

Virtual Reality in Social Work Education & Training

This field investigation was conducted and is being shared for informational purposes only. For additional details, see the original sources referenced. For discussion, contact Diana Marian, Senior Project Manager at the [Digital Education Incubator](#) (dmarian@bu.edu).

January 2021

OVERVIEW

1. Summary*
2. Advantages & Outcomes
3. Challenges
4. Application
5. Cost Implications
6. Market Solutions
7. Next Steps

*The complete investigation & findings are available in [this document](#).

AT A GLANCE

- Effective tool to foster empathy for patients & their families, and to prepare social workers for on-site visits
- Simple VR viewers or desktop-run virtual patient programs can effectively enhance training
- Insufficient data on cost variability, long-term cost savings & ROI for various setups and scenarios
- More research recommended
- Limited number of specialized vendors & readily available simulations

ADVANTAGES & OUTCOMES

- ✓ Immersive, comprehensive, standardized, hands-on training
- ✓ High level of realism
- ✓ Ability to practice assessing home environments in “safe” space with no real-life consequences
- ✓ Great diversity & variability in Field settings & patient demographics
- ✓ Practice for unanticipated situations, anytime, with unlimited repetitions
- ✓ Immediate, objective feedback
- ✓ Positive psychological effect on learners (e.g., ↑ self-confidence)
- ✓ Accelerated learning pace & decision-making
- ✓ Improved teamwork in IPE settings

CHALLENGES

- Insufficient information on:
 - setup and maintenance costs
 - use of VR in the continuing education of social workers
- No standardization of tech training
- Limited effectiveness research
- Lack of in-person communication and ability to observe body language cues
- Scale implications (hardware may quickly become outdated or obsolete)

APPLICATION

- [Navigate community & prepare for home visits](#)
- Build [assessment](#) skills
- Simulate [unpredictable home environments](#)
- Prepare for [field practicum](#)
- Build [empathy](#) for the patients & their families
- etc.

“All of our students go do a field practicum for 420 hours, but they can't go until they have these skills. This [VR experience] is a middle ground to give them some practice before they're out there in it.”

[Jennifer Pribble](#), Director of Field Experience,
Northwestern Oklahoma State University

COST IMPLICATIONS

- Software costs vary by vendor and specific requirements.
- Some tools, such as [WondaVR](#) and [others](#), allow users to create immersive learning experiences with limited or no coding background, and are typically less costly than custom-built solutions (*e.g., WondaVR charges \$350/mth for unlimited experiences & multi-user live sessions, among other features*).
- Hardware costs
 - \$399 per Oculus Quest headset (256 GB)
 - \$49 carrying case per Oculus Quest headset
 - \$10-\$40 per Google Cardboard or similar viewer

MARKET SOLUTIONS

- [Accenture Virtual Experience Solution \(AVEnueS\)](#) - aimed at training child welfare caseworkers. It requires Oculus Go headset.
- [SIMPACT Immersive Learning](#) (by California State University, Northridge) - a mixed reality simulation system that provides a highly realistic virtual platform for practice in social work, counseling, teaching, conflict resolution, and other interpersonal interactions. It utilizes software by Mursion®.
- [The Cornerstone Partnership VR program](#) - aimed at understanding the needs of children in or from the care system.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

- Investigate existing solutions when possible
- Explore desktop-run virtual patient programs or simple VR viewers such as Google Cardboard when limited immersion & interactivity meets the learning goals
- Explore the possibility of vendor partnerships or other cost sharing with institutional stakeholders and/or outside funding for these types of projects
- Determine a feasible long-term approach to VR technology support at the department and/or institutional level