

# Field education and the impact of COVID-19

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*Transitioning a school's programs to accommodate for learning at a distance was the topic of a June ATS webinar led by Barbara J. Blodgett, associate dean for academic programs and assessment at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, director, Office of Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology, and James Barber, interim director of Doctor of Ministry/ director of field education at Oral Roberts University Graduate School of Theology and Ministry. All three are active members of The Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE).*



Field, or contextual, education is about learning by doing, ministry development and professional formation, theological reflection on practice, and more. Field educators usually combine several elements of education and formation to create a full program. Many programs rest on a three-legged stool of work in the field, mentoring, and facilitated peer group reflection. Programs rely on carefully cultivated covenantal relationships among three parties: student, school, and mentor/supervisor.

## **How can we conduct meaningful field education if the COVID-19 crisis prevents students from having any on-site contact with people "in the field"?**

People always find ways to create meaning and form relationship. They just find new ways to do it. As an educator, Fred Rogers found a new way to make contact with families of young children that felt very much like on-site. Just as his "neighborhood" was a new version of and expansion of real neighborhoods, the ministry "field" has

now expanded to include virtual and digital spaces, email, telephone, all sorts of social media, and six-foot distance gaps. These spaces are not what many of us imagine or prefer when we imagine doing ministry "in the field," but they are real nonetheless.

Educators might do well at this time, therefore, to stretch our definition of what it means to do ministry "in-person." Others have, after all. Apparently, some parish pastors have been receiving calls and notes from rarely-seen people who are now coming out of the woodwork seeking pastoral care. (Sometimes they justify their requests by saying that pastors must have the time "because they're not working these days"!) Clearly, these people have not only a need but also an expectation that they will receive quality care remotely.

There is some guidance for making remote experiences more meaningful. The first rule is to give up trying to recreate online exactly the same experiences you are used

to on-site. You have to let go of that desire and temptation. Once you do, you will discover that new, different experiences are possible online. One example from the world of online education is an asynchronous written discussion—it is slower, more measured, and more egalitarian. It is simply a different thing than a loud, lively, spontaneous in-person discussion. Is one better and the other worse? Most of us find that the longer we dwell online, the less frequently we ask the question.

Another example from church life is that some people in the “pews” are finding Zoom and Facebook worship unexpectedly more interactive, as they have the possibility to “chat” with their neighbors during moments when they previously had to be quiet and still. These two examples prove a second rule: if ministers avail themselves of new techniques, they can cleverly create new kinds of person-to-person contact.

Students who have taken and thrived in courses online should prove to be a valuable asset to remote internships. Those who have already learned that distance does not ruin relationship, and that community building is possible online, will bring creative ideas and a positive attitude.

***Some field education internships—those set in prisons, hospices, health care institutions, on the streets, and the like—simply won’t be possible this fall. What are schools to do?***

It is true that fewer places will allow on-site ministry in this time of COVID-19. Churches are opening back up, but the practice of social distancing and using personal protective equipment (PPE) will be around for a considerable time. Some settings—and, therefore, some ministry practices and skills—where students were hoping to learn will not be possible come fall. Some internships may have to be delayed. Here is some advice for alternative solutions:

- **Expand students’ understanding of leadership.** First and foremost, try expanding your and your students’ imaginations about all the types of ministry skills that can be learned in an internship. While direct, hands-on, caregiving work is often the stuff of internships, caregivers also need to learn leadership skills

like organizing, management, strategizing, long- and short-term planning, evaluation, individual and community discernment, storytelling, and more. This may be the opportune season for learning the art of the one-to-one conversation, the oral history, the interview, and the unearthing and gathering of community narratives. Interns can be assigned to this work. In addition, clients have families, other caregivers, advocates, and communities who may need ministering to.

- **Contact potential in-person sites.** Work with existing sites to see whether they are pivoting toward other forms of ministry engagement, or search for ones that are. Contact those facilities that seem promising, and arrange meetings that will allow you to discuss the possibility of individually contacting people.
- **Work your contacts.** If you have a network of local supervisors, some of whom have had to pull out of your internship program, ask them what colleagues and sites they would recommend as alternatives. Often, the local nonprofit world is pretty well connected.
- **Reach out to the field education directors at schools near you.** You might be able to “borrow” a site they are either not using this year or that has the capacity to accept multiple interns. Likewise, reach out to field education directors in your ATFE caucus (denominational/identity group) to investigate the possibility of site sharing.
- **Switch to the other foot!** As Catholic social teaching reminds us, love has two feet in action—justice and charity. In other words, see whether there are organizations in your region that work on the systemic justice issues and/or community education about root causes related to the direct, hands-on charitable work your intern was going to do.
- **Consider national and even international organizations.** If your intern has to work remotely anyway, it might not matter where the organization they are working for is based.

- **Reach out to your alumni/ae.** See if they might be able to create internships for your students.

We recommend that, if at all possible, you not reduce field education hours nor resort to learning from hypothetical case studies of field education instead.

### ***In a time of COVID-19, what precautions should schools take given that students' internships might place them at higher risk?***

Our recommendations about precautions should not be taken as offering legal advice in any way. Start by working with facilities with whom you have long-term relationships, and see whether they will allow students to use PPE and be involved in certain capacities. If there is a risk management office at the facility, contact them about providing liability insurance for your student.

Also consult with your school's business and financial department to see if the school carries liability insurance for students during the semester when they are participating in field education. It covers students in contextual education during COVID-19 and any other time of similar risk, giving them protection and also protecting the facility in case a mishap occurs. Your school may already have had such insurance, particularly if you have domestic or international immersion courses and programs. Insurance may likely pertain only so long as both the student and the site adhere to federal (CDC) and state guidelines, and students might or might not be required to sign liability insurance waivers before being allowed to participate in field education practice.

In the event that a student is identified as high risk and/or does not feel comfortable with certain site-based tasks, you can work with both the site and the student to navigate appropriate opportunities for learning and engagement where risk is minimized. Furthermore, in the event that a site is not adhering to federal and state guidelines, or state guidelines are more relaxed than is comfortable for the student, you can advise the student not to engage in on-site activities in order to minimize risk and ask the site directly to make accommodations for online or other opportunities for learning. In these cases, students should not be penalized for their inability to

engage in site-based activities. In extreme cases, another site may be necessary for the completion of internships.

As for clinical pastoral education (CPE), some sites have canceled or postponed until the following summer, and others are continuing as planned this summer. Some schools' liability insurance may cover students enrolled in CPE.

### ***With finances tightening these days, is it reasonable to waive or lessen sites' requirements to contribute to students' financial support?***

This question raises the larger, long-contested history of the relationship among money, work, and learning in field education. Some argue that because interns are assets to their sites—bringing master's-level professional skills to the ministries—sites should compensate them. Others argue that because interns are learners in a part of the curriculum central to and usually required by their degree programs, they are not primarily performing labor but are eligible for financial aid.

Consider possibilities for securing grants or raising additional funds at this time. Many schools ask their sites to provide their interns with some level of compensation as a demonstration of the sites' commitment. However, some schools also have designated endowment and grant funding that goes toward providing additional dollars to students whose sites cannot provide the full suggested amount. This kind of funding also allows flexibility for those students seeking internships in sites where they can gain particular kinds of experience—smaller churches or nonprofit entities—but where sufficient funding is lacking. (What is sufficient? Internship compensation might be calculated as a fair living wage for a professional position at \$15/hour for 420 hours = \$6,300 total.)

### ***Finally, what guidance do you have for training supervisors in online supervision and students in online ministry? Do students need to be observed while ministering online?***

During the past several months, some supervisors who were previously unable to navigate relationships and

ministry online have now become at least a little more tech savvy than before. For those supervisors who have not been as fluent in online platforms, interns have sometimes initially had to assist them with attending online training. The experience of those of us who have been doing online field education for some time, however, is that Zoom conferences have been one of our greatest allies. All people have to do is click on the link sent in an email and if they have a camera, they are all set. Voice is also applicable if they do not have a camera. It is one of the best methods to navigate and to use for communication. You can have all of your supervisors in one room at the same time or, if necessary, host different conferences for supervisors in other parts of the world who are in different time zones.

The need to train and observe students in online ministry likely depends on the site contexts and the preference of

the supervisor and the member/client/patient. In online settings, conversations might be led by the supervisor with the intern being in a supportive or observing role at first. Or, the student could lead the conversation with the supervisor observing. Or, the conversation could be recorded if the person agrees to this so that it can be reviewed later. Or, the student could simply meet online or by phone and review the conversation later with a supervisor. All of these have the same challenges that are present within in-person, on-site settings as well.

We've highlighted just a few of the questions addressed in the [webinar](#) and have post-webinar resources. Visit the [conversation on Engage ATS](#) to access those resources.

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