Exploring Best Practices in Family Life Education Practicum Courses: Considering the Role of Online Learning

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ABSTRACT. Online learning has become more prevalent in higher education, including expansion into family life education (FLE) programs. The current study surveys FLE practicums on management of practicum experiences within human development/family sciences (HDFS) academic programs with consideration to the role of online technology. Students who wish to be eligible for provisional Family Life Educator (CFLE) status upon graduation through the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) must complete a 120-hour practicum. As online courses become increasingly available across institutions, many faculty members and students are also managing practicum experiences in online settings. To this point, there has been no systematic exploration of HDFS practicum that considers incorporation of online learning options. Using a topical survey, this study ascertains commonalities among practicum experiences from directors of 38 CFLE-approved programs. Through comparison with existing literature on face-to-face and online practicum management, the authors offer an initial set of best practices.

Keywords: distance education, family life education, online learning, pedagogy, practicum

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In 2001 the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) assembled a group of individuals charged with establishing how a practicum course would be incorporated into formal academic standards for Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE)-approved programs. Its purpose was to extend learning and the use of theory and research from within the classroom to the community via supervised field experiences (O'Malley & Wilson, 2004). The recommendations established the practicum as a vehicle for students to gain valuable experience in a work environment before graduation. Specifically, the FLE practicum is intended to give students opportunities to grow as future professionals to improve skills as practitioners, build knowledge bases relevant to the diversity of families they may encounter, become familiar with interrelationships of theory and practice, and apply their developing skills to build or evaluate family-centered community programming (O'Malley & Wilson, 2004).

Initial recommendations by O'Malley and Wilson (2004) and colleagues were developed for practicum students and supervisors in traditional (i.e., face-to-face or F2F) academic programs. Since that time, however, an increasing number of courses (and even entire CFLE-approved programs) have moved into online settings. Yet little if any field-based literature captures online pedagogy, especially with regard to practicum experiences. However, recommendations intended to strengthen and develop scholarship of online teaching and learning are especially important because distance education (DE) presents challenges for any content-based course (challenges include competency with technology, pedagogical approach, and course structure) (Falloon, 2011; Greder, Diers, & Schnurr, 2010; Rehm, Allison, Bencomo, & Godfrey, 2013). Online settings also present unique challenges for practicum courses (e.g., issues regarding effective supervision, evaluation, and/or communication among multiple parties who may all be in different locales) (Chapman, Baker, Nassar-McMillan, & Gerler, Jr., 2011; Dymond, Renzaglia, Halle, Chadsey, & Bentz, 2008). To buffer these challenges and retain student-derived benefits of practicums, FLE programs must maximize efficacy of online practicum management to meet demands of students and administrators who want more online course options.

The Increase of Online Learning

Online courses in post-secondary education settings are increasingly common. Among students and administrations, demands for courses that can be completed entirely using DE technologies continue to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). In 2011, an estimated 89% of four-year public colleges and universities were reported to offer online classes (Parker et al., 2011). While family science programs are no exception to this trend, the discipline has been slower to acknowledge and document the changes. For example, in *Transforming the Master's Degree in Human Development and Family Science* (Benson et al., 2006), the authors do not mention online course delivery as part of HDFS curricula in the 21st century. By contrast, literature published around the same time suggested online education was already becoming an important long-term strategy for postsecondary institutions in the United

States, with more than 2.35 million students enrolled in online courses in fall 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2005).

A call to consider new models for HDFS practicum came from Kopera-Frye, Hilton, Wilson, and Rice (2006), who encouraged academic programs in the field to begin conversations about their internship course configurations to identify best practices and encourage scholarship and consistency. However, similar to other articles published contemporaneously (e.g., Ballard & Carroll, 2005; Benson et al., 2006), Kopera-Frye et al.'s study does not mention online technology in delivery or management of the practicum experience (as an option for instruction or to facilitate course management).

A similar, more recent example includes an article by Smith and Hamon (2014) where the authors propose that family science is entering a new phase of innovation and self-evaluation but do not mention online learning in its trajectory. Smith and Hamon do assert, however, that it is "increasingly imperative for administrators and faculty of family science programs to be capable of identifying the strengths and growth areas of their programs, and to be poised to make necessary changes and to adapt to new demands and conditions" (p. 309). The authors also urge administrators to be "armed with knowledge of the field" and of the best practices within it (p. 309), a suggestion that Jones, Buntting, and de Vries (2013) support.

Similarly, Benson et al. (2006) argued that family science programs must update and engage with undergraduate and graduate students in current and innovative ways. We contend that online practicum courses are one outlet for such innovation. Family science degrees are transforming. In response, we suggest that online learning will be at the forefront of future discussions on how to grow, market, and deliver family life education academic programs and field-based programming. To support our position, we identified at least 38 fully online graduate degree options in HDFS-related programs at 25 different universities in the United States (see Table 1). Of these programs, at least four are CFLE-approved at the graduate level and 12 others are housed in departments with CFLE-approval at the undergraduate level. We also identified 28 HDFS programs within the US and fully online at the undergraduate level, with 18 of those programs CFLE-approved (see Table 2).

As the growing list of online HDFS degrees confirms, content once delivered only in F2F classroom formats may be offered in online settings across program curricula, which often include practicums. The strong general growth of distance offerings in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011), coupled with growing numbers of professionals working with children and families in geographically dispersed locations, means that demand for distance-delivered HDFS degrees is likely to continue.

Considering Online Practicums

Although innovative practices for online learning have become a focus of scholarly research, when these practices are applied to online practicums, challenges may surface that include communication, pedagogy, and course design (Allen, 2011; Balslev, Vanhulle, & Tominska, 2011). For example, contemplation of where and when to use synchronous or

asynchronous communication necessary for well-designed online instruction is important (Kearns, 2012; Romeo, Gronn, McNamara, & Teo, 2012). *Asynchronous* interactions are defined as those occurring outside real time that instructors and students can access at various times (e.g., email message, discussion forum). This is opposite to *synchronous* communication or real-time dialogue between parties (e.g., videoconference, live class session, online chat, phone call). As Dymond and colleagues (2008) note, when instructors and students use videoconferencing or synchronous technology, they must assess its feasibility and practicality.

Additional challenges for online practicums include logistics of using technology tools and resources within the course (Dymond et al., 2008; Piercy, 2006), faculty expertise with technology (Greder et al., 2010), and student familiarity and comfort with using technology (Chapman et al., 2011; Falloon, 2011). HDFS programs that address the need for increased online education options (including practicum) must strive to circumvent challenges such as these so they can provide high quality distance education to students across the curriculum.

There has been no systematic exploration of protocol across FLE programs that considers online practices in practicum pedagogy and management. In response, this study identifies common practicum approaches including incorporation of online teaching and management in practicum experiences among a sample of CFLE-approved academic programs. Since FLE programs are designed to equip students with knowledge and skills needed for work with families, students must be ready to engage with and connect to clients regardless of delivery modality. Accordingly, the practicum course is where HDFS students apply classroom content and theory to practical contexts and real-life situations. Our study uses a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) approach to examine FLE practicum including online management and pedagogy.

Hutchings (2000) noted four types of SoTL analysis including "what works," "what is," "visions of the possible," and "formulating a new conceptual framework for shaping thought about practice" (p. 4). Questions that seek to determine effective practices on a topic fit within "what works" because a study attempts to identify these practices. Given the relative lack of inquiry regarding online practicum in the family science field, the current study is best suited to provide information that answers the question of "what is," capturing germane efforts within the field before assessing the effectiveness of these approaches. As Felten (2013) notes, SoTL inquiry must first be cognizant of its context, including faculty workload, teaching environment, and previous scholarly work in the area. To this end, the current study generates baseline data to explore the topic of online practicum situated within the family science field. The authors attempt to account for practices outside the field, within the field, and among differing types of practicum offerings. Culmination of these efforts also begins to answer Hutchings's (2000) question of "visions of the possible," where various approaches to online practicum can be considered for their efficacy and rightness of fit within HDFS programs.

Method

Participants

The authors obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from their academic institutions before data collection. Using a convenience-sampling method, the authors created a list of CFLE-approved program directors from an online public database maintained by the CFLE section of the NCFR. A total of 104 university directors of NCFR-approved CFLE programs were invited via email to participate in an online qualitative study designed to capture family life education practicum protocol across institutions. A response rate of 36.5% yielded a final sample size of $N = 38$ CFLE-approved programs from 25 different states and one response from Canada, representing academic institutions of varying sizes, types (e.g., private and public, regional and research), and geographic regions. Responses represented every US geographic region.

Earned degrees of respondents ranged from Bachelor's (<1%) to Master's (18%) to Doctoral (81%), with most respondents being tenured and tenure-track professors. Non-faculty titles included lecturer, instructor, and internship coordinator. Undergraduate (85%) and graduate (15%) CFLE-approved programs were represented. Total reported program sizes ranged from 10 to 600, with an undergraduate mode of 200 and a graduate mode of 25. All but one program offers some (if not all) F2F instruction; three noted offering full CFLE-approved curricula as online and F2F options. Distance education options in the sample varied from no online courses to all online courses, with the majority of programs offering between 2-5 CFLE-approved courses online.

Procedure

Participants were asked to describe various aspects of the practicum process within their academic units. These included (a) course structure, (b) supervision and faculty involvement, (c) site selection, (d) assignments and online facilitation, and (e) how practicum success was measured.

Data from the study were analyzed through a topical study lens (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003) that explores qualitative data without attempting to gain a representative sample, and where results are presented through use of categories. To this end, we used content analysis to code the captured data. Two coders categorized responses obtained through the survey, with disagreements between codes settled by discussion until there was agreement on a code. Qualitative responses are reported in aggregate form, quantified where possible in an effort to ascertain common practicum practices among CFLE-approved institutions. Responses that include online supervision or management practices are highlighted.

Results

Course Structure

As expected, basic practicum protocol varied by institution. Most programs reported having practicum requirements that include a single stand-alone practicum course, with a select minority of programs extending practicum requirements over the course of multiple semesters (or even multiple experiences over multiple semesters). All but one program surveyed offers some F2F instruction, with three programs offering full CFLE-approved curricula as online and F2F tracts. Distance education options in the sample varied from no online courses to all online courses, with most programs offering between 2-5 CFLE-approved courses online.

A majority of programs (75%) indicated housing the 120-hour (minimum) CFLE practicum requirement in a capstone or seminar course that averages three credit hours and meets anywhere from weekly to once per semester, whether F2F or synchronous/online. Select programs (3%) reported requiring no prescribed class meetings for practicum students. Instead, a university-appointed supervisor schedules individual student conferences (virtually, by phone, or F2F) on an as-needed or requested basis.

With regard to *ideal* size of a F2F practicum course, participants' mean response was 19.6, which was almost identical to the reported *ideal* size for online practicums ($M = 18.7$). The numbers of reported opinions of *too many* for both F2F ($M = 29.6$) and online practicum instruction *($M = 29.7$)* were also nearly identical among respondents.

Supervision and Faculty Involvement

Although models of practicum placement varied across institutions, faculty involvement (or internship coordinators and others) was reported as necessary and valuable. Participants indicated that supervising faculty/staff serve as instructors, mentors, facilitators, confidants, and community and organizational liaisons.

The vast majority of program directors (94%) reported that students work with one internship director, coordinator, or appointed faculty member designated to oversee all practicum experiences. The remaining 6% reported that interning students work under supervision from individual faculty members based on content area specialization during their practicum experiences.

Interaction with practicum instructors (using F2F, phone, and online modalities) was reported to occur in several settings: during an orientation and/or exit seminar, in regularly scheduled class meetings, during office hours or as-needed conferences, or online through email or a class webpage. Participants indicated that instructors provide regular feedback (e.g., weekly, every-other-week, monthly) to students most often in the form of written comments on submitted assignments, forum posts, or through email. The response from one participant was echoed in much of the sample: *Much of the interaction between students and their university supervisor is online regardless of whether the placement is fairly local or fairly distant.*

Site Selection

With regard to site selection and practicum placements, most participants noted that students were not necessarily limited to geographic locales. Reported site locations ranged from community- or state-based organizations to those located nationally and abroad. However, there appears to be a weighted divide between programs, however, regarding a student's flexibility when selecting a practicum site. Three general approaches were reported in order of theme frequency: (a) self-selected from a student-identified site, (b) self-selected from a pre-approved list of sites, or (c) a student-site match process. Regardless of approach, for programs providing directories of pre-approved practicum sites, many directors specified that these lists were housed on interactive department websites that provided additional information on available organizations (e.g., organizational profiles including contact information, URL links, summary/mission statement, lists of internship expectations).

Self-selected from student-identified site. When asked how students select practicum sites, the protocol reported most often in the sample (56%) relies on students individually to seek and secure practicum sites (with faculty as advisors who final selection approval). This was especially noted in senior- and graduate-level courses where there may be greater expectations on students while they prepare for professional roles and responsibilities post-graduation. Directors reported that this allows students to select practicum sites based on individual career goals, strengths, and experience (while allowing them to exercise networking and job hunting skills).

Self-selected from pre-approved list of sites. Other directors (41%) indicated that their programs monitor site selection by having faculty advisors or internship coordinators provide students with directories of pre-approved practicum sites from which they can choose. There were various reasons for this. Some programs developed pre-approved practicum lists to support local connections of the faculty, department, and/or previous students who have served in noted practicum placements. Alternatively, some lists were put into place due to lack of available choices in the geographic areas in which the academic programs are located, hence saving time (and curbing frustration) for students.

Student-site match process. Finally, a small number of programs (3%) reported a match process between students and placement sites that require students to interview and be interviewed by a set number of potential organizations. After learning more about organizations' missions and expectations for interns, students rank-order their preferred placement sites and the internship coordinators (or designated faculty members) work to match students with organizations based on student rankings and feedback that site supervisors provide.

Assignments and Online Practicum Facilitation

In addition to the internship itself (and the varying seminar attendance requirements), programs almost conclusively reported that regular assignments are routinely incorporated, such as journals or reflections, low-stake homework assignments, projects (e.g., an agency analysis or case study), midterm and/or final papers, and/or final presentations.

When asked whether graded practicum assignments are collected in person or online, 84% of all respondents indicated that all assignments are collected online (even if the course has an F2F component). Participants (even those who did not consider their program to use online facilitation) reported regular use of basic online tools to manage some aspect of the practicum course, even if simply as a document depository where students submit assignments (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) or where course documents are made universally accessible (e.g., an online directory of pre-approved organizations).

A minority of participants (21%) indicated they had no online facilitation. Although contradictory in response, this percentage also captures a portion of the 84% of respondents who indicated that all practicum course assignments are collected online. The 5% discrepancy in reporting is probably due to the secondhand nature of using online course management strategies in F2F courses (e.g., course websites, email). The 21% of programs reporting having no online facilitation indicated that practicum instructors rely solely on F2F interactions between instructors and students, most often through regularly scheduled seminars or class meetings at which practicum experiences are discussed and/or assignments are collected/returned.

The remaining programs (79%) reported incorporation of online resources along a continuum between asynchronous/intermittent communication exchanges and synchronous/real-time interactions. This ranged from simply using email as the main method of student-instructor communication to a more complex approach where instructors use audio- or videoconferencing to engage with students in real-time dialogue (either in one-on-one supervision or in a synchronous online seminar with peer interaction). Inclusion of virtual site visits was also noted. Across online practicums, directors indicated several practices commonly used to facilitate instruction, supervision, and/or communication with students during practicums. The channels cited most often were email, phone, video-conferencing (e.g., Adobe, Collaborate, Skype), course content management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Desire2Learn [D2L], Moodle, OpenClass, Sakai), or other interactive online technologies (e.g., Google Docs, Panopto).

Approximately 33% of participants reported using online course pages or portals as they would in any course, regardless of format, to house practicum documents and resources for students to submit assignments and timesheets, and to post discussion board threads that promote peer interaction, support, and idea exchanges. Select traditional/F2F programs also reported moving to a model where practicums are 100% online, eliminating F2F classroom meetings entirely for on-campus practicum students. One participant offered an explanation of efficacy: *I have so many students that I oversee and cannot give individual attention as much as I would like. That is why I went to an online format. I can give out the instruction to them more efficiently.*

Measuring Practicum Success

The sample generally defined success quite simply as passing the course with a grade of "C" or better. To gauge this overall student success during practicum experiences, programs seem to employ one of three evaluation models led by students, site supervisors, or university supervisors.

Student. The first—and least represented (7%)—evaluation model primarily allows students to evaluate their success by reflecting on the semester and whether or not pre-established practicum expectations were met. Students must submit written summations of the experience including a log of hours worked, self-comparison of final outcomes to self- or agency-identified objectives, reflection on perceived impacts and personal/professional growth, and a grade justification.

Site Supervisor. The second evaluation model, which was also not widely reported (18%), relies solely on site supervisors to evaluate whether or not student practicum experiences are successful. Programs using this model note doing so because site supervisors more closely interact with and observe students as they execute objectives of the practicum. Thus, site supervisors are more adept at rating qualities such as professionalism, attendance, punctuality, dependability, competency, initiative, task completion, and interpersonal communication skills.

University Supervisor. The third and most represented (75%) grading model in the sample charges the university supervisor, practicum instructor, or internship coordinator with determining a student's final practicum grade from a combination of subjective and objective assessments. The instructor then computes the final grade from four commonly-reported categories: (a) graded assignments (low-stakes, papers, presentations), (b) course attendance and/or participation (F2F/online seminars, asynchronous forums), (c) student reflections or self-evaluations (journals, final papers, oral exit interviews), and (d) site evaluation (live or virtual instructor site visits, written evaluations provided by site supervisors).

Additional CFLE-Approved Online Course Options

Recognizing the growing demand by current and future professionals for online CFLE course options, NCFR provides on its website a list of individual CFLE-approved, university-based online course options divided by FLE content area. This is done partly through NCFR's effort to meet needs of students enrolled at CFLE-approved programs who are unable to complete one or more CFLE-approved courses at their degree-granting institutions. The online course listing provides a way for students to complete CFLE-approved courses at other institutions while still meeting requirements for provisional CFLE certification. However, at press, no CFLE-approved online practicums are among the courses listed. For more information, visit https://www.ncfr.org/cfle-certification/become-certified/cfle-approved-online-course-listing

Considering (Online) Best Practices in HDFS Practicums

Research exploring effectiveness of online practicum options is ongoing, with studies from various fields noting potential approaches to support best practices. Based on a review of relevant literature (Allen, 2011; Balslev, Vanhulle, & Tominska, 2011; Dymond et al., 2008; Kearns, 2012; Piercy, 2006; Romeo, Gronn, McNamara, & Teo, 2012) and after ascertaining general commonalities among our sample of CFLE-approved programs regarding (a) practicum protocol, (b) course content, and (c) the incorporation of online technologies into practicum facilitation, the initial set of best practices offered below for HDFS-related programs captures advances in distance education for the 21st-century learner.

Practicum Protocol

When creating protocol for a practicum course, academic programs following CFLE-approved requirements must house the 120-hour-minimum supervised professional experience in a course taken for credit, which is generally met by one three-credit course (NCFR, 2014). Although NCFR endorses general practices for FLE internships/practicum (O'Malley & Wilson, 2004) and CFLE-program approval guidelines exert basic parameters for the course (NCFR, 2014), there are no established structural requirements for course design, site selection, and instructor involvement/supervision. The recommendations offered below are applicable regardless of course delivery method (i.e., F2F, hybrid, online) and they consider integration of online learning technologies.

Course design. Depending on program size and student standing (i.e., undergraduate or graduate), the structural design for FLE practicums will vary. Based on the results of this study and complementary findings in similar disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology; Grahel & Hauhart, 2013), we recommend a practicum enrollment cap of 20 students to maximize faculty-student communication and engagement. Furthermore, to promote internal consistency in expectations and supervision of individual student experiences, each program should adopt a clear, concise practicum handbook or universal course syllabus. This text should list current policies, procedures, assignments, expectations, and evaluation metrics to which all students and faculty should adhere. This echoes the call from Allen (2011) and Jones, Buntting and de Vries (2013) for setting clear expectations for faculty and students when using technology in learning environments. Departments should designate one primary coordinator to instruct/supervise all practicum students. The appointment/teaching load of this individual be accurately and proportionately weighted to reflect the intensity of the position (Beck & Ksonik, 2002). For programs with enrollment sizes or content-area specializations that limit feasibility of such an advising model, we recommended departments appoint one person to oversee, coordinate, and monitor uniform supervisory practices of multiple faculty/staff.

Site selection. Regarding student flexibility when selecting a practicum site, two general approaches were most reported in the sample and are recommended: (a) self-selected from a student-identified site and (b) self-selected from a pre-approved list of sites (with or without a student-site match process). Since students and departments vary in terms of needs and resources, we suggest students seek and secure advisor-approved practicum sites based on individual career goals, strengths, and levels of experience in accordance with the department's preferred model. Providing students with a comprehensive up-to-date directory of past practicum sites can be also beneficial for faculty and students in (a) expediting the selection process for programs requiring instructor approval, (b) generating placement ideas for incoming practicum students, and (c) maintaining a network of department partnerships. We recommend databases be housed electronically rather than in hardcopy form to promote the timely and relevant upkeep of organizational profiles including contact information, URL links, summary/mission statement, and lists of internship expectations.

Instructor involvement and supervision. Instructor engagement is critical to maximize practicum benefits for students (Field, 2004; Frey, 2008). Feedback to students should be frequent, using various modalities as applicable (e.g., assignments, reflections, email, during F2F

and/or online meetings) (Chapman, Baker, Nassar-McMillan, & Gerler, 2011). We suggest that university practicum supervisors (a) be accessible to practicum students for urgent or confounding issues, (b) remain engaged throughout the duration of the practicum experience, and (c) provide regular and thorough feedback on assignments (especially asynchronous assignments) with the intention of eliciting critical thinking and student reflection (Field, 2004). We also recommend that instructors include real-time communication for all practicum students, whether F2F or virtually through videoconferencing (or at minimum, through telephone) (Dymond et al., 2008). Instructor communication with site supervisors is also encouraged in some capacity (e.g., written, email, phone, in-person, virtual) during the semester to corroborate students' effort and self-reports.

Course Content

Research on effective practicums (whether F2F or online) note activities undertaken by students to (a) explore their roles as professionals (Ballard & Carroll, 2005; Frey, 2008), (b) develop professional skills (Chapman, Baker, Nassar-McMillan, & Woodard, 2011; Rehm et al., 2013; Simons et al., 2012), (c) engage in transformative learning opportunities that increase understanding of complex issues (Field, 2002; Frey, 2008; Simons et al., 2012), and (d) allow for reflection on their experiences (Frey, 2008; Hornos et al., 2013). The underlying processes to achieving these goals are similar across the literature and tend to focus on two main aspects of the practicum course: assignments and instructor feedback.

Assignments. The practicum course is intended as a cumulative or capstone experience that adds to academic preparation and centers on adult education methods and program development (NCFR, 2014). Assignments should focus on family life education and prevention rather than therapy, counseling, social work, and early childhood education. (NCFR, 2014). Thus, practicum assignments should be designed to assess the student's practical and professional application of his or her cumulative program of study. We recommend two means for accomplishing this: reflective activities and peer learning.

Reflective activities. Reflective activities during the practicum are tools for students to explore their beliefs and approaches via journals or interviews (Frey, 2008). This process asks students to critically evaluate their beliefs and approaches to promote an increase in working knowledge and expansion of professional values (Simons et al., 2012). Researchers have explored how reflective activities might be best used in the context of an online course to improve student satisfaction with the course and to foster critical thought. For example, Hornos et al. (2013) demonstrate how a system specifically designed to foster development of practice-based expertise, and to increase reflection through daily feedback and self-test mechanisms, can lead to innovative online classroom experiences.

Rehm et al. (2012) emphasize that using appropriate pedagogical activities in online settings often allows for student reflection. An example of this approach is a community of inquiry (COI) in which the instructor establishes a vibrant online learning environment as part of the practicum course where students are asked to reflect and answer questions in an asynchronous setting (e.g., on a class discussion board, forum, or online journal). Rehm et al. (2012) suggest that in a practicum setting, online assignments can play a key role in allowing

students to engage in reflective activities in support of their experiential learning to connect course content to applied contexts.

     Peer learning. Collaboration has been shown to maximize benefits for online practicum students. Specifically, peer learning can be integral to helping students connect content to context. Luke et al. (2009) found that health education students participating in online clinical experiences increased their professional skills when they used an applied peer-learning model (e.g., support networks among students, using cooperative learning groups). Greder, Diers, and Schnurr (2010) also found that in online settings, learning communities allowed for peer interactions outside class and led to learning from diverse opinions and experiences. Furthermore, Frey (2008) found that in teacher education practicums, benefits of online peer learning communities extended beyond those derived from course content or from the instructor.

     Instructor Feedback. Instructor-provided feedback is essential to helping students maximize benefits of the practicum experience. Research suggests that engaging students in reflective and group discussions that include faculty or supervisory feedback allows for nuanced views of their own practicum experiences (Balslev, Vanhulle, & Tominska, 2011). In online practicums, the use of videoconferencing is one example of a synchronous technology designed to foster engagement with and/or between online practicum students and instructors. Dymond et al. (2008) evaluated feasibility of online supervision (and subsequent positive student outcomes) for education students using videoconferencing. The authors noted that when students had access to the technology necessary to facilitate online supervision, outcomes for online students were no different from those of their F2F counterparts in terms of overall performance.

     Significance of faculty support is noted throughout online learning literature. In a study of undergraduate public health students enrolled in an online asynchronous course, researchers found that students' perceived levels of instructional, peer, and technical support were positively associated with course satisfaction (Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011). A qualitative analysis of responses indicated that students wanted more interaction with instructors through synchronous or real-time sessions. Lee et al. (2011) suggested instructors provide ways to increase availability for students through the use of email, discussion boards, or virtual meetings. Students' reports of course satisfaction were clearly related to faculty interaction (over support offered from peers or IT, for example). Furthermore, in response to how the course could better support student learning, the sample mostly suggested increased faculty interaction.

Discussion

     Literature on the FLE practicum protocol is limited. The available texts do not consider the role that online technology serves in (a) delivery of course content, (b) expanded capacities for faculty/student/peer communication, or (c) remote facilitation and supervision of practicum. Each of these areas contextualizes questions that Felten (2013) argues must be accounted for when conducting inquiry in SoTL. This study documents various contexts in an effort to answer what Hutchings (2000) calls the question of "what is." Various approaches to online practicum are noted to document the state of online practicum in the field to establish a baseline set of current practices. This approach also allows for initial consideration of the Hutchings (2000)

question of "visions of the possible" where new approaches to practicum in online settings may be considered.

The combination of these two questions allows for updated approaches and recommendations that incorporate modern technology effectively for the family science field. For example, the NCFR practicum/internship handbook by O'Malley and Wilson (2004) and colleagues was based on data and discussions held in and before 2001 and 2002. Along with the aforementioned recommendations, we suggest expanding the scope of literature on FLE practicum to include online technology as highlighted below.

Delivery of course content. As our sample indicates and as previous research supports, incorporating online technology into practicums is a growing trend. For HDFS departments or instructors who integrate DE practices into delivery or management of practicums, course construction should be deliberate and carefully planned to minimize potential problems for students and faculty. Online course function should extend beyond a resource or assignment depository. Instructors are encouraged to explore and use varied technology platforms to maximize course effectiveness and pedagogical innovation.

As practicums in HDFS and other disciplines are being offered both F2F and online, practicum supervisors should also familiarize themselves with online learning options available through their respective academic institutions. Many universities have DE technologies that are available to all faculty and students. Integrating online technology into practicum management will likely begin with a university-sourced online course page (a) to house practicum documents and resources, (b) for students to submit assignments or timesheets, and (c) to post discussion board threads or forums that promote peer interaction, support, and idea exchanges. From there, instructors can incorporate additional asynchronous and/or synchronous channels (e.g., videoconferences, lectures).

Expanded capacities for communication. Effective use of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools should aim at maximizing instructor feedback to students in online practicums. Research supports comparable effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous communication strategies with regard to online practicum, although there is debate among scholars on whether one approach should be preferred. A study by Chapman et al. (2011) noted that when evaluating "cyber-supervision" approaches with Master's-level counseling students, students felt satisfied with both methods of communication. Conversely, Kearns (2012) argues that synchronous approaches should be used (where appropriate) in place of asynchronous communication. After studying DE modalities used by a variety of disciplines (i.e., education, nursing, gerontology, library science), Kearns (2012) explains that "many of the challenges instructors face when teaching online are the result of the distant, asynchronous nature of most online learning" (p. 205) and that using synchronous communication (e.g., web conferencing, telephone conferencing) can help minimize dissonance that asynchronous communication introduces.

Opportunities to communicate with students (and even site supervisors) via synchronous means are encouraged and may range from one-on-one conferences via computer or telephone to regularly scheduled real-time class meetings and live introductory and/or exit seminars. In a case

study of an online HDFS graduate program, Piercy and Lee (2006) found that DE students sought more input from instructors, increased feedback on assignments, and increased opportunities for instructor interactions. Piercy and Lee also noted that instructors desired mechanisms to more easily provide assistance to online students, as well as more stable technology-based platforms to use in online settings. As media-driven communication capacities improve, so too will online options for effective supervision and instruction.

       Remote facilitation and supervision of FLE practicum. In this study, a recurring response among participants was the flexibility afforded to students by offering the practicum course online. Participants noted that since practicum placements were not necessarily limited to geographic locales, using remote facilitation practices was crucial. Reported internship placements ranged from community- or state-based organizations to those with national or international locales. The more distally located the practicum, the more necessary online supervision options become. Incorporating effective online technologies into construction and supervision of practicums removes demographic delimiters and allows all students to experience quality guidance during practicum courses regardless of locations. It better equips HDFS departments to promote national and global student engagement along with individualized practicum experiences designed to accommodate modern learners—many of whom are digital natives, accustomed to the autonomy that virtual technologies afford.

Conclusion

       As online learning options increase across the family life education curriculum, HDFS and/or CFLE-approved programs must also consider the role of online technologies in supervision and facilitation of student practicums. As Day and Baugher (1999) asserted over 15 years ago, there has been a paradigm shift in higher education: institutions and departments that embrace the move toward expanded outreach and DE programs are most likely to be successful. While the authors acknowledged challenges in providing quality online education, they also argued that continuing discussions among professionals must take place. We echo this need for HDFS scholars: a serious dialogue among professionals must take place, especially because assessing the need for distance education may be crucial to future viability of HDFS programs. The conversation is particularly timely given recent discussion among family science professionals on progress and innovation in the field (e.g., Hamon & Smith, 2014).

Limitations

       Limitations of the present study should be noted. First, although all known CFLE-approved programs were solicited via email for study participation at the time of data collection, less than 40% of programs completed online surveys. The time required to complete the study's qualitative design may have deterred potential respondents because we asked participants to describe practicum protocol at length. Furthermore, there was little way to track potential participants who actually received and/or read email invitations to participate in the study. Scheduling interviews with directors at their convenience, either over the telephone or through videoconferencing, may have increased sample size. Thus, while this study provides basic information on practicum protocol and on ways that CFLE-approved programs incorporate

online technologies into practicum experiences, the study may not provide a comprehensive or generalizable snapshot of HDFS or CFLE practicum or online practices.

Next, even though information regarding basic practicum procedures was collected, including incorporation of online management and supervision practices, there is a need for more information detailing the range of implemented course construction options, including concrete examples of online practicums from programs/institutions that vary in size, region, type, rank, etc. As Kearns (2012) and Greder et al. (2010) note, construction of an online course is linked with course quality. While the current study allows for initial presentation of a general set of best practices for managing practicum experiences more effectively (that considers the use of online technology and distance education options), further research to refine and expand these guidelines is needed.

Implications and Future Directions

Establishing an initial set of best practices for CFLE and/or HDFS-related practicums that consider online learning has implications for students and faculty. Potential program benefits may include establishing partnerships that extend beyond the proximal community of the institution. Another benefit would be in how these steps would help programs remain up-to-date with technology, current practices in higher education, and needs of modern learners. Furthermore, for faculty, the guidelines serve as a cohesive set of practices supported by research and driven by discipline-suggested field data. For students, potential benefits include (a) expanded networking potential; (b) enhanced, applied preparation for careers in family science that incorporate online technology (e.g., videoconferencing and webinars, online FLE programming, social media); and (c) the chance to participate in professional experiences that available in areas that are geographically disparate from the base academic institution.

Future research in this area should explore how various approaches to practicums—when compared one to another and as online-to-F2F courses—relate to efficacy and student success. Specifically, for online practicum management, there is a need for research that systematically explores course construction strategies, pedagogical approaches, and varying types of technology used for facilitating online practicum experiences to further refine best practice recommendations. In the interim, the authors encourage CFLE and HDFS programs to consider the practicum guidelines presented here in an effort to creative purposive, structured departmental protocol and expectations for students and faculty. These protocol and expectations include the use of online management and instruction procedures in practicums.

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Table 1. *Known Online Graduate Degree Programs in HDFS-Related or Concentrated Fields*

College/University *CFLE-Approved Undergraduate** *CFLE-Approved Graduate***	Public/ Private	Department/School Name(s)	Online HDFS Master's Degree Program(s) *Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance Member** *Global Consortium for International Family Studies***	Degree
Arizona State University	Public	– Social and Family Dynamics	– Family and Human Development	M.S.
Clemson University	Public	– Youth Development Leadership	– Youth Development Leadership	M.S.
Concordia University-Saint Paul* **	Private	– Psychology and Family Studies	– Family Science	M.A.
East Carolina University*	Public	– Human Development and Family Science	– Birth-Kindergarten Education – Family and Consumer Sciences	M.A.Ed.
Iowa State University*	Public	– Human Development and Family Studies	– Family and Consumer Sciences (Gerontology)* – Family and Consumer Sciences (Youth Development)*	M-FCS
Kansas State University	Public	– Family Studies and Human Services	– Family and Community Services* – Gerontology* – Youth Development*	M.S.
Lubbock Christian University* ** **	Private	– Behavioral Sciences – Biblical Studies	– Human Services (Family Life Educator) – Family Ministry	M.S.
Michigan State University*	Public	– Human Development and Family Studies	– Family and Community Services* – Youth Development*	M.A.
Middle Tennessee University*	Public	– Human Sciences	– Human Sciences (Child Development and Family Studies)	M.S.
North Carolina Central University	Public	– Human Sciences	– Family and Consumer Sciences (Human Development and Family Studies)	M.S.
North Carolina State University**	Public	– Youth, Family, and Community Sciences	– Family Life and Youth Development	M.S., M.R.
North Dakota State University*	Public	– Human Development and Family Science	– Human Development and Family Science (Youth Development)* – Human Development and Family Science (Gerontology)*	M.S.
Oklahoma State University*	Public	– Human Development and Family Science	– Human Development and Family Science (Gerontology) *	M.S.
Pacific Oaks College	Private	– Human Development	– Human Development	M.A.
South Dakota State University	Public	– Human Sciences	– Human Sciences (Family and Community Services)*	M.S.
Texas Tech University*	Public	– Human Sciences	– Human Development and Family Studies (Gerontology)* – Youth Development*	M.S.
Texas Women's University* **	Public	– Family Sciences	– Family Studies	M.S.
University of Central Arkansas	Public	– Family and Consumer Sciences	– Family and Consumer Sciences	M.S.
University of Florida*	Public	– Family, Youth and Community Sciences	– Family, Youth and Community Sciences	M.S.
University of Massachusetts-Boston	Public	– Curriculum and Instruction (Education and Human Development) – Human Services	– Early Childhood (Community Professional) – Human Services	M.Ed. M.S.
University of Missouri*	Public	– Human Development and Family Studies	– Human Development and Family Studies (Family and Community Services) * – Human Development and Family Studies (Gerontology)* – Human Development and Family Studies (Youth Development)*	M.A.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Public	– Child, Youth and Family Studies	– Family and Community Services* – Human and Family Services Administration – Child, Youth and Family Studies (International Family Studies)** – Youth Development*	M.S.

University of North Alabama*	Public	– Sociology and Family Studies	– Family Studies	M.S.
University of Southern Mississippi*	Public	– Child and Family Studies	– Child and Family Studies	M.S.
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point*	Public	– Health Promotion and Human Development	– Community & Organizational Leadership	M.S.

Table 2. *Known Online Undergraduate Degree Programs in HDFS-Related or Concentrated Fields*

College/University *CFLE-Approved Undergraduate**	Public/ Private	Department/School Name(s)	Online HDFS Bachelor's Degree Program(s) *Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance Member**	Degree
Anderson University*	Public	College of Arts and Sciences	Family Science	B.S.
Arizona State University*	Public	College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics	B.S.
Bellevue	Private	College of Arts and Sciences	Healthcare, Nursing, and Human Services	B.S.
Central Michigan University*	Public	College of Education and Human Services	Human Development and Family Studies	B.S.
Concordia University-Saint Paul*	Private	College of Education and Science	Social and Behavioral Sciences	B.A.
East Carolina University*	Public	College of Human Ecology	Child Development and Family Relations	B.S.
East Tennessee State University	Public	College of Education	Counseling and Human Services	B.S.
Eastern Kentucky University*	Public	College of Health Sciences	Family and Consumer Sciences	B.A.
Kansas State University*	Public	College of Human Ecology	Family Studies and Human Services*	B.S.
Kaplan University	Private	College of Social and Behavioral Science	Social and Behavioral Sciences	B.S.
LeTourneau University	Private	College of Arts and Sciences	History, Political Science and Criminal Justice	B.H.S.
Liberty University	Private	College of Arts and Sciences	Family and Consumer Sciences	B.S.
McNeese State University*	Public	College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	Social Sciences	B.A.
North Dakota State University	Public	College of Human Development and Education	Health Development and Family Science*	B.S.
Oregon State University*	Public	College of Public Health and Human Sciences	Human Development	B.S.
Southeast Missouri State University*	Public	College of Human Environment	Human Environmental Studies	B.S.
Southeastern Louisiana University*	Public	College of Nursing and Health Studies	Health and Human Sciences	B.S.
Southern New Hampshire University	Private	Human Services	Child and Family Services	B.S.
University of Alabama*	Public	College of Human Environmental Sciences	Human Development and Family Studies	B.S.
University of Nebraska Kearney*	Public	College of Education	Family Studies and Interior Design	B.S.
University of Texas (Permian Basin)	Public	College of Education	Child and Family Studies	B.A.
University of Wisconsin Stout*	Public	College of Education, Health and Human Services	Human Development and Family Studies	B.S.
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh*	Public	College of Education, Health and Human Services	Human Services Leadership	B.S.
University of Wyoming*	Public	College of Agriculture and Natural Resources	Family and Consumer Sciences	B.A.
Utah State University	Public	College of Education and Human Services	Family, Consumer, and Human Development	B.S.
Washington State University	Public	College of Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences	Human Development	B.A.
Weber State University*	Public	College of Education	Child and Family Studies	B.I.S.
Western Michigan University*	Public	College of Education and Human Development	Family and Consumer Sciences	B.S.