DEVELOPING AN ETHICAL SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE PREPARATION PROGRAM

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BACKGROUND

The NASP Model of Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services envisions knowledge of legal, ethical, and professional standards as essential for all school psychologists (NASP, 2010a). A similar message can be found in the APA Code of Ethics (2002). Both NASP-approved and APA-approved graduate preparation programs are required to teach such standards and ensure that graduates have entry-level related knowledge and skills. Most programs address legal, ethical, and professional standards in a course on professional practices or in a seminar course, but also cover ethical issues throughout other coursework as well as in field experiences.

In addition to teaching legal, ethical, and professional standards, approved programs must provide multiple and systematic opportunities for their graduates to establish professional identities as school psychologists and affiliate with colleagues and faculty. Professional identities involve not only knowledge of ethical and professional standards but also a commitment to them, as seen in professional practice.

In this Technical Assistance Brief, we highlight program practices and faculty responsibilities that help establish an ethical culture and climate.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES FOR ESTABLISHING AN ETHICAL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

Every school psychology graduate preparation program has an ethical and professional culture defined in part by formal expectations for student and faculty conduct. Every program also has an ethics climate that emerges from interpersonal relationships among faculty and students; a sense of
shared responsibility for maintaining ethical conduct; and the ways that ethics are taught, learned, and practiced by both faculty and students (Keller, Murray, & Hargrove, 2012). An essential goal for school psychology faculty is to systematically build and sustain a culture and climate that “shapes and supports ethical work” of faculty and students (Keller et al., 2012, p. 221). Practices that help establish and maintain an ethical culture and climate follow.

Ensure that the program’s mission statement is consistent with the following statement from the NASP ethics code:

The decisions made by school psychologists affect the welfare of children and families and can enhance their schools and communities. For this reason, school psychologists are encouraged to strive for excellence rather than simply meeting the minimum obligations outlined in the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics, and to engage in the lifelong learning that is necessary to achieve and maintain expertise in applied professional ethics. (NASP, 2010b, Introduction)

Ensure that your program handbook includes a mission statement and standards for conduct related to the NASP and APA codes of ethics. Some programs go further and require a signed statement of student intent to comply with these codes. For example, Central Michigan University includes this statement in its program handbook:

Please pay particular attention to the introductory pages describing our program goals and philosophy. The ethical codes and professional standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) provide the foundations of our program. Key portions of the ethical codes of both APA and NASP are included in the Appendices of the Handbook. (2012, p. 2)

Include in your program handbook policies regarding how the progress of students may be evaluated on the basis of ethical behavior along with other personal and professional factors. Winthrop University, for example, includes this statement in its program handbook:

Academic dishonesty, falsification of admissions information, commission of a felony, or similar act which is judged to impair the professional credibility of the individual or program, personal and professional characteristics or lack thereof which are evaluated as being significant detrments to professional functioning, and/or violation of the NASP ethical principles may result in dismissal from the program. The program reserves the right to require students to complete special interventions as a condition for continuing enrollment when such interventions are deemed necessary by the faculty and program director to assure attainment of program goals/objectives and ability to function effectively as a school psychologist. (2013, p. 6)

Emphasize positive, prosocial ethical conduct rather than just a regulatory “how to stay out of trouble and keep your license” approach. A positive ethics approach, for example, might focus graduate students’ attention on the NASP ethics code’s four aspirational themes as well as the specific ethical standards. Those four themes are:

1. Respecting the dignity and rights of all persons
2. Professional competence and responsibility
3. Honesty and integrity in professional relationships
4. Responsibility to schools, families, communities, the profession, and society

Require first-year students to join a state or national professional association and perhaps attend professional meetings or conferences. This can be one of the professional “rites of passage” that gradually acculturate students into the school psychology profession.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACULTY

As previously discussed, program policies set the stage for a positive ethics climate, but program and faculty practices may be even more important. Writing about professional development (PD) of psychologists, Elman, Illfelder-Kaye, and Robiner point out that “… it is questionable whether trainees can be expected to be more attentive to matters of PD than are the faculty who teach, supervise, or mentor them” (2005, p. 371). Faculty must be good models of ethical and professional practice and model ethical conduct in all interactions with colleagues and students.

A comprehensive treatment of how faculty should teach ethics and professional practices is beyond the scope of this article (see Williams, Sinko, & Epifanio, 2010; Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman, & Klevansky, 2007). Briefly, however, program faculty are encouraged to become familiar with and implement a planned, multilevel ethics training approach. Dailor and Jacob (2010) suggested that this approach begin with an introductory course that provides initial exposure to ethical and professional standards followed by discussions and consideration of legal and ethical issues in other courses. Every faculty member should be able to address ethical issues related to their specialty areas and embed discussions of them in every course.

Ethics training should continue in supervised field experiences. Their prior ethics coursework enables practicum students and interns to resolve many common professional situations by consulting their site supervisors and ethics codes. However, some situations encountered in practice and internships are more complex and present dilemmas in which applying ethical codes is difficult. Practicum students and interns should be taught a problem-solving model such as the one suggested by Armistead, Williams, and Jacob (2011). Faculty and field site supervisors of practicum and internship students are encouraged to use a “think aloud” problem-solving approach in supervision rather than just providing answers to dilemmas.

Finally, faculty should reflect on the extent to which the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics (2010b) apply to their own conduct and to the practices of their graduate program. Faculty understand that the Principles are intended to define the contemporary identity and roles of school psychologists and guide the provision of school-based services. They may not, however, be aware that the Principles assert that “School psychologists who are faculty members at universities or who supervise graduate education field experiences apply these ethical principles in all work with school psychology graduate students. In addition, they promote the ethical practice of graduate students by providing specific and comprehensive instruction, feedback, and mentoring.”
REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


