

# BUILDING CAPACITY IN THE WORKFORCE: A FOCUS ON SUBSTANCE USE EDUCATION

NATIONAL COUNCIL  
for Mental Wellbeing

## Overview

Social workers are the bedrock of behavioral health services in this country, and this workforce plays an important role in addressing substance use challenges in the populations they serve. As such, it is imperative that social workers understand the current theoretical frameworks, evidence-based interventions and the numerous resources that can be used to support individuals with opioid use and/or substance use challenges.

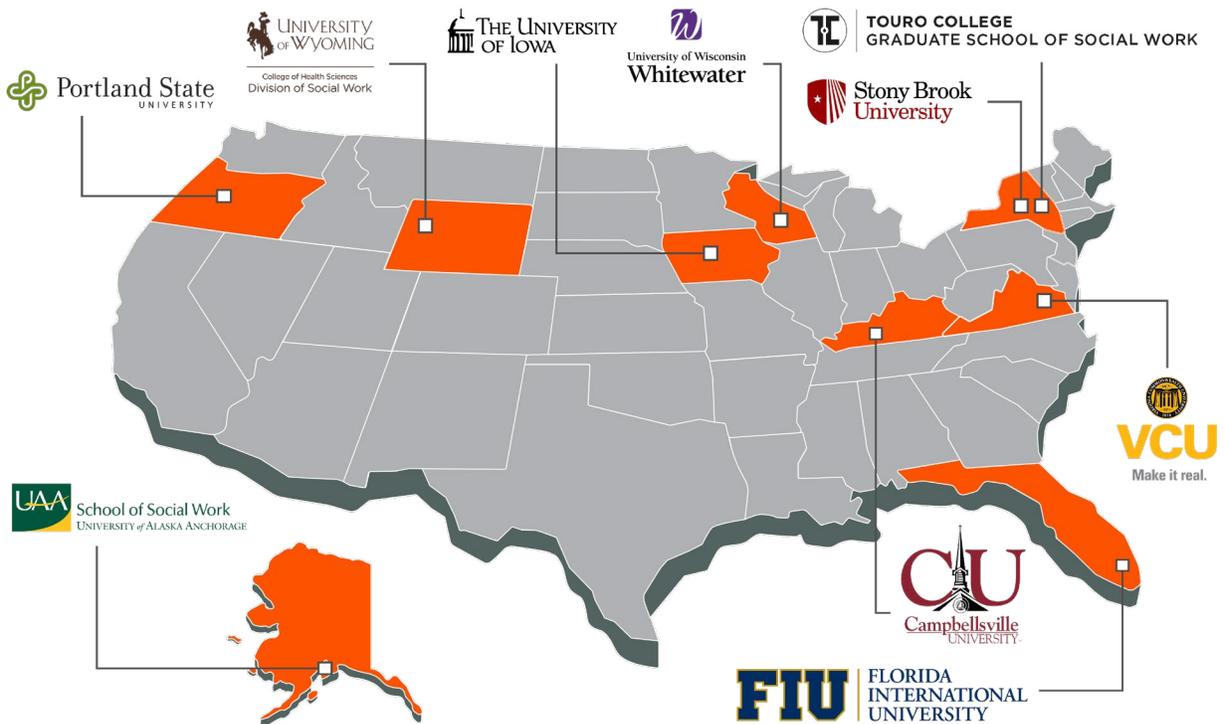
Therefore, with funding from the New York Community Trust (NYCT) and in partnership with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the National Council for Mental Wellbeing designed and ran a learning collaborative from October 2019 to August 2021 that helped programs and schools of social work prepare students to lead the charge against the opioid and drug epidemic in the United States. With funding from the NYCT, the National Council achieved the bold goals of the learning collaborative—curriculum refinement and enhancement, field placement site engagement and student learning both in and outside of the classroom.

To achieve the goals of the learning collaborative, training and technical assistance was provided in a variety of ways, such as monthly faculty calls, quarterly calls with students and field placement site supervisors. In addition, National Council consultants and partners provided content driven webinars and trainings to all three participant groups to enhance their learning and understanding of key components of substance use prevention, treatment and recovery. An expert coach was also assigned to each school to further support their program's curriculum refinements and enhancements.

## Participants

Ten schools were selected through a national, competitive application process. The selected schools included public and private schools and social work programs of various sizes located in a mix of suburban, rural and frontier settings. Additionally, the schools had a variety of social work programs available from the bachelor's level to advanced standing, as well as online, hybrid and on-site programming.

### Participating Schools of Social Work:



This resource was created as a part of Social Workers on the Frontline of the Opioid Epidemic, a two-year initiative focused on preparing social work students across the country in addressing and treating substance use and opioid use disorders in practice. This initiative was made possible by funding from the New York Community Trust Community Trust. For questions, please contact Maura Gaswirth at [MauraG@TheNationalCouncil.org](mailto:MauraG@TheNationalCouncil.org).

## Roles

The Learning Collaborative consisted of three participant groups: Schools of Social Work and their Faculty Champion, Social Work Students and Field Placement Supervisors.



### 1. Schools/Faculty Champions:

- Ensured participation in or completion of learning collaborative activities.
- Liaised with and supported field placement supervisors and student participation.



### 2. Field Supervisors:

- Provided supervision to student(s) at identified field placement.
- Participated in quarterly calls with other field placement supervisors and faculty.



### 3. Students:

- Participated in quarterly discussion calls with peers and the National Council.
- Completed field placement and substance use course.

## Evaluation

To ensure all voices of the learning collaborative were heard throughout, we engaged faculty, field placement site supervisors and students in evaluation efforts by surveying all three groups over the course of the collaborative. Our evaluation was centered on the quality of resources and technical assistance provided, students' ability to improve competencies and confidence and whether students showed an increased interest in working in the substance use disorder (SUD) field.

### At the end of the learning collaborative:

- 91% of students somewhat or strongly agreed that they felt prepared to treat addiction in individuals, families, and communities compared with 67% at the start of the learning collaborative.
- 82% of students somewhat or strongly agreed that their interest in entering professional practice with the intent to address SUD has increased because of this experience.
- The top three social work competencies that improved the most in students throughout the collaborative were engaging, assessing and intervening with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities.
- 91% of students somewhat or strongly agreed that their goals were met for increasing confidence to address SUD in practice.

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## Participant Group Themes



### Students

- Student stipends contributed greatly to students' active participation and engagement in this work, as the stipends gave students the space to dedicate their time to the Learning Collaborative rather than spending time in another role.
- The diversity of participating school locations enriched students learning during the student calls. These calls provided the opportunity for students to connect with students outside of their school and setting, which then allowed them to have a better grasp on the differing perspectives and challenges social workers may face in various parts of the country.



### Schools/Faculty Champions

- Some schools were able to build collaborative models with their programs and create ways for the instructional, field and administrative faculty to work together to create a holistic learning environment for students.
- Faculty updated and refined their courses in both the general social work courses as well as their opioid use disorder (OUD)/SUD-focused courses with the resources provided throughout the Learning Collaborative, which helped keep the coursework up to date with newest information and research related to OUD/SUD.



### Field Supervisors

- Access to the Field Practicum List helped Field Supervisors enhance student experiences in the field placements by providing examples of activities that students can engage in for each Social Work competency.
- Workforce development was a key component of the Learning Collaborative, and field supervisors noticed students actively bringing in what they learned in the classroom into their work in different ways, ranging from having the confidence and skillset to work with individuals with OUD/SUD to educating their colleagues on use and impact and language.