

# Editorial: Licensing of Social Work Faculty

## Licensing of Social Work Faculty: An Issue of Ethics?

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One of the most puzzling debates I have heard in my adult life is, "Should social workers who are faculty be required to be state licensed/certified in their jurisdictions?" Why is this perceived dilemma puzzling to me? Two reasons:

First, I don't see how a person with a professional degree (MSW) could even conjure up the question. How could a professional even consider the option of not having a license/certification? Comparatively speaking, faculty in other professional degree granting programs don't consider the option of failing to be licensed. We rarely see law school professors who are not members of the bar. I have met one and asked him why he was no longer a member of the bar. He replied by saying, "I actually am, I tell people I'm not, so I won't be asked for legal advice and representation." Most law professors are members of the bar and would not consider an alternative. Find me a law professor who is not a member of the bar. I'd like to meet one. In my travels, I have met one physician/professor who had no interest in having a medical license. To restate his commentary in the most tactful manner possible, he didn't like people -- particularly sick people. His professorship in the medical school was limited to grant acquisition focusing on experimental designs. Occasionally, he taught research/statistics. After speaking to this physician, I think he made the right decision by not practicing medicine. However, he was certainly competent as a principle investigator and grant writer. His eyes lit up when he was number crunching and saddened when he faced patients.

Second, back in the 70's when I received my appointment to teach social work at a university, I was struck by the prologue in Herbert Strean's *Clinical Social Work*. Here he notes that many senior social work professors haven't practice social work in 20 years. The concepts many professors address in class are far from the cutting edge. I actually noticed this phenomenon while an MSW student. At that point, I made a commitment to continue to practice social work and never let myself be accused of being behind the times or not being well-read. It appears as if the situation hasn't changed. Last spring, an MSW student told me that she had more years of

practice experience than two of her professors with Ph.D.'s in social work. Being current is an ethical obligation for social work professors. How can one be current without practicing?

To restate the obvious, the *NASW Code of Ethics* includes standard 4.01 a and b. Here it is written:

**4.01 Competence**

Social workers should accept responsibility or employment only on the basis of existing competence or the intention to acquire the necessary competence. Social workers should strive to become and remain proficient in professional practice and the performance of professional functions. Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics.

Sounds simple? But how does one really know when one is competent? Actually, the answer is found in a question: What do faculty in other professional programs do in order to demonstrate competence? Answer: Complete the appropriate state exams! Doing otherwise doesn't seem ethical. The bottom line is the best way for a faculty member to demonstrate competencies by having the state license or certification and maintaining it by complying with the continuing education requirements. Frankly, I think all social work faculty have an ethical obligation to be state licensed or certified. Doing otherwise is an embarrassment to the entire profession.