

## **Tulane University School of Social Work Online Communication Guidelines for Students**

Online communications platforms are powerful tools to share knowledge, advocate, and network. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, SnapChat, Pinterest, Reddit, and others, provide opportunities to follow interests and connect with colleagues, friends, and family members. Blogs, texts, and email listservs are other examples of online communication platforms. These platforms, and the way in which they are used, can be influential and, in some cases, harmful.

The widespread use and accessibility of online information must be carefully considered within social work settings. Social workers must adhere to stringent professional standards as outlined by the [National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics](#). Precautions in online communications should be taken to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and the highest standards of professionalism. This is to protect the practitioner (or student) and the clients they serve while also upholding the core values of Social Work. Therefore, the Tulane University School of Social Work has developed the following guidelines to help students and fieldwork agencies determine appropriate online conduct as it relates to social work practice. They include recommendations from the [NASW, ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice brochure](#) as well as [Tulane University Communications & Marketing](#).

In addition to protecting client confidentiality, social workers should be mindful of everything they do online. Whether sharing news on a private page, commenting on a post, emailing, texting, or retweeting an article, a person's electronic presence can easily be made widely available. Anyone can discover personal information based on professional affiliations and use of social media. Photos, videos, comments, and other postings could undermine a social worker's personal safety and/or professional competence. Any online activity construed to cause boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, harm to clients, or misrepresent the profession.

### **Clinical Guidelines and Expectations**

The following can help students navigate their personal online presence as it pertains to clinical work:

- Obey the Terms of Service of any social media and electronic communication platform employed.
- Do not post identifying or confidential information about clients.
- Do not communicate with clients using technology for personal or nonwork-related purposes.
- Do not accept requests from or engage in personal relationships with clients on online social networks or other electronic media.
- Avoid sharing contact information, including email, phone numbers, addresses, social media links, etc. with a current or former client or client group.
- Think twice before posting. Consider what could happen if a post becomes widely known and how that may reflect on a person, the fieldwork site/agency, or the university.
- Carefully consider sharing a fieldwork site/agency on a personal social media page, as that may easily lead to increased divulgence of information.
- Carefully consider conducting online searches for client information. In a macro setting, this may be common practice when doing evaluation or other work, but in a clinical setting, such searches may lead to boundary violations and other interference with both

client trust and the therapeutic process.

### **Fieldwork Expectations**

As previously stated, students are expected to adhere to social work values, ethics and engage in professional conduct as outlined in the [NASW Code of Ethics](#) when using social media communication tools, whether using a personal site or an agency site. Common issues that students need to understand and manage when utilizing social media in the field setting include, but are not limited to, privacy and confidentiality (Section 1.07), conflicts of interest and dual relationships (Section 1.06), and informed consent (Section 1.03) in our relationships with clients, colleagues and in our practice settings.

Students should learn and adhere to the field site/agency's policy on social media use. If the student learns that the agency does not have a formal social media policy, the student should learn and follow the agency's general guidelines and expectations for students regarding social media use at home and at the field site. A lax agency policy or lack thereof does not supersede the policies of the school as outlined in this manual.

Before using social media communication tools on behalf of a field agency, students shall seek approval of any messages or posts and be careful not to endorse or promote a product, cause or position without prior approval. In some cases, a fieldwork site/agency may ask or encourage students to post information online to further its goals, fundraise, or advocate for their constituencies. In either case, online communications shall be conducted in a professional manner using the following guidelines:

- Exercise great care in the representation of the social work profession. Online content can easily be misinterpreted, so be clear, concise, and thoughtful when posting.
- When sharing social work-related news or academic research, strive for accuracy and review posts for grammatical and spelling errors.
- Be respectful in electronic communications. Content contributed to a site could encourage comments or discussion of opposing ideas. Consider responses carefully.
- Advocate in a manner that is consistent with professional, legal, and ethical standards.
- Do not use technology to harass, threaten, insult, label, or coerce individuals or groups.
- Be mindful of the copyright and intellectual property rights of others and of the university.

### **Student Professional Conduct Expectations**

The Student Professional and Ethical Standards section of the [Student Rights & Responsibilities Handbook](#) indicates that "all students enrolled in a social work degree must abide by the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics." This extends to their behavior online and in electronic communication. Per ethical standards:

#### ***Standard 1.01: Ethics and Values***

**"When social workers use technology to provide information to the public, they shall take reasonable steps to ensure that the information is accurate, respectful, and consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics.** When communicating with the public using Web sites, blogs, social media, or other forms of electronic communication, social workers should make every effort to ensure that the information reflects the values, ethics, and mission of the profession (NASW, 2017, p. 10)."

***Standard 1.02: Representation of Self and Accuracy of Information***

**“When social workers use technology to provide information to the public, they shall take reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of the information they disseminate. Social workers should post information from trustworthy sources, having ensured the accuracy and appropriateness of the material.” (NASW, 2017, p. 10). [See the NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice](#) for all ethical standards related to technology.**

Examples of violations on any of the online communication platforms previously mentioned include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Posting and/or sharing information that violates the standards of behavior contained in the [Tulane University's Student Code of Conduct](#) (for example, using social media for the purpose of harassment, intimidation, or cyberbullying).
- Posting and/or sharing information that violates the professionalism standards contained in the [NASW Code of Ethics](#) and/or [Technology in Social Work Practice Standards](#).
- Posting and/or sharing coursework, assignments, or test/ quiz/ exam answers.
- Emailing and/or messaging faculty or staff in an unprofessional manner.

Individuals who violate the standards of this policy will be subject to corrective or disciplinary action as outlined in the Academic Code of Conduct and Student Professional and Ethical Standards sections of the [Student Rights & Responsibilities Handbook](#).

Above all else, remember to exercise the highest level of professionalism in your words and writing. Social media channels provide an excellent means to build community; however, as students utilize these tools, they should take care to do no harm to themselves, their field sites, their clients, TSSW, their classmates or to the social work profession in the process.

Questions related to these social media guidelines can be directed to Dr. Joan Blakey ([jblakey1@tulane.edu](mailto:jblakey1@tulane.edu)), Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Tulane School of Social Work.

- Adapted with permission from: University of Michigan School of Social Work: <http://ssw.umich.edu/programs/msw/ofi/SocialNetworkingBrochure.pdf>
- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Tate Turner Kuralt, School of Social Work: <http://ssw.unc.edu/files/GuidelinesfortheUseofSocialMedia-2012-2013.pdf>