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# Essential Ethics Education in Social Work Field Instruction: A Blueprint for Field Educators

Frederic G. Reamer

*Rhode Island College*, [freamer@ric.edu](mailto:freamer@ric.edu)

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# Essential Ethics Education in Social Work Field Instruction: A Blueprint for Field Educators

*Author(s)*

*Frederic G. Reamer, PhD  
Rhode Island College*

## **Abstract:**

Ethics content in field instruction is a vital component of social work education. Ethical standards and knowledge have expanded significantly in recent years. The author provides a comprehensive overview of core ethics content that should be incorporated into students' internships, and also highlights key themes that should be addressed. Essential ethics content addresses core social work values, students' personal and professional values, ethical dilemmas in field placements and social work practice, ethical decision-making frameworks and strategies to manage ethics risks.

Meaningful field instruction has been a vital component of social work education since the profession inaugurated formal training programs in the late 19th century (Bogo, 2010; Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011; Homonoff, 2008; Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2012). Early accreditation guidelines in the US – established first by the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) beginning in 1919, and by the National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA) beginning in 1943 – made it clear that development of professional values is critical (Elliott, 1931; Emmet, 1962; Hoffman, 2008; Johnson, 1955; Joseph, 1989).

Since these early developments in field education and classroom instruction, the broad subject of social work values and ethics has matured significantly. What once took the form of relatively narrow exploration of social work students' values has evolved into a much more ambitious, comprehensive examination of a complex array of ethical challenges in the profession. Today's field instructors and students are now expected to incorporate significant ethics-related content into internship assignments and seminars far beyond what was imagined in the early days of field education.

Current expectations concerning ethics content in social work education, including field instruction, are reflected in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) (Congress, Black, & Strom-Gottfried, 2009; Council on Social Work Education, 2008). According to Educational Policy 2.1.2, social work education programs, including field instruction,

must demonstrate that their curricula “apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice” and ensure that students “recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice,” “make ethical decisions,” “tolerate ambiguity in resolving ethical conflicts,” and “apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions.”

In light of these greatly expanded expectations regarding the central role of ethics in field education, and the dramatic growth in social work ethics knowledge, field instructors must be acquainted with emerging consensus about essential ethics content (Barsky, 2009; Congress, Black, & Strom-Gottfried, 2009; Reamer, 2001, 2006). The social work ethics knowledge that existed when many current social work field educators completed their formal social work education pales in comparison to today’s knowledge.

### **A Brief History**

Values and ethics have always been part and parcel of social work education and field instruction. However, the aims and content of ethics education in social work have changed significantly throughout the profession’s history. Social work literature in the beginning of the 20th century, during the earliest chapter of social work’s development, focused primarily on the nature of social work’s values and the moral purposes of the profession (Pumphrey, 1959). Through the 1970s, social work scholars, practitioners, and field instructors grappled with a range of issues, especially the profession’s core values, values clarification, and the relationship between students’ and practitioners’ values and the profession’s values (Hardman, 1975; Teicher, 1967; Timms, 1983).

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a small group of social work scholars and practitioners began more deliberately to explore the nature of ethical dilemmas in social work and field instruction, focusing primarily on instances when social workers’ duties and obligations clash. The literature during this period identifies complex moral dilemmas involving such issues as the limits of clients’ confidentiality rights and right to self-determination, professional paternalism, conflicts of interest, whistle-blowing, administrative and organizational ethics, civil disobedience, and distributive justice (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1982; Reamer, 1982, 1993). In the early 1980s, a pioneering project sponsored by the Hastings Center and the Carnegie Corporation of America produced a seminal examination of curricular issues related to teaching social work ethics in the classroom and field placement settings (Reamer & Abramson, 1982). These early efforts were an outgrowth of the dramatic emergence of the specialized field of professional ethics, also known as applied and practical ethics, in the late 1970s (Rowan & Zinaich, 2002).

Since the mid-1980s, many field seminars and social work practice courses have introduced students to the connections between ethics concepts and ethical dilemmas that they might encounter in field placements (Bogo, 2010; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011; Homonoff, 2008; Reamer, 2001; Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2012). Typically, these discussions explore ethical decision-making models and

the relationship between standard ethical theories—known as deontology, teleology, consequentialism, utilitarianism, ethics of care, and virtue theory—and actual or hypothetical ethical dilemmas encountered by social work students (Rachels & Rachels, 2011). Relevant ethical dilemmas concern clinical practice—for example, confidentiality, client self-determination, boundaries, dual relationships, conflicts of interest, informed consent, professional paternalism, truth telling, program design, agency administration, and social policy—for example, adhering to agency policies or regulations, confronting social injustice and oppression, distributing limited resources; and relationships among practitioners—for example, reporting a colleague’s unethical behavior and addressing a colleague’s impairment. Additional examples include addictions professionals who must decide between their duty to respect the client’s rights to confidentiality and their obligation to protect third parties from harm; whether to place limits on the client’s right to engage in self-destructive behavior or to deceive or lie to clients “for their own good,” known as paternalism; how to allocate scarce or limited resources; and whether or not to report a professional colleague’s ethical misconduct to authorities.

In recent years, a great deal of social work education, including field instruction, has focused explicitly on decision-making strategies that students can use when faced with difficult ethical judgments (Mattison, 2000). Typically, these discussions identify a series of steps that students can follow as they attempt to resolve difficult ethical dilemmas. These steps focus on the conflicting values, ethical duties, and obligations; the individuals, groups, and organizations that are likely to be affected; possible courses of action; relevant ethical theories, principles, and guidelines; legal guidelines and pertinent codes of ethics; social work practice theory and principles; personal values; the need to consult with colleagues and appropriate experts; and the need to monitor, evaluate, and document decisions.

Since the 1990s, social work educators and field instructors have expanded their focus to include a wide range of ethics-related risk-management issues. A major goal of contemporary field instruction is to acquaint students with the ways in which sound ethical judgment and management of ethical challenges can protect clients and prevent malpractice lawsuits and licensing board complaints.

### **Essential Ethics Content in Field Education**

Based on the remarkable expansion of knowledge regarding social work ethics and current CSWE accreditation guidelines, field instruction ought to focus on four key themes: (1) the value base of the social work profession and its relationship to students’ values; (2) ethical dilemmas in social work; (3) ethical decision making; and (4) ethics risk management.

Social work values. Social work is among the most values based of all professions. Social work is deeply rooted in a fundamental set of values that ultimately shapes the profession’s mission and its practitioners’ priorities (Abbott, 1988; Allen-Meares, 2000; Levy, 1976; Varley, 1968; Vigilante, 1974). Field instruction students are expected to embrace social work’s explicit values and explore the rela-

tionship between their values and the profession's values.

Occasionally, field educators encounter challenging circumstances where these values clash. Examples are: when a student's religious beliefs conflict with social work values or school or agency policy, (Doyle, Miller & Mirza, 2009; Reamer, 2006a), or when a student questions social work's venerable commitment to addressing issues of discrimination and social injustice (Gil, 1998). In one prominent case, a Missouri social work student sued the university in which she was enrolled, claiming she was retaliated against because she refused to support gay adoption as part of a class project ("Missouri School Sued by Student," 2006). In another highly publicized case, a California social work student filed a lawsuit against her field instructor, the agency in which she was a field student, and her university, alleging that she was terminated from her field placement unlawfully when her supervisors became concerned about how the student managed her religious beliefs and values in the field placement (Pacific Justice Institute, 2007). In still another case, a Georgia graduate student filed a lawsuit alleging that faculty members and administrators at the university violated her First Amendment rights to free speech and the free exercise of religion by threatening her with expulsion if she did not fulfill requirements contained in a remediation plan intended to get her to change her beliefs which oppose homosexuality (Schmidt, 2010). When such conflicts arise, it is incumbent upon field instructors to help students examine their values and related conduct in light of the profession's core values – particularly as expressed in the NASW Code of Ethics – and assist students in their efforts to reconcile these conflicts in a manner consistent with social work's values and ethical standards. In instances when students' values and behavior continue to violate the profession's core values and ethical standards, the NASW Code of Ethics (Standard 2.11) requires field instructors to share their concerns with appropriate authorities—for example, directors of field education, faculty members, and/or school administrators.

Ethical dilemmas. Situations sometimes arise in social work in which core values within the profession conflict, and this leads to ethical dilemmas (Banks, 2006; Barsky, 2009; Congress, 1999; Reamer, 2009). An ethical dilemma is a situation in which professional duties and obligations, rooted in core values, clash (Dean & Rhodes, 1992). This is when social work students must decide which values – as expressed in various duties and obligations – take precedence.

Field educators are in a critically important position to help students identify and address challenging ethical dilemmas. In one case, a field instructor contacted this author to consult about an ethical dilemma shared by a social work student during a supervision session. The student informed the field instructor that her client was HIV+ and was involved in a sexual relationship with another client at the agency; the two clients met while participating in a support group sponsored by the agency and facilitated by the student. The student told the field instructor that the client's sexual partner was not aware that the client is HIV+, and that while the client promised to share this news with his sexual partner, the client had not taken any steps to do so. The student sought the field instructor's

advice about possible clinical strategies, the nature of the client's confidentiality rights, and whether there is any duty under social work's ethical standards and relevant laws to disclose confidential information to the sexual partner to protect her from harm.

In another case, a field placement student provided counseling services to a 15-year-old client who struggled with clinical depression. The minor's parents consented to the counseling at the local community mental health center. Several weeks after the counseling began, the teen disclosed to the social work student that he was worried about the frequency of his use of the drugs Ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine; the client reported that he was worried that his drug use was "getting out of control." The social work student was aware that the agency had recently received a federal grant to implement a state-of-the-art treatment program for adolescents with co-occurring issues (mental illness and substance abuse) and described the program to her teen client. The client was eager to enroll in the program, but refused to give the social work intern permission to disclose his drug-related problems to his parents. According to the client, his parents would "crucify" him if they found out about his drug use. The grant funds received by the agency would have covered the services; therefore, the agency would not have needed to access the parents' insurance benefits. The social work student recognized the conflict between her duty to respect her client's confidentiality and the parents' right to know about their child's drug-related risks. In addition to discussing clinical options, the student, field instructor, and this author reviewed pertinent ethical standards (NASW Code of Ethics Standards 1.02, 1.03[a,c], 1.07[a-e], federal laws and regulations, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] and "Confidentiality of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Patient Records," Code of Federal Regulations, Title 42, Part 2) and state laws and regulations governing minors' rights to privacy and confidentiality. The case provided a valuable opportunity for the student to learn about systematic ethical decision-making.

Ethical decision-making. The phenomenon of ethical decision-making in the professions has matured considerably in recent years. Today's social work educators and field instructors have far more access to helpful literature and concepts related to ethical decision-making than did their predecessors.

Typically, ethical decision-making frameworks require students to: (1) identify the key ethical issues, including the values and duties that conflict; (2) identify individuals, groups, and organizations who are likely to be affected by the decision; (3) tentatively identify all possible courses of action and the participants involved in each, along with the possible benefits and risks for each; (4) thoroughly examine the reasons in favor of and opposed to each possible course of action, considering relevant ethical theories and principles, codes of ethics, legal principles, social work practice theory and principles, and personal values; (5) consult with colleagues and appropriate experts, such as field instructors, agency administrators, ethics experts, and attorneys; (6) make the decision and document the decision-making process; and (7) monitor, evaluate, and document the decision. Many field instructors include application of such ethical decision-making protocols in the field placement learning contract

(Barsky, 2009; Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2009; Reamer, 2006a,b).

Ethics risk management. Social work students must be concerned about the risk-management ramifications of their ethical decisions and actions, particularly the possibility of professional malpractice and misconduct (Houston-Vega, Nuehring & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2003; Strom-Gottfried, 2000). Contemporary field instructors are much more sensitive to these issues than earlier generations of field educators, primarily due to increases in litigation and licensing board complaints. It is important for both field placement students and field instructors to fully understand the ways in which ethical issues and judgments occasionally lead to malpractice claims, ethics complaints filed with the National Association of Social Workers, and licensing board complaints.

To minimize risk to clients, students, field instructors, and field agencies, it is especially important for social work education programs and field agencies to compare and coordinate their respective ethics-related policies and guidelines to ensure consistency. For example, policies related to students' management of confidential information, informed consent, boundaries and dual relationships, supervision, consultation, client referral, documentation, and documentation should be examined. Field agencies must ensure that students receive comprehensive in-service training concerning pertinent ethical issues.

In one case, both a student and his field instructor were named in a lawsuit filed by one of the student's former clients. The client alleged that the student disclosed confidential information about the client to a police detective without the client's consent. The disclosure violated strict federal laws governing the management of confidential information about clients who are treated for substance abuse issues. In addition to the claim against the student, the lawsuit claimed that the supervisor failed to provide the student with proper supervision and training related to client confidentiality. In another case, a field instructor was sanctioned by a licensing board because she engaged in an inappropriate dual relationship with her student intern; the student filed the licensing board complaint after the relationship ended.

### **Key Ethics Topics in Field Education**

Social work students and field instructors typically prepare a learning contract that identifies principal learning objectives and goals. With regard to ethics, field instructors must help students identify ethical issues that are *directly* and *explicitly* related to the particular field placement setting, and focus on those throughout the placement. For example, a field placement in a school setting should pay special attention to minors' rights to privacy; disclosure of confidential information to school officials, parents, and guardians; minors' right to consent to services; and boundary issues related to social work students' self-disclosure, management of social media and social networking in relationships with clients, and responding to clients' invitations and gifts. In contrast, a field placement in a health care facility (such as a nursing home, hospital, rehabilitation center, or hospice

program) should focus on key bioethical issues related to advance directives, durable powers of attorney, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) guidelines, proper use of institutional ethics committees, informed consent, and end-of-life decisions. A student placed in a substance abuse treatment program must learn about strict confidentiality laws that are tailored to those settings and unique boundary challenges that arise when staffers were once clients of the program. A field placement in a correctional facility or on a military base should focus on the unique confidentiality guidelines that govern those settings and ethical dilemmas that may arise. For example, a student placed in a prison needs to know what to do if she obtains confidential information from an inmate client about a possible riot; a student placed on a military base must be prepared if he receives confidential information from a soldier client concerning a possible national security threat. Each field placement setting poses its own unique ethical issues and challenges that should be represented in students' learning agendas.

In general, field educators should actively look for opportunities to broach pertinent ethical issues that reflect a number of prominent themes in social work ethics: client rights, confidentiality and privacy, informed consent, service delivery, boundary issues and dual relationships, conflicts of interest, documentation, defamation of character, supervision, training, consultation, referral, fraud, termination of services, and practitioner impairment.

Client rights. Social work students should fully understand the nature of clients' rights and become familiar with agencies' policies. Typically, such statements address practitioner and agency policy concerning confidentiality and privacy, release of information, informed consent, access to services, access to records, service plans, service provision, management of emergencies, options for alternative services and referrals, the right to refuse services, termination of services, and grievance procedures. Students who conduct course-related research involving field placement clients, for example, clinical or program evaluations or needs assessments, must pay special attention to the profession's guidelines for the protection of research and evaluation participants (Anastas, 2008; NASW, 2008).

Further, students need to pay special attention to the complex relationship between clients' rights and issues of cultural and social diversity. It is common for both clients' and students' views related to such issues as privacy, informed consent, boundaries, and end-of-life decisions to be shaped by their unique ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and disability (Anderson & Carter, 2002; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2008).

Confidentiality and privacy. Field instruction students should focus considerable attention on a wide range of confidentiality and privacy issues (Dickson, 1998; NASW, 2008; Reamer, 2006b). These include agencies' policies and procedures concerning solicitation of private information from clients; disclosure of confidential information to protect clients from self-harm and to protect third parties from harm inflicted by clients; release of confidential information pertaining to alcohol and substance

abuse treatment; disclosure of information about deceased clients; release of information to parents and guardians; sharing of confidential information among participants in family, couples, marital, and group counseling; and disclosure of confidential information to media representatives, law enforcement officials, protective service agencies, other social service organizations, and collection agencies.

Students should also examine policies and procedures concerning protection of confidential written and electronic records, information transmitted to other parties through the use of computer websites, including social networking sites, email, fax machines, telephones and telephone answering machines, and other electronic or computer technology; transfer or disposal of clients' records; protection of client confidentiality in the event of the student's death or disability; precautions to prevent students' discussion of confidential information in public or semi-public areas such as hallways, waiting rooms, elevators, and restaurants; disclosure of confidential information when discussing clients with consultants or for teaching or training purposes; and protection of confidentiality during legal proceedings. Further, field instructors should ensure that students fully understand what information they may share with the faculty liaison or field education office responsible for the student's placement—for example, if the field instructor is concerned about the student's development or competence. Finally, students should know how to acquaint clients with agencies' confidentiality policies.

Informed consent. Field instruction students should examine closely their agencies' informed consent documents and procedures. Informed consent is required in a variety of circumstances, including release of confidential information, program admission, service delivery, videotaping, and audiotaping. Although various courts, state legislatures, and agencies have somewhat different interpretations and applications of informed consent standards, there is considerable agreement about the key elements that practitioners and agencies should incorporate into consent procedures (Berg et al., 2001). These include procedures and documents that ensure that coercion and undue influence do not affect a client's decision to consent; that clients are mentally capable of providing consent; that clients' consent to specific procedures or actions (as opposed to providing blanket or general consent), consent forms and procedures are valid; that clients are informed of their right to refuse or withdraw consent; and that clients' decisions are based on adequate information. Students should also become familiar with procedures used to obtain clients' informed consent, especially when clients are not literate or have difficulty with English. Further, the NASW Code of Ethics requires that clients are routinely informed when services to them are provided by students (Standard 3.02[c]).

Service delivery. Students should be certain to provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, consultation received, and supervised experience (NASW, 2008). In addition, students should ensure that they provide services in substantive areas and use practice approaches and techniques that are new to them only after engaging in appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are

competent in those practice approaches, interventions, and techniques (Houston-Vega, Nuehring, & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2006b).

Boundary issues and conflicts of interest. Boundary issues — where practitioners relate to clients outside of the professional-client relationship by engaging in sexual, social, or business relationships — are among the greatest risks facing social work students (Reamer, 2012; Zur, 2007). Field instruction should focus especially on the maintenance of proper boundaries with respect to sexual relationships with current and former clients, friendships, encounters with clients in public settings, management of social networking sites and electronic communications (e.g., email, text messaging), physical contact, gifts to and from clients, financial conflicts of interest, delivery of services to two or more people who have a relationship with each other (e.g., couples or family members), bartering with clients for goods and services, attending clients' social or life-cycle events, and self-disclosure to clients. Field instructors and students must also avoid engaging in inappropriate dual relationships.

Documentation. Field instructors should pay close attention to students' documentation styles and procedures. Careful and diligent documentation enhances the quality of services provided to clients (Kagle & Kopels, 2008; Sidell, 2011). Comprehensive records identify, describe, and assess clients' circumstances; define the purpose of service; document service goals, plans, activities, and progress; and evaluate the effectiveness of service. Careful documentation helps students recall relevant details from session to session and can enhance coordination of services and supervision among staff members within human service agencies. Thorough documentation also helps to ensure quality care if a student becomes unavailable because of illness, incapacitation, or vacation. The current NASW Code of Ethics includes several pertinent documentation standards that provide useful guidance.

Defamation of character. Students should ensure that their documentation and communication about clients and colleagues avoids harmful language that rises to the level of defamation of character. In addition to being disrespectful, some forms of pejorative, derogatory, and inaccurate statements can expose students to ethical and legal risk.

Defamation of character can take two forms: libel and slander. Libel occurs when the publication is in written form — for example, a student's progress notes about a client that are read by third parties concerned about the client's circumstances (Sack, 2010). Slander occurs when the representation is in oral form — for example, when a student testifies about a client in a court of law or provides an oral report about the client's progress to a parole officer or child welfare official. Students can be legally liable for defamation of character if they say or write something about a client or colleague that is untrue, if they knew or should have known that the statement was untrue, and if the communication caused some injury to the client or colleague—for example, the client was terminated from a treatment program or the colleague was fired from a job. It is important for field instructors to provide students with feedback concerning this ethical risk.

Supervision. Because of their oversight responsibilities, field instructors can be named in ethics complaints and lawsuits alleging ethical breaches or negligence by students under their supervision (Gelman & Wardell, 1988; Reamer, 1989; Taibbi, 2012; Zakutansky, 1993). Fortunately, such allegations are relatively rare. When such claims are made, they often cite the legal principle of respondeat superior—"let the master respond"—and the doctrine of vicarious liability (Garner, 1999). That is, in principle, field instructors may be held partly responsible for actions or inaction in which they were involved only vicariously or indirectly. Thus field instructors should monitor the way in which students obtain clients' consent; identify and respond to students' errors in all phases of client contact, such as the inappropriate disclosure of confidential information; protect third parties; detect or stop a negligent treatment plan or treatment carried out longer than necessary; determine that a specialist is needed for treatment of a particular client; meet regularly with the student; review and approve the students' records, decisions, and actions; and provide adequate coverage in the student's absence.

Field instructors should document the supervision they provide. They should have regularly scheduled appointments with students, request detailed information about the cases or other work they are supervising, and, when possible, occasionally observe students' work. Field instructors should be careful not to sign off on forms for cases they have not supervised.

Training. Field instructors should ensure that their agencies provide student interns with proper training on ethics-related topics (Houston-Vega, Nuehring, & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2003). Such training should include a discussion and review of issues related to relevant practice skills, professional ethics and liability, especially major risk areas and the phenomenon of ethical decision-making, and relevant federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Other topics include assessment tools, intervention techniques, evaluation methods, emergency assistance and suicide prevention, supervision of clients in residential programs, confidentiality and privileged communication, informed consent, improper treatment and service delivery, defamation of character, boundary issues in relationships with clients and colleagues, including electronic relationships that involve social networking, email, and text messaging, consultation with and referral to specialists, fraud and deception, and termination of services.

Consultation. Students often need to or should obtain consultation from field instructors and professional colleagues. Students can be vulnerable if they fail to seek competent consultation and must understand when consultation is warranted (Houston-Vega, Nuehring, & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2003).

Referrals. Similarly, students have a responsibility to refer clients to colleagues when students do not have the expertise or time to assist clients in need. As part of this process, students should refer clients only to practitioners who have appropriate expertise. Otherwise, students may be accused of

negligent referral (Houston-Vega, Nuehring, & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2003).

Fraud. Students should be acquainted with agency policies and procedures designed to prevent various forms of fraud (Wells, 2011). Prominent risk areas include fraudulent representation, documentation, and billing, such as failure to disclose to clients and third-party payers that services were provided by a student. Field agencies should have procedures in place to ensure that students do not falsify case records (e.g., recording that home visits occurred when they did not or that client consent was obtained when it was not), exaggerate clinical diagnoses to obtain third-party payment, or bill third-party payers for services that were not provided.

Termination and interruption of services. Termination is a critically important risk area, especially since students' field placements have a planned end. Students expose themselves to risk when they terminate services improperly – for example, when a student leaves an agency relatively suddenly without adequately referring a client in need to another practitioner. Students also may be at risk if they are not available to clients or do not properly instruct them about how to handle emergencies that may arise. In general these problems pertain to abandonment. Abandonment is a legal concept that refers to instances when a professional is not available to a client when needed. Once students begin to provide services to a client, they incur an ethical and legal responsibility to continue that service or to properly refer a client to another competent service provider. Students should inform clients of the date on which the field placement ends and discuss termination issues.

Practitioner impairment. Field educators need to be concerned about the possibility of students whose functioning falls below acceptable standards. Impairment may involve failure to provide competent care or violation of ethical standards (Bullis, 1995; Reamer, 1992, 2003). It also may take such forms as providing flawed or inferior services, engaging in an inappropriate relationship with a client, or failing to carry out professional duties as a result of substance abuse or mental illness. Such impairment may be the result of a wide range of factors, such as field placement or classroom stress, illness or death of family members, marital or relationship problems, financial difficulties, midlife crises, personal physical or mental health problems, legal problems, and substance abuse. Both field instructors and students should understand the nature of professional impairment and possible causes, be alert to warning signs, and have procedures in place to prevent, identify, and respond appropriately to impairment.

## Conclusion

Ethics education in social work has come of age, and this important development now permeates field instruction. Contemporary field instruction includes explicit focus on social work values, ethical dilemmas, ethical decision-making, and risk management. Ethics-related field instruction currently depends on rich conceptual models developed since the 1980s and pertinent ethical theories. To date, however, very little empirical research has been conducted on the effectiveness of ethics-related field

instruction. It is essential for social work educators and scholars to generate evidence-based models that support and inform this critically important component of professional education.

Ethics instruction in the context of field education is a vitally important component of students' professional development. Field placements provide the richest opportunity for students to apply a wide range of ethics concepts, theories, and decision-making protocols. It is imperative that social work field educators have a solid command of current ethical standards, ethics literature, conceptual frameworks, and risk-management trends. What students learn about ethics during their field placements is likely to be among the most important and compelling lessons gained during the course of their careers.

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