

The Sticky Side of Service Learning: Confidentiality, Ethical Issues, and Liability

EDUC 3000: Diversity of Learners and Settings in Education

Don't panic. This is not about the mud you will fall into. It's about being aware. So as to stay away from the mud that might get splashed on you.

Confidentiality- As you may already know, professionals in law, medicine, social work, psychology (counseling) and certain other fields are obligated to maintain confidentiality between themselves and their clients, patients, education students. Whatever they learn from or about their patients, clients, or students is privileged information and cannot be revealed to others without permission from the client, patient, or students. Be aware that as a service worker in these situations, you may share in this privileged information. You may learn information about clients or patients, which is covered by these rules of confidentiality. Speak to your supervisor to discuss how the obligations of confidentiality may apply to you. But when in doubt, do not reveal or discuss information about clients, patients, or students without the permission.

Observing Unethical or Illegal Conduct- It happens. You may see contraband or you may be told of something going on (like child abuse, for example) that is illegal. What do you do? Especially in light of the confidentiality rules just mentioned, this is a particularly difficult issue. How do you balance the need to report a crime or unethical behavior against maintaining someone's confidence or jeopardizing someone's safety? Such dilemmas raise serious ethical questions where you may feel you have conflicting duties. What to do?

The possible circumstances are much too varied to be covered in any simple guideline. But the one rule you should always follow is do not try to resolve the problem alone consult with a supervisor or other professional to whom you are responsible. These situations occur more often than you think. They may be new and disturbing to you, but they will not be new to the professionals with whom you are working (and whose reputation and livelihood may be at stake if they are responsible for you). They have dealt with similar situations before and can almost always give good advice, even if it is just advice about whom else to talk to. Illegal and questionable behavior at your community placement should be reported to your Service Learning GTA immediately.

Liability- You are covered under a Limited Professional Liability Policy for any negligent act, error or omission while performing services in fulfillment of requirements of this class.

Prevention is good protection. Pay attention in orientation. It will give you important tips about knowing your limits. Try to avoid accidents and injuries. Ask first. If you have any doubts about the wisdom of doing something, consult your supervisor or other professional employed by your Community Partner.

You may be a volunteer, but you are doing real work with and for real people with real needs. Remember the cardinal rule: When in doubt, ask! Your service learning coordinator and your community partner are here to help.

Your Service Learning Coordinator

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