



# Field Instructors as Professional Gatekeepers: A Qualitative Study of Gatekeeping Influences

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## Abstract

Field instructors play a significant role in students' social work education. Professional gatekeeping is an ongoing process of evaluating students' competence and professional suitability. Gatekeeping responsibility often falls to field instructors during practicum. In this exploratory qualitative study, 13 social work field instructors acknowledged an obligation to be professional gatekeepers when they supervised practicum students. Field instructors described four primary considerations influencing their performance of gatekeeping activities: identification with multiple field instructor roles, ethical obligations as a professional social worker, commitment to their students, and support from the university. Findings may be used for training and supporting field instructors.

*Keywords:* field education; professional gatekeeping; student supervision; social work practicum; field instructors

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on doctoral dissertation research completed by the author on a stakeholder analysis of a baccalaureate social work program. Results of the full stakeholder analysis were published in the winter 2019 issue of the *Journal of Social Work Education*. A second article, published in the spring 2019 issue of *Field Educator*, presented new findings on field instructors' experiences supervising practicum students with challenging behaviors. This article offers additional findings specific to field instructors and their perspectives on professional gatekeeping. Only data pertaining to gatekeeping in field education were included in the analysis reported here. No results or data are duplicated in the three manuscripts.

## Introduction

Field education is integral to the instruction of social work students. Practicum is the stage in which students integrate and apply classroom-based theoretical knowledge to work with actual clients. Field-based supervisors join university faculty in assessing students' knowledge and skills. Field education is social work's signature pedagogy (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015), and requires partnerships with community-based social service agencies to host student interns. Field instructors are experienced, practicing social workers who supervise interns during their practicum experiences in agency settings. As educational partners, field instructors function as an extension of the university faculty and the academic curriculum (Homonoff, 2008). Thus, social service agencies and practitioners are intricately and inextricably woven into what is often the final stage of social work education.

There are considerable challenges in administering practicum programs, such that social work field education is deemed "in a state of crisis" (Ayala et al., 2018, p. 281). At a practice level, funding cutbacks and policy shifts have resulted in higher caseloads for social work staff. High workload is a barrier to social workers hosting and supervising practicum students (Hill et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2018). A proliferation of new social work programs, seated and online, has further increased competition for placement sites both within and among programs. Resources are scarce, for quality agency sites and for individual supervisors (Gushwa & Harriman, 2019). It is crucial to recruit and retain skilled field personnel, support their role, and provide ongoing professional development in student supervision.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about field instructors' experiences supervising social work students and their perspectives on professional gatekeeping during practicum, particularly regarding the factors that influence field instructors' engagement in gatekeeping activities. Field instructor perspectives are valuable to social work educators, since faculty manage and oversee the field education curriculum, striving to maintain strong educational partnerships, enforce high academic standards, and matriculate competent graduates.

## Professional Gatekeeping

Professional gatekeeping is the process of "assessing and screening students' professional suitability for social work practice" (Halaas et al., 2020, p. 417) through a range of activities, including selective admission practices, coursework, student reviews, and academic advising (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013). Gatekeeping has been a topic in social work education since the 1800s (Moore & Jenkins, 2000, pp. 45–59); however, gatekeeping tasks and policies continue to challenge educators (Elpers &

Fitzgerald, 2013; Halaas et al., 2020; Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2012). Social work educators can be reluctant to engage in professional gatekeeping due to a lack of formal policies (Hylton et al., 2017), fear of litigation (Wayne, 2004), philosophical differences (Sowbel, 2012), and social justice concerns over bias and discrimination (Coyle et al., 2011). Faculty may also face institutional pressure to maintain enrollments. Indeed, faculty have reported a perception of reduced emphasis on gatekeeping measures in social work programs (Halaas et al., 2020).

Educators, whether consciously or unconsciously acting as gatekeepers, make determinations on which candidates may be admitted to social work programs, who may proceed to field education, and ultimately who graduates from the program. The credibility and integrity of the social work profession, therefore, depends on educational programs maintaining top-quality practice standards for students and graduates (Tam & Kwok, 2007). Within the system of social work education, there are multiple ethical responsibilities to balance with obligations to students, current and future clients, social service agencies, and the social work profession.

The most ethically and academically rigorous approach to gatekeeping demands high professional and personal standards at each checkpoint in the process of social work education (Elpers & Fitzgerald, 2013). Once students are admitted to a social work program, however, few are terminated or dismissed, suggesting low attrition, weakened gatekeeping efforts, and issues with grade inflation (Miller, 2014; Sowbel, 2011). While failed or terminated practicum placements are few (Sowbel, 2011), there remains a significant number of students with problematic behaviors in field (Robertson, 2013; Street, 2019; Tam et al., 2018), indicating the need for professional gatekeeping in social work education.

## **Field Instructors**

Gatekeeping roles are filled in multiple ways throughout the progression of a social work career. Social work faculty serve as the primary professional gatekeepers, initially at admission to educational programs, and continuing as students advance through the curriculum. During practicum, field instructors join faculty in evaluating students' abilities. As educators and field supervisors evaluate and judge student performance, they assume a gatekeeper role. When faculty fail to exercise gatekeeping authority during admission and coursework, or when problems do not emerge until students encounter the real demands of social work practice during practicum, gatekeeping responsibility falls to field personnel (Robertson, 2013).

The role of field instructor is multifaceted. Within one supervisory relationship, a field instructor may be a teacher, evaluator, supporter, consultant, or mentor (Everett et al., 2011; Ketner et al., 2017; Miehl et al., 2013). Among their many roles, field

instructors have reported discomfort and unease about the evaluation component of student supervision (Gazzola et al., 2013). During practicum, field instructors have found it difficult to balance the inherent power and authority in their evaluator role with serving as a support system for students (Bogo et al., 2007). Along with full-time social work educators, it appears that field supervisors, too, grapple with professional gatekeeping. Despite the demands and challenges of student supervision, field instructors remain committed to field education based on positive relationships with faculty and the quality of the school's interns (Zuckerman et al., 2017).

## **Conceptual Framework and Research Question**

To guide this study, the author used the conceptual framework of R. E. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory. Stakeholders are "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (R. E. Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Social work education is a complex system with multiple stakeholders: faculty, administrators, field instructors, students, alumni, social service employers, and clients (Street et al., 2019). Social work programs work cooperatively with the practice community (including agencies that host students and the practitioners who supervise them) to organize field education. Thus, stakeholder theory is an important framework for seeking field instructor perspectives on social work education. The research question in this study was: What factors influence field instructors as professional gatekeepers?

## **Methodology**

This research derives from a case study of social work admission at a small liberal arts university in the midwestern United States. A stakeholder analysis was conducted to seek stakeholder views on admission and gatekeeping practices in social work programs (Street et al., 2019). This paper offers new findings specific to field instructors and their perspectives on professional gatekeeping in field education.

## **Sample and Data Collection**

There were 13 participants in this exploratory study. Participants were field instructors who held a BSW or MSW degree and had proctored practicum students for at least three years, enough to have had sufficient experience to form opinions on field supervision and professional gatekeeping. The author had contacts with prospective participants in roles as social work faculty and field education coordinator. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling selects cases that are "information rich ... [to gain] insight about the phenomenon [under study]" (Patton, 2015, p. 46). With prior institutional review board approval, the author used purposeful sampling to recruit, via email, field instructors representing a variety of social work practice settings, in

order to elicit general viewpoints not attributable to particular practice specializations.

Using a semistructured questioning format, the author conducted two focus groups ( $n = 2$  and  $n = 3$ ) and eight individual interviews. The individual interviews were scheduled when participants were unavailable for focus group meetings. The sample averaged just over 10 years of practicum supervision experience (the range was 3 to 28 years), proctoring both graduate and undergraduate students. Nine field instructors were MSWs, and four held a BSW degree. Twelve of the field instructors identified as female, with one male participant. The sample represented seven different social work practice settings: youth services ( $n = 3$ ); community development ( $n = 2$ ); addictions ( $n = 2$ ); public schools ( $n = 2$ ); mental health ( $n = 2$ ); juvenile justice ( $n = 1$ ); and hospice ( $n = 1$ ). The field instructors had supervised students from multiple social work programs affiliated with both public and private universities. See Table 1 for a summary of study participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Practice Setting</b>	<b>Years Supervising Students</b>	<b>Interview Format</b>	<b>Interview Duration</b>
1	Addictions	14	Focus Group 1	42:21
2	Youth Services Community	19	Focus Group 1	
3	Development	12	Focus Group 2	47:51
4	Public School Community	11	Focus Group 2	
5	Development	7	Focus Group 2	
6	Public School	17	Individual	40:54
7	Addictions	9	Individual	43:28
8	Youth Services	5	Individual	39:40
9	Juvenile Justice	6	Individual	23:12
10	Youth Services	8	Individual	28:05
11	Mental Health	11	Individual	43:04
12	Hospice	28	Individual	1:06:31
13	Mental Health	5	Individual	49:35

**Notes.** A total of eight individual interviews and two focus groups were conducted with 13 field instructors.

## Data Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. For data analysis, the author used the constant comparative process. First, each transcript was read in its entirety. In the next read-through, the author began the process of open coding by “jot[ting] down notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins [of each transcript]” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). Next, axial coding was applied, by grouping the open codes into categories as patterns of data represented relationships among ideas and concepts (Kreuger & Casey, 2015). Themes emerged during data analysis from consistency among participants’ interview responses in the reiterative coding process. As the study progressed, the author prepared detailed written summaries to reflect on topic development, emerging themes, and questions for future interviews. Member checking was accomplished by sharing initial interpretations with participants to gain feedback; an audit trail recorded decision-making and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To develop trustworthiness, the author engaged two colleagues, both of whom were independent of the project and experienced in qualitative research, in peer debriefing to review methodology, transcripts, and coding process (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Data are presented in the form of participant quotations that represent and illustrate the study’s themes and findings in participants’ own words (Kreuger & Casey, 2015).

## Findings

In this study, field instructors clearly recognized an obligation to serve as professional gatekeepers when they supervised social work practicum students. Field instructors described four primary considerations influencing their sense of gatekeeping responsibility and their performance of gatekeeping activities: (a) identification with multiple field instructor roles, (b) ethical obligations as a professional social worker, (c) commitment to their students, and (d) support from the university. Figure 1 outlines influences on field instructors for professional gatekeeping.

### Figure 1

*Influences on Field Instructors’ Sense of Gatekeeping Responsibility and Performance of Gatekeeping Activities*



## Role Identification

Field instructors identified with multiple roles as they supervised students, serving as a teacher, coach, and mentor as well as a gatekeeper for the social work profession. As field instructors viewed themselves fulfilling multiple roles and functions in student supervision, there was pronounced attention to gatekeeping.

Fundamental to field instructor duties was the role of teacher. Participants took their teaching role very seriously and stressed that practicum students are learners, not an “extra helper.” A field instructor commented, “It’s ... our responsibility as field instructors to guide them [students] and to answer questions and to talk to them and to [provide] a learning moment.” Another field instructor shared, “It really takes a lot of work to instruct and teach them what to do and the processing [of their experiences]. ... I really like it.” Yet another described, “I’m really relaying everything [field experiences] back to their classes.” When students struggled in the field, the teacher role was particularly important to field instructors: “[When students struggle], I try to turn it around and ... [use] it as a teaching experience. ... [Practice] is all very different, and this is good stuff. ... Make them see ... [what] they struggle with is the good stuff they’re learning.”

Related to teaching was a coaching role, which focused more on training students on skill development and providing extra attention when students struggled. A participant noted, “[Field] instructors ... coach them and [must] not think they’re coming in with all the equipment they need [for practice].” Another field instructor

stated, "I'm a hard grader. But I want you to grow, so I will be a hard grader." In contrast was the role of mentor, which encompassed a more personal, relationship-based approach to student supervision. One field instructor stated, "Time ... has to be spent in developing and mentoring [students]." Mentoring involved guiding students in personal growth and development. A participant shared, "One of the core values of where I work is to write your own story, and [mentoring students] is like helping people write their own story."

Finally, field instructors were compelled to perform professional gatekeeping duties, since they strongly identified with the gatekeeper role. One supervisor shared, "Years ago ... I was asked ... was our role as field instructors to be gatekeepers. ... My [response] was, 'If not us, who?' Absolutely!" She continued, "Even if it is halfway through the practicum, I think we still have the responsibility to be gatekeepers and say, 'This person is not ready to be out there.'" As gatekeepers of the social work profession, field instructors felt responsible to provide candid feedback and have "tough conversation[s]" with students to discuss issues such as skill deficits, ethical concerns, and values conflicts. As one supervisor shared, "I think we have to be willing to say, 'We won't go any further at this point.' That's a hard-core decision to have to make." Participants asserted that field instructors must, when necessary, fulfill a gatekeeper role and be willing to say "no" regarding whether to pass a student who failed to demonstrate basic competencies in knowledge, values, and skills. When field instructors assumed a comprehensive approach to student supervision that encompassed multiple roles of teacher, mentor, and coach, professional gatekeeper was prominent among them.

### **Ethical Obligations**

Participants also cited ethical obligations that influenced their gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors. During field instruction, supervisors felt ethically obligated to multiple constituencies in the helping system, including clients, agencies, colleagues, and the social work profession.

Foremost was the field instructors' ethical obligation to ensure the safety and well-being of clients. In extreme situations, field instructors felt they could not risk allowing problematic students to have further contact with clients; they had an ethical obligation to intervene, or gatekeep, to protect clients and prevent harm. A longtime field instructor described a situation in which her student was terminated from practicum: "Finally, it was to the point that we had to say 'no' because this is going to be a danger to our clients. ... When it starts being a detriment to our clients, you have to [gatekeep]."

In addition, field instructors were sensitive to protecting the reputation of their



agencies and organizations. When agencies accepted interns, staff expected the students to “provide services to our clients and to our community.” With students who are, or are at high risk for, harming clients due to negligence or lack of knowledge or skills, participants described negative impacts on colleagues and hosting agencies. A field instructor stated, “As a field instructor ... you can’t have them representing your agency. ... You have to be careful with their interactions with other agencies ... [and] the community. ... You have to be really careful.” Field instructors noted that struggling students required additional oversight by other staff to ensure the students were behaving appropriately. Negative interactions could include those with colleagues and their clients (in group work, for example) and with partnering agencies (such as referral sources). When students are professionally unsuitable, one field instructor explained, “It’s a conflict and a mess. It’s no longer beneficial to us. It’s harmful for us, and it’s harmful to our agency, and our company, and our clients.”

When supervising students who were unprepared or unsuitable for social work practice, field instructors were keenly aware of a larger picture and the potential negative impacts on future employers. One participant observed, “A field instructor is not the final stop [for a student]. ... The agency that hires them [for a job after graduation] is ... even more stuck with the ... bad.” In an even broader view, field instructors described gatekeeping as an ethical obligation to protect the social work profession. One participant shared, “We want to have a good profession. We want to have good social workers out there.” Another supervisor added, “You don’t want to put someone into the profession who’s not going to be able to do it well.”

### **Commitment to Students**

Supervisors were invested in and committed to their students’ success. When students struggled, participants described intensive supervision strategies to help students improve their performance. The supervisors cared about their students’ well-being and viability as future social workers, which urged them to engage in gatekeeping when some students, even with extra support and remediation, still failed to achieve competence. In addition to their roles and identities as supervisors, the field instructors described feeling committed to their students’ success. Field instructors may feel this commitment while serving as a student’s coach or mentor, but this dynamic was greater than just the function or fulfillment of a supervisory role. Thus, it is included here as a separate theme and influence on gatekeeping behaviors.

A supervisor shared, “You find yourself in ... labor-intensive, time-intensive [supervision]. ... You feel frustrated for [the student] as well because of all the money they’ve spent and all the time they’ve spent.” She continued, “You know they’re not going to last in the field, and I feel a sense of responsibility to try to talk with them.” Another supervisor described her commitment to students as “investment in their

future, and that's a big deal."

Professional gatekeeping required supervisors' time, care, and attention. One supervisor stated, "It's a time commitment to take on a student, especially if you have a student that you have to spend a little more time with." She added, "And you've got all your other jobs to do on top of your commitment to the student." Field instructors described commitment to students in multiple ways, such as investing time and involvement overseeing cases while simultaneously demonstrating personal caring and support. A field instructor described a supervisory experience in which "We knew there were problems from the beginning, and we started addressing them. ... [We asked ourselves:] What more could we do? How else can we support [the student]?"

Engaging in professional gatekeeping was certainly not the easy route for supervisors. One participant noted, "[Gatekeeping requires] a lot more field hours. You'd think it would be less, but you find that you're working more." Another supervisor stated plainly, "[Professional gatekeeping] depends on whether you're invested [in your student] or not." Essentially, a field instructor who is committed to their students will engage in gatekeeping, while an ambivalent or uncommitted supervisor will remain uninvolved and simply pass the student without intervention or attempts to improve their knowledge or skills. Participants felt strong obligations to students, chiefly to help them achieve professional competence. Supervisors cared enough about their students and their futures to apply the extra efforts in gatekeeping. Field instructors' efforts were inspired by commitment and extraordinary investment in their students.

### **University Support**

Participants believed strongly that gatekeeping should continue into students' field experiences. One field instructor, for example, asserted that students should be "evaluated constantly." Furthermore, supervisors expected social work programs to intervene and gatekeep if students were not performing well in field. As such, university support was highly influential in field supervision.

The university's presence and involvement in practicum was essential to the supervisors' engagement in professional gatekeeping. Interestingly, participants saw faculty's role in gatekeeping as requiring extra work or effort that, frankly, some faculty and programs avoided. Field instructors appreciated proactive faculty who were "in tune" and available to the supervisors and students for assistance, demonstrating a willingness to participate in the difficult work of gatekeeping.

A field instructor described a challenging supervisory experience in which a student struggled with their own untreated mental health issues. The supervisor expressed the importance of partnering with the university during the process of working with the

student, noting that faculty were attentive and caring toward the student as well as helpful to her as supervisor. The supervisor stated, “*Everybody* [emphasis in original] was involved.” Field instructors wanted, needed, and expected university support in defining performance standards and taking action when students were not achieving basic competencies. A participant urged faculty, “It’s OK to hold somebody back and say, ‘You’re not ready.’” When there were serious problems with students, supervisors found formal interventions by university faculty to be helpful, including extra academic assignments, additional visits at the internship site, and intensive student advising.

Supervisors approached professional gatekeeping as a partnership with university faculty, whom they viewed as pivotal in the process of field education, with final authority to act regarding student performance. Field instructors recognized that their gatekeeping efforts could go only so far, and then the social work program was responsible for taking formal action with remediation, failing grades, practicum termination, or program dismissal. Participants saw practicum as a final gate before students enter professional practice. A supervisor stated, “[A student] can be admitted [to the social work program] and, at some point, still have the chance to derail.” When students struggled in the field and failed to demonstrate basic competence in helping skills, she added, “I think there needs to be an off-ramp.” For supervisors, field education was a rare, but sometimes necessary, “off-ramp” for underperforming students.

## Discussion

Field instructors’ participation in professional gatekeeping during social work practicum was influenced by four principal considerations: (a) identification with multiple field instructor roles, (b) ethical obligations as a professional social worker, (c) personal commitment to their students, and (d) support from the university. The role of field instructor is complex (Everett et al., 2011; Ketner et al., 2017). In this study, field instructors identified most with the roles of teacher, coach, mentor, and gatekeeper. Participants recognized their importance in social work education and were serious about their teaching role (Everett et al., 2011; Miehl et al., 2013). Mentorship, an aspect of supervision that is more relationship-based, has contributed greatly to students’ professional and personal development, with field supervisors serving as trusted guides (Ketner et al., 2017). As such, participants were also dedicated to providing personal, supportive supervisory relationships. Social work educators can prepare and assist field supervisors by acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating their various roles in students’ education and training. Specifically, social work programs can offer continuing professional education for their role as teacher; field faculty can offer support in managing relational aspects of student supervision. Field instructors often supervise students without remuneration or a reduction in their regular workload.

Social work educators must endeavor to support and inspire field instructors' professional and personal dedication to their positions.

When participants identified ethical considerations in professional gatekeeping, their concerns were consistent with the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (2021), in which social workers' responsibilities are outlined by constituency, including clients and colleagues, practice settings, and the profession. It is field instructors' ethical imperative to protect clients from harm by underperforming students (Nordstrand, 2017). In this study, when students failed to demonstrate basic competencies, field instructors reported feeling ethically obligated to intervene and, at times, disallow client contact. Like other field instructors, participants noted ethical implications impacting their agencies and colleagues when students underperformed (Bogo et al., 2007). As helping professionals, their adherence to ethical responsibilities is crucial to sound social work intervention at any level. Participants were keenly aware of and motivated by professional ethics, which is the very reason academic programs need them to teach and model good standards of practice for students. Field instructors have been motivated to supervise students by an ethical commitment to give back to the social work profession (Everett et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2019; Ketner et al., 2017). It is unsurprising, then, that the field instructors in this study were moved to protect their profession by preventing unsuitable students from transitioning into practice.

Supervisors were also driven by personal investment in their students' well-being. Field instructors have established that nurturing, developing, and caregiving are important features of supervision (Everett et al., 2011; B. J. Freeman et al., 2016; Robertson, 2013). Educators have an opportunity to model with field instructors the very behaviors students need during their field experience: those of investment, caring, and support. Social work programs contribute to student success when they support field instructors while also training and retaining skilled supervisors.

Participants consistently cited a need for strong faculty presence in field education. Without university support, field instructors have felt isolated, resenting the burden to pursue gatekeeping alone (Bogo et al., 2007). For example, field instructors have been mixed in their evaluation of faculty site visits, ranging from feeling satisfaction to viewing them "a waste of time" (Nordstrand, 2017, p. 490). Further, the quality of university involvement has been variable, depending on the individual faculty member (Nordstrand, 2017).

Applying stakeholder theory, successful field education programs can develop cooperation, interconnectedness, and interdependence with field instructors and partnering agencies, and operate with awareness of their stakeholders' concerns (R. E. Freeman, 1984). Based on past and present findings, it appears that faculty have

significant room for improvement in assisting field supervisors, beginning with purposeful site visits and availability for consultations (Nordstrand, 2017).

## Implications for Educators and Supervisors

Section 2.2.10 of the CSWE's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* requires social work programs to provide training and orientation to field instructors (CSWE, 2015). Field instructors have expressed that they want increased university support through training and access to learning resources (Hill et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2018), specifically on their role as gatekeepers, how to respond to struggling students, and when and how to counsel a student to leave the program (Everett et al., 2011).

At field trainings, faculty and field personnel should address the topic of professional gatekeeping. Trainings can focus on the considerations presented in this study to help field instructors conceptualize their gatekeeping duties. First, include a discussion of gatekeeper as a supervisory role. Next, frame caring for your student as holding them accountable for demonstration of basic social work competencies and as having difficult conversations to help students assess if social work is a good fit for them personally and professionally. Gatekeeping discussions should also address ethical responsibilities as outlined by the *NASW Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2021), not only to clients, but to the students themselves, agencies and colleagues, and the social work profession. Field instructors have not fully availed themselves of university resources when supervising students; in one study, a mere 35% of supervisors contacted faculty when overseeing a student struggling in field (B. J. Freeman et al., 2016). Therefore, trainings should include considerable discussion of academic resources and supports available from the university to assist field supervisors as well as the struggling student.

Foremost, the university and faculty must play an active, central role in overseeing students in field placements. Faculty and academic advisors must also participate in professional development regarding their responsibilities and expected behaviors in field education. Doing so can help ensure gatekeeping policies and competency-based education are effectively and consistently enforced. At a program level, educators should identify their gatekeeping philosophies, policies, and strategies along with available remediation options such as increased supervision and live observation, advising sessions, assigned readings, extra academic assignments and independent study, or a temporary leave of absence. Most importantly, faculty must follow through on the promises of support to field instructors.

## Limitations

In qualitative studies, researchers are concerned with trustworthiness: the consistency

and dependability of research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity demands reflection on the researcher's role in the co-construction of meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The author of this paper held dual roles as researcher and faculty in the study's setting; researcher positioning necessarily influenced sampling and data analysis. A further limitation is that of single-investigator design, though member checks and peer review techniques were utilized. This is an exploratory study, and greater sample representation would strengthen the research. Additional research might explore what specific gatekeeping techniques field instructors use in student supervision, how they choose and apply gatekeeping techniques, what techniques they find most effective, and how they learned those supervision skills.

### Conclusion

Field instructors are significant stakeholders and contributors to social work education. Students are required to demonstrate basic competence in knowledge, values, and skills with actual clients in a field setting before they graduate and transition to employment. Thus, social work programs depend upon practitioners to offer quality learning opportunities in the field, which requires recruitment and retention of effective and capable field instructors. Faculty have both a professional and an ethical obligation to prepare and support field instructors in their vital role.

In this study, field instructors' performance of professional gatekeeping tasks, a key aspect of effective student supervision, was influenced by four main considerations: (a) identification with multiple supervisory roles, particularly recognizing oneself as a professional gatekeeper; (b) ethical obligations as a professional social worker; (c) commitment to the best interests of their students; and (d) university support and oversight. To facilitate supervisors' participation in gatekeeping, social work programs can focus training efforts in these areas, most particularly with faculty's presence and willingness to assist field instructors.

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