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Original Research

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Social Work Field Education and Supervision: What a Global Pandemic Taught Us

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Abstract

Social work field education programs have experienced changes throughout time, including adaptations to supervision of students in field education settings. Monitoring and developing field education supervision is an essential component of ensuring high-quality practicum experiences and satisfaction among both social work students and field instructors. Most recently, the COVID-19 global pandemic led most social work students and field instructors to a rapid shift in practicum placements from in-person to virtual learning; within the process, supervision changed as well. This study includes feedback from a small group of BSW students, MSW students, and field instructors regarding this transition in placement and supervision. The study's framework investigated the modalities of supervision used, as well as perceptions of the quality of supervision, both before and after the adjustments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Supervision approaches used were developmental, didactic, strengths-based, and trauma-focused. Research findings will be used to enhance BSW and MSW field education within this specific Midwestern university and will aim to provide considerations and recommendations for the development of field education programs in other social work education programs.

Keywords: *field education, supervision, COVID-19, virtual learning*

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Introduction

In March 2020, the transition from traditional, face-to-face practicum placements to virtual field placements changed the delivery of social work education (Gad, 2023). At the onset of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, field practicum placements were moved from in-person placements to off-site, virtual services with virtual supervision. Due to the emergency nature of virtual teaching and field placement, there was no time or resources available to plan and prepare for this shift (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Christensen et al., 2023; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Once the delivery of social work services and social work student education shifted in this unfamiliar environment, the delivery of training for field instructors and students became incredibly important (Gad, 2023; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Further, rapid shifts in the use of technology and practicum locations (from on-site to virtual) required abrupt changes; without care in planning and training for those involved, these changes impacted student and field instructor perceptions of the quality of education found in the field practicum experience, which has been identified as social work's signature pedagogy (Board of Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy, 2015, 2022; Csoba & Diebel, 2020; Skeen, 2023). A Midwestern university measured these field instructor and student quality ratings and models of supervision pre- and post-COVID-19 to determine the need for ongoing training and preparation for the field.

Background of the Problem

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (Board of Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy, 2008) identified field education as the signature pedagogy of the social work profession. Given this distinction, field directors assumed increased responsibility to develop and implement effective, high-quality field education programs and to ensure excellent student field training and supervision experiences. The updates in the 2015 EPAS required field directors to develop learning experiences wherein students demonstrated knowledge, values, skills, and/or cognitive and affective processes tied to each of the nine social work competencies (Board of Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy, 2015). Holosko and Skinner (2015) called for field directors to lead an initiative to "adopt and operationalize field education as the signature pedagogy" of the social work profession (p. 275). Field directors were tasked with using their expertise to match students to field placements and field instructors. As such, field directors assumed the responsibility of linking students and field instructors in beneficial working relationships, as well as promoting the professional and personal development of students (Baird & Mollen, 2023; Bogo, 2015). While overseeing field education programs, field directors also ensured that participating field instructors were effectively trained for their supervisory role with students. Domakin (2014) pointed out that field instructors serve as faculty in the field setting and work to facilitate student learning. Research suggested, however, that instructors often lacked adequate preparation for their role in field placement, as they needed training, and they were not always thoroughly supported by their academic programs (Alschuler et al., 2015; Baird & Mollen, 2023). The same authors also asserted that to train students effectively to become future social work professionals, field instructors must be competent in their roles.

Social work programs must offer high-quality training for field instructors. This training should include the use of alternative training methods, and it requires initiative, effort to reach field instructors, and facilitation of opportunities to consistently provide them with educational opportunities (Everett et al., 2011). Bogo (2015) called for educational programs to "make the development and testing of innovative field models a

priority" (p. 322) and noted that high-quality field experience strongly influences the efficacy of social work programs to "graduate ethical, competent, innovative, [and] effective clinical social workers" (p. 317). Ten years later, field directors have a greater responsibility than ever to incorporate these factors into social work field education experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic uprooted daily living across the world in early 2020 (National Center for Health Statistics, n.d.). Education, including social work education, was taken by storm, requiring prompt shifts in the delivery of field education (Christensen et al., 2023; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). For most students, the winter or spring 2020 terms started with in-person field experiences and were abruptly shifted to virtual activity (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Most students were required to move from face-to-face engagement at an agency and transitioned to completely virtual delivery of services, interactions in the agency, and supervision. In a Midwestern university, Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students and field instructors provided feedback about this shift in the delivery of field education services and supervision through end-of-term field education evaluations. Feedback from students and field instructors about the COVID-19-related transitions was both positive and negative, which will be further explored.

Transitions to Virtual Field Placement

The landscape of social work educational programs has changed in recent years, partially due to growth in online social work programs. This change has significantly impacted field education programs nationwide. Growth in the number of social work educational programs, expansion of programs that are provided fully online, and increasing numbers of social work students generate the demand for more social work field instructors (Gad, 2023). There is also a need for field placements in different, sometimes unique, locations because of students being placed in their home communities. Often, these locations are rural Midwestern towns and cities with few social workers or agencies. These dynamics drive competition among social work programs for quality field placement sites (Gad, 2023). Despite these challenges, social work students and graduates have the potential to expand services, notably in rural communities where providers are limited; this can be especially impactful for online students who desire to serve as practicum students in their home communities but also intend to stay in those communities as social work practitioners (Egbert et al., 2017). This process often addresses "critical service gaps" in these areas that are otherwise underserved or lack qualified professionals (Egbert et al., 2017, p. 6). As a result, the population being served benefits from the students' placement, both during and after the practicum, as it assists in decreasing the lack of services.

The impact of COVID-19 added pressure to the already challenging work of field programs. As noted, the pandemic forced a move to emergency online placements for nearly all field practicum students. Field directors, students, field instructors, and agencies faced instant, unimaginable change (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Christensen et al., 2023; Mclaughlin et al., 2020). Specifically, student placements were converted to emergency online activities, including virtual supervision (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Field directors were required to create new and innovative placements and field tasks so that students could continue to accrue field hours, often under major pressure to complete the hours needed to graduate from BSW or MSW programs (Mclaughlin et al., 2020). CSWE (2020) responded to these concerns by decreasing field hour requirements and acting with flexibility to promote student success in field placements.

Research published since the COVID-19 pandemic has noted the challenges of online field supervision in fields such as social work, including art therapy and couples/family counseling. Telehealth platforms expanded access to student and clinical supervision, including "case consultation, case notes, session video review, and live supervision" (Sahebi, 2020, p. 989). This shift to virtual supervision encountered difficulties, such as maintaining confidentiality and students initially not having access to technology. As these challenges were addressed and eventually resolved, the need for continued growth in the delivery of student supervision

through online methods grew in importance (Orr, 2020). A review of literature in education and counseling fields showed that virtual supervision promoted ease of scheduling for supervision meetings, increased access to training materials, and increased contacts for supervision; however, there were barriers to virtual delivery of supervision that prevented supervisors from witnessing actual services provided by students to their clients (Orr, 2020). Further, engaging in online supervision created barriers to rapport-building, as nonverbal communication methods were much more limited (Baird & Mollen, 2023). The online learning environment also created challenges in engagement and the development of trust within the supervisor and student relationship (Baird & Mollen, 2023; Orr, 2020).

Theoretical Approaches to Supervision

The CSWE Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (Board of Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy, 2008) state, "Field education intends to connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting" (p. 8). Incorporating theoretical approaches into field education is expected as part of this signature pedagogy. There are many approaches and theories regarding supervision, and some supervisors choose to use a formal theoretical approach while others do not (Domakin, 2014). We posit that structuring a theoretical approach to supervision into the fieldwork framework may be a necessary component of sustaining high-quality supervision and meeting the CSWE accreditation standards. Theoretical approaches can create a useful and evidence-based lens in supervision. This lens became increasingly beneficial in the COVID-19 landscape as students became independent learners, and field directors and field instructors were required to exercise more creativity in developing learning tasks.

Those attempting to understand the fieldwork framework may question why the theoretical approach needs to be included. Theory is often included in the context of coursework and not necessarily considered in practice (Domakin, 2014). Practice learning can be regarded in the university setting as having less value than formal classroom learning (Domakin, 2014; Trevithick, 2007), with the assumption that field education makes few formal attempts to link theory to field education (Domakin, 2014). Heffernan and Dauenhauer (2017) stated:

> [E]vidence-based practice behaviors being taught in the classroom need to be mirrored in the field. Social work educators need to make sure that evidence-based practice behaviors are being demonstrated as a professional practice model in the field so that students do not experience a disconnect. (p. 495)

Bogo (2015) reinforced the concept that field instructors in clinical practice need to utilize framework theory and evidence, not only in interventions with clients but also with students.

For our purposes, four theories of supervision were selected, because of the evidence supporting their effectiveness.

Strengths-Based

Strengths-based supervision "incorporates concepts from supportive supervision [and] cooperative supervision, and empowerment, resiliency, and self-efficacy [are] within the strengths perspective" (Alschuler et al., 2015, p. 38). The approach emphasizes the strengths of supervisees through recognition of success and incorporates positive reinforcement when skills are properly demonstrated (Alschuler et al., 2015). Bogo et al. (2007) caution against using only positive feedback, even in this model, regardless of social workers' discomfort with receiving critical feedback. A primary tenet of the model is using a "not knowing" stance, which de-emphasizes the power differential between the supervisor and supervisee (Alschuler et al., 2015).

Reflective

The reflective supervision approach emphasizes the importance of reflecting on one's practice (Ravalier et al., 2022). The ability to learn from reflection is developed and exercised in this approach. The supervisor's experience and expertise are less important in this model; the ability of the supervisor to use skills and interventions to help the student learn from reflection is most important. Davys and Beddoe (2009) use Butler's stages of competence to develop students' ability to reflect. In this approach, "supervision is the forum for learning while reflection is the method" (Davys & Beddoe, 2009, p. 919). Each supervisory session begins with a recall of events since the last session, followed by an engaging discussion. The agenda for the session is set primarily by the student, but the supervisor fills in any missed components.

Developmental

The developmental model of supervision is successful largely because it is "useful to supervisors and supervisees of diverse theoretical persuasions, has implications for direct practice and training, and offers a framework of monitoring student progress over time" (Everett et al., 2011, p. 252). In the developmental model, student professional development follows a series of sequential and hierarchical stages. As students proceed through the developmental stages, they struggle with issues of concern or competence, such as the use of self and identity. Supervisors determine and implement the interventions needed at each stage to advance student development. Developmental supervision involves having goals for students' skills and abilities, assessing progress regularly, and implementing interventions to help students advance toward their goals (Everett et al., 2011).

Trauma-Focused

Trauma-informed practice occurs in many agencies and is rising in usage. The approach of trauma-focused supervision can be effectively incorporated into supervisory relationships when a student is placed in an agency using trauma-informed practice, though the use of the approach is not limited to these agencies. The use of the approach helps sustain the capacity for evidence-based trauma treatment in given agencies and educates students with a focus on trauma assessment in all aspects of their work with clients (Strand et al., 2016). This approach emphasizes extensive assessment of exposure to violence and the traumatic experiences of clients over their lifespan. Similarly, the approach also incorporates the treatment of trauma in all treatment goals. Trauma-focused supervision assures that the practice approach is used effectively and consistently and that the student develops competence in trauma-focused practice. Only competent and trained supervisors who employ trauma-focused practice should use this supervisory model (Strand et al., 2016).

Methodology

The research team developed a survey questionnaire with Qualtrics. This was sent via email on two separate occasions to approximately 31 BSW students, 35 MSW students, and 64 field instructors who participated in practicum placements during the winter/spring and summer 2020 semesters at one Midwestern university. Only students and field instructors during this two-semester period were included in the study, given the onset and critical impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during this time. Participation in the research study was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time.

We developed the survey using a field education satisfaction survey instrument already being used at the university, but it was modified to address the shift to virtual practicum and supervision. The questions contained Likert scales (0-10 points) to compare supervision experiences before and after the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to virtual field placement. The survey contained questions regarding the type of field

placement agency and/or client population served to allow for comparison and data analysis of supervision experiences and placement agencies.

The survey included nine participant background questions (student status, years of field instruction, experience with the university, etc.). No demographic or identifying information was collected since it was unnecessary to the study. Eleven questions gauged participants' experiences of field supervision before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Scaling questions were asked about the perceived quality of supervision before and after the pandemic. The survey included questions about the model of supervision used before and after the pandemic, as applicable. Open-ended questions were also asked, comparing the strengths and limitations of supervision before and after the pandemic, as well as participants' preference for supervision moving forward (face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid). Participants were then asked to share any other comments or feedback.

Results

The research team received 14 complete survey questionnaires within the time period established to collect data. The response rate of students and field instructors was equal. Quantitative data analysis regarding the quality of supervision revealed that ratings of virtual supervision quality (M = 6.07, SD = 2.30) were significantly lower than ratings of face-to-face supervision before the COVID-19 pandemic (M = 8.29, SD = 1.54), t (13) = 4.82, $p < .001$, d = 1.13. The effect size was large; ratings of virtual supervision quality were over one standard deviation lower than ratings of supervision before the pandemic. Due to the small sample size, these findings are interpreted with caution and may not be generalizable to any population outside of the one used as a sample in this study.

The survey inquired about any theoretical approaches used in supervision before and after moving to virtual emergency placement. Not all participants answered this question. Interestingly, the approach to supervision reported by some participants changed because of the move to emergency virtual placement. Thirteen of the participants provided feedback regarding the model of supervision they were using pre- and post-COVID-19 (see Table 1). Before COVID-19, five respondents reported using no specific model of supervision, while five others reported using strengths-based supervision; one respondent reported the use of reflective supervision, another reported trauma-focused, and another reported developmental. After the COVID-19 pandemic began and supervision shifted to virtual, five respondents reported continuing to use no specific model of supervision. Three respondents reported switching to or continuing the use of reflective supervision. One respondent switched to didactic supervision. One respondent continued using trauma-focused supervision, as did the person who was using developmental supervision.

None of the participants reported a higher satisfaction rating for supervision post COVID-19. Two participants reported post-COVID-19 satisfaction scores equal to pre-COVID-19 scores: One reported a relatively high satisfaction rating (8) and no model of supervision pre- or post-COVID-19. The other respondent reported a relatively high satisfaction rating (7), with a shift in the model of supervision from no model pre-COVID-19 to reflective supervision post-COVID-19.

Table 1. *Quality Scores and Models of Supervision Used Pre- and Post-COVID*

Participant	Quality of supervision pre-COVID	Quality of supervision post-COVID	Specific model pre-COVID	Specific model post-COVID
1	9	8	Strengths-based	Didactic
2	9	5	Strengths-based	Reflective
3	8	8	None	None
4	6	4	None	None
5	5	2	None	None
6	9	7	None	None
7	10	6	Strengths-based	Strengths-based
8	8	2	Trauma-focused	Trauma-focused
9	9	8	Strengths-based	None
10	10	7	Strengths-based	Strengths-based
11	7	7	None	Reflective
12	7	4	Reflective	Reflective
13	10	9	Developmental	Developmental
14	9	8	(no response)	(no response)

This mixed-methods survey also yielded interesting qualitative responses. Of note were questions that asked about the strengths and challenges of field supervision, both before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to emergency virtual placement and supervision. These qualitative responses were gathered to enrich the information obtained and gain a well-rounded understanding of field supervision.

Strengths Noted Within Supervision Before COVID-19

Before the transition to virtual supervision, field instructors and students identified clinical supervision as a valued aspect of field education. Field instructors and students reported enjoying face-to-face meetings. Specific strengths included in-the-moment meetings (providing an easier opportunity to build rapport), open communication, and the development of a caring relationship. Specifically, field instructors stated:

> [Strengths] were honest dialogue, energized discussion, [and a] mixture of personal and professional reflection.

> It was helpful to do these meetings in person. You can read body language better; it is easier to grow rapport, since you see the students more consistently. You can also teach/coach your student in the moment versus after the fact during post-COVID meetings.

Of particular significance were the references to the field instructors' ability to observe students and guide reflection, based on verbal and non-verbal skills. Specifically, field instructors noted:

> In-person discussion/communication, opportunities for the intern to interact with clients in person, practice skills, and shadow supervisor. Opportunity for [the] supervisor to observe [the] intern's body language, etc., in engaging with clients.

> There was more meaning behind supervision because we could see the non-verbal emotions behind the words.

Students agreed with the field instructors that in-person supervision was valuable, citing ease of access to supervision as important. In-person supervision helped students gain insight into client cases, receive immediate feedback from direct experiences, and develop a weekly structure on which they could depend.

Challenges Noted Within Supervision Before COVID-19

Of the 14 participants, nine commented on the challenges of supervision before the virtual supervision transition. Respondents identified time considerations as the primary concern; field instructors struggled to fulfill the required one hour of supervision per week. This was related to their high caseloads and students' limited time at the agency each week. Field instructors commented:

> Scheduling time is always a challenge. Especially if the student or you get caught up in meetings or traffic.

> Finding appropriate time for supervision due to high caseloads.

Other challenges centered on the level of social work practice and getting students to engage in critical inquiry. One participant wrote:

> With a macro-level placement, supervision tends to be continuous, with lots of opportunities to ask questions. The biggest challenge has been students not asking questions or engaging in opportunities.

Though student input was minimal, one student identified receiving unstructured supervision and reported that supervision was suspended for a brief time.

Strengths Noted Within Supervision After COVID-19

Changes to virtual platforms for practicum completion occurred quickly in the weeks following the onset of the pandemic. Interestingly, students and field instructors alike were able to identify strengths after the shift to virtual engagement in field placement and supervision. Several respondents commented about becoming more creative in the way they provided supervision. In addition, frequent communication and flexibility in scheduling became a component of the student-field instructor relationship. These strengths counterbalanced the challenges noted before COVID-19, which included scheduling issues when interns and field instructors were much more booked. One participant stated:

> [We] had to be intentional with supervision and [we could have] more in-depth conversations because of fewer interruptions.

In addition, utilizing students' specific strengths, such as bilingual ability, during this time was helpful to the agency. One field instructor reported:

> [Our] intern engaged with clients telephonically and completed various readings/trainings which we discussed during supervision. Due to the student's language abilities, she was able to engage with clients in a variety of programs at our agency when we moved virtually.

Students and field instructors reported seeing the "evolution of the field" during the pandemic, which enriched the learning experience.

Challenges Noted Within Supervision After COVID-19

Twelve of the 14 participants who responded to questions on the quality of supervision reported decreased satisfaction with virtual supervision. Students and field instructors agreed that shifting to a virtual platform for services was complex and that adding supervision time was an extra stressor. One student responded:

> My supervisor made it known that doing supervision was a "waste of time," as she was not watching me do therapy in the office anymore. She stated, "I don't have anything to supervise on." After the pandemic, my supervisor was not as willing to help me learn.

Several students reported a decrease or stoppage in seeing clients. As a result, supervision became less meaningful, because there was little to no service to address in supervision. Field instructors seemed to agree that the shift to online supervision was challenging. One field instructor wrote:

> [There were] fewer teachable moments, since we were not in the same space. Students do a wonderful job of engaging, but it is harder to engage in discussions and learning in the moment when we are all virtual. [It] also feels harder to give critical feedback.

Two respondents reported that the quality of supervision remained the same. One student suggested that figuring out the online platform was initially difficult. Another wrote:

> It was much more challenging to find opportunities for shadowing, training, and practicing skills in our specific department.

However, given the challenges mentioned, the overall practica experiences and perceived quality of supervision were not impacted.

Discussion

Students and field instructors responding to this survey overwhelmingly preferred on-site, face-to-face field placement and supervision. The shift in service delivery of social work practice and social work education, from a university faculty viewpoint, was a direct result of this global health crisis. As we reflect on the pandemic and consider its impact, innovation in approaches to education and field placement for current and future social work students is paramount. Thoughtful consideration must be given to how the impact of the changes discussed herein will affect the future of social work field education.

Continued support of students, field instructors, and field agencies in ongoing virtual practicum activities and supervision has remained instrumental in the current climate of social work practice and education. The creation of the COVID-19 vaccine provided hope that normal life could resume, but the rollout of the vaccine took time, so students remained engaged in virtual field activities and supervision for an extended period. The provision of additional training, consultation, and overall support for virtual practicum placements continued to be instrumental in assessing and promoting the perceived quality of the supervision environment. COVID-19 had a significant impact on the evolution of social work practice and supervision. While there was initial dissatisfaction during the emergency shift to virtual fieldwork and supervision, as time went on, dissatisfaction shifted to creativity and innovation in field service delivery.

Efforts to enhance student learning and field instructor delivery of supervision must be addressed by social work educational programs; these efforts can influence perceptions of the quality of learning within field placement and supervision. Sahebi (2020) recommended that supervisors "especially attend to the [student's] reflections, their fears, their learning curve, both within their client work and technology issues" (p. 990). Intentional reflection and direction related to the shift from office-based, face-to-face meetings to supervision occurring in the homes of students and field instructors need to be addressed, especially as it relates to the confidentiality of these interactions. One example of this involves training created for field instructors and students that will enhance the quality and use of specific supervision models based on field instructor preferences. This specific training not only addresses the satisfaction gap identified in the survey results but also fulfills the need addressed by Bogo et al. (2007) to incorporate theory into supervision during field education.

Another example of attending to changing needs was field directors offering additional support (via phone, email, or electronic platform) to ensure field instructors and students were adapting. This support involved sharing what others were doing to further enhance innovation in practice and supervision. Additionally, social work educational programs developed policies for the essential practice of remote supervision and training of field instructors and students. Content of such policies included the frequency and duration of supervision, training of all parties, and confidentiality as it relates to the use of virtual platforms.

The results of the study indicate that field instructors and students felt limited by how to use supervision effectively when interactions between students and clients could not be directly observed. Notably, this shift in practice brought about changes in the type of supervision in some of the practicum experiences. Field instructors noted a shift from using the strengths-based model of supervision (pre-COVID-19) to reflective or didactic supervision models (post-COVID-19). We see this as an interesting and logical shift.

Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students saw fewer clients, were no longer monitored or supported during sessions with clients, and completed virtual projects to finish field hours. Field instructors were serving in more of a teaching role with students, which required students to reflect on interactions with clients rather than relying on observational feedback provided by supervisors. Furthermore, field instructors were increasingly busy attempting to shift their own work to remote delivery during shelter-in-place restrictions, limiting their availability for oversight work with students. Given these challenges, social work programs need to continue to explore the needs of students, field instructors, and field agencies as they consider opportunities for students to engage more directly in virtual client service and clinical practice, especially at the MSW level.

The sample for this research study was limited to 66 BSW and MSW students and 64 BSW and MSW field instructors at one Midwestern university. These students and field instructors were affected by an immediate shift to virtual activity in practica between March 2020 and August 2020. A limitation of the study is the small sample size and response rate of approximately 11%. Generalizability is limited to the study population, which was that of a specific university and cohort of students and field instructors affected by the pandemic during field placement. However, considerations of the impact of those conditions on the quality of supervision may be helpful in future planning for the study's host university, as well as for other institutions.

Conclusion

COVID-19 was unexpected, yet its impact has altered social work field education and delivery of social work services in ways that have transformed the profession. This study offers insight into perceptions of the quality of supervision during the shift to virtual practica. The transitions were initially abrupt and difficult, yet the level of strength and tenacity shown by field instructors and students was remarkable. As the future of social work practica is considered in the wake of COVID-19, this study highlights the need for increased training, support, and policies to better support field instructors and students. Social work education and practice have been forever changed by practices established during the pandemic, and we see these adaptations as evolutionary to shaping the landscape of social work. Exploring ways to maintain satisfaction and quality of supervision in field education in this changing landscape is imperative to the successful future of the discipline.

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