

Social Justice: Faculty Reports of Student Clinical Incompetence from the Ethic of Justice and the Ethic of Care

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Purpose & Rationale: This study examined the reports of faculty regarding student clinical incompetence. The researcher hypothesized that the extent to which faculty practice from an ethic of justice or from an ethic of care provides the framework, which supports the decisions to dismiss students. The study had two purposes: 1) to increase the understanding of how faculty address the issue of student clinical incompetence and 2) to contribute to educational leadership by examining faculty reports from the ethic of care and ethic of justice.

The rationale for the study is derived from the issue of clinical evaluation. The serious implications of incompetence include, but not limited to, safety, accountability and credibility of the academic institution. Clinical incompetence poses different challenges than failure related to the classroom grades. The issue is compounded by responsibilities to the student including due process and liberty rights.

Research Questions: 1.0 How do faculty report clinical incompetence from the ethic of justice?
2.0 How do faculty report clinical incompetence from the ethic of care?

Synthesis of Literature: The review included: 1) history of student case law as the legal underpinning of student rights and 2) the ethic of caring in professional values and duality of responsibility for patient safety and for due process rights of students. The nursing student is not an apprentice and faculty do not have unlimited control over dismissal. In redefining the relationship between the student and the university, the concepts of the due process have been established. The legal system supports faculty as expert evaluators of performance and there is unwillingness to overturn faculty decisions.

Addressing evaluation in a fair manner, and situations of clinical failure with care, demonstrates the ethic of care as it relates to the duality of responsibility that faculty have for safety and student rights. The right of patients for safe care and the rights of students for due process and fair evaluation are related to both the ethic of justice (Kohlberg 1981) and the ethic of care (Gilligan 1982).

Methods: A qualitative model was used. The purposeful sample of seven baccalaureate faculty was drawn from two private institutions in New England. The data collection involved individual tape-recorded interviews.

Results: Faculty reported student incompetence from the ethic of justice as being related to academic procedures that uphold due process rights of students. Faculty correlated incompetence to the ethic of care in controlling for subjectivity in the evaluation. Faculty related incompetence to the ethic of justice and the ethic of care as supportive constructs reconciling the conflict between the educative role of caring for students and the duty for safety.

Application to Practice: Drawing from the ethic of justice and care models can enhance faculty understanding that addressing clinical incompetence does not negate caring for students. Faculty need mentoring in evaluation and there is a need to develop standardized evaluation tools.