

Article

Ethical Integration of Faith and Practice in Social Work Field Education: A Multi-Year Exploration in One Program

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Abstract: The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) prescribes competencies and professional behaviors for social work educational programs. Respective, individual programs may add program competencies and practice behaviors specific to their schools and universities. The study examines one program's field education measurement of the additional competency: The ethical integration of faith and practice and behaviors related to clients, students, and practicum sites. More than 600 BSW and MSW students' final field evaluations over a five-year period were examined for grades and for evidence of each of the faith and practice behaviors. Findings include students' emphasis on their own ethics including use of supervision and honoring clients' faith perspectives, students' recognition of faith as strength and resource for clients; and students' recording of the importance of agency context policies in the integration of faith and practice. Grades on the faith and practice competency were essentially equivalent to final field evaluation overall grades.

Keywords: faith and practice; field education; religion and spirituality; social work competencies

Field education was recognized in 2014 by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as the signature pedagogy in social work education ([Council on Social Work Education 2008](#)). In the field internship or practicum, students apply the knowledge, skills, and values learned in the classroom. The field practicum is often the setting in which students demonstrate the professional education competencies established by CSWE.

The competencies required for all social work students include cultural competence, addressing various areas of culture and diversity. Religion and spirituality are included in the diversity competence for CSWE ([Council on Social Work Education 2008](#)) and are addressed by the National Association of Social Work (NASW) standards for cultural competence ([National Association of Social Workers 2008](#)). Some religiously affiliated schools of social work have added an additional competency to their programs which is focused on ethically integrating faith (religion or spirituality) and social work practice. This paper addresses one program's implementation of a program specific competency and practice behaviors addressing the ethical integration of faith and practice competency by analyzing the field learning contracts and final field evaluations of Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) and Masters of Social Work (MSW) students over a five-year period.

1. Literature Review

The history of social work education includes changes through the years around the integration of religious faith and social work practice. These changes have implications both for curriculum and for

field education. Since 2008, the focus of social work education accreditation has been on competencies rather than on content areas with flexibility for programs to add competency areas specific to their mission. With a specific focus on field education and practice, we examined the relationship between religious faith and social work education.

1.1. Religion and Social Work Integration

Professional social work in the United States (US) developed partly out of Judeo-Christian efforts anchored in charity and community service (Cnaan et al. 1999; Canda and Furman 2010; Garland 1992; Garland et al. 2008; Loewenberg and Dolgoff 1998; Oxhandler and Pargament 2014; Garland and Yancey 2014). Many early social service agencies were connected to church denominations and religions including children's homes like Buckner Benevolences and community agencies like Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Social Services, the Salvation Army, and Jewish Family Services (Popple and Leighninger 2008). Over time the profession changed, particularly with the advent of social work higher education, to a focus on the science of human behavior and helping and away from the profession's religious roots (Graham and Shier 2012; Roy 1965; Ellor et al. 1999). There was a concern that persists in some settings that the integration of religious faith in social work practice would encourage religiously-based evangelism and the imposition of the social worker's values on clients, i.e., violations of the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics have been cited based on the ethical integration of religious faith and social work practice (Beryl 2001; Garland and Yancey 2012; Harris et al. 2016; Keith-Lucas 1962; Larson and Robertson 2007; Segal et al. 2013; Sherr and Wolfer 2003).

Recent emphasis on human diversity as a focus in curriculum design and delivery has included acknowledging social work's religious foundations, reinforcing the emphasis on religion and spirituality as a component of holistic practice. Graham and Shier (2012) and others suggested that religion and faith can guide people in the process of making sense of themselves and the world around them (Cnaan et al. 1999). Sherwood (2012) found that valuing the importance of beliefs and values of all persons, not only Christians, may inspire programs and workers alike to apply the integration of faith in practice (Sherwood 2012). However, Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) reported that many practitioners (65%) report feeling unprepared to work with the faith element of diversity in the field. This is juxtaposed against the Graff (2007) report that 82% of social work students believe religion should be a part of content taught in the context of diversity. Consistent with student interest and practitioner concerns regarding preparation, Sherwood (2012) found that social work programs are not addressing it in the curriculum, leaving future professionals potentially unprepared and not competent in this area (Sherwood 2012).

1.2. Religious Value Dissonance and Cultural Competence

Harris and Yancey (2017) observed that religion and spirituality may be held so personally by the practitioner that these values may create dissonance in the helping relationship caused by the threat to the practitioner's commitment to client values and client self-determination. The authors provided recommendations for dealing with this value dissonance including:

Human beings have been endowed with the faculty of choice, which must not be denied them except by due process of law, or where their actions or threatened actions are demonstrably gravely harmful to others or self-destructive, or where they voluntarily surrender this right for a prescribed purpose. (Harris and Yancey 2017, p. 137)

The key to addressing this challenge is educational preparation. A 2008 survey indicated about 65% of respondents did not receive any training on spirituality or religion in their social work education (Canda and Furman 2010). In another survey, 43.4% of respondents reported that they 'rarely' had religious/spiritual content in graduate school (Bullis 2013, p. 15). These findings are particularly interesting with the renewed recognition of religion and spirituality as part of diversity and culture in the NASW Code of Ethics, the CSWE Educational Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS), and the Diagnostic

and Statistical Manual (DSM)-5 (National Association of Social Workers 2008; Council on Social Work Education 2008; American Psychiatric Association 2013).

1.3. Faith and Practice in Social Work Education

The curriculum of social work programs, including field education, is accredited through the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which ensures the application of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (Council on Social Work Education 2008; National Association of Social Workers 2008; Cecil and Stoltzfus 2007). The CSWE requires that a social worker be "educated and engaged in practice with nondiscriminatory inclusion of religion" (Canda and Furman 2010, p. 15). The NASW Code works with the CSWE's standards by guiding workers' practice decisions to maintain and encourage ethical work incorporating religion and spirituality as a component of human diversity (National Association of Social Workers 2008; Cecil and Stoltzfus 2007; Hodge 2003). The NASW *Code of Ethics* calls for students to operate within the values of the profession by working with clients of any denomination or religion/faith background and remaining cognizant of personal beliefs and values (National Association of Social Workers 2008; Smith and Teasley 2009; Seitz 2014). The responsibility of application falls on schools to prepare new professionals for ethical work with religious diversity in practice (Oxhandler and Pargament 2014; Seitz 2014; Wagenfeld-Heintz 2009).

The three-legged stool. Harris, Yancey, and Myers (Harris et al. 2016) described the integration of faith and practice as a three-pronged approach including the faith lens of the client, the faith lens of the social worker, and the faith aspect of the organizational context. The authors described the importance of social work practitioners' self-awareness regarding their own values and religious and spiritual bias, the essential exploration of the client's religious or spiritual beliefs and values as they are connected to their challenges and strengths, and the differentiation of agency mission and purpose connected to services. All three are operative for students in field education internships where they experience clients with different value and belief systems than their own and religiously-affiliated agencies in which the worker's role and purpose is shaped, at least in part, by the religious mission.

Professional education, including social work, prepares students to apply knowledge and skills in supervised practice. Field education is the opportunity for students, under the supervision of an experienced social worker, to practice their skills and demonstrate competencies. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (Council on Social Work Education 2008) provides accreditation standards for social work education programs. The CSWE standards, historically based in knowledge and content, have, since 2008, focused on competency areas with specific practice behaviors demonstrated by students and measured by their faculty. The 2015 EPAS focus on behaviors rather than practice behaviors. In both cases, CSWE allows programs to add program specific competencies and behaviors and to measure them along with the EPAS competencies and behaviors.

2. Definitions

For this article, the following definitions by the authors apply:

Social work practice. Persons educationally prepared, and in states where appropriate licensed by the state, engage in direct and indirect professional activity that enhances human functioning.

Field Internships: Students engage in professional practice in social work settings under the supervision of an experienced social worker. In this program, students engage in a minimum of 480–500 h of social work practice in an agency each year of the program. Additionally, they participate in a weekly field seminar led by a faculty member and focused on the educational experience in the field placement.

Non-sectarian Field Internships: Field internship sites which do not have a financial, missional, and/or structural relationship with a religious group or denomination.

Learning Contract: The students' structured agreement with the supervisor(s) for tasks at the agency that operationalize the ten program competencies.

Integration of Faith and Practice: The tenth competency in the school's program which identified three behaviors.

Religiously-Affiliated Agencies and Congregations: Field internship sites which have a financial, missional, and/or structural relationship with a religious denomination or group.

Final Evaluation: The school's academic assessment that includes the student's list of evidence for accomplishing each of the behaviors and the supervisor's grade for each of the competencies. This assessment is made by the social work supervisor and finalized by the student's field seminar faculty member.

Ethical Integration of Faith and Practice: The tenth, program specific competency of the program that is the focus of this study; operationalized by three practice behaviors—

- (1) Understand and work effectively with the religious, faith, and spirituality dimensions of persons and communities
- (2) Examine one's own religious, faith, and spiritual frameworks and know how these aspects self-inform and conflict with one's social work practice
- (3) Understand and work effectively within the context of the practice setting in regard to religion, faith, and spirituality

In the program site for this study, the CSWE competencies and practice behaviors are operationalized in the student's field internship learning contract and evaluated in the final field evaluation by the agency social work supervisor and the field seminar faculty member. Students provide narrative evidence for their completion of each of the behaviors which informs the evaluation including final grade for each competency and for the overall experience. The grade is on a 100 point scale. This study explored students' evidence and faculty scores/grades for the tenth competency and practice behaviors described above.

3. The Study

A mixed method study utilizing secondary data was undertaken of the integration of faith and practice competency of one accredited social work program. This study examined one school of social work's program-specific competency on the ethical integration of faith and practice by analyzing BSW and MSW student final evaluation evidence of the faith and practice behaviors and supervisors' grades for that competency. The research questions included:

- (1) What themes emerged in the narrative evidence for each practice behavior related to the faith and practice competency across BSW and MSW programs over a five-year period?
- (2) Was there any differentiation in faith and practice evidence themes between students in religiously-affiliated agencies and congregations and students in non-sectarian field internships?
- (3) In providing evidence for their achievement of faith and practice competency, how frequently did students refer to the client, student (self), and practice context?
- (4) How did students' grades for the faith and practice competency compare to overall final evaluation grades?

3.1. Methodology

Two graduate assistants in the program de-identified learning contracts and final field evaluations across the BSW program and both the foundation and concentration years of the MSW program over a period of five years from 2012 to 2016. Variables examined from the final field evaluation included student classification, year of internship, type of placement (religiously affiliated or non-sectarian), evidence provided by the student on the faith and practice competency, and grades for each behavior of the faith and practice competency and the overall final grade on the evaluation. There was no Institutional Review Board evaluation or decision as the data did not include any human subject involvement.

3.2. Data Collection

In order to analyze the data, two student graduate assistants received final field evaluations from the field education support staff. The final field evaluations included one field evaluation from each student enrolled in the program for each of the years in the study. These evaluations from 2012 to 2016 were analyzed. The students assigned an identification number to each field evaluation and extracted the data from the field evaluation into an excel file identified only with the ID number. The excel file was transferred to SPSS for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis using quantitative frequencies, Pearson's r , paired sample t -test, and ANOVA, were conducted using SPSS. Data analysis of string variables, i.e., the evidence (narrative commentary) provided by students for accomplishing behaviors for the ethical integration of faith and practice competency, was analyzed by three researchers reviewing the statements for common themes. The first researcher reviewed a representative sample of 133 record statements, identified five themes, and then reviewed the remaining 500 records to examine consistency or differences. The second and third researchers reviewed the remaining 500 records to validate the theme integrity and reliability. The researchers worked together to refine their agreement on themes and representative quotes.

4. Findings

More than 600 students' final field evaluations included more than 1500 statements of evidence for the three behaviors related to the ethical integration of faith and practice. In most cases, BSW and MSW students provided at least one statement of (narrative) evidence for each of the three faith and practice behaviors. The practice behaviors included work with clients and client systems including communities, the student's own faith or religious experience and how that informed or conflicted with their practice, and the organizational or practice setting/context. The graduate assistants reviewing the statements of evidence categorized them as C-client related, S-student related, and P-practicum (organizational context) related in order to code the behaviors.

4.1. The Sample

There were no human subjects in this study. The researchers reviewed 638 de-identified final field evaluations from BSW and MSW students over a five year period. Approximately one-fourth (26.6%) were BSW student final field evaluations while the majority (73.4%) were MSW student final field evaluations. The total evaluations included approximately 20% from each of five the years examined. Eighty-seven percent of the total sample were field evaluations of full time students; twelve percent were part-time students. The placements were fairly evenly distributed between non-sectarian agencies (52.2%) and agencies with a religious or faith affiliation (47.5%).

4.2. Research Question One—Student Reflections on Faith and Practice Competence

The first research question explored what themes emerged from the students' comments (string variables) on their experience in demonstrating the faith and practice competence. Four significant themes included:

- (1) the recognition of the client's faith as a source of strength and resource, i.e., as an asset;
- (2) the importance of ethics in faith and practice including their use of supervision, self-awareness, and "withholding one's faith expression"; self-awareness and the use of supervision for ethical issues are components of the code of ethics specifically mentioned by students in their evidence.
- (3) the importance of understanding agency context including knowing and honoring agency policies; and
- (4) researching different faiths and religions. Other interesting commonalities included the use of other disciplines, particularly chaplains, for the integration of faith and practice.

Most of the responses that students provided for evidence were, predictably, positive and indicated understanding of and commitment to ethical practice. Some students did, however, disclose their own struggles and evidence that suggested some possible boundary violations. We discuss those as well.

Clients. Students wrote about the first practice behavior, related to the importance of faith/religion/spirituality to the client. Our findings revealed that students wrote about this aspect of the faith and practice competency more than any other single topic. Students commented most often on their observations that for clients, their faith was a source of strength, a resource in troubled times. Examples of comments were stated generally: "See faith as a strength that many people possess; See faith as a powerful strength; Discussed faith through the strengths perspective". Other students more specifically spoke about the client's faith: "Understand that clients use their faith as a source of strength; supporting client with faith based strengths; affirmed faith as an asset for clients when they bring it up; and used clients' faith or lack of faith practice to be a strength". There were several times when students found that for some clients, faith was a source of pain or challenge. This was infrequent and almost always included observations that were true of the same client or clients' system: "Identified clients' religious background as a resource or challenge" and "Identified spiritual strengths and challenges".

Students. Ethics was the most frequent theme students wrote about with respect to their own faith and practice integration. For example, students frequently wrote about the ethical issues of use of supervision, self-awareness in practice, and containing their own faith in order not to impose values on clients. In their discussion of professional boundaries, for instance, one student concluded that ethical social workers should: "Allow for client religious freedom". The language "allow" suggests the student still has work to do, but it captures a fundamental important social work boundary.

Code of Ethics. It was not unusual for students to refer in their narratives to their application of the NASW *Code of Ethics* while other times they referred to specific ethical professional standards. One student said "Applied an ethical integration of faith and social work practice" while another noted "Follow the NASW code". Another referred specifically to the ethical requirements around boundaries: "Understand boundaries when working with other agencies" while another referred to the standard around professional competence: "Applied an ethical integration of faith and social work practice by reading social work research." Still another acknowledged ethical nuances: "Learned that ethical integration is not the same as 'religious tolerance'".

Use of supervision. Many students communicated the important role that supervision had in their figuring out this competency and behaviors. Often the student stated simply "Discussed in supervision". Others provided more detail. "Discuss role and purpose as they relate to SW in supervision; Discuss faith and practice in logs and in supervision; Discussed in supervision how faith and values intersect; Used integration of faith and practice in log and discussions in supervision; Discuss role and purpose as they relate to SW in supervision; Discuss faith motivation for practice and future development with task supervisor; discuss with task supervisor questions of integrating faith into practice". These comments note the importance of the weekly log/journal as a source of information for supervision discussion. Additionally, students include both field instructors (social work supervisors) and task supervisors (agency personnel who may not be social workers) in these supervision conversations.

Self-awareness. Self-awareness is a fundamental principle for ethical social work practice. Students discussed in their competency evidence their own self-awareness about their faith and the role it played for them. Comments included a simple statement of self-awareness: "Self-awareness" and "Self-aware of personal faith". Others provided more nuanced responses: "Used faith to bring meaning to work; Struggled to find a balance between having own faith and not forcing it on clients; Identified ways in which intern's own religion/spirituality informs work with clients; remaining unbiased; and rely on faith as self-care".

Withholding own faith. Interestingly, many students discussed the integration of their own faith by noting how they keep their own faith in check. In some cases, they mentioned agency policy and

separation of church and state, but in most cases, students were observing an ethical principle not to impose their faith on clients. Examples include: “Provide spiritual support in an unbiased manner; allow clients to self-determine; examine own faith without projecting onto clients; work within a client’s own faith, religious, and/or spiritual beliefs; learned to support clients and their religion and spirituality; learned to express faith within the agency while not imposing or offending others; do not impose my values or beliefs on my clients; learning not to cross boundaries with own faith and learning how to separate personal faith from work since it’s a state run agency; keep focus on client and their beliefs”.

Self-determination. Student attention to not imposing their own faith extended to their commitment to clients living out their own faith expression. Examples included: “Allow clients to self-determine; Allow patient to be the expert of own faith”. A number of students mentioned specifically using spiritual assessment to direct their support of client faith/religion: “Considered questions from spiritual assessment”.

Researched other faiths. Ethical practice includes culturally competent practice; religion is included by NASW and CSWE as culture ([National Association of Social Workers 2008](#); [Council on Social Work Education 2015](#)). Student evidence for this approach to ethical integration of faith and practice included the following examples: “Understand cultural norms for integration of faith and practice; comfortable working with different faith and spirituality; when unfamiliar with a client’s faith, researched the faith; researched spirituality and aging in faith”.

Agency context. One consistent theme that emerged was student awareness of and fidelity to understanding agency policies and contextual expectations. Students provided examples of evidence that emphasized their focus on agency policies, specifically around the ethical integration of faith and practice. Examples included: “Focused on integrating faith and practice in an agency-acceptable manner; used integration of faith and practice in log, and discussions of the agency and how that can impact service delivery; we are not supposed to bring this up but if the student wants to bring it up and talk about it then we will discuss it with them; supported and upheld agency’s religious vision; researched religious beliefs”. This was the one area there were differences between students placed in religiously-affiliated agencies and those in non-sectarian or public agencies, specifically schools. Another difference had to do with students in agencies with other disciplines whose focus was faith. This was most often referenced to chaplains. Examples included: “Discussed with chaplain client’s desires to be baptized before death; understand chaplain’s role in agency; referred to chaplain”.

Concerns. There were very few examples of evidence that suggested concern around unethical integration of faith and practice. This is to be expected since the source document is the students’ final field evaluations and identifying unethical practice would jeopardize the grade. Some students did disclose their concern that they felt they needed to withhold expression of their own faith in order to honor the client’s faith and/or the agency context, as previously discussed. In another instance, the opposite occurred as a student provided an evidence statement that she, as part of her own faith, was “Praying with clients, and over clients”. The student was in a health care setting. This suggests a lack of attention to the organizational context.

4.3. Research Question Two—The Role of Field Agency Context

The second research question explored the extent to which the themes identified by students were similar or different for students in faith-based or religiously-affiliated agencies and for those students in public or non-sectarian agencies. The themes were consistent across agency contexts of practice even when the responses were stratified by faith or religiously-affiliated and non-sectarian agencies. Students in public schools tended to mention separation of church and state and the need to withhold their own faith more than students in religiously-affiliated agencies. Prayer was mentioned equally in both contexts with the outlier being a student’s evidence of praying with clients in a health care setting.

4.4. Research Question Three—Comparing Client, Student, and Agency Faith Narratives

The third research question addressed students' evidence for the three aspects of their integration of faith and practice—client, student, and practicum setting. Did students tend to provide evidence equally about faith and practice in relationship to clients, to themselves, or to organizational contexts? A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the frequency of faith references for client, self, and practice setting. There was a significant difference between the references to faith of client, self, and practice setting, Wilks' Lambda = 0.96, $F = 12.29$, $p < 0.005$. Students provided more evidence about their work with clients and client faith, secondarily about their own faith and how they integrate it, and third about their recognition of different agency contexts and policies.

4.5. Research Question Four—A Comparison of Faith and Overall Competency Performance

The fourth research question addressed specifically a comparison of the grades students received from faculty and field supervisors for the faith and practice competency and for the overall field evaluation. Final competency scores and overall final scores were strongly and positively correlated (Pearson's $r = 0.83$, $p < 0.005$). A paired t -test was conducted on a sample of 617 students to determine whether there was a statistically significant mean difference between student final competency scores ($M = 95.8$; range = 75–100) and overall final scores ($M = 95.41$; range = 76–100). Participants achieved higher final competency scores (95.8 ± 3.27) as opposed to overall final scores (95.4 ± 3.04); a statistically significant increase of 0.39 (95% CI, 0.244 to 0.534, $t(616) = 5.28$, $p < 0.005$). However, the effect size is small (0.12).

4.6. Discussion

Social work education is by its very nature intended to result in skill development that applies knowledge and values. Field education in social work is by definition experiential and applied learning. Nilson discussed the importance of experiential learning, often through forms of service and applied learning. Kolb's learning cycle includes the culmination of "active experimentation" (Nilson 2016, p. 249). Fink wrote earlier about this concept by emphasizing both passive (reading and listening) and active (experiential) learning. Palmer and Zajonc (2010) described the importance of "living the lesson" (Fink 2013, p. 77) in emphasizing experiential or practice learning both for students and instructors. Nilson encouraged multimodal learning, i.e., reading, listening, speaking, experiential, and writing (Nilson 2016, pp. 253–55). The multimodal model of learning is the theoretical basis for field education that includes experiential practice under supervision, reading and weekly field education seminar discussion, and writing evidence for the accomplishment of objectives/competencies.

The field education program is the place where students demonstrate the competencies and behaviors of the profession. They "lived the lesson" (Palmer and Zajonc 2010) and then wrote about the learning (Fink 2013). In this study, students' evidence for behaviors that demonstrate competence around the ethical integration of faith and practice was centered on the three behavioral indicators, i.e., the faith of clients and how that is or is not supported in practice; the faith of students and how they integrate their own faith in a values intense profession; and the faith or religious-affiliation of the internship agency. In this review of more than 600 final field evaluations across five years of BSW and MSW programs in one religiously-affiliated school of social work, students wrote most about the faith of clients with a significant emphasis on client faith as a strength and resource in their lives. This finding, coupled with the strong emphasis of student evidence on their commitment to ethical practice, suggests that students are able to hold in tension their own religious beliefs and values and those of the client in ways that honor the values and ethics of the profession. While many students identified faith or religion as strengths, only a few identified it as a challenge. This suggests that students may be influenced by their own experience of faith as a strength and so may not be entirely

open to negative experiences of clients with faith, religion, or the church. This is an important area for further exploration.

It is encouraging that students identified a number of ethical principles in their evidence about their own faith experiences. Students acknowledged the importance of the NASW *Code of Ethics* including social work values. Many students identified recognition and valuing of client self-determination both as a positive for clients and as an area of self-containment of their own values when working with clients. This theme of needing to “withhold” their own beliefs is an area for further exploration and emphasis in social work education. It seems students’ understanding of ethical integration of faith and practice creates a sense of limitation around their own expressions of faith rather than recognizing their faith expressions as pertinent to their own meaning making, not changing clients. How can students integrate their own beliefs in work with clients without imposing those? These nuanced skills are an important area of exploration.

This separation of personal faith while encouraging client expressions of faith is reinforced in the students’ observations about agency policy and practice. This finding is the area where the difference in faith-based and non-sectarian agencies showed up the most. Social work education is the place for students to explore agency and public policy in frank discussions about the role and purpose of social work and methods for supporting client faith and the social worker’s faith and the organizational context at the same time. Supervision, both in the field seminar/classroom and in the agency placement are critical to these discussions. While the student evidence did not detail the content of supervision, most students mentioned the importance of supervision in their integration of faith and practice. An area of further research will be to explore how supervision was important, what challenges and celebrations were included, and what was and was not helpful to the student. It might also be important to explore preparation of supervisors for this area of integration.

4.7. Social Work and Applied Learning

Social work education is professional education. Students complete an educational program that requires application of knowledge and skills in supervised practice. While some competencies are prescribed, programs can include competencies specific to their programs. This study examined a program specific competency included in the program site for twenty years; the program has included ethical integration of faith and practice since 1997 through three versions of the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of CSWE. With more than 15 years of experience with placements in congregations and in religiously-affiliated agencies, the program provides orientation for all field supervisors that covering competencies and practice behaviors including the ethical integration of faith and practice and the program specific behaviors. Many field supervisors, both field instructors and task supervisors, are program graduates and so understand the concepts as they experienced them as students. Further, more than half of the field seminar instructors are graduates of the program with the same previous history with the faith and practice competency when they were students.

One strength of the study is five years of data with an “*n*” of more than 600 students across both the BSW and MSW programs and including both generalist and advanced practice. While there was a change in the CSWE EPAS ([Council on Social Work Education 2015](#)) during the five year period, this data was gathered before implementation of the 2015 EPAS in the field education competencies. Additionally, the program retained the ethical integration of faith and practice competency in their new iteration of competencies.

This study is significant in its demonstration of the successful implementation and measurement of a program specific competency. More importantly, the competency is in an area that has not been integrated in the profession for many years. While we do not know what students in other programs think about the integration of faith and practice, we do have information in this study that reflects student commitment to ethical practice in their faith integration. Further, students focused on specific behaviors that include the faith experience of clients. In a profession that values whole person care

and client self-determination, these findings make an important statement about the possibility of including faith in practice and maintaining ethical boundaries.

4.8. Limitations and Challenges

There are several limitations to the study including a number of variables for which we were unable to control. For example, religiously-affiliated agencies vary widely in their policies, their roles for social workers, and their supervision. Our study does not explore those nuances. The program is nested in a Baptist university and while we did not identify specific faith affiliations of students and supervisors, the demographic of the university is largely Baptist and even more significantly Christian. We did not distinguish the profession of task supervisors or the content of supervision which might vary widely. Another limitation has to do with program delivery. In the five year period examined, the program initiated concurrent field placements, increased distant site placements, created an on-line concentration year program, and opened a satellite campus. The data does not differentiate among any of those new programmatic variables and whether or not they impacted student evidence for the integration of faith and practice. Finally, we did not develop any measure or way of determining the extent to which the students or supervisors were motivated by their faith and how practice was informed by faith.

The challenge for the profession is considering how these same variables are addressed in other religiously-affiliated social work programs. The challenge for this program is to consider the ongoing issues around respecting client self-determination and respecting religious freedom of both programs and social work practitioners. These results suggest that it is possible but do not address the questions of other programs, of accountability of programs and students, and of the nuances of student engagement of their own faith.

4.9. Next Steps

As the program begins to implement the 2015 EPAS and retains the program specific competency around the integration of faith and practice, there is opportunity to explore the nuances of these findings. Areas for continued exploration particularly include the theme of students withholding their own faith experiences from clients and the potential differences in faith-affiliated contexts of practice. A qualitative study interviewing both students and supervisors about their own faith perspectives and about the faith integration issues and resolution(s) that they examine in supervision is a logical next step. We were struck by the fidelity of students to the NASW *Code of Ethics* and their use of supervision. Further exploration of the theme of students “withholding” their own faith is indicated as well as exploring how students can integrate their faith while honoring client self-determination.

Broadening the study to programs that are affiliated with other religions is important. Is there a difference in denominationally affiliated universities and programs? What does the integration of faith and practice look like in religiously-affiliated programs that are not Christian? How is the integration of a student’s personal faith and their practice addressed and accessed in non-sectarian universities and programs. These would be important additions to the literature and to our understanding of the strengths and challenges of faith integration.

4.10. Implications

The role of religion and religious organizations has varied through the years of the social work profession. Social work education programs include those in religiously-affiliated universities as well as those in non-sectarian higher education. Further, students in all higher education settings have a variety of faith affiliations and convictions. The findings in this study suggest that it is possible for students to behave in ways that demonstrate fidelity to the profession and the code of ethics and to attend to the faith perspectives of clients. Further, students in this study demonstrate that their integration of faith and practice is largely from a professional rather than personal perspective. There is still work to be done to help students honor their own faith perspectives without imposing

those on their clients. Finally, there is significant opportunity to explore policies and social work role definition in religiously-affiliated agencies which may expect inter-professional sharing of faith and in non-sectarian agencies which may be rigid in their interpretation of the separation of church and state. The profession has an opportunity to respond to these questions through evidence of practice and of challenges. Rather than saying “no” to the integration of faith in social work practice, the profession has the opportunity to explore the possibility of ethically integrating the faith of social workers and clients in professional practice. Further, there is additional opportunity to revisit affiliated agencies including congregations hiring social workers for the work ahead.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This study included a review of final field education evaluations of more than 600 BSW and MSW students in one program in a religiously-affiliated university. The program included a program specific competency around the ethical integration of faith and practice. The data included final field evaluation grades, competency grades including ethical faith and practice, and students’ evidence provided in narrative form for each of the three practice behaviors operationalizing the ethical integration of faith and practice.

The researchers examined the evidence provided by students for themes and identified four primary themes including identification of clients’ faith as strength and resource; students’ recognition of the importance of ethics in their practice related to faith or religion; attention to the recognition of the client’s faith as a source of strength and resource, i.e., an asset; the importance of ethics in faith and practice including supervision, self-awareness, and “withholding one’s faith expression”; the importance of understanding agency context including knowing and honoring agency policies; and researching different faiths and religions. Other interesting commonalities included the use of other disciplines, particularly chaplains, for the integration of faith and practice.

While this study was limited to one field education program in one social work program, the scope of more than 600 BSW and MSW students across five years, the consistent implication of the study is that it is possible to ethically integrate personal faith and social work practice particularly by including the client’s faith as a resource in both assessment and intervention. Even with this positive result, there were a number of students who believed that, in order to practice ethically, they had to withhold expression of their own faith. This suggests that there is still work to do to examine how students might fully integrate their own faith without violating client self-determination. On the other hand, the consistency across religiously-affiliated agencies and non-sectarian agencies is encouraging as both field directors and graduates examine the internship and employment landscape. These students and their field faculty provide encouragement and hope that social work, across contexts of practice, can honor ethics and self-determination while drawing on the motivation and strengths of religion and faith. Here we found evidence of integration rather than polarization.

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