

# UPHOLDING PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY: NEEDS FOR COLLABORATION

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# Acknowledgements



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1 – Questionnaire Survey 2007; 2 – Qualitative Study 2013-2015

# Purposes

1. Share findings from two studies in Ontario on Professional Suitability for Social Work Practice
2. Articulate needs for collaboration to uphold our professional integrity
3. Provide recommendations to strengthen existing mechanisms



# Definitions

## ■ Professional Integrity

*“...high level of professional conduct by acting honestly and responsibly, and promoting the values of the profession” (CASW, 2005, p.6)*

*“A social worker or social service workers shall have and maintain competence in the provision of a social work or social service work service to the client” (OCSWSSW, 2008)*

## ■ Professional Suitability/Competency/Fitness to Practice

*Professional suitability is defined as a person’s overall suitability for the profession, reflecting the person’s knowledge, skills, and values combined with the performance of appropriate professional behaviors in given practice situations (Bogo et al., 2011, Boak et al., 2012, Gibbs & Blakely, 2000, Tam & Coleman, 2009)*

# The Context (1)

- First social work educational program delivered by U of Toronto in 1914
- In 2017, there were 42 Schools of Social Work across Canada with approximately 14,000 students
- Close to one hundred diploma programs in social services
- Thousands of social work and social services graduates each year
- In 2016, OCSWSSW registered 938 new graduates
- In 2017, total numbers of registered social workers and social services had exceeded 35,000 (CCSWR, 2017)

# The Context (2)

- Social workers and social service workers (SW/SSW) are dealing with more complex social issues with less resources
- We are expected not only to demonstrate our compassion and commitment to social justice, but also professional competence
- To protect the public interest, social work and social service educational programs are obligated to ensure that social work/social service graduates meet the entry-level of practice
- Whereas, professional regulatory bodies are mandated to ensure that their members “...remain competent, current and ethical in their practice” (OCSWSSW, 2016, p.2)



# The Context (3)

- Even though the numbers of discipline decisions issued by each SW/SSW regulatory body are very small (less than 1%), the vulnerability of the people we work with demands our due diligence
- How well are schools of social work fulfilling their gate keeping responsibilities to ensure that their graduates are suitable for entry-level practice? How well is the social work professional regulatory body in Ontario ensuring that their members are competent, ethical and remain current?
- Our presentation focuses on entry-level professional suitability, generally referring to someone with a bachelor's degree

# Theoretical Framework

- Adopted the Competency-based Education and Training (CBET) approach
- CBET suggests that each profession shares a systematic body of knowledge, a code of ethics, a subculture, and a self-regulatory professional body, and is expected to carry out specific functions for the well-being of people in the society (Carraccio et al., 2002; Epstein & Hundert, 2002)
- Professional education and training is based on predefined knowledge, skills, and values for practice (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Drisko, 2014; Falender and Shafranske, 2012)

# First Study - Mail-out Questionnaire Survey in 2017

- a. Random sample of registered social workers with OCSWSSW
- b. In the open-ended section, we asked participants, who had been a social work field instructor, to indicate: what challenges, if any, they faced as field instructors, what those challenges were, and what solutions they could provide to overcome those challenges
- c. Of the 341 (69% response rate) participants who took part in the questionnaire survey, 132 indicated that they had been a field instructor and answered the open-ended questions about their experiences as a field supervisor
- d. Quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; LeCroy & Solomon, 2014) was used

# Findings of the Questionnaire Survey (1)

All names presented on the findings are pseudonym.

## 1. Student Related Issues

- a. *Practical Issues*
- b. *Personal Issues*
- c. *Ethical Issues*

Example quote:

*“In two instances I’ve had to remove students from their placements. In both instances, the students’ emotional and interpersonal maturity and skills were lacking.” (Monica)*

# Findings of the Questionnaire Survey (2)

## 2. University Related Challenges

- a. Questionable admission criteria*
- b. Inappropriate matching*
- c. Lack of support or field instruction training*
- d. Unclear learning expectations*
- e. Inadequate or unclear evaluation*
- f. Reluctance of schools to fail a student*

### Example Quote:

*“The lack of field training to field supervisors. It seems like the organization and the school of S.W. feel that once blessed with supervision responsibilities, one should know what to do.” (Valerie)*

# Findings of the Questionnaire Survey (3)

## 3. Practicum Setting Related Challenges

- a. Organizational constraints*
- b. Demands of balancing work and supervision*
- c. Complexity of practicum settings*
- d. Problem with non-social work professionals as instructors*

Example quote:

*“I’m very concerned that all practicum placement need to be supervised by a registered social worker. I do not feel it is appropriate to place students with people with no social work training or unregistered people with a degree.” (Frank)*

# Second Study – Qualitative Study (2013-15)

- Individual interviews
- Objectives:
  - a) Examine the nature and breadth of challenges to define and assess professional suitability*
  - b) Identify adequate models of assessment on professional suitability for social work practice*
- 35 diverse stakeholders participated (e.g. students, practicing social workers/administrators, faculty/field supervisors/field education coordinators, and social work regulators/board members/members from provincial social work associations)

# Findings from the Qualitative Study (1)

All names presented on the findings are pseudonym.

## 1. Issues with Student Related to Professional Suitability

Example quote:

*“...the biggest difficulty for some students was that they did not realize the significant amount of transference they would have in the setting in which they were placed for their placements. So what ended up happening was that they themselves experienced something in their adolescence that directly impacted their ability to function within the same environment when they were in their fourth year placement. Well, a huge amount of support that was required and a huge amount of work, it took a while before the individual even acknowledged that what they were doing was a result of the resistance to the environment that they had experienced when they were an adolescent.” (MONICA)*



# Findings from the Qualitative Study (2)

## 2. Challenges with Schools

### Example Quote:

*“They (students) can get through academic no problem, they can pull of A’s and B’s and their prof’s love them and think that they are all that; (but) when they meet with a client they are not able to sit or be empathetic and hear the story... because what faculty are letting students away with in class, in giving them good grades and they don't have to do assignments on time. But out in the field, if you, if I as a practicing social worker, have to put in a funding request by a certain date. I don't get an extension (frustrated)... the schools and the faculties are concerned about money, funding, student in seats. They are concerned about tenure, not having bad evaluations, and it's really the field folks.” (SANDY)*

# Findings from the Qualitative Study (3)

## 3. Needs to Improve Current Assessment Mechanisms

Example Quote:

*“I feel that regulation and professionalism brings legitimacy to our practice. And it also protects ourselves and it protects our clients from the work that we do. I understand the anti-oppressive and empowerment piece, I do. So I’m sure some people would, complain about competency saying that, this is going to be too directive for our practice, and it doesn’t allow people to kind of exercise their own clinical judgment. I don’t think that competencies are a bad thing, it gives people guideline. It gives people suggestions. Especially I think if you’re working with students, I mean, we’re asking them to do in creating their learning plans. We’re asking them to list which competencies they want to achieve. And certainly from a learning perspective, I think competencies are very helpful, because they’re milestones and they’re markers, which allows people to mark themselves against it and to strive towards. I think, certainly, from a student’s perspective, that they would be very useful.” (ELLEN)*

# Findings from the Qualitative Study (4)

## 4. Need for Collaboration

Example Quote:

*“What I have been thinking for this year is that I really want to figure out what is the road of the education programs and the regulatory bodies or the education sectors and the regulatory sectors can have a better kind of connection or collaboration so that we really make sure that we got the right people into the program, even though they might be skill wise or knowledge wise, not ready, but they have that potential. Once finished the program, they would be ready to practice. At the same time, the regularly bodies or regulators would be doing the protection of the public and to make sure they have the mechanisms. So that is the ideal world we would like to see.”*  
(PHOEBE)

# Findings from the Qualitative Study (5)

## 5. Suggestions to Strengthen Existing Mechanisms

Example Quote:

*“I know in (name of city) they’re just constantly needing field instructors, so it’s staying in contact with people who are working in the field to determine how social work is changing in the community and to be able to reflect that in the school as quickly as possible. Rules are changing and expectations are changing then they would be able to know that right away instead of sort of. Because a lot of academics or professors are not practicing any more so being able to have that feedback I think immediately can help guide what needs to change in terms of the type of students that are coming in or being accepted or trained.” (MABEL)*

# Shared Themes that Hinder Professional Integrity

*Acknowledge that positive experiences were identified, we focus on ways that could further strengthen our professional integrity*

1. Students' fitness for practice
2. Inadequate assessing and screening mechanisms within schools of social work
3. Field agency supervisors/agencies not only have to deal with stretched resources, but also they have to handle students who are not ready for practice while receiving limited support from one's agency or the University/Faculty

# Understand the Regulatory Context

- In Ontario, an individual who fulfills the required criminal check and educational qualification could register and become a registered social worker or social service worker
- However, how well individual schools are carrying out their gatekeeping responsibilities varied is a concern. For example, among the 15 schools of social work, which offer undergraduate programs in Ontario, only one requires an admission interview, and there is no program where an exam exists like medicine nor post-degree licensing examination like British Columbia, nor the post-degree paid supervised candidacy like Nova Scotia
- Consequently, responsibilities for the assessment of professional suitability fall to Schools, which are often reluctant to embrace this role. Moreover, Schools face with increasing challenges in securing field placements for students; whereas, more and more students asked for paid internships

# Recommendations (1)

## Educational Sector – Develop Proper Assessment Mechanisms

- a. Incorporate the Professional Suitability Scale (PSS) (Tam et al., 2018) to assess students' performance at the beginning, middle and end of their program. Scores could serve as a benchmark, monitor and outcome indicator
- b. The PSS was developed in the Canadian context, is well-validated with sound reliability and validity indicators, has 21-items and is designed to measure Ethical-Practical Suitability, Social Consciousness and Personal Suitability



# Recommendations (2)

## Practice Sector

- a. Agencies could incorporate internal assessment mechanisms to ensure that individual social worker or social service worker demonstrates required knowledge, skills and value in given practice situations at different levels of practice (e.g. OACAS' examination for newly employed child protection workers before granting the designation)
- b. OASW could play a leading role to bring stakeholders from similar fields of specialization together to identify what core suitability criteria are expected in different fields of practice and communicate those to schools or at university level



# Recommendations (3)

## Regulatory Sector – OCSWSSW

- a. Examine post-degree paid supervised candidacy examination similar to the one in Nova Scotia before granting the registered social worker or social service worker status
- b. Add random audit to Continuing Competence Program similar to nursing and psychology

# Recommendations (4)

## Collaboration among the Three Sectors (i.g. CCSWR, CASWE, CASW)

- a. Develop **core** competencies and corresponding indicators
- b. Examine post-degree internships similar to law given the consideration of challenges in field placements delivered by schools of social work

# *Thank you!*

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