBP	Difficult and/or Complicated	8 (*29*)
"opinion"	Confusing	8 (*29*)
	Burdensome	6 (*21*)
	Positive and/or Important	8 (*29*)
Knowledge of how to find research literature	Yes	10 (*36*)
	No	10 (*36*)
	No response	8 (*28*)
Opinion about EBP over time	Improved	14 (*50*)
"change in opinion"	Unspecified change	3 (*11*)
	No change	8 (*28*)
	No answer	3 (*11*)

Discussion

In summary, students listed a wide variety of interventions that they had either observed or implemented. The interventions included documentation/tracking (e.g., case notes), individual counseling approaches, group counseling, obtaining material support, and skills building. Over half of the interventions to which students were exposed at the field placement included individual counseling strategies, while one quarter of the interventions were group-based counseling strategies. This is not surprising given that the field placement settings usually served a clinical population with traditional office-based services. Creating synergy between classroom and field placement in the didactics of EBP is grounded in the professional theoretical framework, which emphasizes experiential learning and cognitive processes of skill acquisition

through self-efficacy and observation. Therefore, a focus on traditional counseling approaches in demonstrations of EBP in the classroom resonates with a broad range of students and ought to be prioritized as students first become acquainted with the process. For example, including role-plays that emphasize a supportive psychotherapy approach will be viewed as useful, by students who may be observing similar approaches in the field.

Only 15 (44%) students learned about case management services including: connecting clients to material support like housing or cash assistance, and several reported learning about documentation of client contacts and outcomes. Case management is integral to beginning human services students. It provides students with an understanding of the social issues affecting clients, the policies that exist for providing a safety net for those who are most vulnerable, and a broad understanding of social justice issues in practice. Prior research emphasizes the importance of setting clear expectations and offering professional development to field supervisors (Loos & Kostecki, 2018). Therefore, field placement supervisors should receive support and training on how to include students in case management processes. As suggested by Kolb (1984), pairing students with a case manager for some portion of their internship to shadow and assist with routine intakes and outreach, may provide the initial impetus for students to become more engaged with this practice.

Three students learned about skills building approaches that aim to introduce or augment clients' capacities for living independently and managing the challenges of daily life. Skills building approaches that students were engaged in helping clients to develop included: work readiness skills, re-entry, or management of chronic health conditions. One possible explanation for the low reporting of the aforementioned interventions is that students either do not consider these as interventions or that they do not consider them as EBP. Either explanation suggests that there is a gap in students' understanding of the definition of EBP. Notably, 4 students reported

having had no experience with EBP at all. This finding is unexpected, given the fact that all of the field placement settings offer behavioral interventions. However, it suggests that the field placements may not be offering all students an opportunity to engage with the interventions they do offer, or that some students are disengaged during their time spent at the field placement and may not be taking an active role in working with clients.

> *"I have yet to be trained on this, but I would like to be fully trained before I do use evidence-based practice on a client. I want to know what it's like and the skills that you can obtain to do it. And I also want to know if it gets easy. And is not so complicated and frustrating, because when you don't know much about it, it can be very upsetting."*

Students' experiences with training in EBP at their field placement were most often through informal methods. Informal methods include observation, supervision, and hands on experience. Only three students attended formal workshops and only one student received online training in EBP. Nearly half of all students had received no training at all.

> *"I remember one time asking the case manager if the agency used any evidence-based practice. The case manager did not know what evidence-based practice was and after I explained what it was, she said that she does not believe that the agency uses any evidence-based practice. It is understandable that she did not know what it was, because she went to college for business administration, and not social work or human services."*

The above may help to explain many of the other findings in this first journal entry. Receiving no training in EBP is certainly likely to leave students the least equipped to develop knowledge, positive attitudes, and skills of EBP. EBP is a skill that connects practice and research. Lacking this skill may also lead students to be less able to apply EBP to practice later on.

For the slightly over half of students who received informal training, there are concerns that the training was incomplete, inadequate or even inaccurate. This concern is raised because it is not known how the content of the training is conveyed through informal methods. Nor is it known whether the informal training method has been tested for effectiveness, whether it is grounded in scientific evidence, practice experience, anecdotal knowledge, intuition, or whether it is based on up to date information. For example, when students responded that they were trained through supervision, it is not clear whether that is based upon a specific methodology or curriculum. Often supervision takes place ad hoc, is interrupted, unplanned, or is held in busy, noisy, public settings. This is simply a reality of agency-based settings; however, it is therefore difficult to rely on training offered exclusively from this platform.

Students who are trained through observation may simply be "watching" an intervention take place without necessarily receiving instruction on theory, practice or skills building. While modeling is a crucial element of social learning, it must be complemented with instruction and explanation. Social work is not a mechanistic practice, and without context and theory to provide a framework, shadowing seasoned practitioners is inadequate. There is a limited utility in simply shadowing, as this cannot be evaluated based on any standardized measures or assessments. Experiential theory suggests that reflection, meaning making, and practice with feedback, are essential to the development of skills, emotional connection to the work, and to sustainability of new practices. We cannot conclude that informal training methods share those features consistently.

Conversely, formal workshops, seldom offered to students have often been tested and shown to be effective teaching tools. Field placement settings should strive to incorporate formal workshop training and/or online training in EBP for students. Students may be included in regularly scheduled workshops for staff if this is not cost prohibitive for the agency. If, however,

there are no workshops scheduled or if workshop trainings are too financially burdensome for the agency to provide to students, the field placement office should develop a resource guide that includes free training opportunities for students. There are numerous free webinars and online training modules offered by non-profit and governmental organizations that students may access while they are at their field placement. Depending on the geographic region, many city health departments provide free trainings to health professionals and social service workers related to mental health, substance use, and HIV. For example, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene offers free training in Mental Health First Aid and administration of Naloxone. Organizations like the AIDS Institute offer training in HIV prevention. Students should be able to include training activities as part of their required field placement hours as a critical piece of their learning. Written assignments require students to reflect on training experiences and identify associated research evidence would provide a connection in the classroom.

In the second journal entry, which was collected at the last month of the second semester, we saw only modest improvement in students' awareness about the definition of EBP. Students were asked to list the skills that they learned in placement and then were asked to evaluate whether those skills are EBP and explain why. We anticipated that after nearly two semesters of field placement, most students would be able to complete this assignment. However, while nearly half of students did in fact correctly identify their skills as EBP and adequately explain why they believe this is so, more than half were unable to do so. More than one third of students did not even identify their skills as EBP, and the remaining students were unable to explain why the skills were EBP. This reveals a startling gap in knowledge that we hypothesize can be traced back to both gaps in the curriculum for the integrative seminar course and the lack of formal training opportunities at the field placements.

The types of skills that students described having learned fell into many of the same categories as the first journal entry and included individual and group counseling approaches. One notable difference in the second journal entry was that students began to identify professional work behaviors (e.g. punctuality, attire, taking initiative), ethical practice, critical thinking, self-reflection, and self-monitoring as skills they were developing. Despite having gained a wide breadth of exposure through their field placement to EBP, most students did not view these skills through the lens of EBP. To highlight this point, only one student listed EBP as a skill that they learned in their field placement.

Once again, only a small number of students listed case management activities. This time students included: outreach, financial literacy education, and eviction prevention. These practices require important case management skills like making phone calls, home visits, and advocating on behalf of clients. Being aware of the evidence base for these interventions is crucial to develop the flexibility that is needed in the human services field.

Regrettably, by the end of the second semester there were no changes in the type of training that students received during their field placement. The vast majority only received informal training through supervision, observation, or participation. Most students also identified the field integrative seminar class as a source of training. However, only a small minority of students attended a formal workshop or online training through their field placement. This gap in students' exposure to tested training tools may have a direct impact on their awareness of EBP and their willingness to learn about EBP in the future. Each student had a unique training experience which, in most cases, had no structure, may or may not have been grounded in theory, may or may not have been based on up to date information, and may or may not have been complete. Therefore, students' training experiences end up being idiosyncratic and difficult to

measure, modify, or improve.

Also, it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum changes that endeavor to include EBP in the field placement component by measuring changes in student satisfaction, willingness to implement EBP, level of EBP awareness and skills, and students' intentions to use EBP during their senior college experiences and beyond. Evaluating field placement supervisors' satisfaction with student participation, EBP workshop, and resource guide would be equally important in refining strategies to engage agencies in developing the future social work professionals for the next generation.

Collecting data at two distinct time points, first in the early stages of the field placement and the second at the end of the field placement offered an advantage over a single measure. According to our theoretical framework, experiential learning and social cognitive theory rely upon a process of exposure to new skills, knowledge, and observation of practices of peers and colleagues. This process may only happen over time. In order to evaluate and understand the quality and breadth of how EBP is assimilated by the students it was critical for us to ask that they offer reflections at the beginning and end of their internships. Therefore, we are able to identify salient leverage points to enhance the development of EBP awareness and skills through experiential learning.

Limitations

The small sample size of the study presents a limitation however, we are encouraged that most students' responses reflected common themes and experiences. We are confident, that we reached saturation, and that a larger sample size would not yield drastically different findings. Another limitation is that the students in our sample came from the same cohort. Therefore, there may be a contamination bias happening if students are sharing their responses with one another. However, most students had some variation in their responses. Another bias is social desirability.

Students may have been offering answers that they thought would be looked upon favorably. To combat this, the students were told that their responses had no bearing upon their grades and that all of their journals would be de-identified so it would not be possible to match students to their responses. The research team is comprised of persons representing the field of social work, specifically. While human services include social work, there are other professional designations that were not represented by the researchers leading this study. Despite this, the research team's diverse personal and professional experiences, as well as demographic diversity is an advantage in this instance. Lastly, there is the limitation of self-report. The students' experiences are expressed through their own words and not corroborated through objective measures. However, our research question is focused on understanding how students' attitudes and experiences change over time and self-report is a strong measure of this particular construct.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that community college students were indeed exposed to EBP through the field placement component of the Human Services major. We identified several key successful features of this component including gaining experience with individual and group-based interventions, and in some cases, students were implementing interventions independently. Students improved their attitudes toward EBP and developed an interest in learning more. Students began to develop professional practice skills, counseling skills, characteristics of personal growth, and ethical practice skills. However significant gaps were identified where the field placement component fell short. Specifically, students in the field placement did not develop actual EBP knowledge. They did not receive formal training and most students did not encounter practices beyond individual and group counseling. As a result, we have proposed several leverage points for development of curriculum, policy, and research that may help to fill these gaps.

Curriculum. - To improve student knowledge about EBP, the Integrative Seminar must include this as a learning outcome for the course. Field placements should be trained in how to teach students to identify, define, and apply EBP as an approach to practice. Any changes to assignments or pedagogy would be grounded in this goal. Students would begin to learn about EBP at the outset of the Integrative Seminar course in the first semester within the context of the unit on Ethical Practice and NASW Code of Ethics. Students would become oriented to EBP as a mandate of providing high quality care, grounded in current research, and shown to be effective. Students' written assignments would include: 1) identifying and prioritizing the needs and issues facing clients at their field placements; 2) creating practice-based research questions from the needs and issues that they identified; 3) locating sources for data to answer their questions; 4) assessing the available evidence for relevance to their population; and 4) using the evidence they find to develop strategies for practice and/or applying the strategy to work with a client or discussing the strategy with their field supervisor during supervision.

This type of scaffolded assignment could be done in both first and second semester as an ongoing continuous project. Practicing EBP throughout the semesters and through steps allows students to reflect on the process, integrate the content knowledge into their experiential practice in the field, and receive feedback from the professor and field supervisor. Importantly, students would have an opportunity to understand EBP as an approach, rather than as one particular type of intervention.

To align the field placement with the integrative seminar we propose a capacity-building workshop with resource guide for field agency supervisors. The workshop will offer supervisors strategies to engage new interns with EBP through formal supervision sessions, hands on experience, and through observing the practices of the staff at the agency. Supervisors will receive tools to help stimulate students to integrate classroom EBP content with their field

experience that they can use to create their own assignments for students to complete in the field. The resource guide will also contain a directory of free online and in-person trainings in specific interventions that students may be offered if the agency is unable to provide formal training opportunities. Supervisors would be encouraged to support students in accessing formal training to elevate their practice skills and to enhance their EBP knowledge. We recognize the burden that supervisors may experience in having to attend an in-person workshop and will therefore offer the workshop through online technology and in-service site visits based upon the preference of the agency leadership.

Policy. - Traditionally, integrative seminar and field placement curriculum recommendations are guided by faculty and administration at the College. We propose that to meet the needs of our students and their future employers, the field placement agencies, that we develop a mechanism for including their recommendations for the curriculum as EBP becomes more widely adopted. Including student and field supervisor members on advisory committees that make recommendations to the Human Services program would help to fill this gap.

Future Research. - Future studies should include nationally representative samples of community college students throughout the United States and use validated scales to test EBP attitudes and knowledge among a broad sample, as well as survey field supervisors about their experiences engaging community college students in EBP.

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