

Editorial: How Far Do You Go?

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Stephen M. Marson & Jerry Finn

Cheating in college! Literature on the subject is quite distressing and sadly cheating appears to be on the increase. We suspect that cheating in social work departments is no different than any other areas of study. We have two particularly terrible examples of academic dishonesty.

The first had to do with a quiz and the aftermath. A student who was sitting in the back of the classroom complained that she could have a higher grade if she cheated as two other students had. The (social work) professor asked the two students to visit his office. When the first one arrived, he naively asked about the possibility of cheating. She immediately broke into tears and claimed she didn't. She was merely handing "whiteout" to her friend who had asked to borrow it. When the second student came to visit, in the same naïve manner, the professor asked her about cheating. She was outraged and lost her temper in a manner unprecedented for a student. Although the professor was in the classroom, he saw no cheating and therefore had no firsthand evidence to pursue adjudication. However, he had an intuitive sense that cheating had occurred.

After the second student (the one with the temper) graduated, she obtained employment as the *only* social worker in a small rural hospital. During a complex review of the medical charts, the staff came to the horrendous conclusion that this hospital social worker had consistently fabricated a large number of social histories, progress notes, and so forth. In some cases, she was writing social histories and progress notes on patients she had never seen. Upon this realization, she was fired and told to leave the hospital premises *immediately* and never return. Although that happened ten years ago, that hospital will not accept field work students from the BSW program nor will they hire any of its graduates. In addition, few human service workers in this rural county are unaware of the story of the fabricated medical records. As a result, the former hospital social worker cannot obtain a professional position.

The second story is much more complex. Susan pushed to be placed in a field setting the social work program had never used in the past. The director of the field work accommodated her.

Early in the semester, she complained that it was a terrible experience because she was not seeing any clients. Through a series of complex arrangements, the student was removed from this placement and started with another agency. After she graduated, pieces of a complex puzzle emerged. A second social work student asked¹ Susan to gain her field placement at the first agency in order to procure mental health records of the second student's husband. The second student wanted to employ these confidential records for an upcoming divorce proceeding. Copies of the records were passed from one student to the other. When the deed was completed, Susan was able to switch her field placement.

Prior to any of this being uncovered, Susan was accepted into an MSW program with advanced standing status. At the same time, Susan had been requesting to purchase term papers from current social work majors and graduates. These term papers were to be used toward her MSW degree! After the discovery, the chair of the social work department contacted the MSW program and forwarded a series of certified affidavits regarding the mental health records. In addition, the MSW administrators learned of her alleged purchases of term papers. At least three lawyers were involved and, due to the complexity of the law, *nothing could be done*. To everyone's best knowledge, both of these characters are practicing social work.

Major questions constantly should haunt us about both of these situations. Do social work students who cheat in the process of learning also act in unethical manners in their professional practice? The first case suggests "yes." However, little support is found in the literature. The professor who was involved in both of these examples attempted to conduct a national survey of academic misconduct. No social work program would reply or allow their students to complete the survey – even though the same survey was employed in research for other academic programs. One comment was that "the IRB [Institutional Research Board] would not permit" the acquisition of such information.

The big question is this: What responsibilities do social work professors have to identify, prevent, and adjudicate cheating within our respective academic programs. We do not see this

¹ Probably for the exchange of money.

issue as “yes, we should address cheating” or “no, we shouldn’t,” but rather the intensity of our involvement. Or, stated more clearly, how far should professors go to prevent and address cheating?