



# Expanding Mental Health Services Through Graduate Student Field Interns:

*Best Practices and Key  
Considerations for Colleges*



**Mental Health Improvement  
through Community Colleges**



**The Hope Center**  
for Student Basic Needs

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## MHICC Mission Statement

The Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) team works in partnership with Michigan community colleges to improve the availability, accessibility, and equitable distribution of mental health resources for students across the state.

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## Disclaimer

This toolkit was created by the MHICC initiative to assist Michigan community colleges in exploring the process of hosting graduate student interns as a method of expanding their capacity to support student mental health concerns. The information provided in this toolkit is for general guidance. In all cases, readers should use discretion and/or seek advice from professional advisors familiar with their partnership venture before undertaking field education partnerships.

# Executive Summary

Amidst the high prevalence of mental health challenges among students, many community colleges lack the resources and staffing to meet the demand for student mental health services. To expand community colleges’ capacity to provide high-quality student mental health services with minimal additional funding or resources, colleges may consider hosting graduate student interns as part of a master’s level field education program. Designed to support colleges in exploring this strategy for expanding their capacity to support student mental health, this resource guide provides information on the general requirements for hosting master’s level social work and counseling field interns. This toolkit outlines the potential benefits of hosting field interns, offers key considerations for determining whether hosting field interns might be a fit for your college, and describes several best practices for successfully hosting field interns.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The number of college students reporting clinically significant mental health symptoms has risen in recent years,<sup>1,2</sup> with over half of college students experiencing at least one mental health condition.<sup>2,3</sup> The growing proportion of students seeking mental health services often exceeds the capacity of on-campus mental health providers, both within four-year institutions and community colleges.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Many Michigan community colleges (CCs) contend with limited staff capacity and funding for mental health service provision. Research from the Mental Health Improvement through Community Colleges (MHICC) initiative shows 85% of Michigan CCs fall below the recommended counselor-to-student ratio, often requiring CCs to explore innovative approaches to expanding service capacity.



One approach to expanding colleges' capacity to support student mental health that may require fewer resources than hiring additional staff is by hosting graduate level interns (such as master's level social work or counseling students). This resource is intended to shed light on the process of hosting field interns as a means of expanding college counseling capacity.

## FIELD EDUCATION OVERVIEW

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**Field education** is the process through which graduate students in social work and counseling psychology programs receive hands-on experience and training in the field, oftentimes at partnering institutions and organizations. Field education is designed to be a mutually beneficial partnership between students and the partnering organization that hosts them - often referred to as an intern's **field site** - where students gain supervised practical experience while supporting the mission and work of their host site.

Field interns usually work part-time at their field site for 2-3 academic semesters, typically committing between 15-25 hours per week. Interns might work on-site, remotely, or in a hybrid arrangement to accrue these hours, depending on the specific needs of the field site and the intern.



Specific tasks that field interns complete are collaboratively determined based on the intern's training program, educational focus, and the needs of the field site, though these tasks often include:



Coordinating intake sessions



Carrying out mental health screening initiatives



Conducting counseling sessions with clients



Hosting mental health workshops and events



Facilitating group counseling or peer support groups



Leading outreach efforts

In order to ensure appropriate support and guidance during their internship, field interns are assigned a fully licensed, on-site supervisor to facilitate their learning and professional development while at their field site, often referred to as their **field instructor**. For community colleges that are hosting field interns to support student mental health, an intern's field instructor would likely be a full-time staff counselor at the community college.

While field interns are typically allowed to conduct clinical work without the immediate presence of a supervisor, continued guidance and oversight is provided by their field instructor through regular structured meetings, commonly referred to as **clinical supervision**. Since field interns generally have limited experience providing direct care to clients, clinical supervision provides a critical space for interns to receive direction and feedback on client treatment and other elements of their field work.



# FIELD EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

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When considering hosting field interns at your college, it's important to understand the specific field education requirements of the program(s) you are working with to ensure that your college is able to commit to these expectations.

The most substantial requirements for field education involve the number of hours that interns complete at their field site and the frequency of the clinical supervision they receive from their field instructor. In alignment with accreditation requirements, field instructors should anticipate providing approximately 1 hour of clinical supervision per intern each week. In addition, field instructors will likely have to allocate time for tasks such as onboarding interns, providing real time guidance, and completing any periodic meetings, training, or paperwork required by the intern's educational institution.

**Therefore, a counseling staff member serving as an intern's field instructor should expect to dedicate a minimum of 2 hours per week to supporting a field intern.**

Field interns are typically enrolled in either a master's level social work program or a master's level counseling psychology program. Though there are similarities between these two program types, each program has specific field education requirements based on their unique accreditation standards, as shown below.

## Social Work Field Education Requirements

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the accrediting body for social work education in the United States, providing detailed guidelines for MSW field education through their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Important elements of the CSWE standards include:

**Field Education Hours:** MSW students must generally complete a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field education, accrued over the course of multiple semesters. This minimum may be less for MSW students with advanced standing status (i.e., students with prior social work coursework and field education obtained from a BSW) who are required to complete between 450-600 hours of supervised field education.

**Field Instructor Qualifications:** CSWE requires that all field instructors possess a master's degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program, have at least two years of post-master's social work degree practice experience, and be fully licensed in Michigan. These requirements ensure that field instructors are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and practical experience to guide and mentor student interns effectively.

**Clinical Supervision:** MSW students are required to receive regular clinical supervision from their field instructor. Though the structure of this supervision can vary, it's generally recommended for MSW students to receive at least 1 hour of supervision per week.

## Counseling Psychology Field Education Requirements

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is the national accrediting body for master's degree programs in counseling psychology. Important CACREP standards for students' field education include:

**Field Education Hours:** CACREP mandates that master's level counseling students must complete a minimum of 600 hours of supervised field work over the course of multiple semesters. Within these hours, at least 240 must be direct contact hours with clients.

**Field Instructor Qualifications:** Those supervising master's level counseling interns during their field placement must hold at least a master's degree in counseling or a related profession and be appropriately licensed according to relevant geographic requirements. Field instructors must also have at least 2 years of post-master's experience in work relevant to the supervisee's practice area (i.e., mental health counseling).

**Clinical Supervision:** CACREP standards require that master's level counseling students receive regular individual clinical supervision that averages *a minimum of 1 hour per week*. In addition, counseling students must receive 1.5 hours of *group* supervision per week, however, this is typically provided by program faculty or doctoral students, and *not* on-site field supervisors.

Each social work and counseling psychology graduate program will also likely have its own unique set of additional guidelines for field education that may vary across institutions. Additional institution-specific requirements for students' field education process may include:



**Affiliation Agreements:** Most programs will require interns' field site to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other formal agreement outlining the overall framework and relationship between the educational institution and the hosting field site. This agreement typically specifies the roles and responsibilities of both the educational institution and the field site, the duration of the agreement, renewal terms, and conditions for termination, though the specifics of this agreement will vary between institutions.



**Intern Placement Process:** The process for matching masters' students to field placements will vary across institutions, including the window for when field sites are recruited, how students apply to field sites, and what field sites are expected or encouraged to do in vetting students.



**Learning Objectives:** Programs may have specific learning objectives and competencies that students must achieve during their field placements, often reflecting the institution or program's particular focus area (e.g., social justice, clinical assessment). Interns should be able to adequately demonstrate their achievement of these learning objectives through tasks completed at their field site.



**Field Instructor Requirements:** Some programs might have additional criteria for supervisors, such as specific training or certification requirements that need to be completed prior to supervising field interns.



**Supervision Requirements:** The modality and frequency of supervision may be regulated more specifically by graduate programs than by their accrediting body.



**Assessment Methods:** The processes for assessing interns' performance at their field site can differ, sometimes including comprehensive evaluation forms, hour tracking forms, regular progress reports, reflective journals, or project-based assessments.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF HOSTING FIELD INTERNS

While hosting field interns may not be the right solution for every college, this practice offers the potential for several benefits, including:

### Expanded Clinical Capacity

Though hosting interns requires some staff time to train and provide clinical supervision to interns, interns can also often provide direct counseling services to students, which may often lead to a net increase in a college's total capacity to provide counseling services to students. This expanded clinical capacity can reduce the burden on college counseling staff, decrease student wait times, and potentially reduce the necessity to hire additional paid counseling staff.

Assuming the average intern works with their field site ~20 hours per week, around 12 of these hours could realistically be spent providing direct client contact (leaving the remaining hours for supervision, record keeping, and other administrative tasks).

Hosting an intern will likely require an average of 2 hours per week from their supervising counseling staff member at the college (to provide weekly clinical supervision and any other relevant training and support).

***This means that one intern may yield a net increase of 10 clinical hours per week.***



## Enhanced Mental Health Service Provision

In addition to or in lieu of providing counseling services, interns can often add value by leading broader mental health initiatives, such as screening efforts, case management, campus outreach, and mental health workshops. These are often services that college counseling staff lack the capacity to carry out on top of their clinical caseloads, so by utilizing interns to lead these efforts, colleges can broaden their services provided across the mental health continuum of care and enhance their college's capacity to respond to students' needs.

Delegating these non-clinical mental health services to interns may be particularly appealing if colleges have concerns about interns' limited clinical experience.

### Example: Interns as Case Managers

Some colleges who utilize field interns to expand their capacity to support student mental health have interns operate as case managers. In this capacity, interns aren't providing direct counseling to students, but facilitate referrals and connections to appropriate care across student needs.

This model delineates roles between full time counseling staff and interns, allowing full-time staff to prioritize providing counseling to students in need, rather than trying to juggle multiple roles.

## Minimal Cost to Colleges

Field interns are typically not financially compensated for their field work since these hours are a required part of their graduate education. Therefore, colleges may be able to increase their counselor staffing and capacity without the financial investment typically associated with hiring additional professionals. The cost-effective nature of hosting interns and building partnerships with interns' training programs may be a particularly beneficial practice for colleges within a behavioral workforce shortage area, or those who have struggled to hire additional counseling staff given provider shortages.

It's so important for colleges to consider whether they have the resources needed to host field interns. While some college counseling centers offer some of the most mutually beneficial field experiences I've seen, I've also seen a few occasions where college counseling placements were not as rich. These colleges often lacked the resources needed to support interns, for example, the counseling center lacked on-site supervision, lacked orientation practices, or didn't have the ability to triage if a student seeking care was not appropriate for an intern to support.

*-Debbie Ronk, LMSW, counselor at Grand Rapids Community College  
and former field education coordinator at Grand Valley State University*

# DETERMINING WHETHER HOSTING FIELD INTERNS IS A FIT FOR YOUR COLLEGE

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When considering whether hosting field interns may be a fit for your college, it's important to assess both the mental health needs of your students and the feasibility of hosting interns at your college. The prompts below are designed to walk you through critical factors to consider when determining whether field interns may be a feasible option for expanding your capacity for student mental health support.

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***Does your college have at least one Licensed Mental Health Professional on staff who provides counseling services to students?*** Hosting interns requires an on-site licensed mental health provider to provide clinical supervision and guidance to interns.

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***Does your counseling staff have the ability to allocate the needed time to onboard and supervise an intern?*** Hosting a field intern requires a minimum average of approximately 2 hours per week of counseling staff time for clinical supervision, real time guidance, and period trainings, meetings, and paperwork.

*Note: If your college's counseling staff member who will serve as interns' field instructor is compensated by your college on a fee-for-service basis (rather than a full time salary), it's important to discuss ways for the counselor to bill the time they spend supporting interns to ensure this system is sustainable for all parties.*

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***Does your college have a need for tasks that align with master's level interns' abilities and/or program requirements?*** Common tasks completed by field interns include coordinating intake sessions, conducting individual counseling sessions, facilitating group counseling or peer support groups, carrying out mental health screening initiatives, leading outreach efforts, and hosting mental health workshops or other campus events.

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***Does your college have a demand for counseling services that additional capacity could help counseling staff to meet?*** Hosting clinical interns can often help expand your college's clinical capacity, which can lead to an increased number of students receiving mental health care and reduced wait times for appointments. However, student demand for services and student receptivity to receiving care from a graduate level intern is important for the success of this model.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR HOSTING FIELD INTERNS

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Hosting field interns can sometimes feel like a bit of a risk, as this approach to building capacity requires time and energy from staff who are likely already managing full workloads. Through conversations with colleges across Michigan, it is clear there are both rewarding and challenging aspects to hosting field interns. In response, we have compiled a set of best practice considerations to support organizations in successfully hosting interns.

The best practices below are organized chronologically, including suggestions for preparing for an intern, practices for when an intern starts, and considerations to revisit throughout the duration of the internship.

## Preparing for an intern:

### **Identify roles that potential interns will fill.**

Prior to bringing any interns on board, outline the tasks that interns might complete and the services they might provide. This list should be somewhat flexible to accommodate interns' individual interests and strengths, but will serve as a foundation for identifying partnering programs and individual interns that could be a fit for the roles desired.

### **Understand internship requirements.**

Work with your partnering educational institution to understand expectations for interns' learning objectives, supervision responsibilities, evaluation methods, and a timeline for the internship.

### **Thoughtfully evaluate potential interns for fit.**

Recruit field interns as you would approach full-time hiring: take the needed time to screen and interview interns to ensure their interests, experience level, and expectations align with what your college can offer them and what's needed by your college. This might include asking questions such as:

- What experience does the intern have conducting the tasks that they'll be carrying out at your college? While they likely have not provided direct counseling before, what experiences have they held that have given them transferable skills?
- What are the intern's preferred supervisory and learning styles? Do they expect or prefer a supervisor to be more hands on, or more hands off?
- Does the student's schedule and availability (including in-person availability) match the needs of your college?

### **Prepare resources needed.**

To ensure a smooth transition for interns, ensure the relevant resources they need are prepared ahead of their start date. This might include:

- Any relevant keys, institutional IDs, and building access to campus spaces they will utilize.
- Office space / access to a private space to meet with students.
- Access to any relevant electronic health record systems (EHR), data collection tools, or other institution-specific software that interns will need to use.

### **When an intern starts:**

#### **Invest time in training interns in institutional fundamentals.**

Ensure that the appropriate staff can dedicate time upfront to familiarize interns with relevant campus software systems (including EHR or other systems for tracking student engagement with services), relevant departmental operations, institutional confidentiality regulations (including HIPAA and/or FERPA if applicable) any relevant campus policies, institutional crisis protocols, and any other relevant information interns will need for daily operations.

#### **Identify interns' goals and priorities.**

Communicate with interns about their strengths, areas where they need support, and what they hope to gain from the experience. By gauging their comfort with various tasks and the skills they wish to develop, you can better leverage their existing abilities while connecting them with relevant training, resources, and opportunities. From a supervisory standpoint, knowing which tasks they're more or less comfortable with also helps ensure appropriate guidance when needed.

#### **Collaboratively outline intern roles and responsibilities.**

Work with interns to determine what will fall within the purview of their role - what services will they provide to students? When are they expected to start meeting with students / providing services? What volume should they expect from their caseload throughout the year? Collaboratively establishing these parameters for interns' role at the start of their internship can play a critical role in their sense of comfort and confidence in their role.

### Establish working expectations.

Outline what is expected of interns, such as:

- What autonomy will interns be given over their schedule? Are there explicit working hours by which they're expected to abide? Are they required to be on-site during specific days or times?
- Are interns expected to check in with their supervisor at the start or end of their "shift", or establish regular touch-points in other ways? Do interns need to log or record their hours in any particular way?
- What incidences or occurrences require interns to immediately contact their supervisor, compared to things they might discuss with their supervisor at their next regularly scheduled clinical supervision meeting?
- What are interns expected to be doing if they don't have clients scheduled or other immediate tasks on their calendar? Are there ongoing projects they should be working on, or other resources they should engage with when they find themselves with downtime?

### Establish clinical supervision guidelines.

Establish shared expectations for clinical supervision frequency, format, and content. This might include:

- Setting a recurring weekly time for clinical supervision to ensure this is built into interns' and supervisors' schedules on a weekly basis.
- Having a shared understanding of what topics should be discussed in clinical supervision. Clinical supervision topics typically surround **case conceptualization** (guiding interns in developing a comprehensive understanding of clients' presenting challenges to inform clients' treatment plans and approaches used) and **ethical decision making** (i.e., addressing ethical dilemmas and challenges that arise in practice to support interns in developing critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills).
- Creating a running agenda for clinical supervision discussion items that interns and supervisors can add notes to before, during, and after supervision meetings.

#### Additional Supervision Resources:

For additional guidance on clinical supervision best practices, see [the Association for Social Work Board's supervision best practices webpage](#).



## Throughout the internship

### **Integrate interns into the campus community.**

College counseling services exist within an expansive ecosystem of services and supports for students. As outsiders to the college, field interns likely aren't very familiar with the broader campus community and the array of services and supports available through the college. For interns to best serve students, explore ways for them to broaden their understanding of the campus community. Provide opportunities for interns to get involved in relevant campus committees or other initiatives to broaden their perspective, such as event planning committees, staff advocacy groups, inclusion and belonging committees, or other staff interest groups.

### **Intervene when concerns arise.**

Like any role, it's always possible for a seemingly well-fitting intern to be a poor fit or to struggle with what is expected. It is important for field instructors to keep a pulse on interns' work, successes, and challenges, and to intervene as early as possible if concerns arise. If needed, concerns that arise about an intern's fit, qualifications, or work ethic should be discussed with the field liaison at the students' educational institution.

### **Embrace reciprocity of learning.**

Field education is meant to be a mutually beneficial partnership. While interns glean clinical knowledge from their on-site field instructor, interns can also bring fresh perspectives to your college's counseling staff, such as new ways to engage students or ways of streamlining processes to be more efficient. Field instructors also often report that the experience of mentoring is meaningful and affirming. Remain open minded about what your team can learn and gain from the experience.

"I've talked to many clinicians that supervise field interns who've expressed that having an intern actually enhances their own clinical practice, as they have to break down and explain their practices to interns which helps them to think more deeply about their own practice. Many supervisors also appreciate the fresh perspective that an intern brings into the college counseling center."

*-Debbie Ronk, LMSW, counselor at Grand Rapids Community College and former field education coordinator at Grand Valley State University*



## GETTING STARTED: IDENTIFYING PROGRAMS TO PARTNER WITH

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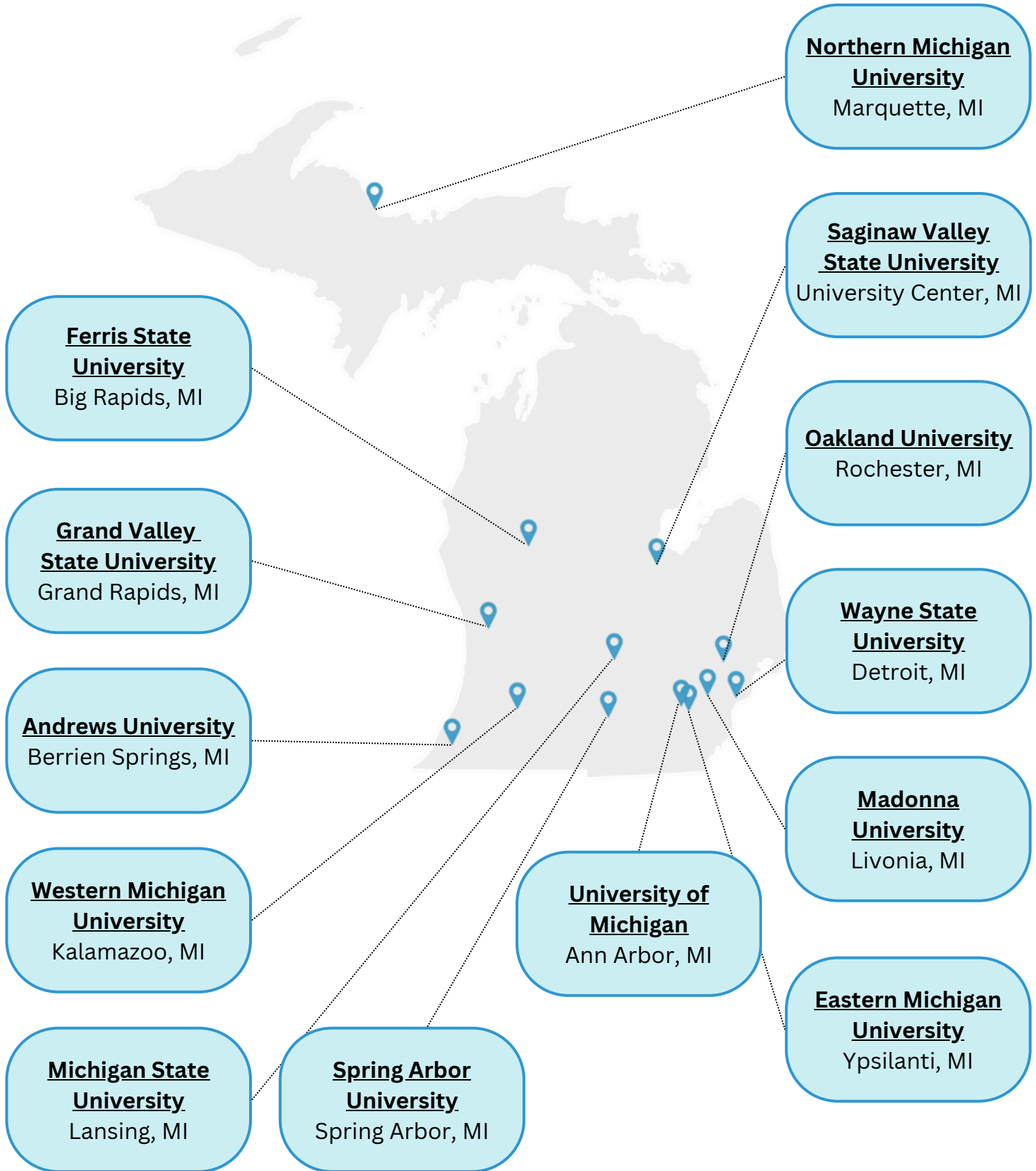
Once you have decided that hosting field interns may be a match for your college's needs and available resources, you are ready to start forming a relationship with an educational institution that enrolls master's level counseling or social work students.

The geographic availability of local institutions is often a leading factor in determining the specific graduate training programs your college might partner with. However, with the rise of telehealth services, virtual work, and online learning, students might not need to live in close proximity to their field placement or their educational institution. For example, some programs will place field interns at geographically distant locations and have these interns provide services remotely.

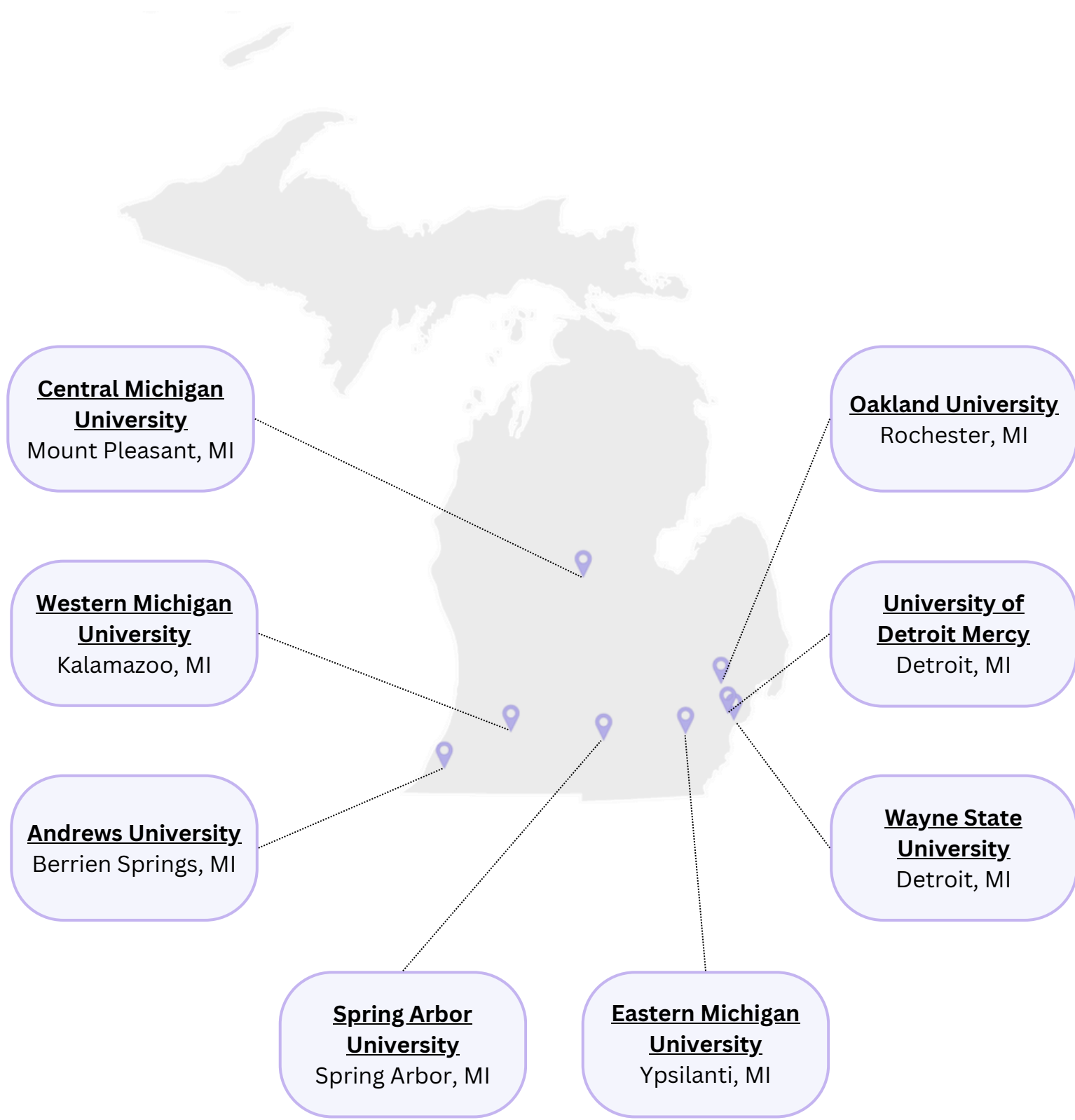
Other important considerations when selecting a partnering educational program include the alignment between the program's educational focus and your college's services, as well as the licensure or degree(s) held by college staff who will serve as interns' field instructor(s). You might also consider discussing what support is available from the program's field coordinator or other liaison staff members throughout the partnership. Understanding the investment the program makes in ensuring both interns and their field sites have positive, mutually beneficial experiences can help ensure the formation of a sustainable partnership.

The following pages highlight accredited master's level social work and counseling programs across the state of Michigan, to facilitate the process of identifying potential partner educational programs.

# Accredited Master of Social Work (MSW) Programs in Michigan



## Accredited Master of Arts (MA) in Clinical Mental Health Counseling Programs in Michigan



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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This toolkit was developed to provide community colleges with a comprehensive guide to hosting clinical interns as part of their mental health services. The following resources informed the development of this toolkit and offer additional information on specific topics.

Burstein, B. *Faculty Guide for How to Start a Psychology Traineeship/Internship on your Community College Campus*. California Mental Health Service Authority (CALMHSA) Los Angeles Consortium: Building Healthy Communities Initiative; no date.  
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