Introduction: The Arena of Gatekeeping

Patty Gibbs and Harry J. Macy

In social work education, selective evaluation, screening, and retention of students are decision arenas in which students’ rights and interests, faculty’s responsibilities, program integrity, institutional policies, professional practice standards, social work’s ethical principles, and the legal requirements of higher education converge. Few program operations are viewed as more complex, troublesome, and emotionally charged than the gatekeeping component of the educational enterprise. And few program operations are imbued with more mystery and misunderstanding.

Even the term *gatekeeping* invokes different notions in the minds of those who are responsible for the evaluation, selection, and retention of students. Some see gatekeeping as a process whereby students are nurtured through the educational enterprise in order to ensure that they successfully complete the program and are competent to practice when they graduate. Others think of gatekeeping as primarily a way to selectively “close the gate” at some point in a student’s program when she or he is found to be unsuitable for practice in the field of social work, and a student might be seen as unsuitable for any number of reasons related to the inability to function within the parameters of professional expectations.

Those who see gatekeeping as a nurturing process, a perspective based on the students’ strengths, are generally uncomfortable with a gatekeeping mentality that ostensibly centers on the need “to
close the gate.” To view gatekeeping primarily if not exclusively as closing the gate seems somehow anathema to those who want to nurture students up to and through the gate of professional practice. However, gatekeepers who emphasize occasionally closing the gate seldom view this as incompatible with nurturing any given student through the program when that student needs, and responds to, extra supports and attention. For gatekeepers who are social workers both by training and by professional identification, helping students to achieve their goals is second nature, and thus they may not even think of this as one of the functions of gatekeeping: It is just what a good faculty member or field instructor does to help students succeed and to support them in reaching their personal and career goals. These gatekeepers don’t disagree with a strengths perspective; in fact, they undoubtedly implement it on a day-to-day basis as they interact with social work students in various capacities. However, their basic stance on gatekeeping as requiring closing the gate when necessary probably stems from unfortunate experiences with students who graduated from the program despite concerns that may have been voiced along the way.

The following example, written by a BSW program director on the BPD (baccalaureate program directors) listserver, eloquently and poignantly illustrates the urgency and critical nature of effective gatekeeping practices, as well as the reasons why some faculty think of gatekeeping as first and foremost a way to selectively close the gate to students whose fit with the requirements of professional practice is questionable.

I recently received a communication from CSWE regarding academic and nonacademic criteria for dismissal from a BSW Program. Undoubtedly like many of you, our faculty have been having discussions about student performance standards, both for individual courses and overall program completion. We seem torn by conflicting goals. On the one hand, we want to produce well-prepared social workers. On the other, we are reluctant to give low grades or to terminate students who are performing poorly. We may view the student as client—we want to help them, to give them another chance. Or, as one faculty member stated, “Well, even if he graduates, probably no one will hire him anyway.” I’d like to share a recent experience that has influenced my thinking on the importance of this issue.

My oldest son, Dave, is now twenty-five. Immediately prior to his senior year in high school, we moved to a distant city, and he had to
spend that senior year in a new high school. It was a traumatic year, but he adapted and made new friends, one of whom was Mike. Mike came from a blue collar family and wasn’t interested in attending college. In spite of that, he was bright and would graduate about 10th in his class from a large high school. When my son went away to school, Mike attended the local community college in a skilled trade program. Our home was close by, and he would frequently stop over to mooch a meal or just to talk. He became like a member of the family. I’d come home from work to find he had let himself in the house and was playing computer games, a luxury he did not have at his own home. I joked about adopting him so I could at least use him as a tax deduction. The following year, my son opted to attend the community college too, and so we saw even more of Mike. When Dave returned to . . . [XYZ] University, Mike got a job about 50 miles away, and the boys kept in close contact.

Occasionally Dave told me about the dumb stuff that Mike was doing. He joined a band 60 miles away. He bought a chipping machine to dispose of one little tree in the yard of his rental duplex. Then he bought a large, new car. We dismissed his behavior as growing pains of a sheltered kid who had to learn how to get by on his own. But in retrospect the signs were more ominous. Mike’s parents were celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Mike was supposed to come home to bartend for the celebration. Home is 400 miles away, so when he didn’t show up as scheduled, they waited. It wasn’t like Mike to miss something like this. They called his apartment. Finally he answered the phone. Mike, the happy-go-lucky kid, was sitting on his bed with a shotgun in his hand ready to kill himself. After emergency hospitalization, Mike returned home. He was under the care of the local community health center. He made some progress toward recovery but then suddenly left home on a trip through Wisconsin. He was eventually detained by authorities for a traffic offense. During the course of this spree he had been charging hundreds of dollars worth of Green Bay Packer gear and giving it away to kids. Eventually, he was released to his family and returned home. He was diagnosed as bipolar. His concerned parents took him to the Mayo Clinic where the diagnosis was confirmed, but for treatment, Mike would have to depend on the mental health resources of the local community.

For a year or so, Mike seemed to be managing. He had returned to his old grocery store job that he had held before graduating from the community college. He would see the psychiatrist for medication, and he had a case manager. The case manager was Bill, one of my own BSW graduates. I consult with the particular mental health agency on a weekly basis, so I would occasionally see Mike when he came in for appointments with Bill or the psychiatrist. I couldn’t discuss the particulars of the case with Bill, but we did talk about his
job, and I’d occasionally get comments from other staff. As a student, Bill had been “OK.” He missed some classes, it was rumored that he had an occasional substance abuse problem, but his grades were good enough. They liked him in his field placement and even hired him.

Last week, I received a phone message from Mike’s mother. She was near tears. Mike was back on the psych unit at the hospital. Would I go see him? I did, and over the last several days the story began to fall into place. Although Mike had been assigned to Bill as his case manager, Bill seldom saw his client. Appointments fell through; they had to be rescheduled. Bill was having “personal problems” of his own. Because Mike didn’t demand to be seen, he fell through the cracks. The agency was reorganized; supervisors changed, and no one noticed that Mike wasn’t being followed, that he was drinking, and that he wasn’t taking his medication. When his behavior again became bizarre, it was his family that got him to the hospital. Fortunately, Mike is still alive, and he has the potential to recover, but I seriously question if this latest episode had to happen. There are multiple reasons, but high quality case management might have prevented the relapse. Now, when I go to see Mike on the psych ward, I see a young man who could just as well be my son, but I also see a person whose very life partially depends on the skill and professionalism of my BSW graduate.

I’m not sure what the answer is, but I know that I cannot be content with gatekeeping as, “Oh well, no one will probably hire him anyway.” When you look at your graduates, not just your “star” students, but your run-of-the-mill BSW, are you willing to entrust them with the lives of those you love? Perhaps that should be our standard.

C. DeJong, electronic mail on bpd listserv, March 2, 1999

As this illustration so clearly shows, avoidance of gatekeeping responsibilities can lead to potentially dangerous outcomes for an unwary public that entrusts the lives of loved ones to professional helpers. Thus, the primary intent of gatekeeping is to protect the public at large, who are left unsuspecting and vulnerable when an unsuitable student is credentialed and sanctioned to practice. Consequently, gatekeeping, at least in part, involves boundary maintenance. Sound gatekeeping policies protect the space between the primacy of public need and trust and the essential nature of professional responsibility. If we as faculty members misunderstand our role as gatekeepers and permit an unsuitable candidate for a
degree to obtain that degree, we have abdicated our responsibility to society by minimizing the potential harm that could result.

To put our gatekeeping responsibility in its proper perspective, a short mathematical exercise may be helpful. As of March 1999 there were six hundred accredited and in-candidacy BSW and MSW programs—and the list keeps growing. But let’s assume that as of that moment the growth of accredited programs permanently stalled. If annually each of these six hundred programs confers a social work degree on just one student who is ill suited for professional practice, in ten years we will have let loose on an unsuspecting public more than six thousand unsuitable practitioners nationwide. These sobering figures show that if we look at the mathematical ramifications alone, the potential cost of evading gatekeeping responsibilities is staggering. If the number of accredited programs continues to increase at the same pace we have witnessed in the past five to ten years, negligence in gatekeeping could have crushing repercussions on the lives of countless individuals who seek help.

BSW program directors figure prominently in the gatekeeping equation because of their critical role in helping faculty members to overcome their resistance and to move forward with sound gatekeeping policies and processes. Program directors shoulder a series of gatekeeping responsibilities that distinguish this administrative position. Their responsibilities include, at the very least, staying apprised of the legal dimensions that must guide a program’s gatekeeping efforts; facilitating the creation of structures, policies, and processes for implementing effective gatekeeping in the program; aiding in the development of appeal (due process) procedures; and monitoring the implementation of gatekeeping standards once they are developed and approved by the faculty body. In addition, program directors also must ensure that institutional administrators are apprised of both the unique legal status of professional schools and the legal precedents that support extension of academic standards to include professional qualities and behaviors.

The growing complexities of gatekeeping, particularly in relation to gatekeeping’s legal dimensions, often immobilize faculty. Rather than grapple with the variety of legal, ethical, administrative, professional, and curricular issues in order to establish sound
and effective gatekeeping policies, faculty sometimes resort to taking the path of least resistance. They may decide to use grade point average (GPA) as the primary definer of competence and potential for professional success, a position that ignores some obvious pitfalls; for example, it begs the question of students who easily meet scholastic expectations but are ill suited for other dimensions of professional practice. For many faculty members the issue is quite simple: why struggle with the complexities of gatekeeping and go to all this effort when only an occasional student needs to be stopped at the gate? This attitude seems fairly prevalent, and it greatly impedes the development of sound gatekeeping policies and practices.

Gatekeepers and Their Constituencies

From a program director’s perspective, selective admission and retention procedures represent a delicate balance of the diverse interests of the various constituencies involved in the enterprise of social work education. These groups include students, faculty, field instructors, academic administrators, quality assurance entities, and the clientele. Each of these constituencies holds key interests related to gatekeeping in social work education, and many face complex issues related to developing and implementing gatekeeping standards.

Students

As consumers of social work education, the admission and retention procedures in social work programs are a gateway to students’ personal aspirations, career opportunities, state licensure for practice, and future entrance to advanced education. Also, the use of selective admissions tends to increase students’ identification with and commitment to the profession because individual capability and potential for a career in the field are formally recognized and rewarded through sanctioned entry into the professional core classes. Students are proud of this initial accomplishment, and their investment in quality control seems to crystallize as a result.
When the process for selective admissions is somehow flawed and a student who is ill suited for the profession slips through the gate, it is not unusual for other students to express their concerns among each other or even privately to a faculty member. An E-mail from a student representing a University of Kansas (KU) group called Social Work Students Concerned About Retaining Ethics (S.C.A.R.E.) illustrates this point. The message, which was sent to more than forty BSW program directors, explained that S.C.A.R.E. was a new KU campus organization dedicated to safeguarding and exploring the NASW Code of Ethics. The organization was in the process of reexamining the undergraduate admissions process because group members had some concerns about how to screen out students who appear unable to adhere to social work ethics and values and how to achieve diversity within the program (Martin, electronic mail, January 29, 1998). They put their message on-line in order to find out about admissions processes in other BSW programs and to discover whether or not other programs included standards on values and ethics as part of their admissions screening. This group’s efforts illustrate each student’s stake in their program’s admission and retention processes. Other variables are also important.

Through sound gatekeeping procedures, students are able to demonstrate achievement of outcomes that lead to professional competence, which is extremely critical in order to effectively practice in a society whose problems have become increasingly severe. The nature of social dysfunction that must be addressed by entry-level social work practitioners has grown in complexity and scope over the two-decade history of accredited BSW programs. This phenomenon requires students to demonstrate higher levels of professional competence, a more extensive knowledge base, and a broader range of practice skills in order to function within the world of contemporary social work realities. Consequently, gatekeeping takes on increased significance in today’s society.

**Faculty**

As the primary evaluators of students’ cognitive abilities, affective capacities, value orientations, maturational levels, and mastery of professional competencies, faculty members’ gatekeeping func-
tions are highly significant. Our gatekeeping responsibility involves providing academic instruction and assessment of the students’ performance in our classes. Additionally, as faculty we make judgments at various points in the program about performance in relation to potential for success, and we give professional counsel and guidance on career matters to every individual who seeks a social work degree.

We are credible and legitimized as gatekeepers because of our practice backgrounds, education, and expert knowledge. By the same token, our backgrounds and expertise in the field of social work give us special understanding of and sensitivity to the students, to their growth and development. If we stay strictly in our role as gatekeepers and thus negate our interpersonal connection to the student and our commitment to the student’s development, it becomes easy to dismiss the emotional impact our actions have on individual students and to deny our role in facilitating a student’s success. On the other hand, if we divorce ourselves from our commitment to society and focus primarily on our interpersonal connection to students, we may become negligent in our function as gatekeepers. We must achieve a balance, and we must be ever mindful of it as we carry out our charge.

As a logical extension of our gatekeeping responsibilities we must collaboratively develop and implement sound gatekeeping policies, procedures, and processes. It is at this juncture, however, that faculty encounter many stumbling blocks. In an era of mushrooming enrollments, limited fiscal resources, legislative mandates for increased workloads, and increased accountability for both faculty productivity and educational impact, the time-consuming tasks associated with conscientious gatekeeping find scant room on a plate that is already too full.

Many programs are rapidly expanding while resources are simultaneously diminishing, which leads to larger classes as well as increased teaching loads. These factors make it extremely difficult to get to know a large number of individual students other than through the work they produce or the GPA on their transcripts. It is difficult to make accurate assessments of any given student for gatekeeping purposes when the student may be a virtually “unknown quantity” to all or most of the faculty—sometimes to the extent that the student’s name may not even elicit a visual
image in anyone’s mind when faculty meet to make admissions decisions. Consequently, faculty must design application materials that enable students to provide a clear picture of who they are and what their potential is for becoming an effective helper.

Field Instructors

The role of field instructors in gatekeeping efforts is often not explicitly and formally recognized (e.g., in the social work program’s written policies). However, on the informal plane, sentiment generally takes a dramatic reversal when a problematic student slips through the admissions gate and into the program. Then, all too often, reluctant faculty gatekeepers suggest that the field will be able to “do something” about the problematic student at a later point in the curriculum, that is, during the field placement. Field instructors, on the other hand, are caught up in the various demands of their workplace and often feel only a tangential connection to the complexities of the educational enterprise. While many field instructors take their educational role during student field placements quite seriously, some become involved with the social work program primarily to acquire additional “staff” to help with the agency’s myriad tasks and endeavors. This additional help is needed to ease the workload in the agency or to augment the services provided by employed staff, who are already stretched almost to the limits of their capacity.

The difficulties with gatekeeping during student field placements are further complicated when field instructors substitute their clinical function for their gatekeeping function while working with a student whose performance is weak or unsatisfactory. As practitioners, field instructors assume the roles of nurturer, facilitator, advocate, caregiver, and enabler on a daily basis with their clients. However inappropriate, these professional helper roles often become too prominent when field instructors work with students, or, even worse, these roles may take primacy in the student-supervisor relationship.

While judicious use of these roles in moderation with students helps them gain confidence and develop as professionals, overreliance on a helping relationship dynamic rather than a supervisory-educational dynamic in work with students during the field experience is problematic for several reasons. It blurs the bound-
aries of the respective functions of each role (i.e., social worker or supervisor) in relation to work with the student. This blurring leads to confusion about what the student can and should expect from the field instructor and about what the field instructor can and should do about a problem student. However, the weak or problem student may come to prefer the helping relationship dynamic with the field instructor because it is less threatening; that is, it probably will neither lead to termination from the placement nor result in an unsatisfactory evaluation for field performance. The field instructor who takes the role of a more traditional helper may be disinclined to “fail” a student because of the inconsistency of that action with the facilitative, enabling, and nurturing roles of the helper, a role that feels more comfortable and “natural” to social work supervisors. Faculty must work closely with field instructors to orient them to their role in the program as gatekeepers.

**Academic Administrators**

Management issues related to selective admission and retention become more convoluted as higher education faces external demands and controls, such as legal protections, accountability for outcomes, requirements for diversity among students, fiscal constraints, and issues of faculty autonomy. The many pulls and tensions created by external demands and controls force the institution’s administrators to assume a conservative posture when it comes to giving guidance and counsel to programs that are trying to establish and enforce academic standards designed to safeguard the profession and its clientele.

When the call for more professionally appropriate standards sounds from the ranks of social work faculty, forward momentum is often met with resistance from the administrators of higher education, who tend to have little awareness of professional programs’ special privileges to broadly define academic performance, as established through case law. Thus, administrators tend to favor clear-cut standards and screening criteria, such as grades, over those that address ethical and behavioral expectations, which they fear might leave the institution open to possible litigation. With little or no support from administrators, faculty members find themselves in reluctant collusion with the institu-
tion’s “don’t-rock-the-boat” position. Faculty must take responsibility for educating administrators on case law that applies to professional programs, the mandates of accreditation, and the faculty’s role in gatekeeping.

Quality Assurance Entities

As the demands for professional accountability increase, the dictates of many groups external to the institution gain greater influence and control over educational programs within the institution. Some of these external entities include state, regional, and national accreditation bodies; licensure boards; certification groups; and other quality assurance bodies. Although educational programs are often blocked in their efforts to address professional gatekeeping in any but the most basic ways, quality control agencies paradoxically look to the educational program to provide assurance that the program’s graduates are morally, ethically, and behaviorally suited for practice.

Clientele

As indirect beneficiaries of academic gatekeeping standards, clients are ultimately impacted by whether or not educational programs are able to screen out or terminate students whose suitability for a career in social work is compromised for any reason. Educators and institutions of higher education cannot and must not evade their professional responsibility or their legal obligation to protect the clientele from future social workers whose personal issues or deficits might interfere with competent social work practice. Only through application of appropriate quality control mechanisms in social work programs can educators carry out their commitment to clients, the profession, and society at large.

An Overview of the Issues

If faculty members’ commitment to gatekeeping is a critical function of their role as educators, then what seems to keep them from fully carrying out their obligations? Why is it that faculty who have been in academia for any length of time can cite many cases of students having received their degrees against the better judg-
ment of many of the faculty? What legal issues must faculty be aware of as they develop and implement gatekeeping processes? How do students’ rights factor into the gatekeeping equation? How does the issue of achieving diversity in the student body relate to gatekeeping? Does field instruction give rise to any special gatekeeping concerns? What factors might lead to students losing access to professional education? These questions defy easy answers because of the complexities inherent in gatekeeping.

**Legal Issues and Student Rights**

Most faculty easily identify legal issues as the primary obstacle to effective gatekeeping. Today’s litigious society coupled with a conservative political climate in academe dramatically compromises the commitment to gatekeeping. Foremost in this scenario is the fear of lawsuits. Pressures from institutional administrators and their legal counsels are barriers to the development of sound policies and practices that would allow programs to screen out or terminate students who are not suited for a career in social work. Moreover, faculty remain uninformed about legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and case law, that impact gatekeeping policies. Fear of doing something wrong often keeps faculty from doing anything at all.

Concerns about students’ rights present another series of sticky wickets in gatekeeping, not because students’ rights are not valued but because students’ rights are often misunderstood or misinterpreted. Students, as well as many faculty members and administrators, believe that decisions that negatively impact tuition-paying students violate the students’ rights. Access to a degree is seen as entitlement rather than as an opportunity. Carte blanche entitlement to a degree that sanctions professional practice in a human service arena is fraught with dangers that frequently go unrecognized.

**Achieving Diversity**

As social workers, faculty are committed to promoting social justice and eliminating institutional barriers that negatively impact disadvantaged and oppressed groups. Reconciling commitment to eliminate discriminatory practices against minority groups and
commitment to gatekeeping in social work education is a challenging issue that frequently leaves faculty torn and bewildered. Some faculty take the position that affirmative action on behalf of minorities means lowering standards, if necessary, to ensure that minorities can enter the social work program and ultimately the profession. Conversely, some faculty view lowering standards for minorities as reverse discrimination because nonminorities who cannot meet the program’s articulated standards are turned away while minorities with comparable or even lesser qualifications gain access.

According to many proponents of inclusionary strategies for achieving diversity in programs, a different perspective is called for with respect to what is meant by the term “excellence,” as it relates to the abilities and qualifications of the students. Are we placing too much emphasis on the excellence of the candidate/applicant when we should instead devote our energies to ensuring the excellence of the graduate? A shift in our thinking allows us to conceive of excellence as the high performance of students at exit from the program rather than at entry into the program. Thus, rather than students “measuring up” at entry, the institution or program itself must measure up with respect to providing a sufficiently supportive curriculum and learning environment in order for students who are generally underserved and underrepresented to realize success in achieving their academic and career goals.

The issues inherent in achieving diversity illustrate how, in many respects and for obvious reasons, minority issues in gatekeeping are a particularly sensitive area for faculty and students alike.

*Institutional Contexts and Program Policies*

Gatekeeping does not occur in a vacuum; it is contextual. As previously noted, the context of academe involves a slew of pressures and tensions that sometimes countermand conscientious gatekeeping. In the face of such forces, faculty members may relinquish their gatekeeping responsibilities in favor of tasks that “count” in higher education, namely teaching, research, and service.

Other gatekeeping issues involve setting standards and developing policy. Faculty would like some assurance that the standards they set are, in fact, predictors of success in the program and in the
field of practice. Impressionistic information suggests that GPA, for example, may not be as sound a predictor as we might wish, particularly if it is applied without more professionally oriented standards during screening and retention. An intellectually bright student does not necessarily become an effective practitioner who is interpersonally capable of establishing effective helping relationships. In the absence of data to guide the development of appropriate screening and retention policies, faculty either rely on hunches and intuition or establish criteria that are less apt to be challenged, such as GPA, completion of certain courses, standardized test scores, and the like.

Above and beyond setting appropriate and effective standards is the issue of identifying the various gatekeeping points in the program and matching the appropriate standards to those points. For instance, students should not be expected to demonstrate achievement of the expected outcomes at the point of entry into the program. In the same vein, evidence of potential for developing effective interpersonal relationships, for adhering to the code of ethics, and for establishing positive working relationships is sufficient at the point of admissions but insufficient at the end of the practicum. By the end of the practicum, that is, near the time of graduation, students need to be demonstrating more than mere potential. They must be able to demonstrate competence.

**Field Instruction**

The role of the field practicum and field instructors in the program’s gatekeeping efforts is another thorny gatekeeping issue, although it should not be. Field instructors are essentially more than adjuncts to the program; they are an integral component of the educational endeavor. During field placements students test out classroom learning and demonstrate their abilities not only to apply those learnings but also to perform as a beginning professional. When programs sanction field instructors to supervise students, those field instructors become an extension of the academic faculty and carry comparable gatekeeping functions. However, as previously noted, a paradox sometimes occurs in this context. Academic faculty are inappropriately inclined to surrender gatekeeping responsibilities to field instructors while field instructors
are sometimes disinclined to assume a gatekeeping role in their work with students.

**Attitudes About Screening Students**

An issue noted earlier is the program’s basic approach to gatekeeping. Does the program take a basic screening-in or screening-out position during gatekeeping endeavors? A screening-in posture may mean that all students are nurtured through all screening points, whereas a screening-out posture involves stopping some students at any given screening point because they do not meet predetermined criteria and standards or because of some program constraint, such as limited resources. Either posture may be problematic under certain circumstances. For example, programs that consistently screen in students not only fail to meet accreditation standards but also violate the public trust. On the other hand, a screening-in posture may not be problematic if the program has the institutional supports to build student competence in areas where deficiencies exist. In the latter case, faculty are in the enviable position of focusing on the students’ strengths at all gatekeeping points. Throughout the program the students’ strengths are built upon with the help of various resources and services to awaken in students areas of untapped potential and to enable them to overcome any self-identified or faculty-identified deficits.

Not all programs that screen out students at the point of admission to the program do so because the criteria are not met. Some programs are compelled to screen out students at the point of admissions not because of any deficiency of an individual student, but simply because the number of acceptable applicants to the program exceeds the institutionally enforced enrollment cap on the program. Enrollment caps pose particularly painful issues for faculty because students who are at least minimally acceptable candidates for the degree must be turned away at a time when this country’s social problems and social welfare needs are ballooning.

Institutional services and faculty time are finite resources, and at a growing number of institutions there are not enough of either to go around. Programs in these institutions, by necessity, must rely on a deficit model during gatekeeping activities: only the strongest students survive the gatekeeping cuts. For social
workers turned academicians, this state of affairs is contrary to
the basic tenets of the profession, but it is a reality over which
there is little control.

Purpose and Overview of This Book

This book was conceived to equip faculty gatekeepers with the
required knowledge, facts, and tools for carrying out their gate-
keeping functions in a responsible and fair way. Since knowledge
is power, information is the first step toward reaching this goal.
Some of the gatekeeping approaches and tools discussed in this
book are neither widely known nor frequently employed, such as
comprehensive exit exams, psychometric tests, and portfolio
assessments. We hope that faculty will explore their merits and
their use based on the information we have included.

Because the task group that formed to write this book was an
outgrowth of gatekeeping panels and networks that began in the
Baccalaureate Program Directors Association, the book unfolded
as a work devoted entirely to BSW-level education. However, the
issues, tensions, concerns, and policies discussed in this book are
not peculiar to BSW programs. They span BSW- and MSW-level
education, so faculty in MSW programs also will find this book
extremely useful.

There are no pat answers, easy solutions, road maps, or cook-
book approaches to gatekeeping, regardless of the program level
at which gatekeeping is implemented. In essence, “one size doesn’t
fit all.” Institutional and programmatic policies vary from place to
place; some are more restrictive than others. These policies gener-
ally vary among programs because of the perspectives of the dif-
ferent players at each institution and in each program. For
instance, some programs run police checks on students, either at
the point of admissions or prior to entry into the field practicum.
Others do not run police checks and would not even consider
doing so. The same holds true for the use of psychometric tests as
part of gatekeeping processes. Some use such tests and swear by
them; others find the very idea terribly disconcerting. Differences
of opinion flourish even within the same institution. Not infre-
quently, for example, tensions exist between the institution’s legal
counsel and the social work faculty, the former taking a more con-
servative stance and the latter taking a more active stance. This
dynamic greatly impacts how gatekeeping policies will be framed in that particular program.

Because of differences among institutions and programs varying inclinations of faculty, some of the issues and ideas discussed in this book will be viewed as very controversial. Actually, this book is designed to unveil as many controversial issues and ideas as the editors were able to identify. Faculty members need to have roundtable discussions on all issues, exploring the pros and cons of each in relation to their respective institutional climates, program needs, and student populations.

Overview of the Book

This book is divided into four main sections. In this first section, “Background and Issues,” the chapters that follow this introduction examine the issues that shape, impact, or obstruct gatekeeping functions and implementation in social work education. Gatekeeping is examined from several different vantage points, including historically, and a variety of gatekeeping approaches and attitudes are discussed. The critical nature of gatekeeping standards that include professional performance standards is a common theme. A topic of special concern, achieving diversity in higher education, stresses inclusionary strategies for achieving both equity and excellence in higher education. A review of the research literature reveals some of the primary issues associated with gatekeeping, and field instruction as a significant component of the curriculum in which gatekeeping problems often manifest is explored.

Whenever gatekeeping concerns are raised at conferences or in other contexts, the most compelling issue articulated with the greatest passion and the least knowledge is the legal dimension of gatekeeping. For this reason, section two of the book is devoted to comprehensive coverage of the “Legal Perspectives” that pervade gatekeeping in social work programs. This section includes a lengthy annotated list of case law that is germane to gatekeeping in professional programs and which will be helpful in working with an institution’s legal counsel. The remaining chapters in this section conceptualize the landscape of gatekeeping legalities and provide practical suggestions for policy development and implementation. Actual student case examples
illustrate how faculty members have addressed gatekeeping concerns in their home programs.

The third section of the book, “Strategies and Processes,” provides practical suggestions and information to aid faculty members as they carry out their difficult charge as the profession’s gatekeepers. Included in this section are discussions of drawing on local practitioners as resources during admissions screening, of using psychometric testing to assess the students’ readiness and suitability for professional practice, and of developing program policies that permit sharing sensitive information about students with field instructors. Two useful approaches to the evaluation of student performance are examined in chapters on portfolios and comprehensive exit exams. A central feature of this section is a collaboratively written chapter that details the differences between two types of academic standards—scholastic and professional. Listed under each type of standard are illustrative program criteria, outcome statements as evidence of achieving each criterion, and measures useful in evaluating student outcomes.

Part four of the book, the appendixes, provides a wide selection of sample tools and policies that programs may find useful as they develop their own policies, forms, contracts, and guidelines for gatekeeping.

The traditional use of selective admission and retention policies to provide a quality control dimension is emerging as an even more significant concern facing social work education given contemporary fiscal, legal, and political realities. It is imperative that information about gatekeeping policies, procedures, and mandates stemming from case law and legislation become more widely available in order to facilitate gatekeeping efforts across the country. It is equally imperative that the issues implicit in the complex process of policy development undergo continual systematic evaluation, refinement, and discussion by program faculty.

Gatekeeping in social work education should occur throughout the program. It is inseparable from curriculum, faculty, students, field instructors, and institutional auspices. It cuts across CSWE’s evaluative standards. Additionally, it converges with other program responsibilities, as illustrated by a not altogether surprising theme that emerged in the book. Chapter discussions of gatekeeping prac-
...tices and approaches frequently led to discussions of evaluating educational outcomes, showing that the two are not mutually exclusive categories. The intersection of gatekeeping and outcome evaluation occurs primarily due to the use of various tools common to both endeavors, for example, psychometric tests, exit exams, portfolios, skill labs, student self-assessments, and the like.

The remaining chapters of this book are designed to take faculty on a journey of gatekeeping that promotes exploration and development of effective gatekeeping policies in their respective programs. Although the road will sometimes be bumpy, with sharp curves and steep inclines that must be navigated successfully, the outcome of those efforts should be well worth the travel across rough terrain. The National Task Group on BSW Gatekeeping Standards wishes you well as you undertake your individual journeys, which ultimately will serve each program in several ways: to protect students’ rights, to attend to diversity concerns, to better meet accreditation standards, to aid in students’ successful passage through the program, to meet legal requirements, and to provide assurance to the public that they are protected from helpers who do not belong in the profession of social work for one reason or another.