

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Introduced by: Graduate Academic Council and Undergraduate Academic Council

Date: November 2005; Amended March 2006

PROPOSAL FOR STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

IT IS HEREBY PROPOSED THAT THE FOLLOWING BE ADOPTED:

1. That the University Senate approves the attached "Proposal for Standards for Social Work Education" as approved by the School of Social Welfare, the Graduate Academic Council and the Undergraduate Academic Council.
2. That this proposal be forwarded to the President for approval.

School of Social Welfare University at Albany
Proposal for Standards for Social Work Education

The MSW and BS in social work prepare students for practice as professional social workers. The conduct of professional social workers is guided by a Code of Ethics and governed by state standards of professional conduct. Students in social work programs, as aspiring professional social workers, are expected to adhere to the same standards of conduct as degreed social workers. As part of their academic programs, students work in agencies conducting professional activities such as counseling and advocacy under supervision. Social work professional organizations expect schools of social work to screen students for suitability for the profession, a “gate-keeping” function. Consequently, social work programs hold students to professional standards of behavior that are higher than standards for students not in professional programs. Indeed, the social work accrediting body specifies that programs must have procedures for terminating students for reasons related to professional performance.

The School of Social Welfare proposes standards of professional responsibility for students in the Bachelor of Science in Social Welfare and Master of Social Work programs. The proposal also includes procedures for addressing violations of failure to meet the responsibilities.

The “Standards for Social Work Education” (attached) includes behaviors considered minimal for a professional social worker:

1. basic skills to attain professional competence (communication skills, interpersonal skills, cognitive skills and appreciation of diversity)
2. coping skills necessary for performance in the program and professional practice
3. professional performance skills necessary for work with clients and professional practice (professional commitment, professional conduct, self-awareness, and ethical obligations)
4. scholastic performance.

We propose that each student, upon matriculation, be required to sign acknowledging that s/he has read the Standards and understands that s/he is expected to uphold the standards. Later, while the student is matriculated, anyone affiliated with the School of Social Welfare may file a charge with a committee alleging the student has violated the standards. The Committee on Standards for Social Work Education will review the allegation and make a recommendation to the Dean of the School of Social Welfare. Sanctions should the charges be substantiated include a warning, probation, or dismissal from the major or the graduate program. The full Procedures for Addressing Violations...” are attached.

The Standards include standards of behaviors that students are currently expected to meet but which are not explicitly specified. The Standards and Procedures will clarify for students what is expected of them as social work students. The Standards and Procedures are modeled after similar standards and procedures at other social work programs. They have been reviewed by the University at Albany Counsel’s Office.

The procedures will not replace the University’s Community Rights and Responsibilities (the Judicial System) nor course grading. The Standards for Social Work Education will cover professional conduct behaviors that are not covered by current university procedures. However, they may also cover behaviors that are currently covered. For example, a student who harms a client may be failed in a Field Education course and may also be referred to the Committee on Standards for Social Work Education. Other examples of behavioral problems for which a student might be referred to the Committee include persistent violent behavior off-campus or impairment of professional judgment because of substance use.

Rationale for Professional Standards

The MSW and BS in social work prepare students for practice as professional social workers. The conduct of professional social workers is guided by a Code of Ethics and governed by state standards of professional conduct. Students in social work programs, as aspiring professional social workers, are expected to adhere to the same standards of conduct as degreed social workers. In addition, the social work accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education, requires that each program have procedures to terminate students for reasons of academic and professional performance.

During the senior year of the undergraduate major and during both years of the masters program, students undertake a field placement (internship) in a social work agency under the supervision of a professional social worker. The internships are two or three days a week through two academic semesters. The students perform a range of social work duties appropriate to the level (undergraduate or graduate), including interacting with professionals in a collegial manner, providing services to clients, and representing the agency in public. Students must have enough maturity, self-discipline, and self-awareness to handle such professional duties, particularly those related to client services. Indeed, to protect the agency and university from malpractice by the students, the university has legal contracts with field agencies and provides malpractice insurance.

Both MSW and BS social workers are also expected to adhere to professional conduct spelled out by the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999). The Code includes as core ethical principles

- service (to help people in need and address social problems),
- social justice,
- respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person,
- importance of human relationships as strengths and means of change,
- integrity or practicing ethically, and
- competence.

The NASW Code of Ethics (<http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp>) spells out ethical obligations that social workers have

- to clients (self-determination, informed consent, confidentiality, competent service, cultural competence, etc.),
- to colleagues (respect, collaboration, referral, etc.),
- in their practice settings (supervision, billing, continued professional education, etc.),
- professional ethical responsibilities (not misrepresenting one's-self, not acting while impaired), and
- to the professional (e.g., ethics in research, dissemination of new knowledge).

In addition, the State Office of the Professions uses the NASW Code as "standard practice" when considering ethical violations for licensed social workers (N. Cohen, personal communication).

In New York State, MSW social workers are licensed. Applicants must be "of good moral character;" "good moral character" is not clearly defined but candidates are screened for felony and misdemeanor convictions, disciplinary measures, or professional restrictions. Licensed social workers must adhere to the rules of professional conduct specified by the NYS Education Law (Title 8) and the Rules of the Board of Regents (part 29). These rules include .

- Engaging in acts of gross incompetence or gross negligence on a single occasion, or negligence or incompetence on more than one occasion
- Permitting or aiding an unlicensed person to perform activities requiring a license
- Refusing a client or patient service because of race, creed, color, or national origin
- Practicing beyond the scope of the profession
- Releasing confidential information without authorization
- Being convicted of a crime
- Failing to return or provide copies of records on request
- Being sexually or physically abusive
- Abandoning or neglecting a patient in need of immediate care
- Performing unnecessary work or unauthorized services
- Practicing under the influence of alcohol or other drugs

Office of the Professions, State Education Department, Professional Conduct and Discipline, <http://www.op.nysed.gov/opd.htm>, accessed 9/24/04

In many other states, baccalaureate level social workers are licensed or certified with similar legal rules governing professional conduct.

Finally, to reinforce the gate-keeping function of schools of social work, the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) specify: "The program has policies and procedures for terminating a student's enrollment in the social work program for reasons of academic and professional performance" (CSWE, Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, 2001, 5.7; <http://www.cswe.org>). While the CSWE does not dictate the content of the policies, there is extensive literature in social work education on "gate-keeping," including what behaviors are essential to professional social work, legal precedents for requiring professional behaviors of students, ethical obligations to protect clients, and the extent of the Americans with Disabilities' act (especially concerning impairment due to mental illness and substance abuse).