

CHAPTER 3: VALUES, ETHICS, AND LAW



The Muddy Waters of Ethics Seminar, conducted by Dorinda Noble and Andrew Marks (above), assisted by Dave Henton (left), Ted Watkins (center), and Angela Ausbrooks (right)



Professional Thinking, Identity, and Behavior Built on the Bedrock of Values, Ethics, and the Law

Shaping a Value-Laden BSW Curriculum

“Life can only be
understood
backwards; but it
must be lived
forwards.”
--Kierkegaard

The School expects faculty, students, and field supervisors to embrace social work values, to study professional ethics and incorporate them into practice, and to understand the relevant laws that regulate social work practice and specific areas of practice in which an individual functions. Dealing with values (what we believe) and ethics (what we do) can be quite messy and confusing, and when we add laws (court decisions and legislative actions) to the equation, a professional can face serious consequences unless the professional is alert, knowledgeable, and self-aware.

Given these realities, the School aims to teach values, ethics, and the law at every level and in every course. Grappling with values, ethics, and law requires higher-order decision-making, and it also taps into personal emotions. Consequently, we believe that this body of knowledge is best learned in a cumulative manner, building knowledge and understanding of values, ethics, and law course by course.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.1—Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly. Social workers serve as representatives of the profession, its mission, and its core values. They know the profession’s history. Social workers commit themselves to the profession’s enhancement and to their own professional conduct and growth. Social workers

- advocate for client access to the services of social work;
- practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development;
- attend to professional roles and boundaries;

A BSW student doing his field placement at a low-income high school recognized that some at-risk youth would benefit from a GLTBQ support group. He learned that there had been such a group before, but it had languished when the faculty sponsor left. The student developed materials on student leadership, working with student leaders. By the end of the semester, 10-12 students were meeting regularly and anticipated passing the torch from class to class, rather than relying on a faculty sponsor.

- demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication;
- engage in career-long learning; and
- use supervision and consultation.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.2—Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice. Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law. Social workers

- recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice;
- make ethical decisions by applying standards of the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics, and, as applicable, of the International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles
- tolerate ambiguity in resolving ethical conflicts; and
- apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.3—Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments. Social workers are knowledgeable about the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and reasoned discernment. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity. Critical thinking also requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information. Social workers

- distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom;
- analyze models of assessment, prevention, intervention, and evaluation; and
- demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and colleagues.

Professional Identity

Faculty as Role Models

The School is committed to and proud of the social work profession, which in Texas is regulated by the Social Work Practice Act, a title-protection act mandating that no individual can call him/herself a social worker without benefit of licensure. Consequently, the School mandates that faculty who are qualified for licensure (hold the BSW or MSW) be licensed in good standing. All our faculty are eligible, so all are licensed. Maintaining licensure is a factor the School checks when faculty undergo yearly evaluation, and faculty include licensure information on syllabi and other pertinent documents.

Thus, our students see faculty present a role model of professional identity and commitment; they know that faculty are submitting to the same standards of accountability and life-long learning that apply to our School's graduates.

Meredith, a recent BSW graduate, is now working in an agency in Houston that deals with human trafficking victims. She maintains an active blog that encourages professionals to consider the terrible effects of trafficking and to develop strategies to fight this scourge.

Anecdotally, students say they are proud of being part of a school in which all eligible faculty are licensed and can thus be called “social workers”.

Students also see faculty exhibiting commitment to the profession through their extensive work serving on agency and professional boards, through various professional groups and associations, and through research to expand social work knowledge. Faculty bring these activities into class discussion and use them as teaching items. These are just a few of the many examples of how our faculty serve the community and profession:

- ✓ Dr. Mary Tijerina has served for several years as an appointee of the Lt. Governor to the Texas Office for Prevention of Developmental Disabilities.
- ✓ Dr. Raphael Travis is a board member of the Texas Partnership for Out-of-School Time.
- ✓ Dr. Dorinda Noble was recently appointed to a joint Association of Social Work Boards-National Association of Social Workers Task Force to set up guidelines for professional supervision.
- ✓ Dr. Christine Norton serves on the Advisory Council for Restoration Not Incarceration.
- ✓ Dr. Kathy Selber brings a social work perspective to role on the Texas State Veteran Advisory Council.
- ✓ Dr. Dorinda Noble recently completed six years of service as a gubernatorial appointee to the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners, and previously served as Chair of the Louisiana State Board of Social Work Examiners.
- ✓ Dr. Nancy Chavkin is a reviewer for the U.S. Department of Education Field-Initiated Grants. She is also on the Research and Evaluation Expert Panel of the U.S. Department of Education, National Parent Involvement Resource Center, and is likewise an Expert on the Parent Involvement Panel.

Class Content Shores Up Professional Identity

Beginning in the pre-professional classes (SOWK 1350 and SOWK 2375), we teach students the history of social work and how it has developed into a profession. This content is shored up in SOWK 4355 Policy Practice, where students learn the profession’s background and dimensions in greater depth.

Throughout the program, faculty encourage students to think of themselves as future social workers, with all the responsibilities and opportunities that being a professional entails. Faculty discuss career options, including the possibility of pursuing further social work education. They inform students about licensure and its relationship to professional identity.

Personal Reflection and Self-Correction

The importance of personal reflection cannot be overemphasized in professional thinking. Throughout our curriculum, we encourage students to reflect on their personal values and their influence on behavior. For example:

- ✗ Students in **SOWK 1350 Introduction** consider the elements that identify them and their family and create a personal shield, which they then

A student group in SOWK 4310 Diversity and Social Justice helped develop a project to organize a memorial candlelight vigil on campus connected with GLBTQ Spirit Day to acknowledge the ill effects of bullying and GLBTQ teen suicide.

explain to the class. Students also do pre- and post-values clarification exercises when faculty present case examples.

- ✘ Undergraduate students in **SOWK 2375** do 50 hours of volunteer work with diverse client groups in an agency. Their supervisory evaluations at the end of this experience rate students on how consistent their behavior is with social work values and ethics.
- ✘ In **SOWK 3420 Practice I**, undergraduates identify their personal values, and compare and contrast these with social work values.
- ✘ In **SOWK 4355 Policy Practice**, undergraduates discuss ways to recognize and reject their personal prejudices. They also delve into how institutions may bureaucratically discriminate against marginalized populations and discuss ways to alter institutionalized bias.
- ✘ **SOWK 4356** students write an ethics and law paper on issues facing a specific client group. They explore their own values and potential conflicts between their personal values and social work values and ethics.
- ✘ Field students assess their personal values and how those values affect their relationships with clients/client groups. They also process their reactions to the poverty and discrimination they see in client situations.

Professional Growth and Conduct

BSW students take **SOWK 4356 Professionalism**, which assists them to develop a professional self as they prepare for field practicum and practice after graduation. In this course, students reflect on their learning throughout the entire BSW program, and integrate this knowledge within a context of social work values, ethics, and the law. Students synthesize the knowledge they have gained throughout the degree program, developing a reflective portfolio which includes significant papers and other course work, along with their personal reflections on what learning experiences were most valuable to them during their BSW journey. Students integrate knowledge with skills, identifying highly ethical behavior for effective performance and leadership for positive change.

The class begins with the most basic aspects of professional conduct, such as dressing professionally, being on time, avoiding gossip and unprofessional communication (especially in emails and social networking sites), interacting professionally with peers and the Instructor, and completing required coursework timely. The course moves sequentially to higher level ethical and professional dilemmas, in which students have to assess cases and simulated situations with vulnerable populations and with colleagues, apply principles of ethical practice as covered in the Code of Ethics and the Texas social work regulatory law.

This course also highlights professional supervision. Students practice using supervision both through individual and group supervision sessions with the instructor regarding their 'mock client' in the advanced practice course. During these sessions, students think critically and ask relevant questions about issues

One scenario the School professionally filmed involves a social worker (played by Christine Norton) and supervisor (played by Angela Ausbrooks). The social worker, facing high student loans, takes an extra job marketing an energy drink, one that requires a scanty costume. In the course of her second job, she encounters her client, who photographs her and puts the picture on his Facebook. Students have lively discussions about the ethics of this situation, the pressure of student loans, and the supervisory relationship.


which present struggles with their client. They develop self-examination skills in recognizing and managing personal values so that professional values can guide practice. They also use supervision sessions to identify strengths and problems created by societal and organizational structures, and generate appropriate responses to those problems. This experiential learning helps students understand key factors in successfully using professional supervision and consultation.


SOWK 4356 Professionalism also encourages students to value and demonstrate self-care skills by developing, using, and refining a personal stress reduction plan. Preventing burn-out and vicarious trauma are key issues that students learn as ways of maintaining professional commitment to social work practice over time.


Learning to Make Ethical Decisions

Students get generous exposure to the Code of Ethics, as well as the Texas social work regulatory law and its Code of Conduct, in courses at every level. Though we realize that many of our graduates will work in other states with different regulatory laws, the Texas law serves as a regulatory model for them.





Because the rules which implement the Texas regulatory law contain a 13-point code of conduct, considerably shorter and more focused than the NASW Code, students are able to compare the lofty aspirational code of NASW with the legally-binding codified version. For instance, the Code of Ethics urges professionals to allow clients self-determination. Self-determination is not a legally-defensible concept, however, and is not reflected in the regulatory law.

 We begin by discussing professional values with undergraduate pre-majors in **SOWK 1350**. Students learn about elements such as empathy and non-judgmentalism, self-determination, and mutuality. They also deal with case examples of work with various populations, and these examples give rise to discussing ethical standards, such as confidentiality and boundaries. Students begin to learn how to make ethical decisions.

 The School has made a number of filmed scenarios dealing with aspects of actual ethics cases which have come before the licensing board. (Texas has a very strong Open Meetings Law, so all ethics cases are on the public record and can be discussed.) We contracted with a professional videographer to produce these films, and they are well-done. Students view these films and discuss the ethics involved, as well as the regulatory law, and think critically about what the licensing board should do.





 Various faculty (for example, Dr. Dorinda Noble, Dr. Catherine Hawkins, Dave Henton) regularly discuss with the HBSE and field classes how professional ethics and the social worker's personal religious faith mesh. Students often struggle with the fact that their personal beliefs may be inconsistent with the client or client group's goals or needs. Students consider cases such as the social worker employed by a faith-related agency who was required by the agency to alert the bishop to situations in which church families are considering divorce—regardless of whether the clients wish to share that information.

Texas State
University ranks
#13 in the nation
in awarding
undergraduate
degrees to
Hispanics.

-  Faculty encourage students to attend open meetings of the state licensing board's Ethics Committee to hear cases and watch how board members make decisions on the cases.
-  Faculty encourage all students to learn the laws that apply to their fields of service delivery. For instance, in all **Field** courses, students study the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and assess how that has affected services. Students also write an ethical dilemma paper and present it to classmates.
-  Undergraduates in **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** are divided into "boards" of social service foundations. Each board receives a list of ten agencies that have applied for money and must determine how to distribute one million dollars to these agencies. Their answers are usually very different, and the discussion allows them to explore how values and ethics affect their decisions.
-  Undergraduates in **SOWK 4305 HBSE II** divide into two groups and receive a scenario about a mother who kills her child with a charge to determine a punishment. Students are not told, however, that the two scenarios differ in the circumstances around the child's death. The absolutists in the class say, "The child is dead, and it doesn't really matter how it happened." The relativists in the class say, "The child may be dead, but the way it happened matters." When the students discover that the scenarios are different, they have a lively discussion about how they arrived at the punishment and compare their responses.

Promoting Professional Values

Students in the School not only have many opportunities to develop a deep acquaintance with professional values and ethics, but they also think through how to further those values. Here are examples of those activities:

-  **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** students write an integrative paper, a section of which addresses how values intersect with a social problem in the agency where the student is volunteering. Students discuss how professionals in the agency deal with the values involved in attacking that problem, and how they can address the problem in ways that are more ethical.
-  Undergraduate students in **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** complete a research paper studying a macro system (such as an agency), and compare the macro system's values with social work values.
-  Undergraduate students in **SOWK 3340 Research** see a powerful video about the Tuskegee Experiments. Students discuss issues of informed consent, the rights of human subjects, and bias and insensitivity in research. They ponder ways that the profession can work to make sure such invasive research is never conducted. Students also discuss values in research, examining the positivist vs. the interpretive approach.
-  In **SOWK 3350 Connecting Policy with Practice**, undergraduate students study and debate policy issues. The debate deals with the values that shape those policy issues, and how those policies affect vulnerable populations' access to social services.

Dr. Betsy Wisner weaves the skills of mindful meditation into her classes. She has extensively researched using meditation as an intervention strategy with high-risk adolescents. One BSW graduate who now works in public child welfare contacted Dr. Wisner to tell her that the graduate uses meditation at work to help her focus and care for herself. In fact, Dr. Wisner has led faculty in mindful meditation sessions as they worked on competencies and practice behavior materials.

Undergraduates in **SOWK 3425 Practice II** complete macro practice projects in the community, identifying and examining salient values and ethical issues about the project. For instance, students banding together to start a food bank must address ethical ways to solicit money and to establish eligibility rules for recipients.

Agency-based field instructors are treated to a yearly Field Office training on ethics and the regulatory law. They must assess field student on values and ethics.

Professional Roles and Boundaries

Moving from knowledge of ethics to actually making ethical decisions is challenging. Complex real-life situations are never as clear-cut as the ethical codes and legal statutes we apply to them. Here are some examples of how we teach students to make ethical decisions:

Undergraduate students doing agency volunteer work in **SOWK 2375 Social Services in the Community** keep logs of their work. In those logs, students identify the values and codes of ethics that non-social work professionals in the agency hold. They compare and contrast those values with social work values, and note any congruencies or conflicts.

Undergraduate students in **SOWK 3420 Practice I** have a lab on ethical dilemmas in which they use an ethical screen and determine which ethical principles have priority.

Undergraduate students in **SOWK 4356 Professionalism** deal with how to address perceived ethical violations. We help them understand the complex nature of case situations, as well as the concept of due process. They learn about mandatory reporting laws.

Undergraduates in **SOWK 4425 Practice III** videotape simulated interviews that highlight ethical dilemmas. For instance, the case of a woman diagnosed with HIV who continues to have unprotected sex with unaware partners raises questions of confidentiality and self-determination, and an investigation of laws involving duty to warn.

Field students identify ethical dilemmas in their field experiences, writing a paper about a dilemma. They use an ethical screening guide to examine the dilemmas and incorporate legal and regulatory statutes, discussing these issues in seminar. Their agency-based field instructors help them examine ethical decision in cases, agency protocols, and building resources.

BSW students learn about the rights of research participants, including voluntary participation and informed consent. They also learn about IRBs and the importance of ethics and informed consent in social work research.

Encouraging Critical Thinking

Professionals must engage in reasoned discernment and logical decision-making, so students must learn to consider all aspects of a situation with discipline, intentionality, and mindfulness. This discipline requires us to

eliminate biased and uninformed thinking, while valuing scientific inquiry as both an aim and a means to establish best practices in making decisions, solving problems, and communicating the paths by which we reach conclusions.

Dr. Kathy Selber often teaches an elective on working with military troops and veterans, as well as their families. For Dr. Selber, this area is a passion that grows out of a having a son in the military who has deployed four times. Dr. Selber says that, when it comes to working with vets and active troops, “I’m all in!”

- ✓ Students in **SOWK 3305 HBSE I** produce a research paper in which they discuss and synthesize research findings on a topic important to them. Students then forge connections between their topic and macro-level theory and implications for practice. For example, students recently produced papers on such topics as “Human Trafficking Victims and the Social Systems that Affect Them” and “Alcohol Use, Abuse, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Combat Veterans”. Not only do students learn critical thinking, but they also apply values and ethics.
- ✓ In **SOWK 4356**, students have to work in groups to brainstorm the important therapeutic, ethical, and legal issues that their mock ‘clients’ are facing. They are encouraged to ‘step into the shoes’ of their client and take on the client’s worldview. They are also asked to give and receive feedback from other students regarding their clients. Often, students leave this activity saying, “I hadn’t thought of that before.”
- ✓ Students in **SOWK 4425 Practice II** form and participate in groups, with the focus of observing and learning group facilitation skills and developing mutual aid networks. As an example, students developed a “School of Social Work Survival Kit” to help new BSW students and a presentation to be used at the BSW Success Orientation for new students. This project reflected critical thinking in its intent, which was to “pay it forward” to incoming students, and in its execution, which analytically assessed students’ relationships with the School faculty and procedures as well as students’ needs for self-care.

Advocating for Client Access to Services

Advocacy in social work involves action taken on behalf of clients to create access, opportunity and positive social change. Often, advocacy happens directly with clients in a community setting, linking clients to direct resources and services. Advocating for client services is one of the key aspects of SOWK 4356: Professionalism, where students have to identify the needs of their mock ‘client system’ in their advanced practice class and create a resource manual of relevant and meaningful resources that clients can access. Advocacy is also something that is infused throughout the BSW curriculum. We teach advocacy experientially, as students go out into the community to help link community members to needed services. Advocacy also happens on a policy level, as students analyze and influence policy in order to better advocate for clients on a macro level.