A Contemporary Fable

A long, long time ago in a university far, far away a student enrolled in a social work program. He was a handsome, personable fellow with one of those gifts for speaking pleasantly and knowledgeably—most everyone was assured of his competence, sincerity, and integrity.

The student traveled many hours from his humble home each day, climbing hills, fording streams, and cutting paths through the woods to reach the fortress of higher learning. Possibly because he was also a full-time knight in an agency serving despairing and discouraged humankind, faculty were understanding and patient when he missed classes because of inclement weather, trolls, or because his steed had an appointment at the smithy.

Brave and hard-working (to hear his accounts), the student seemed destined for greater things—perhaps prince of a small realm of his own some day. He would be an alumnus who would give the learned social work faculty abundant reasons to be proud.

All went well until one day, during a routine midsemester visit to the student’s practicum agency, the student’s field instructor voiced a small complaint to his learned faculty liaison. Allowed to serve his internship in the evening hours after his supervisor had gone home, the confident and assertive student had been given
assignments he could complete on his own. His supervisor trusted that he would faithfully and honestly record his time and perform his work. He was, after all, a student in the noble field of social work.

The field instructor even stayed past her normally scheduled work hours and risked the wrath of an evil husband-gnome so she could meet with the student for his weekly supervision. She hadn’t complained that the student-knight missed about as many of these sessions as he kept; she understood that he was busy saving the poor and unfortunate, and he did travel a long way.

No, what bothered her more was that his assessments often were so generally written and vague that she felt either his pen was blunt and needed sharpening or, worse, his assessments were an exercise in creative fiction—he had never met with the clients assigned to him. She began checking.

What she found was that the student-knight wasn’t meeting personally with his clients, he wasn’t even coming to the place of healing and residence when scheduled. Alas, his armor was no longer shiny bright. When the student was confronted by the learned social work faculty, he had a ready excuse: he had been in the cafeteria, or the library, or in one of a dozen different places, always unavailable by phone.

Unfortunately for the student, he could produce no evidence that he had been in the agency on the occasions in question. He seemed to have lied not once, but many times. Ultimately, he received a failing grade in not only one but two field placements, and is no longer associated with the fortress of higher learning.

The Case for Gatekeeping

Part of our job as social work educators is to evaluate students’ performance. Whether we like it or not, we are thrust into the role of gatekeeper. It is our responsibility to assess whether all students enrolled in our courses acquire the content necessary to function as social work professionals.

We educators pass or fail students based on criteria that are well reasoned and spelled out in our course syllabi. Students who are unable to complete the requirements for a social work degree and those we counsel out or terminate from our programs can be
viewed as unsuitable for the profession. While we may differ on how “wide” or “narrow” the gate that opens to professional practice should be, every educator and every college or university with a social work program must be concerned that their graduates exit with certain minimum competencies and knowledge. The accreditation process is but one means by which we are held accountable for those we graduate as social workers. Other concerned parties may include our alumni, their parents, the agencies that hire and provide our students with field experience, their clientele, state licensing boards, and our college or university administrations. Each of these influential groups supplies, on occasion, feedback about how effective we are as social work educators.

However, we act as gatekeepers even before students are allowed into our classrooms. It is not uncommon for BSW programs to have admission standards. A minimum GPA of 2.0, for instance, is often required. In deciding whom to admit into our programs, we also decide who ought to be excluded. It would be entirely reasonable, for example, to refuse admission to convicted felons. Perhaps even a stronger case could be made against admitting a convicted child molester. Although there would seem to be good grounds for adopting exclusionist criteria based on legal violations (a study by Wellner and Albidin in 1981 found that forty-five of fifty state licensure boards would deny, revoke, or suspend the license of a psychologist for a felony conviction), such matters, as we shall see later, are more complex than they appear.

It would also seem to be very reasonable to keep out of our BSW programs known drug addicts and nonrecovering alcoholics as well as those who are mentally ill or incompetent. But what if someone had a problem in the past and has now recovered? What if the problem is held in check by medication? (See chapter 10 for a complete discussion of the Americans with Disabilities Act as it relates to gatekeeping in social work education.)

Professional mandates established by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW 1996) compel social workers to “discourage, prevent, expose, and correct the unethical conduct of colleagues” (18) and to “prevent the unauthorized and unqualified practice of social work” (25). Thus, the NASW Code of Ethics requires us to be gatekeepers—at the entry into a program, during the course of educational instruction, and no less so whenever we are made aware of a violation of our ethical code.
Consistent with that perspective, a Task Force on Quality in Graduate Social Work Education of the National Conference of Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools of Social Work (1984, cited in Hepler and Noble 1990) has stated that excellence in social work and social work education is "essentially a matter of ethical responsibility" that we educators have for protecting the public interest and promoting the general welfare (126).

The best argument for gatekeeping and maintaining firm, uncompromising standards is that without them it is difficult to protect the vulnerable sections of society from dishonest, impaired, and incompetent students who would like to call themselves social workers. Most educators have encountered one or more of these students.

The Case of William, an Antisocial Personality
Consider the student we'll call William. William was not polished, sophisticated, or even very smart. He had shifty eyes that didn't engender trust, and he was inconsiderate, dropping in on faculty at every opportunity to make small talk. On one such visit he remarked that he had been fired from every job he had ever held. That term, he was working part-time at a liquor store.

A short time later, William took a gift, a bottle of wine, to a faculty member's house one evening and left it with his wife. He took a pint of whiskey to another faculty member and something else to a third. Several weeks later William visited again and complained he had been "laid off" because the liquor store owner wasn't making any money. Most likely he was fired for stealing.

William was not the type of student most of us would encourage to enter the field of social work. When an acquaintance, Jack, learned that William was a student in the social work program, Jack told of being invited to William's house and discovering that pornographic movies were playing on the television, although William and his wife had young children who wandered in and out of the room.

Even though program administrators were aware that William posed potential problems, he could not be denied a practicum placement. The reason? There were no charges, no hard evidence that he had violated the NASW Code of Ethics (1996). A review
of his folder revealed no letters complaining about him or reporting illegal or unethical behavior. Officially, the university doesn't know about his improper, if not illegal acts, and cannot solicit such information to screen William out of the program.

Somehow, after one or two false starts, William completed his practicum requirements and graduated. Within months he experienced some difficulties in his new job; there were allegations of sexual imposition in his dealings with a minor. He retained an attorney and agreed to resign with no charges in his personnel folder. William is not presently working as a social worker and probably never should do so again. However, one wonders if he won't attempt to improve his luck, as an unemployed BSW, by applying to an MSW program.

Because of students like William, we social work educators must be vigilant regarding those who would abuse trust and power. We must accept the notion that gatekeeping is our responsibility as much as monitoring and documenting instances of poor judgment, fraud, and deception, moral turpitude, incompetence, and values in opposition to commonly accepted practice principles. We must not be naive and believe that our students would never do anything inappropriate.

Impaired Helpers

Impairment in professionals resulting from substance abuse, mental illness, and emotional stress is gaining attention. Deutsch (1985), for instance, found that more than half her sample of therapists (including social workers, psychologists, and counselors) reported significant problems with depression: 24 percent had been in therapy because of depression; 11 percent reported substance abuse problems. In a review of studies on the topic, Pope (1988) estimated that about 8 percent of male therapists reported sexual contact with their clients.

Although our social work literature only recently acknowledged the issue of impairment (Reamer 1992), there is no reason to suspect that social work would have fewer problems with impaired professionals than allied fields. We also have a code of ethics that
requires that social workers seek consultation and get help if personal problems or mental health difficulties begin to interfere with their professional judgment and performance.

Though few studies document social workers with impairments, there is an increasing amount of data suggesting that traumatic events early in life may be associated with the selection of social work as a career (Black, Jeffreys, and Hartley 1993; Lackie 1983; Marsh 1988; Rompf and Royse 1994; Russel et al. 1993). Similarly, Pope and Feldman-Summers (1992) found that one third of a sample of five hundred clinical and counseling psychologists reported having experienced some form of sexual or physical abuse as a child or adolescent.

As social work educators, we should not allow students whose impairments will interfere with their professional judgment and performance to graduate from our programs. We must not pass the buck and hope that some day a licensing board will stop those likely to be dangerous or harmful. Licensure boards can’t do it all. In fact, in some areas they do very little other than conducting examinations and screening applications.

Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985) in their chapter on incompetent and troubled psychologists have noted, “the evidence tends to refute the claim that licensing protects the public.” They go on to explain, “except for the most populous states, licensing boards are often so overworked and underfunded that disciplinary enforcement is nearly impossible except in the most flagrant cases of abuse or misconduct” (235).

Similarly, Berliner (1989), in a study of individual ethics cases filed with NASW Committees on Inquiry between 1979 and 1985, found that state regulatory boards initiated less than 1 percent of all complaints.

Towle (1954) provided a good case for educators’ ethical responsibility to act as gatekeepers: “A professional person’s services are sought because he has a competency, a mastery of knowledge and skill, which the recipient of the service does not have” (4). If we educators knowingly allow unqualified and incompetent students to go into our communities and practice as social workers, we are guilty twice: for deceiving the American public and for permitting them to be harmed.
The Ethical Dilemma of Gatekeeping

The thought of screening out, choosing this student and rejecting that one, is distasteful, if not abhorrent, to many social work educators. The main reason, I believe, is that we strongly believe in and adhere to our fundamental values: Every individual has a right to be accepted as he or she is; each one is deserving of consideration and respect. Because of confidentiality, we can't always reveal information that we have in our possession. Most important, maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude means that we avoid passing judgment on people. Our values and code of ethics call upon us to foster maximum self-determination.

Similarly, Peterman and Blake (1986) observe, “We have been socialized into being non-judgmental, fighting for the underdog and the oppressed; however, this may take the form of graduating inappropriate students” (33).

Several years ago, I heard of a female undergraduate student interning as a social worker in a high school. It was her misfortune to be caught “making out” with a high school senior. They were discovered after hours by the principal in his office. This brief example suggests a number of issues. First of all, was the social work program at fault for teaching that sexual misconduct was a behavior in which only men could be the offenders? Had it been made abundantly clear that female social workers are equally at fault when they engage in sexual activities with their clients? Indeed, had the program dealt with the issue at all? Second, because there was no harm, no complaining client, should this little indiscretion have been overlooked—attributed to the social work student’s lack of maturity? She was, after all, only a few years older than the high school senior. Do we rationalize, saying to ourselves, “She’s young; she won’t make that mistake again”? Do we give her another chance?

Had the students been sitting in a parked car or in the BSW student’s apartment, probably no one would have been the wiser. But because the BSW student was engaging in unprofessional behavior in a place where she was expected to conduct herself as a social work professional, the dilemma is in deciding whether this one incident is a one-time lapse of judgment or the first evidence of a troubling inclination to engage in hedonistic, self-serving behav-
ior. If we knew that the BSW student had previously been considered a "good" student, should we social work educators provide a word of caution but allow her to proceed unimpeded through the social work program? Or should we dismiss her from the program because of a violation of one of the ethical standards in the NASW code: "Social workers should under no circumstances engage in sexual activities or sexual contact with current clients, whether such contact is consensual or forced" (NASW 1996:13)?

If we think of the student as an inexperienced, immature individual deserving special consideration, and we sincerely believe in her worth and potential, we are likely to be very uncomfortable labeling her unfit or unsuitable to practice social work. At best, we might acknowledge that her actions were improper, but with infinite respect for the individual, we may separate a single instance of inappropriate behavior from the whole of her worth. And, as a result, we would likely give her a second chance, overlook this one episode. But should we? Would we be so quick to overlook a violation of our professional standards if the BSW student had been a male and the high school student a female?

In this particular case, the faculty field liaison placed the BSW student in a different practicum agency, and she was not allowed to count the hours previously accumulated at the high school. It meant that the student had to work several weeks after the end of the semester—not much of a reprimand. No note, no letter, nothing "official" went into her folder. However, the faculty liaison could also have given the student a failing grade for that one practicum course, which would have added an additional semester to the amount of time required to graduate. Such an action might have served as the catalyst for the BSW student to examine anew her interest in and motivation for a social work career. Maybe at that point she might have selected herself out of the program.

A more severe measure would have been to discharge the student from the social work program. Such an action would demonstrate to our students, their clients, and the community around us that ethical behavior is a serious matter and that violation of professional standards has major repercussions.

1An excellent resource for untangling issues of professional boundary violations is Marilyn Peterson's At personal risk: Boundary violations in professional-client relationships (New York: Norton, 1992).
When we are not serious about ensuring that our students abide by ethical standards, we weaken and dilute the profession by lowering its reputation and prestige. Brighter, superior students don't want to be associated with those they consider less than competent. Students who see violations of professional practices and note our reluctance to enforce standards lose respect for us as faculty and social workers. Our NASW Code of Ethics is not just a guide to professional conduct, it is a set of criteria by which social work practice can be evaluated (Cobb 1994; Levy 1976).

We create difficulties for ourselves and are unable to perform the necessary gatekeeping when we view students as our clients. Born and Carroll (1988) argue that practically and ethically our clients are not the students; our clients are the recipients of our graduates' services. While good arguments can be made either way, viewing the public as our clients would likely result in less cognitive dissonance with our values and our purpose as educators and would free us to engage in more spirited and enthusiastic gatekeeping. Ultimately, such a perspective affords the public a much higher degree of protection from those unsuited to practice the profession of social work.

Even if students and not the public were our primary clients, we must not let our interest in producing graduates from our programs interfere with our professional objectivity. As Levy (1976:136) has articulated so well,

another important ethical principle involves objectivity toward clients. The social worker is enjoined, according to this principle, against letting extraneous interests or biases affect his professional decisions and actions in relation to his client. ... Any risk of insufficient objectivity may mean less than the best service or less than the unbiased service that the social worker can offer a client and that the client may need.

What Can We Do to Promote Ethical Standards?

At a minimum, the Code of Ethics should be distributed to students going into every practice course and every practicum and should be discussed at some length, preferably with some examples or vignettes that prompt students to react and raise questions. Assigned papers should require students to contemplate ethical
issues and aspects suggested in their cases and case material. Levy (1976) suggests that “students should have the opportunity in both classes and field instruction to suffer the discomfort of uncertainty with respect to the ethical choices they must make, and of inner and outer tension with respect to the consequences of the ethical choices they will have made” (230).

There is no reason to assume that students are well informed or instructed regarding ethics. Indeed, the few studies available seem to suggest an appalling lack of recognition of ethical dilemmas and usefulness of the Code of Ethics as a guide to ethical problem-solving. Holland and Kilpatrick (1991) interviewed twenty-seven practicing social workers to explore the experiences and relationships that shaped their ethical development and value commitments. They found that “not a single respondent offered the profession’s code of ethics as a resource for helping to deal with complex ethical issues” (140).

Lindsay (1985, cited in Slimp and Burian 1994) asked psychology graduate students to listen to taped, scripted interviews of therapist-client interactions. Although the students were not prompted to listen for the ethical dilemmas built into the interviews, nearly 50 percent failed to recognize the ethical concerns.

Berliner (1989) states that “anecdotal and other evidence indicates that few NASW members have read or are familiar with provisions of the Code of Ethics” (70). He later argues that the code is “so unfamiliar . . . that it fails to serve as an ethical guide” (71). Clearly, if the code is to guide practice, we educators must give students a working knowledge of it: the Code of Ethics cannot be treated as just another class handout.

Content of expected professional behavior must not be left to chance. Congress (1992) speculates that field instructors who received their degrees a number of years ago may not be stressing social work ethics as much as we might want or expect. Obviously, field instructors and faculty need to engage in a dialogue about the importance of teaching ethical decision making to students; they should jointly develop plans to provide students with opportunities for learning about and understanding the ethical conflicts that occur in social work practice. Professional development seminars can help staff and students “sharpen ethical decision-making skills” (Simp and Burian 1994:44).
If we are serious about enforcing the Code of Ethics, we must establish a formal process that outlines how reports of problematic behavior and questions about ethical issues can be documented and conveyed to an academic hearing committee. If there is no standing committee within the program to review allegations of ethics violations, one should be created. Even flagrant violations may be overlooked and forgotten when there is no procedure in place to review allegations. Indeed, of the three case examples presented so far, only in the first case was a special committee appointed to hear the charges. That may help to explain why no action was taken on the other two.

In an article outlining the legal issues involved in dismissing students, Madden (1993) notes that courts expect due process: students are entitled to hearings prior to academic dismissal. However, virtually any form of hearing is sufficient as long as the process is not arbitrary and capricious on the part of the institution. Social work programs must develop their own procedures in such cases.

Cole (1991) also addresses the legal issues associated with gatekeeping and student admissions, pointing out that in our search for "suitable" applicants we cannot exclude students solely on the basis of an admission to a mental hospital or prior chemical dependency. However, schools do have the right to insist upon sobriety and to set minimal standards that must be met by all students, regardless of protected classifications or other special circumstances.

Whether or not we are successful in getting our administrators to create standing committees to review instances of unethical and unprofessional practice, each of us can determinedly assess competence in our classes and practicum sections. In the first disguised case that opens the chapter, the polished and sophisticated but unethical student probably could have easily graduated from the program with a high grade point average—had it not been for a field instructor who took seriously her responsibility of overseeing students' performance within the agency. It was her concern about the quality of the work produced that led to the discovery of problems in other areas. It was her sense of ethical responsibility to the profession that led her to confront the student and request that his practicum at her agency end.
Unfortunately, this student would have passed through most BSW admission screenings. Probably no amount of vigilance at program entry would have detected him as potentially problematic. However, it is very likely that such students can be detected in their field placements—if administrators, educators, faculty liaisons, and field instructors are sincerely interested in assessing competence.

Madden (1993) observes that difficult legal issues do not usually arise from fair and impartial admissions procedures or from the dismissal of grossly inappropriate or unethical students, but from students who pass most of their academic courses and fall short of field expectations. The field experience is the best “window” we have for observing and determining competence. Field instructors and faculty liaisons to the field agencies have a weighty responsibility. Their tasks are made easier with clear behavioral expectations regarding skills and competencies to be acquired by students. (Chapter 6 fully explores the place of field instruction in gatekeeping efforts.)

Finally, we need more research on ethical dilemmas and ethical decision making. According to MacKay and O’Neill (1992) there has been “relatively little examination of exactly what an ethical dilemma is” (227). Dolgoff and Skolnik (1992) reviewed all the issues of Social Work with Groups and found only one article focused specifically on an ethical issue. Holland and Kilpatrick (1991) note that “the profession suffers from a lack of systematic studies of ethics in practice. Little is known about how practitioners respond to moral and ethical issues, how they understand and cope with these aspects of their work, and what resources are used or needed for improving performance in this area” (138).

Discretion and Choice in Gatekeeping

Having argued that the ethical position for us as social work educators is to hold firm in our expectation of professional behavior and to be vigilant in monitoring and reporting infractions, let me now address the other side of the coin. For completely altruistic reasons, we may decide to overlook areas of incompetence.

During her junior year in college Daphne survived a multivehicle accident that fractured her skull and spine. With paralyzed legs
and limited use of her arms, she resumed her college education in social work with the assistance of a motorized wheelchair and an attendant twice a day. Unfortunately, traumatic injury to her brain also left Daphne with cognitive impairments. To compound her problems, the emergency tracheotomy and tubes forced down her throat permanently damaged her vocal cords, and Daphne was unable to speak beyond a barely perceptible whisper. In order to make herself heard, Daphne would suddenly arch her back and with great willfulness project her voice toward the ceiling. To an unprepared bystander, she often appeared to be having a seizure.

Daphne desperately wanted to live independently and to finish college; she told one instructor that she would take his course again and again, as many times as it took until she passed it. Her faculty field liaison had a difficult time finding a suitable agency for her internship. One was finally secured that did not require Daphne to have any client contact. Procedures were bent, expectations were lowered, and she was allowed to stay in that placement both semesters. Her perseverance paid off. Daphne graduated at the end of five years with a GPA of 2.16.

The consensus of the faculty was that Daphne would never be hired as a social worker and for that reason "bending" the rules and lowering the expectations regarding Daphne's performance did not seem to trouble any of the faculty. Had the faculty insisted that Daphne demonstrate the same level of competence as other students in the program, it is very likely she never would have received her BSW.

Did the faculty do the right thing in passing Daphne in each course? This is not an easy question to answer. Daphne may or may not ever be employed as a social worker. If she obtains employment, her employer will have decided that she can perform a specific job after closely assessing both her abilities and disabilities. She will not be hired with a quick interview and by merely presenting her BSW diploma, as happens with some graduates.

It could be argued that the faculty did Daphne no favor. If she is unable to find a job as a social worker, is the faculty to blame for leading her to believe that she could function on a professional level? If she is unable to secure employment, would it have been less cruel to have counseled her out of the program? Ethically, our profession expects each practitioner to be competent and for each
of us “to act to prevent the unauthorized and unqualified practice of social work” (NASW 1996:25). But we also are called upon to prevent and eliminate discrimination and “to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups” (NASW 1996:27).

Competence and admission standards that are too rigid can come across as the products of uncaring and unsympathetic bureaucracies. Rigid standards don’t allow our humanity to emerge; they can hold back and exclude from participation those who are differently abled and those who have the potential to succeed although they have not previously revealed it.

However, there is obviously a difference between making an occasional exception or bending the standards a little and not having any kind of admission or competence standards in the first place. When there is no minimum grade point expectation and no interview to inquire about students’ motivations, their prior experiences in helping others, their interests in working in traditional social work fields of practice, we prop open the admission gate so wide that insincere and undesirable students enter.

Moore and Urwin (1991) present a rather comprehensive gatekeeping model for baccalaureate programs that includes an evaluation conference to determine the students’ readiness for field placement. Faculty discuss a wide variety of topics with each student, such as academic performance and extenuating circumstances affecting performance, volunteer experience and goals for the field experience, reasons for choosing social work, attitudes and behaviors in need of attention, special interests, and preference of client populations with which to work. Faculty evaluate several areas during the conference: academic performance, sense of responsibility, communication skills, social work values, and ability to handle feedback.

Following the individual conferences and assessments, faculty decisions include approving a student for a particular field site, postponing field education, or removing the student from the program. Postponement may result when students are assessed as immature, academically marginal, in need of more volunteer experience, or when students have changed majors or transferred late in their academic careers. Students with personal issues to resolve
may be asked to wait a year before reapplying. Because the decision is made by a committee, students who are dismissed from the program receive the deliberations of the faculty as a group, and a potentially arbitrary individual decision is avoided.

Moore and Urwin caution that their gatekeeping model is time-consuming and intense. Implementation requires the support of faculty and university administrators as well as inclusion of the evaluation process in all program literature. They recommend educating administration officials about the legal precedents noted by Cobb and Jordan (1989) that student "conduct, character, and psychological fitness" (91) can be considered in academic evaluations.

When a program is this diligent in its evaluation process, students cannot help but regard the transition from classroom to field education with great seriousness.

Grades and Test Scores as Screening Criteria

In our university, the social work program is popular with the athletic department. That concerns me—not because I believe that athletes can't become wonderful social workers, but because in a large university being an athlete on scholarship is a full-time job. And sports are not played for fun or recreation, but as a means to acquire wealth. These athletes do not hide the fact that they want to play for the NBA or the NFL. Visions of big bucks dance in their heads; most of these athletes have no interest in becoming social workers. What do they care about the NASW Code of Ethics? Some of them don't even care about graduation, it's the professional drafts that have their attention. Do we gatekeepers make it too easy to choose social work as a major? Gibbs (1994) reported on a survey of BSW programs and their screening mechanisms. She found that 88 percent of those programs with a formal admissions process specified that their admissions criteria required an overall GPA of at least a C but less than a B, and 46 percent of these programs required only a C average.

The potential to do well in a program or to perform adequately as a social worker may not always be measured by academic criteria. A colleague argued this point by telling her personal account—of not being in the top 10 percent of her high school
class and not having the test scores necessary to get admitted to a noted midwestern university. However, she was admitted to and attended its sister school. Under a reciprocal agreement between the two schools, she took a number of her courses at the more prestigious school. Not only did she do well in those classes, she often did better than the students who had been admitted to the more celebrated of the two schools. Although high academic criteria kept my colleague from attending the prestigious university, these criteria did not measure her desire to obtain superior grades in college or her ability to perform in her chosen career.

Should We Use Values for Screening Criteria?

Several years ago I spent a little time developing an instrument to assess social workers' values. It was my intent to design an objective means for measuring who had the "proper" values to be a social worker and who didn't. Preliminary results indicated that students in an introductory social work course had lower scores than students who had completed several social work courses. Delighted with these findings, I argued for using the instrument to eliminate the athletes and other insincere students from our social work program. An associate on the committee with me, a graduate of a Lutheran seminary and the University of Chicago, looked over my instrument and said, "You know, I don't think I would have passed a values test at the point when I applied to my MSW program."

Even though I think it is possible to assess with some precision whether a student has social work values, my colleague made a good point. After all, students enroll in our programs so we can educate them. Screening for inappropriate values at entry into a social work program may be like expecting a calf to give milk. A question we need to resolve is: at what point in the social work program do we administer a values test? Before students enter field placements? Before students exit our programs? I don't know.

Certainly, important learning occurs in field placements. This learning is apt to make social work values come alive for students in a way that classroom discussion of hypothetical cases does not. On the other hand, if a student doesn't have social work values by the end of the last field placement, what recourse do faculty and
program administrators have then? Is there some remedial course we could require these students to complete? Screening for social work values is obviously a complex issue and should not be adopted rashly as a means to exclude students from our programs.

Although the issue is complex, we shouldn't avoid classroom discussions of topics like abortion, homosexuality, welfare dependency, racism, capital punishment, and others that will "test" the beliefs and values of our students. This allows them to decide whether they could be impartial and objective in working with persons whose value orientations and lifestyles are different from their own. Indeed, rich and fruitful discussions can help students realize, in some instances, that their attitudes are not consistent with social work's values.

The Gatekeeper: A Lonely Sentry

Because of fear of litigation and charges of discrimination, many social workers are afraid to be candid and put in writing what they know or have observed about improper and illegal actions of social work students. Although it is not possible to share all the details of the cases presented earlier, suffice it to say that several social workers had ample opportunity to initiate charges against William and the student-knight for various violations of the NASW Code of Ethics. None did.

The conscientious social work educator has a lonely role for reasons other than fear of litigation: universities and their administrators often appear to be more interested in numbers—state appropriations frequently are based on enrollment—than in screening out students who do not aspire to the standards expected of a professional social worker.

Concerns about not weeding out students at admission is a topic beginning to appear with some frequency in the literature: "There is evidence that schools of social work fail to screen applicants adequately" (Hepler and Noble 1990:126). Cole and Lewis (1993:150) state, "The review of professional literature has revealed that limited research on the termination of students has been published, and the few studies available clearly indicate that termination is almost nonexistent." Along this line, Peterman and Blake (1986) surveyed nine BSW programs in New Jersey and
found that over a five-year period fewer than 3 percent of the students were dismissed or counseled out of those programs.

At the same time, applications to graduate programs in social work fell between 1975 and 1984 while admission rates increased from an acceptance of 41 percent to a conservative estimate of about 70 percent. The actual acceptance rate could be 80 percent or higher since many individuals apply to more than one program (Born and Carroll 1988). In 1982 Ginsberg reflected, “I have been puzzled over the years by being told that the number of applicants is down but that the quality is better. The explanation for this phenomenon has always escaped me” (9).

If universality in admissions has become normative in BSW programs as well, we educators have an even greater responsibility to monitor students for unprofessional behavior and values than in the past. However, gatekeeping should not be conceptualized as an activity limited to admitting or rejecting applicants to our programs. Born and Carroll (1988) argue that gatekeeping should continue through graduation and licensure.

When I caught two students cheating on an exam at another university, the head of the program informed me that he was uncomfortable with my failing them. Indeed, he would not support me in even giving them even a D. Given several more weeks to prepare for another “final” exam, neither student got less than a C. Was this an isolated incident? I think not. At various times colleagues have reported to me that they have been instructed not to give low or failing grades to certain students. Sometimes the student is an athlete or a member of a minority group, but that need not be the case. What do you do with a student, the daughter of a powerful state senator, who doesn’t attend class or who repeatedly sleeps through it? Do you give her the grade she deserves? Or try to convince yourself that she probably won’t ever practice social work and give her the grade she needs to graduate?

In a political bureaucracy such as a university, administrators have been known to advise untenured professors not to “rock the boat” and caution that “the nail that sticks up gets pounded down.” In such situations, faculty may not feel it is politically expedient to call attention to themselves by pursuing an ethics violation charge against a student. What happens to the faculty member’s reputation if a committee does not uphold his or her charge
against a student? And what happens to enrollment when the word gets out that social work students can be kicked out of the program—not because of low grades, but because of just one incident involving poor judgment?

As an educator, I must admit to liking rigid, inviolate standards. Cheating on a test, for instance, should always result in a failing grade. Students who engage in or who attempt to engage in sexual activities with clients violate the NASW Code of Ethics and should always be dismissed from a social work program. Life is made simpler when there are rules and boundaries demarcating appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, more than standards are required: it takes courage to confront students who violate ethical standards, to refuse admission to marginal students, and to fail those who lack competence.

Gatekeeping is not just difficult for social work educators. In a study of clinicians, 42 percent reported offering help or referring impaired colleagues to therapists, but only 8 percent had ever reported an impaired colleague to a regulatory body (Wood et al. 1985).

The last case I want to present is illustrative of the ethical dilemmas attendant on gatekeeping. A BSW program received an application from a man, a convicted felon, who had served two years in prison for child molestation. Attached to his application was a poignant letter in which he professed his innocence, explaining that he and his wife had been going through a divorce and that in an act of anger she had accused him of molesting his stepdaughter during a bath. The letter went on to explain that after he was sent to prison his exwife attempted to recant her testimony, but the judge would not allow it. Even his daughter protested that she had not been abused. After he served his time, husband and wife were remarried and the daughter chose to live with them instead of with her biological father and stepmother. It was at this point that the application was made to the BSW program. Two members of the faculty interviewed both the prospective student and his wife. She verified his version of events as elaborated in his letter, specifically stating she did not believe that he had ever sexually abused her daughter.
The faculty of that university went through a process for making ethical decisions that is instructive for others. They identified the parameters of the problem, fleshing out all the potential issues involved. They discussed existing university and program admission standards as well as the relevant values. Then they debated their alternatives and the consequences of each course of action. Ultimately, they decided to admit the student.

Ralph was a model social work student and did so well in his final field placement that the agency offered him a job. However, the offer was quickly rescinded once agency management learned that he was a convicted felon. Several years later Ralph was still unable to find employment. Even though the BSW program faculty made the very best decision they could—consulting others, asking for additional information, discussing their values and concerns, and brainstorming the consequences of their final decision—the faculty had no guarantee that Ralph wouldn’t be arrested a second time for child molestation.

Morally, if we follow Loewenberg and Dolgoff’s (1988) ordering of social work values, protecting life and vulnerable populations is a higher good than facilitating the autonomy and self-determination of an individual (in this case, the convicted felon). Philosophically, allowing a student such as Ralph into a BSW program bestows trust and power (particularly if the degree requirements are completed) that place him in a position to do greater harm than might occur if he were urged to find another career. However, it cannot be said that the faculty did anything unethical. Indeed, there was strong sentiment among faculty that it would have been unethical not to admit this man.

Was he really guilty? We’ll never know, but that’s not the point. Our profession obligates us to engage in a process though which we attempt to discern the best possible course of action whenever we face two conflicting decisions. When we go through a deliberate process that is objective and impartial like the one used by the faculty in this example (others have been suggested by Loewenberg and Dolgoff 1988; Tymchuk 1982), then we have discharged our ethical obligation—no matter whether the final decision is to admit or to reject.

How do we know when we are doing the right thing? We don’t always know, and in some cases we may never know. Sometimes
we’re proven wrong. A basketball player whom I failed in one course and never would have admitted into the program has returned on several occasions to talk to me about his job as a social worker in Chicago. A student with severe physical impairments, very much like those of Daphne described earlier, was hired by a branch of the government to review the completeness of employment applications. I’m glad to admit that sometimes I’m wrong. These little discoveries force me to examine my own biases and prejudices.

Because I know that not all of us may share the same value orientations, I trust an open process that attempts to be impartial, where different views and arguments can be expressed. As we struggle with the complex issues of gatekeeping, let’s understand that none of us have to make these decisions alone. All of us do, however, have a responsibility not only to teach about the NASW Code of Ethics, but also to act as role models, demonstrating ethical professional behavior, and to become involved whenever we detect inappropriate, incompetent, or unethical students. We can do little more—and must do no less.

References


The Ethics of Gatekeeping


