

## Memorial University School of Social Work

# Social Media Policy and Guidelines for Social Work Students

### **Preamble**

“The academic unit has a guideline regarding the ethical use of all forms of social media to ensure the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the academic unit and its field practicum community” (SB/M, 2.4.6, *CASWE Standards for Accreditation*, 2012).

With more and more social workers embracing social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, the question arises as to where social workers draw the line in terms of boundaries with service-users or participants and other professional relationships.

The rapidly changing world of social media has exceeded our ability to anticipate the impact of these forms of communication. As people increasingly use social media, the School established the *Social Media Policy and Guidelines for Social Work Students*.

***The Social Media Policy and Guidelines apply to all Memorial University social work students in all aspects of their studies, including when participating in field practica and undertaking research. This guideline does not preclude using social media to undertake research or recruit research participants, subject to approval by an ethics board.***

*The Social Media Policy and Guidelines* are consistent with the *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005), which outlines the core social work values as:

- Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons
- Pursuit of social justice
- Service to humanity
- Integrity of professional practice
- Confidentiality of professional practice
- Competence of professional practice

*The Social Media Policy and Guidelines* also are consistent with CASW’s *Social Media Use and Social Work Practice* (2014), the CASW’s *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005), the Memorial University *Student Code of Conduct* (2015), and the School of Social Work document *Bachelor of Social Work Programs Suitability for the Profession Policy and Procedures* (2016).

### **Social Media Policy Statement**

The School of Social Work recognizes the importance of the internet and is committed to supporting the right of students to interact knowledgeably and respectfully through social media. The School of Social Work strives to provide students with an environment of free inquiry and expression, wherein freedom of expression and academic freedom in electronic format has the same latitude as in printed or oral communication.

As such, all social work students are responsible and accountable for their actions and statements. Students are expected to use social media in a manner that upholds the standards and ethics of the social work profession and Memorial University's expectations of students' conduct.

The use of any information without permission; confidential information; or unfounded, derogatory, or misrepresentative statements about the School of Social Work or its members (including students, staff, faculty, and guests), field practica, or field agencies or their members (including staff, volunteers, service users, and participants) on the internet can result in disciplinary action up to and including termination of the field practicum and/or expulsion from the social work program.

## **Guidelines for the Use of All Forms of Social Media**

The School of Social Work encourages students to write accurately and knowledgeably, and to demonstrate professionalism. Despite disclaimers, internet interactions can result in members of the public forming opinions about the profession of social work, the School of Social Work and its members, the field internship, and field agencies and their members.

While these guidelines are not intended to infringe upon students' personal interactions or commentary online, as developing or existing professional social workers, it is students' responsibility to understand and consistently live by the *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005).

These guidelines are intended to provide guidance for students to:

- interact respectfully and knowledgeably with people on the internet;
- make appropriate decisions about any online exchanges related to the School of Social Work and field agencies within the scope of the *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005) and *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005), *Memorial University Student Code of Conduct* (2015), and the School of Social Work document *Bachelor of Social Work Programs Suitability for the Profession Policy and Procedures* (2016); and
- protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the School of Social Work and its members and field agencies and their members.

Students shall be mindful of professional boundaries if they request members of the School of Social Work or field agencies to connect with them on social media sites.

If students are developing websites, social networking groups, or writing blogs that will mention the School of Social Work or its members or field agencies or their members, students shall:

- Identify that they are students and that the views expressed are theirs alone and do not represent the views of the School of Social Work and/or field agencies.
- Not speak on behalf of either the School of Social Work or field agencies, unless given permission in writing by the School of Social Work or the field instructors.
- Inform the School of Social Work and/or the field instructors that they are doing so. Students need to clearly state their goals and what the social media site intends to say or reflect. Representatives of the School of Social Work and the field agency may choose to visit the social media site from time to time to understand the students' viewpoint.

## **Confidential Information**

Students shall not share any confidential information about the School of Social Work or its members or field agencies or their members.

If students have any questions or are unsure about whether information is confidential or public, it is important to speak with a field instructor, a Field Education Coordinator, and/or an Associate Dean or Dean of the School of Social Work before releasing any information that could potentially harm the School of Social Work or its members or field agencies or their members.

## **Respect and Privacy Rights**

Students are expected to speak respectfully about the School of Social Work and its members, their field internship, and field agencies and their members. Students shall not engage in behaviours that will reflect negatively on the social work profession, the School of Social Work or its members, or field agencies or their members.

## **Photographs and Other Audio/Video Recordings**

Taking and sharing photographs or other audio/video recordings without consent is a breach of privacy and confidentiality. As agencies increasingly use photography and other forms of audio/video recording for professional consultation, research, and education purposes, it is crucial for students to know the field agency's policy regarding photographs and other audio/video recordings, including any limitations on their use.

## **Legal Liability**

Students are legally liable for anything they write, present, or submit online. Nothing published on the internet is confidential. Students can be disciplined by the School of Social Work for commentary, content, or images that are defamatory, pornographic, proprietary, harassing, libelous, or that can create a hostile work or learning environment, or that contravenes the *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005), the Memorial University's *Code of Student Conduct* (2010), or the School of Social Work document *Bachelor of Social Work Programs Suitability for the Profession Policy and Procedures* (2016).

Students may be subject to legal action by any individual, agency, or organization that views their commentary, content, or images as defamatory, pornographic, proprietary, harassing, libelous, or as creating a hostile work or learning environment, or as contravening their right to privacy and confidentiality.

## **Interactions with Past and/or Present Field Agency Service Users and Participants**

Students shall:

- Not "friend" past or present field agency service users or participants.
- Not allow past or present service users or participants to "friend" you.
- Not use messaging on social media networks (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) to contact service users or participants, or to respond to service users or participants who may have contacted students. These sites are neither secure nor confidential.

- Possess a working knowledge of the privacy controls on the social media networks they use.
- Ensure that the general public cannot see personal details of their lives that they would prefer to share only with friends and family.
- Use only their professional (field agency) email address to communicate with service users and participants.
- Ensure that all email communication with service users and participants is of a professional nature and does not involve personal discussions or disclosures.
- Not discuss details of their social work practice with service users or participants.

If students choose to communicate with service users or participants via email, they need to be aware that all emails are retained in the logs of the Internet Service Providers. While it is unlikely that anyone will examine them, these logs are available to be read by the Internet Service Providers' system administrators. Thus, privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

## **Tips for Responding to Social Media Requests from Service Users and Participants**

*Here are examples of what students can say to service users or participants who request or attempt to contact them through any form of social media.*

### **Friending:**

“I do not accept friend requests from current or former service users or participants on any social networking sites, including Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. I believe that adding service users or participants as friends can compromise confidentiality and blur the boundaries of our working relationship. If you have questions or concerns about this, I will be happy to talk more about this when we next meet.”

### **Connecting:**

“Please do not contact me by using messaging on any social networking sites, including Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. These sites are not secure or confidential. Also, I may not read these messages in a timely fashion. If you need to contact me, please use the system outlined in our first meeting.”

### **Email:**

“I prefer to use email only to arrange or modify appointments. Please do not use email to send content related to our work together, as email is not completely secure or confidential. If you choose to communicate with me by email, please be aware that all emails are retained in the logs of your and my Internet Service Providers. While it is unlikely that anyone will look at these logs, they are available to be read by the system administrators of either Internet Service Provider. I print and place in your file all emails that I send to and receive from you.”

## **Consequences**

Information shared on the internet is public and may be shared with unintended recipients. Such information may be used for pre-field practicum screening, pre-employment screening, evidence for disciplinary action, and grounds for legal action.

The use of unfounded or derogatory statements or misrepresentation of the School of Social Work or its members, the field practicum, or the field agency or its members can result in disciplinary action up to and including termination of the field practicum and/or expulsion from the social work program.

Complaints about BSW students using social media in an unsuitable, unethical, or inappropriate manner will be addressed by the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs using Memorial University's *Student Code of Conduct* (2015) and/or the School of Social Work document *Bachelor of Social Work Programs Suitability for the Profession Policy and Procedures* (2016).

Complaints about MSW and PhD students using social media in an unsuitable, unethical, or inappropriate manner will be addressed by the Associate Dean of Graduate Programs and Research.

(This document is adapted from the *Renison University College, School of Social Work Social Media Policy, 2012*)