Association of Social Work Boards
ACE Resource
Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development

Introduction

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) *Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development* is the first attempt by a national organization of social work regulatory boards to develop a set of guidelines for the content of social work ethics courses, workshops and seminars. This guide is the result of two years of work by members of the ASWB Approved Continuing Education (ACE) Committee, guided by input solicited from social work regulatory boards, social work practitioners, and social work educators.

The purpose of this resource is to provide a social work ethics course structure for continuing education (CE) providers that is informed by the perspective of social work regulators. The *Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development* establishes standards for common course goals and objectives and core content as well as acceptable teaching methods, resource materials, and instructor qualifications. The Association of Social Work Boards believes that social work boards can better protect the public when they have access to resources such as this document, which reflects the most current thinking on issues relevant to professional regulation and discipline.

Over the past few years many social work regulatory bodies have begun requiring specific continuing education in social work ethics for licensure renewal. This trend has created a new set of challenges for continuing education providers, regulatory boards, and social workers: providers are eager to provide social work ethics CE but unsure of board expectations, boards are clear about the need for ethics CE but unsure of how directive they should be as to actual course content and delivery, and social workers are willing to comply with the requirements but unsure of whether the courses they take will satisfy board requirements and provide relevant CE on social work ethics.

An important goal of the *Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development* is to facilitate greater standardization of ethics courses among jurisdictions both nationally and internationally. Use of this guide will make it possible for boards to develop common course goals and objectives while allowing jurisdictions to modify content to reflect the practice of social work in their particular area. Providers—

many of which deliver CE in multiple jurisdictions, or over the internet—will have access to more standardized information on appropriate content and delivery methods. Finally, social workers will be able to connect with providers whose courses meet certain standards for social work ethics content.

Basic framework

The guide establishes three levels of course work; basic, intermediate, and advanced as well as an emphasis on either direct or indirect practice. Common course goals and objectives are established and course content is identified. Course goals cover a range of topics from understanding the history of social work ethics to critical thinking skills. Course content reflecting these goals and objectives includes the history and evolution of values and ethics in social work, ethics theories, professional standards of practice, legal requirements, self-awareness about ethical professional behavior, and an examination of ethical decision-making processes. The guide goes on to provide examples of course objectives at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels. Acceptable teaching methods, resource materials, and instructor qualifications are outlined. A listing of key definitions is included.

The *Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development* is the beginning of efforts to standardize ethics education in the regulatory community. As continuing education providers look at ethics and ethical practices, this curriculum outline can be used a resource guide for upgrading and adopting a standard for the ethics courses in their jurisdictions.

Section 1. Course Goals
Course goals should be clearly stated, and must be related to social work practice.

The overall purpose of this model course is to encourage and help participants develop a better understanding of and manage the ethical issues and dilemmas they encounter in practice. The goals are:

1. To enable participants to increase their appreciation and understanding of the history and evolution of values and ethics in the social work profession
2. To enable participants to develop skills in applying relevant ethics concepts and theories of ethics to social work practice
3. To provide opportunities for participants to acquire knowledge about professional, legal (state, jurisdictional and federal) and ethical standards of practice, their role in competent, ethical social work, and times at which legal and professional standards may conflict
4. To provide opportunities for participants to increase self-awareness and develop an awareness of the interplay of personal values and professional behavior
5. To enable participants to increase their ability to recognize ethical issues and to apply ethical decision-making frameworks and protocols through enhanced use of critical thinking skills
6. To enable participants to increasingly recognize and embrace the role of diversity and social justice in understanding and addressing ethical dilemmas

Section 2. Core Content
Content should address specific core areas. The needs of course participants may determine how much emphasis each of these content areas will receive.

The core content areas are:

1. History and evolution of values and ethics in social work
2. Ethics theories (e.g. Abramson, Gilligan, Levy, Keith-Lucas, Loewenberg, Reamer, etc.)

3. Professional standards of social work practice, such as exhibited in the ethical codes of the National Association of Social Workers, the Association of Canadian Social Workers, the Clinical Social Work Federation and the Council on Social Work Education.
4. Legal requirements and other considerations for each jurisdiction that registers, certifies or licenses social workers
5. Professional values and self-awareness about ethical professional behavior
6. Ethical decision making processes and dilemma examples

Section 3. Applicable Areas of Practice

Social work ethics applies to all aspects of social work practice, and is not limited to clinical direct practice. Providers should understand that social workers may come to an ethics training from a wide range of professional backgrounds, and should be aware of whether the content provided is applicable to direct practice, indirect practice, or both practice areas.

Direct practice

Direct practice can be defined as the range of professional social work activities with or on behalf of clients in which goals are established, worked toward and reached through personal contact and immediate influence with those seeking social services.

Potential ethical issues include but are not limited to sexual misconduct, boundary issues, dual and multiple relationships, conflicts of interest, confidentiality, informed consent, service delivery, professional competency, fraud, client rights, professional impairment, mandatory reporting, discrimination, diversity, billing practices, social justice, supervision and consultation.

Indirect practice

Indirect practice can be defined as those professional social work activities such as administration, supervision, research, publication, policy development, education (classroom and field instruction) which may not involve immediate or personal contact with clients being served.

Potential ethical issues include but are not limited to use of authority, representation to the public, sexual misconduct, boundary issues and dual relationships, fiduciary responsibilities, research and human subjects protocols, impaired professionals, mandatory reporting, discrimination, personnel and administrative decisions, supervision and consultation, diversity, billing practices and social justice.

Section 4. Objectives

Providers should have a clear idea of what a participant who takes an educational course will be able to do at the end of the course presentation, and should clearly communicate these objectives to participants. Both providers and participants should be able to measure the degree to which these objectives were met through the course.

Objectives for a course will vary depending on the purpose of the course, the skill level and experience level of the social worker, and the educational preferences of the person and/or organization designing the course.

The first step in designing course objectives is to develop a clear idea of the target audience for the course. Just as social workers are employed in a wide variety of clinical and non-clinical settings, they bring a range of knowledge and skill levels to any continuing education course. Courses in ethics could be designed to meet the needs of practitioners of three general skill levels: basic, intermediate and

advanced. These skill levels may be conceptualized by using a variety of factors. The following are a few examples of these factors:

- Level of competency of the social worker
- Level of education; level of licensure; years of practice experience
- Use of specialized methods or ability to use more complex methods
- Focus on a particular population, problem or area of practice

The following sub-sections contain examples of possible course outcomes or objectives for a core content area entitled "Ethical decision-making processes" for three skill levels.

These sample objectives contain references to a "social work practice situation"-- in the basic level this is referred to as an "uncomplicated social work practice situation, "while in the intermediate level there is a reference to a "moderately complex social work practice dilemma." The differences in these practice situations would lie in the factors that may complicate an ethical dilemma: for example, the relationship between the severity of the problem and a client's strengths, or the experience level of the social worker, the number of people involved and/or degree of magnitude of the problem (e.g. life or death situation).

Suggested action verbs are given for each level as a guide to help potential course developers write objectives or outcomes that are measurable and action-oriented.

Basic Level: Course, "Ethical Decision Making Processes"

Course Objectives
Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to:
1. Identify an ethical decision making process
2. Explain an ethical decision making process
3. Apply an ethical decision making process to an uncomplicated social work practice situation.

Objective 1 reflects *knowledge,* or the recall of previously learned material. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the beginning *knowledge* level are: define, recognize, match, memorize, distinguish, identify, name, label, know, recall, select, list.

Objective 2—"explain an ethical decision making process"—reflects *comprehension,* or the ability to grasp the meaning of the knowledge being learned. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the basic *comprehension* level are: translate, change, rearrange, express, give examples, transform, restate, comment, demonstrate, infer, generalize, illustrate, interpret, explain, summarize

Objective 3 reflects *application*, or the ability to use learned materials in new and concrete situations. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the beginning *application* level are: apply, organize, restructure, solve, generalize, use, classify, choose, transfer, dramatize

Intermediate Level: Course, "Ethical Decision Making Processes"

Course objectives

Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to:
1. Analyze a moderately complex social work practice dilemma and identify the key issues confronting the practitioner
2. Apply an ethical decision making process to a moderately complex social work practice dilemma

Objective 1 reflects *analysis,* or the ability to break down material into its elements and understand its underlying structure. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the intermediate *analysis* level are: discriminate, compare, diagram, differentiate, put into lists, deduce, describe, classify, analyze, categorize, subdivide.

Objective 2—"apply an ethical decision making process to a more complex social work practice dilemma"—reflects *application*, or the ability to use learned materials in new and concrete situations. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the intermediate *application* level are: apply, organize, restructure, solve, generalize, use, classify, choose, transfer, dramatize.

Advanced Level: Course, "Ethical Decision Making Processes"

<u>Course objectives</u>
Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to:
1. Develop possible options for resolving a complex social work practice dilemma
2. Consider and weigh the potential impact of each option on the client, social worker and others in the resolution of a complex social work practice dilemma
3. Select and support a course of action for resolving a complex social work practice dilemma

Objective 1 reflects *synthesis*, or the ability to put parts together to form a new whole, and to create new patterns or structures. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the advanced *synthesis* level are: write, originate, develop, compose, role- play, construct, manipulate, produce, design, formulate, plan, create, modify.

Objective 2 reflects *evaluation* or the ability to judge the value of material for a given purpose, using predetermined criteria. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the advanced *evaluation* level are: judge, consider, conclude, weigh, criticize, appraise, rate.

Objective 3 reflects *application* or the ability to use learned materials in new and concrete situations. Suggested action words or verbs helpful for constructing course objectives at the advanced *application* level are: apply, organize, restructure, solve, generalize, use, classify, choose, transfer, dramatize.

Section 5. Suggested Teaching Methods and Resource Materials
A variety of teaching methods should be used during each course whenever possible to accommodate the different learning styles of participants. Similarly, providers should consider using a broad range of resource materials to support their presentations.

Because interaction in the form of discussion, role play, and/or debate is an important part of the learning process in an ethics course, it is recommended that one of these three teaching methods be used. Following is a list of a variety of teaching methods, which address the various learning styles of students:

- Case studies
- Mini-lecture
- Group discussion
- Role play
- Debate
- Presentations
- Professional audio/video
- Appropriate audio/video from popular media
- Pre and post tests
- Web enhanced instruction – May be interactive or web-based
- Multi-media presentations
- Assigned readings

Resource materials can include:

- Readings
- Web sites
- Professional audio and video
- Case scenarios
- Appropriate readings/videos from popular media

Section 6. Instructor qualifications

While there are elements of ethical practice that apply to many health and mental health care professions, the relationship of these ethical principles to the practice of social work, and the integration of ethics into the core values of the profession, demands that presenters be members of the social work profession, and that they have extensive knowledge in broad ethical principles and theory, values and ethics within social work, and the practical application of these concepts.

At a minimum, presenters should have the following qualifications:
- Degree in social work
- Certified, registered or licensed as a social worker
- Knowledge of social work values and ethics
- Knowledge of ethical theory
- Knowledge of high risk areas of practice
- Practice competence in course content

Co-presenter: There may be instances when it is desirable to include a co-presenter from another professional discipline. In these situations it is important that the other professional is licensed, registered or certified in his or her field, if applicable. Individual regulatory boards may require specific instructor requirements or qualifications. Providers should check with the individual boards to determine specific requirements.

Resources

The ACE Program Committee reviewed a great deal of material taken from the professional literature on ethics and the following resources were used in the creation of the *Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development*. For an explanation of ACE terms used in this document please see the ACE resource *Glossary of Defined Terms*.

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Creation of the Guide to Social Work Ethics Course Development

Members of the ASWB ACE Committee who drafted the social work ethics course guide reflected diversity among the profession and the regulatory community, including academia and direct practice. The ASWB Board of Directors approved the dissemination of this guide as an association resource document in November 2003.

The ACE Committee considered several domains of social work professional ethics related to continuing education, and examined connections to the licensure and renewal processes and discipline. Data were collected from a range of sources beginning with a survey of boards. Published materials focusing on practice competence, malpractice, risk management, and the social work profession's evolution in the field of ethics were reviewed. Data from educational sources, both colleges and universities, and continuing education materials were investigated. The committee queried the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Insurance Trust and the ASWB Disciplinary Action Reporting System (DARS) report. A complete listing of bibliographic resources used can be found in Appendix A.

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ACE Program
Association of Social Work Boards
17126 Mountain Run Vista Ct.
Culpeper, VA 22701

For more information contact:
ace@aswb.org

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