GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE IN PRACTICUM AND IN CLASSROOM

Commitment to ethical principles and the capacity to engage in ethical decision-making processes are hallmarks of professionalism. The MSW program prepares students for ethically-grounded practice across diverse social work arenas. Part of that professional development includes inquiry into the history of human values and ethics; the evolution of standards for ethical practice in social work; and the differing ways of framing practice ethics in different cultural, political, and organizational contexts. During the first semester of the foundation year, students will be studying the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, the International Federation of Social Workers Statement of Ethical Principles, and the ethical codes governing practice in a variety of national settings. This course of study is geared to help students understand the history and evolution of codes of ethics over time, the variation across contexts, and the implications for contemporary professional practice.

Students will also be engaging in practice guided by the NASW Codes of Ethics, both in their practicum settings and in the classroom. The practicum and the classroom offer structured opportunities to apply ethical principles of social work; utilize frameworks for ethical decision making; and address ethical dilemmas in a supportive context. Both classroom and practicum experiences offer opportunities to explore the core values of social work, their relationship to professional goals and values, and the ways in which values and ethical standards may conflict. For example, through direct practice experiences and classroom simulations, students learn about values related to confidentiality and privacy, self determination, conflicts of interest, informed consent, social justice, and professional boundaries. They face the challenge of negotiating situations where two or more of these values are in conflict. Course instructors, field instructors, agency supervisors, and students are expected to help one another maintain standards of ethical practice and professionalism and continually examine the ways in which ethical principles are realized in practice.

In both practicum seminar and practice classes students will be asked to prepare case presentations wherein they present a specific issue related to a client, organization, or community with whom they are working; address the background of the issue; summarize an action plan, and put forth a series of questions or concerns for peer consultation. In preparing and presenting cases in seminar or other classroom settings, students are expected to adhere to NASW standards of ethical practice. When presenting a case involving an individual or family, students must ensure that the confidentiality and anonymity of the client(s) are protected. Students should adhere to
agency protocols and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) regulations as appropriate when preparing a case presentation. The preparation of a case presentation can raise complex ethical questions, and we encourage students to consult with the agency supervisor and the course instructor regarding these questions prior to the presentation.

The rural context presents another layer of complexity for ethical practice. Frequently social workers in multiple agencies work with the same client. Changing identifying information for a case presentation may not necessarily protect a person’s anonymity. Thus, confidentiality regarding case presentations is critical. Further, following best practices for peer consultation, if a class member believes that he has personal or professional knowledge of the “case” under discussion, he should excuse himself from the discussion to avoid violation of professional boundaries.

Case presentations involving community organizations, social actions, and policy work also require careful attention to standards of ethical practice. Here the boundaries between public knowledge and issues of privacy and confidentiality may be less clear. Students are encouraged to consult with their practicum supervisor and instructor regarding ethics of macro practice and case presentations prior to the presentation.

All participants in seminar discussions and classroom case presentations are expected to maintain and respect confidentiality regarding both the “case” and the discussion by group members. This respect encourages a safe, honest teaching-learning environment at the same time that it creates the opportunity to put ethical principles to practice.