Foreword

Baccalaureate social work education has served as a gateway to the profession for diverse student populations: ethnic minority students, immigrant students, students with low incomes, returning adult students, and students from rural areas. As baccalaureate social work educators, we are responsible both for gatekeeping and for preserving this gateway. We fail the profession when we graduate unsuitable social workers. We also fail when, for lack of financial or academic support, gifted prospective social workers do not enter the profession.

In the professional literature, we educators have supported the BSW gateway by presenting research on recruiting and retaining ethnic minority students, on teaching culturally competent practice, and on infusing human diversity through the curriculum. At the same time, we have shown increasing interest in gatekeeping, in narrowing access to the profession. At conferences for social work educators, sessions on gatekeeping attract overflow crowds. I view this trend uneasily. In choosing sessions on gatekeeping, we may be avoiding discussions of other, more basic issues in social work education.

Does gatekeeping mask our difficulties in teaching students from various cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds; students with weak academic preparation (preparation often related to their economic status); students with English as a second language; or students with learning or other disabilities? In the name
of gatekeeping, we can design admissions policies to screen out those students whom, regardless of their potential for social work, we do not know how to teach.

Does gatekeeping mask our difficulty in teaching values? Although social work education includes affective outcomes, such as respecting the positive value of human diversity, we do not have empirical evidence that social work education significantly influences students’ attitudes toward diversity or oppression. In the name of gatekeeping, we can deny admission to those students who do not already demonstrate the attitudes and values we hope to teach.

Does gatekeeping mask our difficulties in conducting evaluative research? Social work has not made a commitment to sustained, consistent evaluation of education or practice. As a result, we do not have an empirical basis for predicting which students will succeed as baccalaureate social work students or as practicing social workers. In the name of gatekeeping, we can use admissions criteria without concern for their predictive validity.

With this book, Patty Gibbs and Eleanor H. Blakely have brought together resources for a responsible study of gatekeeping in BSW education. They make no attempt to simplify the discussion, to reduce gatekeeping to a two-sided debate with a single resolution. From screening-in to screening-out, the papers collected here represent the wide range of current opinion, research, and practice on gatekeeping issues.

How should baccalaureate social work education reconcile its responsibilities for affording and for restricting access to the profession? This collection challenges our tacit values as educators and as social workers. It makes a distinct contribution as a catalyst for further research and honest thought.

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