

PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY

School of Social Work, McMaster University

Rationale

The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Standards of Accreditation (2012) state that "The academic unit has a policy requiring that the performance of professional responsibilities of social work students be in accordance with the relevant social work code of ethics" (SB/M 2.4.4) and "The academic unit has a policy regarding the professional suitability of the student for the profession of social work. Students are made aware that serious or repeated violations of the Code of Ethics put them at risk of exclusion from the program on the basis of professional unsuitability" (SB/M 2.4.5)¹

CASWE's expectation of professional suitability derives from the wish to ensure that Schools not graduate social workers whose behavior is at odds with social work ethics and values and indicates they may do harm to service users and communities. In keeping with CASWE's intent and with the School's statement of philosophy, this policy is designed and will be implemented with scrupulous attention to understanding the context of behavior deemed unsuitable/ unethical and to ensuring that it not uncritically reproduce systemic exclusions.

Pursuant to the CASWE standards, the School of Social Work at McMaster University has developed the following document. Through this policy, the School of Social Work acknowledges its responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of students, staff, faculty members as well as the clients and staff of those agencies in which students carry out their field placements.

This policy shall be outlined in students' offers of admission to the School of Social Work. Students will be encouraged to become familiarized with the rights and responsibilities that are required of them in accordance with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics², the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice³, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms⁴, the Ontario Human Rights Code⁵ and McMaster University Policies including but not limited to Student Code of Conduct⁶, Academic Integrity⁷, Research Ethics⁸, Sexual Harassment⁹, Anti-Discrimination¹⁰ and Accessibility.¹¹

¹ <http://www.caswe-acfts.ca/vm/newvisual/attachments/866/Media/CASWEStandardsAccreditation2012.pdf>

² http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/CASW_Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf

³ <http://www.ocswssw.org/docs/codeofethicsstandardspractice.pdf>

⁴ <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/CH37-4-3-2002E.pdf>

⁵ http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90h19_e.htm

⁶ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/StudentCode.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/AcademicIntegrity.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/faculty/Conduct/ResearchEthicsPolicy.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/sexharassment.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Anti-Discrimination%20policy.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Accessibility.pdf>

Criteria for Review of a Student's Suitability for the Practice of Social Work

Situations in which students will be assessed for unsuitability include, but are not limited to the following:

- a) Concealment or distortion of the truth on the Application for Admission to the School of Social Work or to McMaster University;
- b) Harassment or any threat, intimidation or attempt to harm another person;
- c) Persistent and /or serious unethical behaviour which interferes with the ability to function within a professional context (as defined in the current CASW Code of Ethics and the OCSWSSW Social Work Standards of Practice) including but not limited to:
 - evidence that a student cannot effectively exercise judgment or function in a professional context;
 - evidence of persistent and/or serious inability to form professional relationships;
 - evidence of discriminatory behavior and persistent lack of reflexivity about behavior or lack of effort to change behavior identified as discriminatory;
 - persistent abuse or misuse of substances that interferes with the ability to function within a professional context;
 - criminal behaviour (a charge and/or conviction for crimes such as physical assault, sexual assault, drug trafficking, for which a pardon has not been received) which would interfere with the ability to function within a professional context; and
 - persistent and/or serious conduct that contravenes the policies of the university or of a field placement setting which cannot be resolved through negotiation or reassignment.

Procedure for Review of a Student's Suitability for the Practice of Social Work

Most concerns are resolved through a discussion between the student and the faculty member or field instructor. However, occasionally it is necessary to have an additional discussion and review of the concerns. We have found that the earlier a situation is identified and reviewed, the more likely the situation can be resolved informally. In some instances a concern is resolved by a student withdrawing from a course (including a field placement) without penalty. There are time limitations related to course withdrawal.

It is important to note that when a concern arises in a field setting, the earlier the field instructor and/or the student contacts the School, the greater the likelihood of resolution.

This procedure outlines two levels of review, an informal review and a formal review. A student may be asked not to attend class, field placement and/or other school activities until the review process is complete. If a student is asked not to attend a class and remains registered in the class, arrangements will be made for course material to be covered.

Informal Review

When a faculty member or field instructor has concerns about a student's suitability for the practice of social work, the faculty member or field instructor shall request a meeting with the student to discuss the concerns. If, however, the concerns are considered to be of a serious nature, the faculty member or field instructor will initiate a formal review.

When the concerns are identified by a field instructor, the faculty member who is the student's integrative seminar leader will be involved in the informal review meeting. It is assumed that in most circumstances, the field instructor and student have had some conversation about the concerns.

When concerns are identified about a student by another student, the student who identifies the concerns shall discuss her/his concerns with a faculty member, integrative seminar leader or field instructor who, depending upon her/his assessment of the complaint, shall request a meeting with the identified student.

The request for a meeting may be verbal or written. The faculty member, integrative seminar leader, field instructor or student may invite another person to be present for the meeting to act as an observer or support.

The review will seek to determine the student's suitability for the practice of social work and may result in:

- a fuller understanding of the situation and no need for further action;
- an agreed upon plan outlining actions the student will take to address the concerns and the establishment of a date to review the student's progress; and
- a decision to proceed to a formal review

The faculty member, field instructor and/or integrative seminar leader will summarize in writing the results of the informal review and will provide the student with a copy of the written summary.

Formal Review

A formal review of a student's suitability for the practice of social work will be requested in writing by a faculty member and/or a field instructor. The request will be addressed to the chairperson of the appropriate School program or her/his delegate (Chair of the Graduate Programs, Chair of the Undergraduate Programs or Chair of the Field Program). A copy of the request will be provided to the student. When a field instructor is requesting a formal review, the faculty member who is the student's integrative seminar leader¹² will be notified, consulted, and in most circumstances, will initiate the request. The concerns regarding the student's suitability for practice will be outlined in the request. The Program Chair or her/his delegate will decide if a formal review is necessary¹³. She/ he will provide, within one week of the request, written notification to the student and the faculty member and/or field instructor of this decision. If there is a decision to hold a formal review, the review will be scheduled for a mutually acceptable date normally within three weeks of the written original request.

The Formal Review will be chaired by the Program Chair or her/his delegate. The faculty member or field instructor who requested the review and the student will attend. At the discretion of the Program Chair or her/his delegate, additional people may be required to attend the review:

- a program chair other than the one chairing the Review.
- faculty members, field setting employees, students or any individuals who have relevant

¹² Integrative seminar leaders are faculty members. When the concern relates to a student in a field placement, the term "faculty" includes the integrative seminar leader. Henceforth in this document, the term "faculty" refers to integrative seminar leaders and/or other School faculty members.

¹³ If another university office or body is investigating the student's situation and the issues of concern, the Program Chair should consult with them to determine how best to proceed in order to ensure that reviews/ investigations do not overlap or compromise each other and that the safety of the student and others is not compromised.

- information or perspectives to contribute to the discussion
- the student may choose to have a person accompany them to act as an observer or support.

During the review, the information relating to the concerns about the student's suitability for practice will be presented by the faculty member and/or field instructor who requested the formal review. Any individuals in attendance who have relevant information or perspectives to contribute to the discussion will present their information. Relevant documentation, if available, will be reviewed. The student will have the opportunity to ask questions and present his or her position regarding the concerns. Suggestions regarding possible remedies

or sanctions will be considered. The student may request that only the Program Chair or her/his delegate hear information of a private nature. In this situation, the Program Chair or delegate may ask all other parties to leave.

Following the conclusion of the formal review, the Program Chair or her/his delegate will decide upon a course of action. A letter stating the decision, the reasons for the decision and a plan (when one has been developed) will be provided to the student within two weeks of the formal review. A copy of this letter and relevant documentation will be placed in the student's file.

All written communications will be delivered by post or email. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the School has her/his most recent mailing addresses.

The formal review may result in a number of possible outcomes. These outcomes may include, but are not limited to, the following decisions:

1. The student will continue in the program with no conditions;
2. The student will be referred to appropriate campus resources. Depending on the nature of the concern, the student may be referred to the Human Rights and Equity Office, the Academic Integrity Office, the Wellness Centre, Student Accessibility Services or other resources established by university policies governing student conduct. The student may be referred to or seek out a community resource to help them address the concern;
3. The student will continue in the program with conditions. These conditions must be met in order for the student to remain in the program. The conditions will include establishing a plan with goals, a time line, a description of how progress will be monitored and how the student will be evaluated. The conditions may involve a referral and attendance at counseling, advising and/or medical services. They may include attendance at workshops or courses or volunteer work. The student will report, with documentation, to the Program Chair or her/his delegate, within an agreed upon period of time, how she/he met the conditions. The student may be required to temporarily withdraw from the program or from field placement; and
4. The student will be required to withdraw from the program. The student will be given a written letter explaining the reasons for the withdrawal and the conditions, if any, under which they may be readmitted.

Appeals

The student will be informed that she/he has the right to appeal and should consult the McMaster University Student Appeal Procedures.¹⁴

Confidentiality

The School's responsibility is to protect the public and future service users and matters of confidentiality are articulated in that context. The School is committed to meeting the highest standard of ethics with respect to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the personal student information that we

¹⁴ <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/Students-AcademicStudies/StudentAppeal.pdf>

collect, use and disclose. The School of Social Work strives to protect the privacy rights of our students even when that student has been subject to a review of professional suitability as defined by this policy. However the School will balance the student's confidentiality against the School's duty to protect others. Therefore, information disclosed will not be kept confidential if the information raises concerns about a student's capability of assuming professional responsibilities related to social work practice. It should be noted that the School of Social Work reserves the right to share information with the University or a third party as required by law.

Approved: February, 2013