

MELISSA SINGH, LCSW  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
[singhmi@usc.edu](mailto:singhmi@usc.edu)

MICHELLE BELL, EdD, LMSW, ACSW  
Clinical Associate Professor  
[bellmm@usc.edu](mailto:bellmm@usc.edu)

NADIA ISLAM, PhD, LCSW  
USC Telehealth™ Director  
[nislam@usctehealth.com](mailto:nislam@usctehealth.com)

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

Social workers providing services through electronic means should demonstrate the same level of professionalism as in person counseling, therefore it is imperative to cultivate professionalism in the digital age and evaluate the efficacy of professional standards

### GROWTH OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

There were 412,000 more online students taking at least one online course in the US in fall 2012 than in fall 2011, for a new total of 7.1 million (Allen & Seaman 2014).

The Commission on Accreditation of CSWE, notes that there are distance education offerings by accredited programs at 22 master's and 5 baccalaureate level programs in the United States (CSWE, 2013).

### PARADIGM SHIFT: Evolution of Online Therapy

According to the NASW (2005), technology and social work practice is defined as any electronically mediated activity used in the conduct of competent and ethical delivery of social work services.



Telementalhealth: U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs



USC Telehealth Virtually Well™



Chicago Therapy Solutions

### IMPACT OF TELEMENTAL HEALTH

According to The Effectiveness of Telemental Health (2013): The Internet & other technologies have the potential for delivering:

- Better mental health information
- Improved & cost effective mental health services
- Prevention of mental health disorders

### PURPOSE OF STUDY

The demonstration and application of professional standards were examined with MSW interns placed at USC Telehealth™, a virtual outpatient behavioral health clinic, in comparison to MSW interns placed in a traditional community-based agency.

Data was collected from the professionalism components of the Comprehensive Skills Evaluation, in an effort to contribute to the validity and strength of distance education in social work education and practice.

## METHODOLOGY

### TEACHING PROFESSIONALISM AT USC TELEHEALTH™



Interns participate in an intensive mandatory 6 week initial training which includes but is not limited to:

- Reviewing readings, training manual, policies, and procedures
- Cultivating an online presence/viewing self and client simultaneously
- Participating in multiple role plays and skill building exercises
- Completing mock bio-psychosocial assessment interviews utilizing LA County Department of Mental Health template documents
- Engaging in 1-hour, weekly individual supervision and 90-minute bi-weekly group supervision
- Completing 1 Reflective Learning Tool per week

### PROCEDURE

Measurement included data collected from a Comprehensive Skills Evaluation instrument, an assessment tool which measures an intern's performance as it coincides with the ten core competencies of social work practice

### COMPREHENSIVE SKILLS EVALUATION SCALE

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR RATING INTERNS N/A= No opportunity to observe

Level 0 = Intern has not met the expectations in this area  
Level 1 = Intern has not met the expectations in this area, but there is evidence that expectations will be met in the near future  
Level 2 = Intern understands the concept and is beginning to demonstrate the skill in this area, however, student performance is uneven  
Level 3 = Intern understands the concept and has consistently met the expectations in this area  
Level 4 = Intern demonstrates a high level of skill development and has exceeded expectations in this area

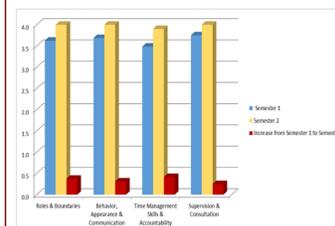
### SAMPLE

- A stratified random sample included 64 students:
- 32 MSW interns placed at USC Telehealth™, a virtual outpatient behavioral mental health clinic, for two semesters of their second year of placement (Concentration year).
  - 32 MSW interns placed at a traditional community based placement, for two semesters of their second year of placement (Concentration year).

## RESULTS

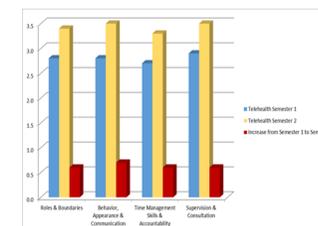
### ANALYSIS

#### Community Based Placement



Semester 1: Mean of 3.6 of 4 pts.  
Semester 2: 4 of 4 pts.  
Total increase: 1.4 pts,  
**Total mean: 0.3 – 0.4 increase**

#### USC Telehealth™



Semester 1: Mean of 2.8 of 4 pts.  
Semester 2: Mean of 3.4 of 4 pts.  
Total increase: 2.5 pts.  
**Mean: 0.6 – 0.7 increase**

### FINDINGS

USC Telehealth™ presented a higher increase of points earned (0.6 -0.7 points) on the Professionalism Comprehensive Skills Evaluation, in comparison to the traditional community based placement (0.3 – 0.4 points).

Data concluded up to a 50% improvement of USC Telehealth™ interns from baseline in the area of professionalism, in comparison to 25% from community based placement counterparts.

### DISCUSSION

In the area of professionalism, USC Telehealth™ interns increased their knowledge base and performance up to 50% versus 25% with traditional community-based placement interns.

Findings are likely due to a combination of factors. These factors may include but are not limited to:

- Intensive supervision
  - Mock assessments
  - Role plays
  - Rigorous training
- Which occur prior to independent work with actual clients

## CONCLUSION

### LIMITATIONS

Due to the evolution of USC Telehealth™, a small sample size was utilized and compared to USC traditional community based placement. Future studies could include a larger sample size as well as comparison of age, gender, and undergraduate degree typology. All 10 competencies could also be measured as opposed to one.

### IMPLICATIONS

Field Instructors can benefit from facilitating intensive supervision of 1-hour weekly supervision coupled with 90-minute biweekly case conference sessions. In an effort to promote an optimal level of functioning, intensive training should include multiple role plays, mock assessments and skill building exercises before working independently.

Additional instructional factors to promote professional standards can include but is not limited to:

- Addressing utilization of professional backdrop
- Enforcing zero tolerance for non-private setting
- Developing pattern of arriving 10-minutes early for appointments
- Establishing consistency with maintaining eyes on screen and distraction-free zone
- Procedure for cancellation of appointments
- Encouraging 4 P's: Prepared, Polite, Professional, Positive
- Facilitating terminology for documentation
- Implementing EBP: MI, CBT, PST

### CONCLUSION

Findings of this study proved valuable insight into the strength, validity, and academic integrity of the distance education and virtual field practicum experience, contributing to social work education and practice

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