An increase of 88% in programs from 1990 through 2004, low GRE scores, low entry-level wages, declining pass rates in licensing tests, and an increase in ethical violations reported all support the contention that there are higher enrollment rates and decreased gatekeeping selectivity in today’s graduate MSW programs. This article discusses four factors that are important in distinguishing a uniform, transparent gatekeeping stance for the profession, to begin to resolve the intrinsic dilemmas of those factors.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS have agreed since the inception of the profession that gatekeeping is a fundamental ethical obligation (Leighninger, 2000). However, our profession has been previously, and continues to be, conflicted about the programmatic guidelines needed to screen out unsuited students more effectively. In fact, a perspective adhered to but less often discussed in the literature, suggests that every student could be screened into the social work profession, given sufficient educational resources (Madden, 2000a). This perspective is mainly espoused by program faculty who function from a screening-in position. This article is intended to add to the ongoing discussion of student suitability, and how educators might become more comfortable with the inherent ambiguities in gatekeeping the profession. Although there are a variety of definitions of gatekeeping in the social work literature, the one that informs this research recognizes gatekeeping as both an outcome and a process.

As an outcome, *gatekeeping* is defined as the professional obligation of social work educators to ensure that graduates are fit to practice social work by screening out unqualified students who may cause harm to clients (Moore & Urwin, 1991). As a process, screening out a student entails rejecting a candidate at the door or actively interrupting a student’s advancement forward at any point along the training continuum if standards are not met. Gatekeeping is comprised of careful consideration of criteria including candidate admissions protocols of essays, transcripts, and reference...
letters; assessment of student performance in the classroom and the field; screening out ill-equipped students; and keeping students who are competent to practice (Barlow & Coleman, 2003).

This article has multiple aims: (a) to provide a comprehensive review of gatekeeping in social work literature, (b) to explore the overarching ambivalence among schools of social work concerning gatekeeping, (c) to identify relevant themes that emerge from the literature that underscore the ambivalence, and (d) to provide suggestions for addressing the ambivalence to enhance our facility in gatekeeping for the profession. To develop a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of gatekeeping, it will be examined from both the admissions policy standpoint and from the perspective of other types of termination at later points in the educational process.

**Literature Review**

**Program Admissions Policies**

The number of graduate social work education programs has doubled from 99 in 1990 to 200 in 2010 (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2010; Kindle & Colby, 2008). One factor specific to social work programs that has contributed to low admission rejection rates is the intense administrative pressure to maintain or increase enrollment levels that affect funding allocations (Rhode, Ward, Ligon, & Priddy, 1999). Social work faculty has very little influence on this administrative reality, which has direct bearing on how gatekeeping is understood and operationalized at the front door.

Program enrollments have fluctuated since the 1970s due to resource allotment, political contexts, gatekeeping perspectives, student motivations, and job opportunities (Moore & Jenkins, 2000). In 1975, 41% of social work applicants were accepted into graduate programs (Born & Carroll, 1988), whereas in 2005, 75% of social work applicants were accepted into graduate social work programs (Kindle & Colby, 2008). High admission rates are particularly important because so few students are terminated from social work programs once they are admitted (Rapp-Paglicci, Allen, Cabness, & Ersing, 2006; Ryan, McCormick, & Cleak, 2006).

**Termination Policies**

Although most social work educators today probably would agree on the importance of the process of gatekeeping, not long ago 67% of graduate social work programs had no termination policies for students, other than policies regarding failure to maintain an acceptable GPA or failure to abide by the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) Code of Ethics (Koerin & Miller, 1995; NASW, 1999). Currently, the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) mandate that all social work programs institute clear programmatic termination policies (CSWE, 2008).

Aside from legal issues, there is a limited body of literature that addresses the details of screening out social work students who have been admitted (Cole & Lewis, 1993). It has been estimated that 10% of students will likely be screened out of professional educational programs overall (Bogal-Allbritten & Allbritten, 2000). However, the little research available indicates that social work programs screen out 2–4% of their students at most (Gibbs, 1994; Hartman & Wills, as cited in
There is a general assumption among social work educators that the primary locus for termination of students will be in the field internships (Miller & Koerin, 2001). One of the few researchers who examined failure rates related to social work students' field performance received surveys from 207 CSWE-accredited BSW programs and found that 80% of those programs failed fewer than five students per year (Gibbs, 1994).

Social work educational institutions frequently expect the field supervisor, who is a volunteer professional educator, to be the primary person to identify, confront, and address problem behaviors and attitudes among students (Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001). Despite valiant efforts on the part of educational institutions to provide training, field instructors may receive little guidance from their parent agencies on teaching strategies for the requisite skills of the profession (Glassman & Robbins, 2007; Miller & Koerin, 2001). Additionally, social work programs do not always emphasize their termination policies related to field performance to field instructors and students. Instructors and students may not necessarily agree, or even be aware, that the primary location for screening students out is the field practicum.

Perhaps this lack of agreement or clarity may contribute to the reality that so few terminations actually occur based on the evaluations of experienced professionals who function as volunteer educators (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Cole & Lewis, 1993). According to research done with social work field instructors and medical instructors, field instructors have been reticent to fail students (Dudek, Marks, & Regehr, 2005; Samec, 1995). Their explanations included systemic factors such as lack of support from a liaison or school administrations, a tendency by a school to transfer students to other placements when they were not doing well, the emotional toll resulting from the experience, a lack of knowledge regarding what to document, lack of remediation alternatives, concern about affecting the career or emotional state of the student, or discomfort and avoidance of authority or the appeals processes (Dudek et al., 2005; Samec, 1995). Institutionalized support to compensate for the additional time spent and psychological costs could be critical to a field instructor's willingness to fail an unsuited student (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Samec, 1995).

Disagreements on what the priorities of the profession should be (Raskin, 1994; Raskin, Bogo, & Wayne, 2008) could explain the lack of uniformity among programs regarding policies of termination (Gibbs, 1994; Lager & Robbins, 2004). However, social work educators agree that more effective gatekeeping supported by more research is needed (Bogo, Power, Regehr, Globerman, & Hughes, 2002; Gibbs & Macy, 2000). A systematic review of the literature on gatekeeping for social work students from several databases, including social service abstracts and academic premier, yielded four critical and complex factors that contribute to the kind of ambivalence that leads to ineffective gatekeeping of unsuited social work students. The four factors are (1) fear of litigation, (2) unclear suitability criteria, (3) conflicting educator roles, and (4) a lack of valid measures or protocols for evaluating students in the field.
Factors of Gatekeeping
Ambivalence

Fear of Litigation

Despite a rich literature documenting deference by the courts toward academic institutions' decisions on student termination, litigation is by far the most universal concern when termination of students is considered (Cole & Lewis, 1993; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004; Wayne, 2004). Although some candidates who are admitted to social work programs are clearly unsuited for the profession, the burden is on the academic institution to demonstrate that a student's performance is below acceptable policy standards. When inadequate performance has not been consistently and clearly documented or policies are not concretely spelled out, proving unsuitability is a formidable task (Wayne, 2004).

Discrimination is one of the reasons students give for the intention to sue a social work institution that is terminating them from the program. Although there may be an assumption that social work educators would be unlikely to discriminate against students based on categories such as sexual orientation or race, faculty members sometimes struggle with exactly what discrimination is, especially with respect to psychiatric disability (Cole, 1991; Wayne, 2004), which generally refers to having a mental impairment that interferes with the major activities of the individual (GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990) is still undergoing refinement in case law related to psychiatric disability (Stromwell, 2002). For example, ADA (1990) does not allow faculty members to speculate about future job performance in admissions decisions but does permit supposition regarding future risk to clients (Cole, Christ, & Light, 1995; GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007).

In a recent study of academic institutions 91% of respondents indicated that their programs had students with psychiatric disabilities within the last 5 years (GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007). Less than one third of institutional respondents in the study had policies for psychiatric disability; yet two thirds of those respondents had counseled out students with a psychiatric disability where the majority of those students had problems interacting with clients (GlenMaye & Bolin, 2007). However, social work educators may be unfamiliar with exactly what ADA (1990) would consider reasonable accommodations, and students with psychiatric disabilities have continued to complain that they experience discrimination throughout the educational process (Stromwell, 2002).

Although it would be ideal to screen out people with attitudes or behaviors incompatible with the profession prior to admission, not all unsuited candidates will be denied admission (Cole & Lewis, 1993). One study found that although faculty members believe it is their role to observe students' emotional, mental, and behavioral functioning for suitability, they rarely failed students once they had been admitted to a program (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2006), presumably because of fear of litigation (Cole & Lewis, 1993). Therefore, some authors have advocated that institutions would do well to encourage applicants to challenge admission policies, or encourage students to challenge termination
policies, because the courts have supported academic institutions as long as they are honoring their own clearly defined, nonarbitrary, nondiscriminatory criteria of professional expectations and due process requirements (Cole, 1991; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Wayne, 2004). Courts consider professional conduct and psychological fitness to be part of the academic criteria for dismissal from programs with explicit standards of professional behavior rather than simply misconduct (Cobb, 1994; Cole, 1991; Haski-Leventhal, Gelles, & Cnaan, 2010; Wayne, 2004). Courts also permit greater discretion to educational programs when ethics, relational ability, and client safety are aspects of prescribed professional behavior (Moore & Urwin, 1991).

Due process may seem like a complex and overwhelming construct to educators who are unfamiliar with assumptions of the judicial system. Social work educators may assume that due process in educational settings is parallel to the process required in criminal situations (Wayne, 2004); this is not the case. Procedural due process for an academic dismissal requires only that students receive notice regarding their status and does not require a hearing, as it would in criminal cases (Madden & Cobb, 2000; Wayne, 2004). Courts also view “graduate professional education as a privilege and not a constitutional right” (Cobb & Jordan, 1989, p. 94).

Unclear Suitability Criteria

So who is “unsuitable” for social work? There are varying definitions of unsuitability. Madden (2000a) defines an unsuitable student as “one who exhibits emotional or mental instability that poses a risk of harm to the student or to potential clients or whose values are in clear and direct conflict with those of the social work profession” (p. 141). This definition focuses on an individual’s emotional stability and ethics as primary components of student suitability. A content analysis of responses to questionnaires sent to all U.S. MSW programs that were accredited or in candidacy, revealed that, poor grades aside, ethical violations of behavior, mental health problems, substance abuse issues, and poor functioning in the field were the leading reasons for termination of unsuited students (Koerin & Miller, 1995). A decade later in-depth interviews with faculty members and an online survey used similar categories related to emotional, behavioral, mental health, ethical, or academic performance as markers of unsuitability for social work (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2006). Faculty respondents encountered students they deemed unsuited for social work, but few of those students were screened out; those who were screened out most often were reported to have problems academically or emotionally (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2006).

The consensus from the literature is that several criteria may be relevant to unsuitability for the profession: performance problems, incompatible ethics, and mental health problems or emotional instability (Gibbs, 1994; Koerin & Miller, 1995; Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2006). However, the first criterion, performance problems, is a catchall category confounded with the last two and might include relational problems, lack of motivation, or personal extenuating circumstances. These topics are relevant to the most recent practice behaviors outlined in EPAS for the core competency—EP 2.1.1: Identifying as a professional social
worker and conducting oneself accordingly—but otherwise these performance problems are beyond the scope of this article (CSWE, 2008). The consistent criteria relevant to unsuitability according to the literature, and those focused on in this article, are incompatible ethics and emotional instability.

The second unsuitability criterion, incompatible ethics, is primarily discussed in local and national meetings with respect to unique case examples specific to a particular student. It is therefore understandable that the literature does not provide much guidance regarding ethical breaches other than general guidelines in the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999; Reamer, 1995). Immerged in the busy pace of academia, educators may have little time to reflect on subtle questions of integrity or ethical behavior by students (Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix, 2006). However, individual states may have their own distinctive social work regulations that supersede the universally accepted guidelines of the Code of Ethics (Buccino, 2008; NASW, 1999). Although it is very difficult to get exact statistics of malpractice violations because some state boards only retain data on adjudicated cases, traditional wisdom has suggested that social work malpractice claims may be on the rise (Reamer, 1995; Strom-Gottfried, 2003).

One of the more complex characteristics of suitability has to do with emotional stability or “psychological equilibrium” (Moore & Urwin, 1991, p. 11), although it is not clear how emotionally healthy a student needs to be to practice or how best to make that appraisal. And emotional instability is difficult to define and assess. The process of determining suitability prior to the enactment of ADA (1990) incorporated personal growth discussions with students in practica including field instructors' direct exploration of mental health issues that might interfere with client interactions (Fox, 1989; Hamilton, 1954). However, subsequent to ADA (1990) those approaches were critiqued as intrusive, inappropriate models of “therapizing” the student and were replaced by task-centered and competency-based models (Epstein, 1980; Knight, 2004).

Regehr and colleagues (2001) found themes of personal histories of abuse, injustice, or neglect, and the desire to work with clients who come from similar backgrounds in a study designed to identify students at risk of difficulty in the field. The personal issues that attract students to the helping professions most assuredly may enhance student empathy and knowledge with respect to client struggles, the social service system, and the development of coping strategies. At the same time, certain family-of-origin issues may render students vulnerable to failure in the field (Regehr et al., 2001). Students' backgrounds have been found to be potentially more relevant to performance in the field than was previously assumed (Fortune, 2003). In fact, studies on attachment suggest that students with certain family issues may require more intensive assessment to determine whether a social work profession is contraindicated (Deal, 1999; Lyons-Ruth, Dutra, Schuder, & Bianchi, 2006; Winnicott, 1971).

Interestingly, emotional stability was a criterion for admission to social work programs according to 44% of faculty respondents in one study (Gibbs, 1994). Yet there were no further explanations provided in the
findings as to how that criterion was to be implemented (Bogol-Allbritten & Allbritten, 2000). However, one BSW program actually administered personality testing to every candidate who applied, to determine emotional stability for the social work program (Bogol-Allbritten & Allbritten, 2000). If problems emerged in personality profiles, applicants were given the opportunity to address those problems in counseling and still be accepted into the program. During that time approximately 11% of the prospective social work students’ profiles raised concerns and most of those candidates complied with counseling requirements based on their admission protocols (Bogol-Allbritten & Allbritten, 2000).

Interventions to address instability are difficult to implement due to multiple concerns including nondisclosure of emotional problems, fear of discrimination leading to student litigiousness based on reasonable accommodations (Madden, 2000b), and the high number of students drawn to the profession based on past experiences (Gibbs, 1994; Rompf & Royse, 1994). Educators maintain that because social work requires influential relationships with vulnerable clients (Knight, 2004), social work programs should be able to require that students who are emotionally unstable resolve personal issues that might be harmful to clients without worrying they will be accused of discrimination (LaFrance, Gray, & Herbert, 2004). However, there are few specific recommendations in the literature to remedy what educators recognize may be a growing trend in the field: an increasing number of students with emotional difficulties (Glen-Maye & Bolin, 2007; Lager & Robbins, 2004). The ethical dilemma presented by emphasizing reasonable accommodations for students versus protecting clients is not one easily resolved.

**Conflicting Educator Roles**

Social workers are guided by core values of acceptance, nonjudgment, self-determination, the inherent worth of every individual, and by the basic belief that all people have internal resources and the potential to change. At the same time, the NASW Code of Ethics (1999) and state regulations require that social workers prioritize clients’ well-being above all else.

Social work educators frequently experience conflicting feelings between the desire to work with their students from a strengths perspective and the need to prevent individuals who may potentially harm clients from entering the profession (Regehr et al., 2001). Additionally, there are intrinsic values on self-directed learning and teaching students to be self-critical in the practicum (Regehr, Regehr, Leeson, & Fusco, 2002), which may seem to be in conflict with the specific evaluation and screening tasks expected of social work field instructors. Field supervisors, especially new ones, may also face discomfort when providing negative feedback to students, which could result in unclear expectations (Regehr et al., 2002).

Educators generally approach the question of student termination from a screening-out perspective. However, another point of view found in the literature is that of program faculty who function from a screening-in position; that is, they believe that students should be nurtured throughout the program regardless of any red flags, simply because all students have potential, as do clients (Madden,
The central guiding feature of screening-in is that with sufficient support and resources, by graduation students will achieve a minimum level of competence (Madden, 2000a). Field instructors in particular have reported that they approach their supervision from a strengths or person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, preferring to focus on gatekeeping as a nurturing process that attends to student potential rather than suitability (Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Miller & Koerin, 1998).

It seems logical that a screening-in process and/or open admissions incorporates a PIE approach appropriate for a profession immersed in the tradition of social and economic justice (Madden, 2000a). However, this viewpoint seems to be presupposing that anyone can be a social worker if faculty members are attuned to and can address specific personal situations of their students. From a screening-in perspective, the extent to which a program deems a particular student unsuited is the degree to which the program has failed to individualize the training of that student and to accommodate to their environmental needs (Madden, 2000a).

Faculty members who were uncomfortable with a termination policy expressed concern that such a policy might be used to discriminate or disproportionately screen out diverse individuals (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). If oppressed group members such as people of color; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered population; or those who have survived abuse have internalized self-stigma, perhaps they might exhibit behaviors or feelings that are not considered the norm and therefore might be assessed as unsuit-
and to protect clients by challenging students who might view themselves as competent in spite of their cultural biases, ethical violations, emotional instability, or other personal problems.

**Lack of Measures or Protocols**

The difficulty of evaluating performance in the field is well-documented in the literature (Garcia & Floyd, 2002; Holden, Meenaghan, & Anastas, 2003; Raskin, 1994; Lager & Robbins, 2004). Numerous measures have been used to evaluate social work students, but few have had known reliability and validity (Pike, 2005). This is not uncommon among training programs in general. In medical training where ratings in the field account for 50-70% of students’ grades, instructors have used evaluations with unknown reliabilities, and validities and programs relied heavily on those faculty ratings (Dudek et al., 2005). However, screening out any student is difficult if evaluation criteria are vague or subjective (Cobb, 1994; Miller & Koerin, 1998).

The set of guidelines for field performance across social work programs other than the NASW Code of Ethics (1999) and state licensing regulations is EPAS, which endorses student attainment of certain competencies (CSWE, 2008). Competency-based outcomes across values, skills, and knowledge in arenas such as the attainment of assessment skills and ethical decision-making are therefore reflected in most field evaluations. Self-efficacy measures also have been introduced, at least as one aspect of program outcomes (Holden et al., 2003; Petrovich, 2004; Rishel & Majewski, 2009). However, the correlation between student self-efficacy ratings and supervisor performance ratings has been shown to be low for students having difficulty in their field placements (Regehr et al., 2002). Competency-based objectives or outcomes establish behaviorally based, observable guidelines in practice to prevent arbitrary or discriminatory screening out of students.

Specific behavioral outcomes employed by competency-based evaluation (CBE) measures have been embraced by educators who recognized the lack of uniformity regarding specific goals or outcomes in field education. CBE is well-articulated with respect to procedural skills but may miss certain other nuanced skills but may miss certain other nuanced qualities (Bogo et al., 2006) such as moral standards, emotional stability, self-awareness, or emotional intelligence. Opponents of the CBE movement consider it a reductionist approach with little empirical validity (Talbot, 2004). Likewise, field instructors polled in recent qualitative research deemed CBE measures insufficient to capture judgment, analysis, and relational capacities (Bogo et al., 2006; LaFrance et al., 2004; Ryan et al., 2006).

In an attempt to cull a set of skills and competencies intended to reflect a more accurate picture than had been made clear previously, Bogo et al. (2006) instead discovered personal qualities or metacompetencies that affected learning. Personal attributes such as “maturity, initiative, energy, independence, responsiveness to others, and commitment” (Bogo et al., 2006, p. 583) and integrity, comfort with emotions, flexibility, humility, self-awareness, and empathy are consistently used to describe exemplary students (LaFrance et al., 2004; Schottler, 2005). Several studies indicated that trustworthiness and self-reflection
to resolve conflicts were the primary ingredients of suitability for the profession (Currey & Atherton, 2008; LaFrance et al., 2004). Problem students were described by field instructors, on the other hand, as irritable, rigid, defensive, judgmental, intolerant, quiet, and lacking empathy (Bogo et al., 2006). Several students described in the literature had undisclosed health or mental health problems that affected their learning (Bogo et al., 2006). The student's approach to learning, ability to "conceptualize practice broadly," and relational abilities were ascertained to be at least as significant to field performance as operational skills (Bogo et al., 2006, p. 585).

A student vignette matching evaluation, which incorporated assessment by field instructors of student competencies and metacompetencies, resulted in greater variability of ratings of student performance in the field than CBE at either end of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from unsuited to exceptional students (Regehr, Bogo, Power, & Regehr, 2007; Sowbel, 2011). These differences led authors to conclude that an evaluation encompassing more balance between competency and metacompetency might be needed and that the specific tools might not be the source of difficulty in evaluating students. They speculated that the problem might not be in the specific format or content of the scales but rather in using scales at all (Regehr et al., 2007).

Several other recent research efforts have presented alternatives to using only CBE measures. For example, several graduate programs have employed an Objective Structured Clinical Exam based on a role-play of a specific case scenario to evaluate student practice competence in procedural skills and metacompetencies (Rawlings, 2007). This tool and a subsequent self-assessment paper employ multiple measures—an experiential component, a student reflection component, and an objective evaluation by a practitioner—to produce a more reliable source of evaluation of student practice competence (Rawlings, 2007).

Additional systematic research on evaluation measures and protocols is underway. It is hypothesized that this body of research may determine that traditional measurements based solely on competencies reflected in numerical scales do not appeal to field instructors, might not accurately assess all dimensions of student learning, and might not encompass important metacompetencies necessary for suitability in the field (Bogo et al., 2006; Regehr et al., 2007). This last gatekeeping factor is not a consequence of ambivalence on the part of educators to terminate students, but rather reflects a recognition that imprecise measures could result in potentially unfair and ineffectual screening out of students. Whatever the reason a social work educator is reticent to terminate a student, it is essential to be mindful of the well-articulated gatekeeping mandate that social work program policies must be developed to "safeguard the rights of students, the well-being of clients . . . and the integrity of the profession" (Koerin & Miller, 1995, p. 249).

**Discussion**

**Gatekeeping Ambivalence Themes**

As indicated by the title of this article, the question for those committed to quality social work education is not so much "is there
ambivalence in gatekeeping in our profession” but rather, given the complex and confusing constructs inherent in social work gatekeeping, “Why shouldn’t we be ambivalent?” How is it possible to both support students and screen out those unsuited to the profession? The major themes woven throughout the four ambivalent gatekeeping factors described in this article have to do with the values intrinsic to social work, especially nondiscrimination, a strengths perspective, and social justice. These values sometimes seem at odds with being discriminating about which students are best suited to work with clients.

Concomitantly, students have become more demanding about their social work education experience, viewing access to a social work degree as an entitlement and viewing themselves as consumers of social work institutions that have a fiduciary obligation to prepare paying students for professional practice (Cole, 1991; Gibbs & Macy, 2000; Lager & Robbins, 2004). The process of terminating a student does represent “a withholding of service and limits applicants rights to self-determination” to pursue social work as a career choice (Born & Carroll, 1988, p. 81). This is in some ways antithetical to a social work ethos. However, the desire to enter a profession does not necessarily translate into entitlement (Born & Carroll, 1988) and/or appropriate fit.

Although the scarce research available suggests that unsuited students are a small minority, this number can require major investments of time and energy by field educators and agency staff (Regehr et al., 2001; Ryan et al., 2006). Many educators express a commitment to being more precise about identifying those who are unsuited to the profession. A series of key questions emerges from that very challenge.

- Is it possible to reconcile that obligation with the resolute postmodern commitment to openness and uncertainty?
- Is it possible to be committed to hope and self-determination for all people and still recognize that there are some situations that do not lend themselves to total self-determination?
- Is it possible to recognize that oppressing anyone, in any way, for any reason, even inadvertently, is not acceptable, and to separate that from a gatekeeping obligation?

Before social work educators can truly achieve best practices with respect to gatekeeping, some of the profession’s ambivalences need to be resolved.

**Addressing the Ambivalence**

Issues of discrimination are difficult to teach, difficult for many teachers to discuss in-depth in the classroom, and may even be difficult for social workers to acknowledge. Yet what distinguishes social work from other professions is our self-awareness, our dedication to grow in our understanding of difference, and our commitment to work with our clients toward true positive change. Familiarity with the ADA (1990), legal consultation, and relevant literature on litigation of professional programs can help alleviate the apprehension that educators feel when dealing with a student with problems. Open communication between the field instructor, student, and the school liaison is highly recommended (Zakutansky & Sirles, 1993). Clear dismissal policies
and procedures, including a paper trail and an educational due process that includes a forum for a student to be heard, can minimize the possibility of lawsuits (Wayne, 2004). Few faculty members will find threats or actual lawsuits to be acceptable costs of doing business, and yet they must not compromise professional integrity to avoid discomfort. Even with the above recommendations in mind, educators may still be intimidated by the expectations of the ADA (1990), be uneasy about vital social justice concerns, and concerned that ultimately, some suitability questions will always be debatable.

Can social work educators become more comfortable with self-identifying as educators with a gatekeeping function rather than identifying as educator-clinicians serving student-clients? A strengths perspective does not imply that social work educators enable students or avoid unpleasant challenges. It is essential that educators make a clear distinction between clients and students, conduct ongoing self-evaluation, and seek consultation with respect to this slippery slope no less vigilantly than is expected of social work students.

Still, social injustice and discrimination are formidable foes, of which social work educators must always be wary. We social work educators are imperfect people who must never take for granted the extreme privilege and power inherent in the responsibility to impart professional knowledge, skills, and values to students. The question must be asked therefore: Can educators realistically multitask the disparate activities of teaching, mentoring, supervising, evaluating, and screening out students? There is no quick fix to the inherent ambiguity in the social work educator role. The best approach may be to recognize the responsibility to struggle honestly with the multidimensional identities of being a social work educator.

Future research will be essential to more clearly define suitability and develop better measures to operationalize the construct. Perhaps clearer parameters of suitability could emerge if we adopted the following key assumptions: that social work educators generally do not discriminate against students, because they want students to succeed; that educators will give students every benefit of the doubt; and that educators will provide each student with the opportunity to correct any major deficiencies.

Quantitative and qualitative research needs to be conducted to support the use of evaluation measures in discerning the primary components of suitability. New research is being disseminated in this area, including the evaluation of personality variables in predicting field performance, a descriptive vignette matching evaluation developed specifically for field, the construction of a student suitability scale, and the use of the Objective Structured Clinical Exam to evaluate practice skills (M. Bogo, personal communication, November 7, 2009; Rawlings, 2007; Sowbel, 2009; Tam & Coleman, 2009). It is important to understand that improved evaluation measures are needed so that suitability will not be determined by ethical judgments made only in the context of practice (Curer & Atherton, 2008).

The general suggestions given here are intended to (a) help decrease fear of litigation, (b) better define social work suitability by
supporting continuing research efforts, (c) enhance our knowledge of new performance evaluation measurement options, and (d) heighten social workers' awareness of the innate contradictions within the educator role. Schools of social work need to disseminate these kinds of suggestions and promote ongoing discussion among field faculty to deconstruct the ambiguity that prevents effective gatekeeping of unsuited students in the field.

**Conclusion**

It is essential for the profession to face the reality of screening out unsuitable candidates evenly, directly, and courageously, despite the predictable discomfort caused by occasionally thwarting intrinsic social work values. As in all arenas of social work practice, there will be uncertainty in imperfect processes, and those processes will be facilitated by imperfect faculty members in imperfect systems. And yet educators must develop means of gatekeeping that will be as fair as possible to students while also protecting clients. This will be difficult and uncomfortable at times, and in the end, no matter how much knowledge we have or how fair and effective our due-process procedures, ambiguity will not be totally eliminated. Clearly, these challenges will not be easily resolved.

We must strive for a critical consciousness resulting from a dialectical process of reflection and action (Friere, 1973) focused specifically on gatekeeping. Perhaps it is inevitable that our priority of enhanced gatekeeping will continue to be loosely dealt with, will be ill-defined at times, and will most certainly continue to be ethically challenging because of the strong value orientation within the social work profession. However, we must maintain a commitment to persevere through our uncertainty and discomfort with the innate dueling values that inform being a social worker while gatekeeping for the profession.

**References**


The Department of Marriage and Family Therapy in the Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics at Syracuse University invites applications for two positions, one tenure-track position (open rank), and one tenured (associate or professor), to begin September 2012. Individuals are sought who can teach courses in foundation or advanced practice, preferably with expertise in the area of family mental health.

Responsibilities include, but are not limited to:

- Teaching in the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy, and the School of Social Work
- Supervising Marriage and Family Therapy graduate students
- Having a defined research agenda, preferably in the area of family mental health or marriage and family therapy
- Advising and mentoring Marriage and Family Therapy graduate students
- Supporting and maintaining the clinical training component of the program, including services provided at the Goldberg Couples and Family Therapy Clinic
- Contributing to the program’s accreditation including program review, data collection, written sections of the self study and participating in the planning and implementation of the site visit.
- Service to the department, the Falk College, the university and the profession of Marriage and Family Therapy

Qualifications:

- Doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy
- Master’s degree in MFT and/or Social Work; two years post-master’s practice experience preferred
- Clinical and supervisory experience in Marriage and Family Therapy
- Approved MFT Supervisor status preferred or eligibility and willingness to obtain the credential
- State license in Marriage and Family Therapy or Social Work, or license eligible
- Established research agenda and record of publications in peer-reviewed journals
- Evidence of commitment and service to diverse populations and social justice
- Clear systemic model of therapy and supervision
- Demonstrated teaching excellence at the graduate level (Tenured Position)
- Experience in a COAMFTE accredited program (Tenured Position)

The department, the college, and the university are strongly committed to working with populations from diverse backgrounds and to conducting research that advances clinical practice and individual or community well-being. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is expected and supported within the college. As such, tenure track faculty are expected to engage in teaching and research, and collaborate with others in pursuing funded research, and engage in service activities related to the department, college, university and the community.

Review of applicants will begin on December 1, 2011 and will continue until Feb. 1, 2012. Application instructions and additional information can be found at: www.sujobopps.com, job # 028522 (Assoc/Prof) and Job # 028521 (Assist/Assoc) Questions may be addressed to: Thoma deLara, Department Chair, Department of Marriage and Family Therapy, Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics, Syracuse University, 1045 James Street, Syracuse, NY 13204
delara@syr.edu, 315-443-9830

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