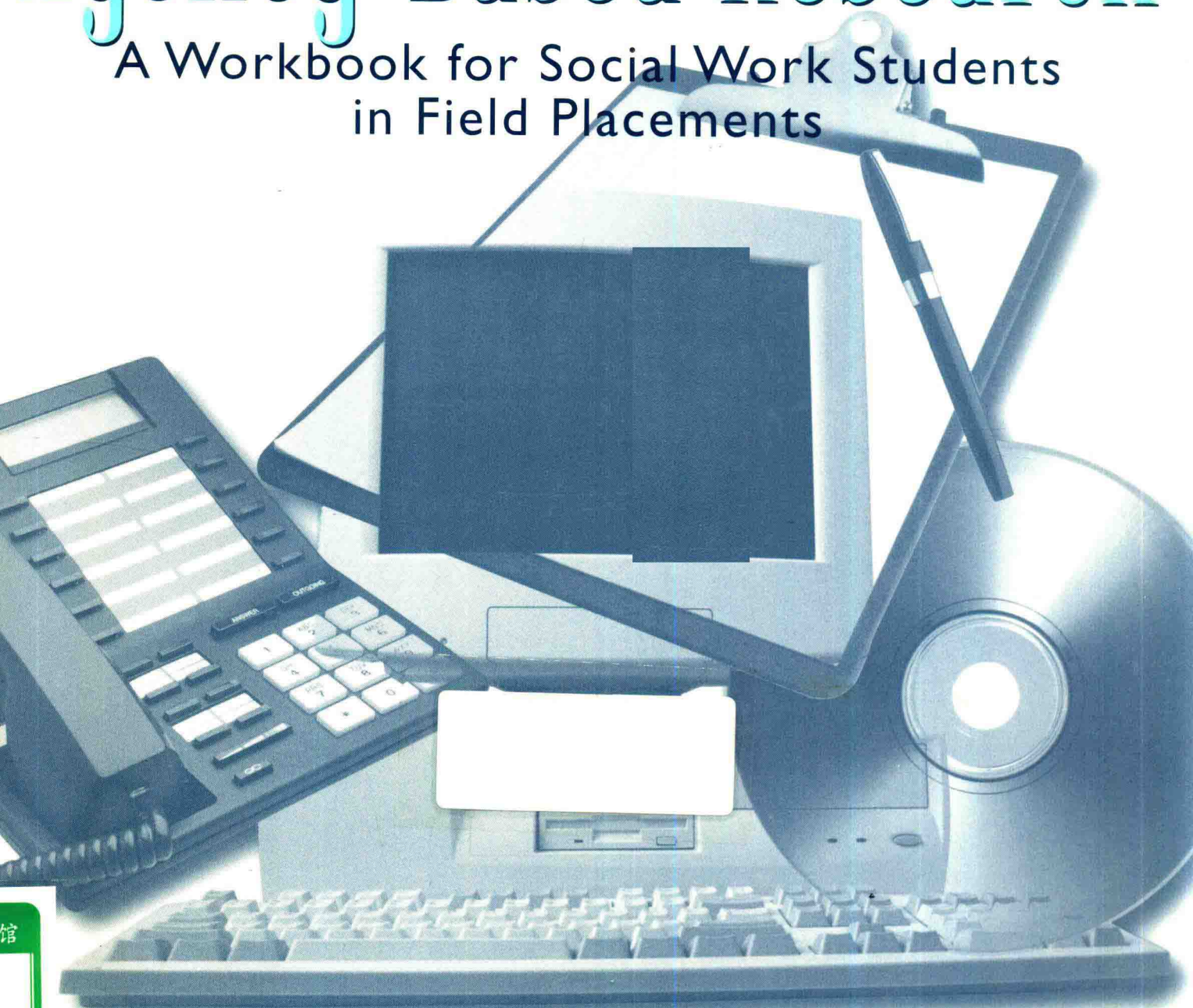


Second Edition

# Planning & Conducting Agency-Based Research

A Workbook for Social Work Students  
in Field Placements



Alex Westerfelt — Tracy J. Dietz

# **Planning and Conducting Agency-Based Research**

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in Field Placements**  
Second Edition

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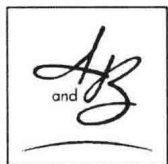
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# INTRODUCTION

Social work educators are aware that graduates of social work programs rarely *use* research findings in their practice and even less often *conduct* research in their practice (Epstein, 1987; Kirk, 1990; Kirk & Fisher, 1976). In a survey of field instructors regarding assessment of their MSW students' skills in social work practice, the field instructors rated understanding of research as the lowest skill area for students (Knight, 1993). In a survey of potential employers' views of the ideal undergraduate curriculum, agency personnel rated research as their least valued content area (Forte & Mathews, 1994). Furthermore, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Task Force on Social Work Research asserts that there is a crisis in social work research, claiming that at all levels of social work education, the teaching of research skills is inadequate (Report of the NIMH Task Force on Social Work Research, 1991).

Yet the contexts in which social work practice occurs increasingly demand that social workers be proficient in evaluating intervention outcomes. Although course work in research methods is an essential component of social work education, students should also have opportunities to apply research knowledge and skills outside the classroom, ideally in their field placement (Strom & Gingerich, 1993). As Fraser, Lewis, and Norman (1990) note: "For many schools, the development of a sophisticated research curriculum with opportunities to apply research skills in a supervised practice setting remains an unfulfilled challenge" (p. 100).

We developed this workbook in response to that challenge. Its purpose is to provide undergraduate and graduate social work faculty and students a systematic series of research assignments leading to a completed research study that students could carry out in their field placements. These assignments have three ultimate goals: (1) to increase students' interest and skills in practice research; (2) to help students produce agency-based research that contributes to the mission of the agency; and (3) to demonstrate to students the value and utility of practice-based research. Our premise is that once students experience success in carrying out a research project in a practice setting and see the usefulness of their findings, they will have the confidence and motivation to continue research efforts in their own postgraduate practice.

Social work has long recognized the importance of field education as a means for integrating knowledge and practice skills. We believe that the field setting also provides students an ideal opportunity to apply research concepts and methods learned in research courses and to see firsthand how their research projects can benefit



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## 2 INTRODUCTION

clients and agencies. For a practitioner, conducting research in the field can lead to an understanding of the real importance that research results can have in daily practice.

### Agency-Based Research

This workbook is designed to aid students in planning and conducting research projects based in an agency setting. We define agency-based research as applied research with the goal of producing information that can be used to improve conditions and services for clients. This is in contrast to basic research, which seeks to generate theory or lead to a deeper understanding of an issue (i.e., knowledge for the sake of knowledge). Agency-based research involves studying some aspect of the agency and its programs or its clients and their communities with an emphasis on the utility of that information. Applied research should inform action, enhance decision making, and lead to solutions of human and societal problems (Patton, 1990).

### New in this Edition

In this edition, we include a new section that directly addresses outcomes evaluation (**Section IX**). In addition, this edition features more examples for students to follow, including a list of research questions of projects undertaken by our students, a fully annotated example of a literature review, examples of how to use existing literature, sample consent forms, and a time line for students to plan their project. We have also added resources for locating established research instruments and measures. Based on feedback from our students and others, we believe the second edition of the workbook is even more user-friendly and will be a valuable tool in planning and conducting agency-based research.

## DESIGNING AN AGENCY-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT:

# LAYOUT OF THE WORKBOOK

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### *If you want to know . . .*

- ✓ What research has the agency already done?
- ✓ What data does the agency routinely collect?
- ✓ How do I develop a research question?
- ✓ What has already been written about this topic?
- ✓ What is the best way to answer my question?
- ✓ How do I choose who to study?
- ✓ What procedures must I put in place to safeguard research participants?
- ✓ How do I analyze my findings?
- ✓ How do I present my results and conclusions?

### *Turn to . . .*

**Section I:**  
*Orientation to  
Agency Research*

**Section III:**  
*The Research Question*

**Section IV:**  
*The Literature Review*

**Section V:**  
*Choosing Your Methodology*

### *See also . . .*

- **Section VI:** *Survey Research*
- **Section VII:** *Qualitative Research*
- **Section VIII:** *Single Subject Design*
- **Section IX:** *Outcomes Evaluation*

**Section X:**  
*Sample Design*

**Sections II & XI:**  
*Protection of Research Participants*

**Section XII:**  
*Data Analysis*

**Section XIII:**  
*Writing the Final Paper*

---

## 4 INTRODUCTION

We would like to thank the following people for their suggestions for the second edition of the workbook: Ineke Way, University of Michigan; Arlene Kaplan Brown, Florida International University; Patricia Kolar, University of Pittsburgh; and C.G. Kledaras, Campbell University. We also thank our editor at Allyn & Bacon, Judith S. Fifer. We received helpful comments on earlier versions of the workbook from: Tara V. Bankston, Louisiana State University; Cynthia Leonard Bishop, Meredith College; William Cloud, University of Denver; Nancie Palmer, Washburn University; Gregory Pettys, Washburn University; Steven Rose, Louisiana State University; James Stafford, University of Mississippi; and Barbara Key Wickell, University of Illinois at Chicago. We appreciate comments from participants who attended our workshop on agency-based research at the 1994 Baccalaureate Program Directors' Meetings in San Francisco and from students who have used earlier drafts and the first edition of the workbook in planning and conducting their agency research projects. Finally, thanks go to Tom Barton for his comments.

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# HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

To use this workbook effectively, students should either have completed a research methods course or currently be enrolled in one. Although the workbook is designed to follow the basic steps of the research process as covered by any research methods text, it is not a research textbook and will not provide all the necessary information to conduct a research project. Rather, it asks the questions students must answer as they plan and conduct a research study. We intend that the workbook be used in conjunction with a research text, and throughout the workbook we remind students to draw upon their text.

The workbook provides guidelines for the development of four methods commonly used in agency-based research including survey research, qualitative research, single-subject design research, and program outcomes evaluation. For each method, we outline the steps we think necessary for completing a research study utilizing that method. We recognize that the steps laid out in this workbook may differ from those presented in other texts, but we expect that the differences will be slight. Further, we recognize that there are many acceptable ways of conducting research.

For each step of the research process we detail what students should cover when writing that section of the research paper. There are two options for the actual writing of the workbook exercises. One option is for students to use the workbook pages to compile their beginning thoughts and ideas. The perforated pages allow them to turn in their work for instructor feedback. Based on instructor feedback, students can then begin their drafts of their research papers. A second option is for students to use the workbook pages to compile their beginning thoughts and ideas and then to use word processing for more thoughtful first drafts. These drafts can use the outline numbering of each workbook section for consistency and structure. The advantages of this option are to provide the instructor with typed copy, and once the instructor provides feedback, to allow students to incorporate it into their draft documents more easily. By the time the students have completed the workbook, they will each have a substantial draft of their final paper.

Because the terms *field instructor*, *field supervisor*, and *field liaison* are often used interchangeably, we want to clarify the terms we use. In the workbook, *field instructor* is used to refer to the agency staff member who is responsible for supervising the student. *Course instructor* refers to the university faculty member who is teaching the course in which the workbook is being used. *Field liaisons* are typically university faculty members whose role is to coordinate the students' learning experiences in both the agency and the university. A program may give different responsibilities to

different individuals; for example, a program may provide a significant role for a field liaison in the research project. When there are variations from the definitions or names given here, it would be helpful to designate for students the individuals who correspond to the course instructor and the field instructor as identified in the workbook.

## **Special Note to Students**

We have two suggestions for you. First, reiterating what we have stated above, we recommend that from the very beginning you do all the writing for this project on a personal computer using a word processing package. Our students have repeatedly said that this was the single most helpful suggestion we gave them, saving them hours of time in completing the final draft of their paper. If you type a draft of each section and save it on disk, then revise each section after receiving feedback from others, all you should need to do for your final paper is to put the sections together and make minor edits.

Our second suggestion is that while using the workbook to guide your research project, you make a habit of referring to both your research text and the suggested article for the particular method of study you choose. In the Table of Contents you will see the four methods listed. At the beginning of each of the sections we have indicated a specific article that will provide you with an example of a research study that utilizes that method. Reference to your methods text is intended for review of material; reference to the article will give you a complete picture of an actual study and examples of how to write sections of your own study.

Keep in mind that the research process is an ongoing feedback loop. As it is explained, it may appear quite linear, but in actuality, research activities may not follow the orderly steps we present. Inevitably, you will find yourself returning to prior steps to revise them based on what you have found in later steps. Eventually the pieces of the puzzle will all fit together. Trust us. We have designed the workbook in an easy-to-follow, step-by-step format that we believe demystifies the research process. We hope it will build your confidence in your ability to participate in and conduct research in an agency setting.

## Special Note to Course Instructors

The workbook can be used in a variety of courses. It is an obvious addition to a research course, but we intentionally designed it for use in a field seminar or a practice course that is taken concurrently with field activity. We encourage faculty to experiment with various options for coverage of this material. The following social work program components are considerations for determining the ideal format: research course requirements and expectations, block versus concurrent placements, the proximity of placements to each other, the primary instructor, and the other people involved in guiding the student project.

Some course instructors, faced with certain program constraints, may want students to complete only a research proposal and not actually carry out the project. Others may want students to work in groups and complete group research projects. In large programs where individual agencies may have several students in placement, students could work together on one project for the agency.

A computer template is available to course instructors who adopt the workbook. The template includes the sections of the workbook assignments and may be used with your students. The purpose of the template is to enable students to more readily move their thoughts and ideas from the pages of the workbook to a computer for word processing. We hope that this aid will encourage students to utilize computers and will help them as they organize and write the first drafts of their papers. Once the first draft is on computer, revisions should be much easier for students. Further, course instructors may find typed drafts of the workbook assignments easier to read and evaluate. If you are interested in obtaining the template, you may contact Tracy Dietz at [T.Dietz@tcu.edu](mailto:T.Dietz@tcu.edu).

## Special Note to Field Instructors

You are a key player in your students' research projects. Your view of research and the value you place on it will affect their experiences with agency research. However, you will not be totally responsible for helping them conduct the research project. The course instructor is responsible for teaching the students basic research methods and the application of these to agency settings.

Your role is to support and monitor the students along the way. You will be able to provide the best assistance if you are involved from the beginning. The steps we outline in the workbook promote your involvement by requiring students to ask



questions of you and other agency staff. Your comments and feedback to them are necessary and will be extremely helpful.

You are an expert about your agency and its clients. You know what questions, if answered, will provide information that will benefit the clients. You may also be an expert in conducting research. However, you do not need a strong research background to work with students. If you lack confidence in your ability to help them with research projects, this workbook will serve as a resource to you as well.

Research resources for field instructors are available from faculty members. You could request that your school present a seminar for field instructors that focuses on conducting agency research. In addition, we provide a bibliography at the end of the workbook for more information on conducting agency-based research.

## **A Final Note**

We would like to hear about your experiences using the workbook. Your comments about what was most helpful and least helpful will help us improve future editions. Please send your comments to us. Include the course for which the workbook was assigned and which sections of the workbook were unclear or difficult to complete. We look forward to hearing from you! Tracy Dietz, TCU Department of Social Work, Texas Christian University, Box 298750, Fort Worth, Texas, 76129, or [T.Dietz@tcu.edu](mailto:T.Dietz@tcu.edu).

# ORIENTATION TO AGENCY RESEARCH

Two major arguments support the need for incorporating a research perspective into one's practice. First, our professional code of ethics emphasizes the responsibility of social workers to understand, utilize, and conduct research. Accordingly, professional responsibility requires that we draw on and contribute to the knowledge base of social work.

Second, we are accountable to those we seek to assist. We are responsible for knowing the struggles, needs, and assets of those we assist and for providing the services that make a difference. Only through our continuous search for better understanding and the testing of current understanding can we effectively assist others.

As part of the curriculum in your social work program, you have been exposed to various aspects of research. Much of the information you have acquired is the result of others' research endeavors. In addition, you have either taken a specific research methods class or are currently enrolled in one. Now you are ready to move beyond the role of consumer of research to that of producer of research by conducting a research project at your field placement.

The best way to begin this process is by familiarizing yourself with the research efforts that have already been undertaken at your agency. To that end, we provide the following questions for you to consider as you begin your research project.

Starting with your field instructor (a must!) and proceeding to individuals he or she recommends, ask agency staff about the agency's own research program. You may need to ask more than one person to get a clear picture. Always be sure to indicate to whom you spoke and that person's position title.

If the agency has a research program, complete the questions in Part A. If the agency does not have a research program, complete the questions in Part B.

---

NAME:

DATE:

(A) If the agency has a research program

(1) What are its goals and purposes?

(2) Who is responsible for overseeing agency research? Interview that person, and ask whether the research is done in-house or contracted out. If in-house, what is the size of the research budget? How many staff are involved in research activities? If done by contract, how often have studies been done in the past and by whom?