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Distance and Online Social Work Education: Novel Ethical Challenges

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Digital technology has transformed social work education. Today's students can take individual courses and earn an entire degree without ever meeting their faculty members in person. Technological innovations such as videoconferencing, live online chat, asynchronous podcasts, and webinars enable social work educators to reach students whose personal circumstances and geographical locations make it difficult for them to attend school in person. This paper highlights complex ethical issues associated with the proliferation of digital and online social work education. Key ethical issues concern student access; course and degree program quality and integrity; academic honesty and gatekeeping; and privacy and surveillance.

KEYWORDS *digital education, social work education, distance education, ethics, online education*

The digital world has created remarkable opportunities for creative social work education. Videoconferencing, online chat rooms, webinars, podcasts: The electronic options seem endless. And, simultaneously, online and distance social work education have unleashed a staggering array of ethical concerns and challenges for which the profession has few existing guidelines.

In 1994, the Code of Ethics Revision Committee began drafting the current National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*. Committee members spent considerable time discussing the ethical implications of social workers' use of electronic communications. At the time, electronic communications primarily included electronic mail (e-mail), fax

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machines, and telephones. Online social networking and social media as we know them today (for example, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) did not yet exist. In 1994, no social workers provided counseling services using e-mail, Skype, or live chat rooms. No social work educators taught courses using synchronous (real-time) digital tools, webinars, or other web-based platforms.

Fast forward: Both social work practice and social work education have been transformed by the digital era. Social workers entering the profession today now have the option to communicate with clients on social networking sites, provide online and video counseling services to people they have never met in person and who live thousands of miles away, save electronic records in the virtual “cloud,” and exchange e-mail and text messages with clients using their respective smartphones. Social work educators now teach clinical courses online using videoconferencing. Indeed, social work students now can earn their degree without setting foot in a traditional classroom or meeting in person with a professor.

THE EMERGENCE OF DISTANCE AND ONLINE SOCIAL WORK

Social work and other mental health services emerged on the Internet as early as 1982 in the form of online self-help support groups (Kanani & Regehr, 2003). The first known fee-based Internet mental health service was established by Sommers in 1995; by the late 1990s, groups of clinicians were forming companies and e-clinics that offered online counseling services to the public using secure websites (Skinner & Zack, 2004). In social work, the earliest discussions of electronic tools focused on practitioners' and educators' use of information technology (IT; Schoech, 1999) and the ways in which social workers could use Internet resources such as online chat rooms and listservs, joined by colleagues, professional networking sites, news groups, and e-mail (Grant & Grobman, 1998; Martinez & Clark, 2000).

Today's social work services include a much wider range of digital and electronic options, including a large number of tools for the delivery of services to clients (Chester & Glass, 2006; Kanani & Regehr, 2003; Lamendola, 2010; Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002; Reamer, 2012a; Wells, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Becker-Blease, 2007; Zur, 2012). These include e-mail counseling, live chat counseling, video counseling, cybertherapy, avatar therapy, self-guided web-based interventions, and the use of social networking and text messaging for therapeutic purposes.

Serious efforts to teach social work courses online using distance technology are more recent. However, the idea of distance education itself is not new, with the correspondence course representing its earliest form. The first such course was the Pitman Shorthand training program that brought cutting

edge stenographic practices to the United States in 1852. Using the U.S. Postal Service, self-taught secretaries mailed their exercises to the Phonographic Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio and, after completing the required coursework, received a certificate of expertise in stenographic shorthand skills (Casey, 2008). In 1892, the University of Chicago created the first college-level distance education program for students who lived far from campus; students used the U.S. Postal Service to send their professors completed assignments and lessons (Hansen, 2001). In 1934, the University of Iowa began broadcasting courses by television; in 1963, the FCC created the Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS), a band of 20 television channels available to educational institutions to provide distance education. Also in 1963, the California State University system was the first to apply for ITFS licensing (Casey, 2008).

Coastline Community College in California was the first college without an actual campus, and by 1972, colleges in Miami-Dade, Florida; Costa Mesa, California; and Dallas, Texas became pioneers in telecourse offerings. Ten years later, the National University Teleconferencing Network used satellites to transmit programs to its 40 institutional members. In 1985, the National Technological University, located in Fort Collins, Colorado, began to offer online degree courses (in both continuing and graduate education) using satellite transmission to access course materials from other universities which then were downloaded and redistributed by satellite. All instruction was either real-time broadcast or video (Casey, 2008; Matthews, 1999). As Rumble (2008, p. 167) notes:

Distance education developed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s because it provided a cheaper option of meeting demand, and because it was able to reach people in their homes, thus meeting the needs of those who had not gone to or could not attend regular face-to-face classes. The 1960s' and 1970s' growth in educational provision, including distance education, occurred because governments saw it as both a duty (arising from egalitarian arguments) and a need (arising from thinking on human capital and modernization) to meet the costs of educational provision.

In the early 1990s, the advent of high-speed broadband transmission introduced the Internet as the next distance education frontier. The creation of online course management systems, such as WebCT and Blackboard, transformed colleges' and universities' opportunities to reach off-campus students throughout the world. Today, increasing numbers of social work educators are teaching hybrid (combined in-person and online) and exclusively online courses using web-based platforms. Faculty members offer synchronous (simultaneous interaction in real time) and asynchronous (the absence of simultaneous interaction in real time) instruction; simulcast classes using ITV online; live interactive video technologies and related

programmed instruction; and Skype-based seminars and faculty advising via video conferencing. Students now can earn their MSW degrees completely online.

Distance education has brought with it complex ethical challenges, especially when it is online (Reamer, 2012b). As Anderson and Simpson (2008, p. 129) observe:

Teaching at a distance raises ethical issues particular to the distance context. When distance teaching is also online teaching, the situation is even more complex. Online teaching environments amplify the ethical issues faced by instructors and students. Online sites support complex discourses and multiple relationships; they cross physical, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Data of various kinds are automatically recorded in a relatively permanent form.

As social work educators expand their use of distance instruction, it is essential that they address a wide range of ethical issues. Key ethical questions pertain to student access; course and degree program quality and integrity; gatekeeping and academic honesty; and privacy and surveillance.

Student Access

As a profession, social work is deeply committed to enhancing access to resources. The concepts of fair access and equal opportunity are deeply rooted in the profession's values. According to the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2008), social workers seek "to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (Standard 6.04[a]). Consistent with this widely embraced ethical standard, distance education enhances opportunities for prospective social workers to obtain professional education. Distance education may be particularly appealing to people whose life circumstances (for example, work schedules, family responsibilities, financial status) make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to enroll in bricks-and-mortar social work education programs. Being able to complete coursework (for example, watching online video lectures, listening to podcasts, and reading Internet-based literature) at any time, day or night, is particularly appealing to students who would have difficulty attending classes in person. In addition, distance education options enable students who live in remote locations to complete courses and degrees without the time and financial burden of traveling long distances to attend classes.

Distance education also may appeal to students who prefer learning in nontraditional ways (Kolb, 1984). Several studies have demonstrated correlations between students' learning styles (for example, visual, verbal, nonverbal, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic) and their preference for online

versus traditional education (Buerk, Malmstrom, & Peppers, 2003; Federico, 2000; Lippert, Radhakrishnam, Plank, & Mitchell, 2001; Terrell & Dringus, 2000; Zacharis, 2010). Thus, distance and online options may serve to enhance access among students whose learning styles mesh with these modalities of delivery. As Sankey and St. Hill (2008, p. 344) note in their discussion of distance education,

importantly, as these students learn in different ways, so they may also represent knowledge in different ways, and as performance can be related to how they learn, it may be seen that people can learn more effectively when taught by their preferred approach to learning.

However, the current structure of many social work distance education programs may limit student access as well. Some students may have unique learning needs and styles that make distance and online education difficult. Those who have problems, for example, processing information that is presented in written form online or through online podcasts or have difficulty completing reading and written assignments without the guidance of an in-person instructor may find distance and online education inaccessible and unrealistic (Zacharis, 2010).

Further, several widely publicized online MSW programs charge tuitions that are significantly higher than those charged for their in-residence programs; these tuitions may be out of reach for students of modest financial means and whose prospects for paying off significant loans may be dimmed by moderate-wage social work jobs. For example, the University of Southern California tuition for its 2-year MSW online program (2013–2014) is \$87,074. Brey (2006, p. 130) poses a compelling question about access in his discussion of the ethical and social justice implications of distance education: “Does a reliance on computer networks in higher education foster equality and equity for students and does it promote diversity, or does it disadvantage certain social classes . . .?”

Hence, distance and online MSW programs can, simultaneously, enhance access for some students and limit access for others. Kelly and Mills (2008, p. 149) note this contrast in their assessment of the fit between students’ learning styles and distance education:

Open, distance and e-learning institutions of higher education often face ethical issues relating to their distinctive mission, especially where the core role is to open educational opportunities to under-represented groups while maintaining academic standards. Openness is surely a “good thing”; and yet there are often tensions relating to government policies, recruitment, access to technology, curriculum, teaching and student support that sometimes involve uncomfortable trade-offs.

Quality Control and Integrity

Social workers are morally obligated to provide services in a competent manner. Such a commitment is particularly important when social workers offer services that are considered novel and innovative (for example, online graduate education). According to the NASW *Code of Ethics*, “when generally recognized standards do not exist with respect to an emerging area of practice, social workers should exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps (including appropriate education, research, training, consultation, and supervision) to ensure the competence of their work . . .” (Standard 1.0[c]).

Several scholars who have investigated distance and online learning have raised troubling questions about the quality of instruction and the lack of empirical evidence of its effectiveness (Casey, 2008; Leh & Jobin, 2002; Rinear, 2003). Common concerns include unevenness in instructor competence and training, curriculum quality and rigor, use and implementation of online and distance teaching tools, and student monitoring and assessment.

In an unsolicited e-mail communication sent to this author, a seasoned instructor in an online MSW program sponsored by a prominent school of social work expressed his grave concerns about quality control (J. Kanter, personal communication, October 4, 2012). Although this instructor’s views are not necessarily representative of the universe of experienced online social work educators, they do offer an unusually detailed, thoughtful, and thought-provoking perspective.

I began teaching the beginning Social Work Practice with Individuals class in the university’s “virtual” MSW program in January 2011. After viewing an advertisement seeking faculty, I submitted my resume and received an e-mail response in December 2010 inviting me to interview for the position. The interview was virtual. There were 10 video questions from a faculty member and I had 3 minutes to respond to each one with a video feed from my personal computer. This was non-interactive. About two weeks later, I received an e-mail inviting me to teach two sections of the introductory Social Work Practice class and offering me a choice of dates and times . . .

Apart from a minority of classes which had lengthy, and rather compelling videos (which the students could essentially watch or not watch), most of the material in the asynchronous classes could be completed in 15–30 minutes. On average, these asynchronous assignments never seemed much more than 1/3 of the 75 minutes of “class time” that they were supposed to occupy and the degree of intellectual challenge seemed extremely low

Kanter shared a number of concerns about his ability in an online social work practice course to monitor and assess students’ interpersonal skills, focus on online course activity, and nonverbal behaviors.

The technical limitations of the “virtual classroom” are omnipresent. Depending to some extent on the speed of each student’s internet connection (wireless, cable, DSL, etc.), the visual acuity of each person’s image varies greatly. Of course, the “box” on one’s computer screen for each participant is relatively small and facial gestures can be difficult to discern even when internet speeds are high and the images are responsive. However, for the majority of students, their facial images were minimally responsive and it was not possible to observe gestural nuances. Eye contact is not possible with online communication and it was almost impossible to establish non-verbal communication with students when they were silent. Most boxes would evidence a blank stare and it was not possible to differentiate whether students were concentrating on the classroom experience or drifting off thinking about other matters. Of course, other visual cues concerning each student (grooming, posture, etc.) were extremely limited as only faces dominated the visual field

In all of my four sections, I had one or two students who largely monopolized the discussion. These students were commonly those with more self-confidence and professional experience, and their comments and questions were mostly worthwhile. Yet it was difficult to connect with the “silent” members in the 75 minutes we had allotted. I should note here that it took a minimum of 5 minutes in each class to get everyone “signed in” to the virtual classroom. And, as in any graduate class, there was often 10 minutes of “housekeeping,” discussing upcoming assignments and so on. Thus, the time available to discuss each week’s course content was frequently 60 minutes or less

Overall, I don’t think there is any question that all online communications, whether student-teacher, patient-therapist, and even friend-to-friend, suffer from the implicit technical limitations of talking to each other via computer networks and monitors. Non-verbal communication is severely curtailed. One cannot see the twinkle in the other’s eyes, a look of rapt attention, a bored expression or a quizzical expression of disbelief. One cannot judge well how one’s humor is being received. Or if a student’s quiet behavior is simply shyness, profound depression, or even emergent psychosis

Kanter also conveyed his strong concerns about the quality and competence of a number of the students enrolled in his online courses, compared with students he has taught in traditional classroom settings.

It was my impression that the admission requirements for the online program were not as rigorous as for the traditional MSW program, one of the most selective MSW programs in the nation. This seemed odd as the syllabus had a demanding reading list and 90% of the grade was

based on a lengthy written midterm and final assignment each semester. Several of the students were barely literate and perhaps at least one-third did not have the intellectual background to digest the complex reading assignments.

Also, half the students had severely limited skills in written communication. By “severely limited,” I refer to papers with numerous spelling and grammatical errors, sentences that required multiple readings to decipher the author’s intent, and an inability to construct coherent paragraphs. With these students, I often wondered if they would be able to appropriately write an agency report or letter that described a client problem

It also became apparent that overzealous admissions counselors “oversold” the ease and convenience of the online MSW program. While the time commitments involved in the online MSW program were obviously less than in a conventional MSW program . . . they still were significant and some students were disappointed to learn mid-semester that they could not work full time and matriculate full time. Given the cost of tuition, this was a very expensive lesson for some, leaving them with expensive debts which should have been prevented with appropriate pre-admission counseling. In other situations, clearly unqualified students dropped out of the program leaving them with costly loans

Kanter shared a number of compelling observations pertaining to the cornerstone of MSW education, field work.

The field work experience is perhaps the centerpiece of MSW education. However, unlike conventional MSW programs which have an array of ongoing relationships with community agencies and field supervisors, the online program staff were required to develop new relationships with agencies that had to be formed across the U.S. for every student in our sections. As I learned halfway through my first term, this agency “recruitment” was not handled by university staff, but rather by employees from the Utor Corporation (now known as 2U, Inc.) who a) lacked knowledge of the communities which the students lived in, and b) were unfamiliar with the learning objectives of MSW-level field internships.

Our faculty cohort (teaching the initial Social Work Practice course) was told upfront that students would not have field placements until Week 7 of the semester. This created problems as the first part of the semester’s curriculum focused on basic interviewing and relationship skills that the students would not be able to practice *in vivo*. Also, the midterm writing assignment (due Week 8) was supposed to be a discussion of a client the students worked with in their placement. Instead, they had to write about a character or situation in a Hollywood movie.

As the semester evolved, only one student in my sections was in placement by Week 7, only half by Week 11, and all but two by Week 14. My faculty colleagues teaching other sections reported similar delays. Students reported an array of problems including a placement that required a two-hour commute from one student's home (when she lived near a large city with dozens of agencies), a placement that simply asked the student to compile a resource directory (with no client contact), and many that seemed to have no good idea how to deploy an MSW student. As one might imagine, the quality of field supervision seemed universally mediocre as agency supervisors had neither knowledge of the university nor were personally screened by School of Social Work faculty

Of course, in traditional social work education, it is common for some students to struggle with various aspects of the educational process; this is not unique to online programs. However, the problems are more complicated to address when there is no in-person contact and when adjunct faculty across the continent (or globe) are very loosely supported by the educational institution. Kanter further highlighted a number of novel challenges he encountered managing students who struggled with the academic work and the logistics of online education:

- a student who was literally homeless and without cell phone and Internet hookup for several weeks;
- a student who e-mailed him confidential agency files about a client in preparation for a case presentation (the student had been asked to prepare a brief outline of the case);
- a student who plagiarized a number of passages in her midterm;
- a student who was “absent” without cause for several classes and e-mailed a midterm two weeks late, claiming—without evidence—that a computer problem had caused the delay;
- a student paper, describing a case of a child physically abused by a sibling, with no awareness of any duty to report; and
- two students who were unable to write more than two pages of an 8- to 10-page midterm assignment.

There was a much higher proportion of such problems than when I taught social work practice in a conventional classroom-based program . . .

Gatekeeping and Academic Honesty

Social work educators are deeply committed to upholding high standards of academic honesty, consistent with the NASW *Code of Ethics*: “Social workers should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty, fraud, or deception” (Standard 4.04). Of course, academic dishonesty, primarily

in the form of plagiarism, is possible in any educational setting, including face-to-face social work education programs. Students can “lift” passages from other publications and insert them in their written assignments, hire ghost writers, and cheat on exams. However, distance education poses additional and unique risks because of the absence of in-person contact between instructor and student. Unscrupulous students can arrange to have a knowledgeable acquaintance take an online exam or consult with a friend surreptitiously via text message or e-mail. According to Casey (2008, p. 49),

the essential nature of distance learning, with teacher and student being separated by both space and time, creates an environment that could threaten the quality of learning that is supposed to take place. The educational institutions, the learners, and the teachers are all subject to the honor system. However, many educators question if the honor system is enough to guarantee an education.

These sentiments are echoed by Olt (2002):

In considering the issue of ethics and distance education . . . the “age-old concerns about ethical practices in assessment . . . take on new twists in the distance-learning environment” (Abbott, Siskivic, Nogues, & Williams 2000). Students are no longer in close proximity. In fact, they may be separated by thousands of miles. Distance, however, does not diminish the possibility of students cheating, with or without an accomplice, on online assessments; instead of developing codes or passing erasers, students pass private e-mails, which instructors have no means of intercepting. In some cases, students can also download an assessment, look up the answers before actually taking it, and share those answers with classmates. Instead of using crib notes or writing answers within the margins of the textbook or on the desktop, students simply use the verboten sources during the assessment. Instructors can no longer depend on different handwriting, a change in ink color, or the detection of eraser marks on an assessment as evidence that a student has changed answers after having taken the assessment. Under such circumstances, it would seem that ensuring the integrity of online assessment is almost an impossibility, or is it?

Digital Surveillance and Privacy

Respecting privacy and confidentiality is a time-honored value in social work. Since the formal inauguration of the profession in the late nineteenth century, social workers have understood how important it is to respect people’s judgment about what information they choose to share about themselves and not to pry intrusively into people’s lives (see *NASW Code of Ethics*, Section 1.07).

Online social work education is raising new questions and introducing unprecedented challenges pertaining to student privacy. Many online courses feature electronic chat rooms that provide students with an opportunity to share their opinions about course-related issues; as in face-to-face classes, students sometimes choose to share personal information, for example, related to past trauma or their mental health challenges. Such disclosure can be valuable educationally. However, unlike traditional classroom settings, online learning creates a permanent, written record of such disclosures. Although course management software is typically secure, students who choose to disclose personal details online run the risk of electronic breaches or hacking. Further, an unscrupulous or insensitive classmate might choose to print out a confidential message and share it with a third party. As Anderson and Simpson (2008, p. 135) observe, students often are more relaxed about self-disclosure when they communicate with each other online and do not have to face each other in person:

In online classes students gradually establish a presence and identity through interaction, becoming known in some way to other members of the class. In fact, Joinson (2001, p. 188) has shown “people disclose more information about themselves during CMC [computer mediated communication] compared to FtF [face to face].” Entering a new course, students bring with them sets of expectations. When the course anticipates or requires interaction with other students, they might realistically expect that only basic information such as their name is provided to other class members, expect that interactions will be constructive and primarily course-focused, expect that students will work together when required, and expect that class discussions are for the class, not for a general audience. Over time, often reflecting practices set by the instructor and beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning, students come to know each other’s online persona, beliefs and ideals. At times students reveal other contact information to enable ongoing interaction. The trust that underpins the free exchange of ideas and the flourishing of debate ensures this. Personal details are inevitably recorded—in reasonably permanent text.

Instructors and educational administrators must make earnest and proactive attempts to protect student privacy and confidentiality in online learning situations. This is an extension of the longstanding principle in social work practice to discuss confidentiality guidelines and exceptions at the very beginning of practitioners’ work with clients. Instructors similarly should share their expectations with students about their obligation to respect classmates’ privacy, consistent with social work values, and obtain students’ agreement to honor these expectations.

Further, instructors and administrators must hold themselves to high standards as well by respecting student privacy and ensuring that the course

management software provides adequate encryption and protection of electronic communications. Anderson and Simpson (2008) highlight the need for new and strict norms pertaining to electronic surveillance of students' online communications, informed consent, and related privacy protections. They note:

How can we assess the kind of surveillance that occurs in online courses and make ethical judgments about the use of such data? For used it will be The large amount of data about students being collected in most learning management systems is usually collected automatically. Lecturers or tutors do not typically make active decisions to collect information about how often or when students are online, reading or posting messages, or working through course content in a particular order. Messages themselves remain as data. The usual safeguards offered to students are guarantees of privacy and of data protection. But, while important, are these safeguards addressing the right issue when an even more fundamental issue, informed consent for data gathering, is overlooked? It is possible that some students are not aware that data about their actions are being recorded. How often do instructors pause to think about whether that recording requires informed consent or at least awareness on the part of the student of the nature and extent of the data gathering? The question of safeguards highlights the possibilities for control, and of judgments about students on the basis of the collected data. Privacy and data protection safeguards do nothing to protect against those aspects of surveillance. (Anderson & Simpson, 2008, p. 134)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Online and distance education in social work are coming of age. The bell has been rung, and it is not possible to "unring" it. Clearly, there is much to be said in favor of online and distance education. As noted, students who live in remote areas, have a disability, or have work schedules or family obligations that make traditional, face-to-face instruction difficult or impractical can acquire new knowledge and skills. Online and distance education offer opportunities to tailor instructional tools and media to suit students' unique learning styles. Social work students can access creative and instructive videos, websites, and podcasts at convenient times and develop digital relationships with colleagues around the globe.

Accompanying these benefits and advantages, however, are numerous and serious ethical concerns. Chief among them are troubling issues that must be addressed pertaining to student access; course and degree program quality and integrity; gatekeeping and academic honesty; and privacy and surveillance.

At this relatively early stage in the development of distance and online MSW education, social work educators, therefore, should address several

compelling questions. First, what are the overarching motives for promotion of distance and online MSW education? Are educators paying sufficient attention to the quality of the product and student learning outcomes, or are these efforts driven to a significant extent by the revenue that these programs may generate? Decisions about whether to mount profitable distance and online MSW programs must be a matter of conscience, not revenue.

Second, social work educators must ask whether there is sufficient evidence that essential social work knowledge and skills can be taught and learned in distance formats—especially clinical skills. To what extent have schools relaxed admissions standards in order to enroll large numbers of tuition-paying students? Are we satisfied that the distance courses being offered measure up to the high standards associated with rigorous social work education? Does currently available technology enable instructors to truly assess the quality of students' professional demeanor, interpersonal skills, and clinical acumen? To what extent are social work education programs arranging and supervising field placements in ways that ensure close and careful scrutiny of students' performance and field instructor quality? Are program administrators able to develop close working relationships with course and field instructors they have never met in person? Do programs have adequate protocols and mechanisms in place to address instructors' concerns about students' academic performance, field work performance, or impairment?

Third, have programs developed and implemented mechanisms to promote and enhance student honesty and prevent forms of plagiarism and cheating that may be unique to distance and online education? Finally, have distance and online social work educators paid sufficient attention to the unique challenges associated with student privacy, confidentiality, and surveillance? The task here is twofold. First, the education programs must use course management software that truly protects digital communications and avoids any untoward surveillance or misuse of students' electronic data. Second, and more broadly, social work educators must cultivate and promote a new set of norms regarding students' moral obligations to respect and protect classmates' privacy and confidentiality. The concept itself is not new; what is novel are the ways in which students' privacy and confidentiality can be compromised due to the permanent record created by digital communication.

As with so many innovations, the digital revolution is a mixed blessing. In social work education, earnest and principled academicians are now able to share knowledge with vast numbers of students who, but for this technology, would not be reached and served. Further, currently available audio, video, and digital technology is remarkably versatile and enables one to communicate with students in a wide variety of engaging ways. That's the good news. The less-than-good news is that there are troubling signs of ethical problems and compromises associated with the rush toward distance and

online social work education. Our moral duty, at this stage of development, is to acknowledge these challenges honestly, wrestle with thoughtful options, and develop principled guidelines and safeguards to ensure that social work education fulfills its principal duty: to educate the next generation of social workers who will carry out the profession's mission to, in the words of the NASW, "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty."

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