



St. Thomas
UNIVERSITY

School of Social Work
Policy on Social and Electronic Media
and the Use of Electronic Devices

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CONTACT
School of Social Work
(506) 452-0540 | socialwork@stu.ca

1.0 Preamble

The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Standards for Accreditation, SB/M, 2.4.6, requires that the School of Social Work have a policy that covers the “ethical use of all forms of social media to ensure the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the academic unit and its field placement community” and that demonstrates “how the policy and procedures are consistent with the relevant human rights legislation, with the mission of CASWE, and with the mission of the academic unit concerned.”

The *Policy on Social and Electronic Media and the Use of Electronic Devices in the School of Social Work* is 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 School of Social Work recognizes that the use of social media and electronic devices can enhance learning and knowledge sharing and support social justice goals. However, the widespread integration of social media into personal and professional life poses unique challenges and risks to professionals and service users. All social work students are responsible and accountable for their actions and statements. Students are expected to use social media, and electronic devices, in a manner that upholds the standards and ethics of the social work profession.

This policy applies to all St. Thomas University social work students in all aspects of their studies, including participation in field practicums and research. This policy does not preclude using social media to undertake research or recruit research participants, subject to approval by a research ethics board.

Students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with policies related to ethical standards of communication including, but not limited to, the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers (NBASW) *Code of Ethics* (2007) and the NBASW *Standards for the use of Technology in Social Work Practice* (2010), the *New Brunswick Human Rights Act*, and the St. Thomas University *Policy on Non-Academic Misconduct* (2015) and the St. Thomas University *Harassment and Discrimination Policy (Students)* (2012).

2.0 Definitions

2.1 *Social Media*: “Social media” refers to socially interactive networked information and communication technologies by which information, opinions, and discussions are presented for public consumption on the internet. This includes, but is not limited to, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Texting, Email, Blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, etc.

2.2 *Post*: “Post” refers to any user-generated information shared on a social media site. This includes, but is not limited to, Facebook status updates, tweets, blog updates, etc.

2.3 *Electronic Device*: “Electronic device” refers to any computer or wireless device that provides communication by e-mail, telephone, text messaging, internet browsing, or is used for recording purposes. This includes, but is not limited to, cellphones, smartphones, tablets, smart pens, laptops, etc.

3.0 Social and Electronic Media Policy Statement

The School of Social Work recognizes the importance of the internet and is committed to supporting the rights of students to interact respectfully and knowledgeably through social media. The School 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. The School requires students to demonstrate professionalism in all interactions; written, electronic and oral forms. Despite disclaimers, internet interactions and postings can result in the public forming opinions about the profession of social work, the School of Social Work, and St. Thomas University.

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 practice, or field agencies or their members (including staff, volunteers, service users, and participants) on the internet may result in a review of the student’s status under the *Policy Governing Deferred, Denied, or Unsuccessful Field Placements in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017) and/or the *Policy Governing Professional Suitability in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017).

4.0 General Guidelines for Appropriate Use of Social and Electronic Media

These guidelines are intended to provide guidance for social work students to:

- interact respectfully and knowledgeably with people on the internet
- respect copyright and intellectual property rights
- make appropriate decisions about any online exchanges related to the School of Social Work and field agencies within the scope of the *CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005) and the *NBASW Standards for the use of Technology in Social Work Practice* (2010), the *St. Thomas University Policy on Non-Academic Misconduct* (2015), and the *Policy Governing Professional Suitability in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017); and
- protect the privacy, confidentiality, and interests of the School of Social Work and its members and field agencies and their members.

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

- Identify that they are students and that the views expressed are their own 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 field agencies, unless given permission in writing by the School of Social Work or field instructor.
- Inform the School of Social Work and/or field instructor that they are doing so. Students need to clearly state their goals and what the social media site intends to say or reflect.

Confidential Information

Students shall not share any confidential information about the School of Social Work or its staff, faculty, 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, the Field Education Coordinator, and/or a faculty member before releasing information that may reflect negatively on the social work profession, the School of Social Work; its staff, faculty, field agencies or their members, or students in the social work program. **Students should always seek permission before they post information about a third party on public social media.**

Respect and Privacy Rights

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

Students shall respect the privacy of their classmates. Defamatory, harassing, or insulting comments and postings to produce a hostile work and/or learning environment constitute unprofessional behavior and will result in a suitability review under the *Policy Governing Professional Suitability in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017), and /or the St. Thomas University *Policy on Non-Academic Misconduct* (2015).

Photographs and Audio/Video Recordings

Taking and sharing photographs or 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 audio/video recordings, including any limitations of their use.

Professional Suitability

Nothing published on the internet is confidential. The *Policy Governing Professional Suitability in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017) outlines behaviours and situations that may result in a suitability review. In particular, students should note that their behaviour outside of the university and social work practice environments, including certain aspects of their personal lives, may have an impact on their suitability for practice.

Use of Electronic Devices in the Classroom

Students are required to approach the classroom environment with the same level of professionalism that applies to field placements and other professional work settings. It is important that the classroom is a place of focused attention to the material under review. In an effort to maintain educational integrity, respect for the rights of others, and a positive learning

environment, the School of Social Work has developed the following guidelines for the use of electronic devices in the classroom:

- The use of handheld electronic devices during class time can be distracting, disrespectful, and viewed as unprofessional behaviour. Therefore, the use of such devices is limited to scheduled breaks;
- Electronic cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, are treated in the same way that regular cigarettes are treated and may only be used in designated smoking areas;
- Laptops may be used only in consultation with the course instructor;
- All handheld electronic devices, including cellphones, must be stored out of sight and switched off during class. No electronic devices should be on the desk/table or a student's lap. Texting messages during class is prohibited;
- Receipt and response to electronic messages or phone calls during class or field placement will be restricted to emergencies. When such a call or message is expected, the student should consult the instructor or field supervisor in advance;
- It is prohibited to record classroom lectures and/or interactions through photography, audio-recording or video-recoding unless authorized by the instructor and all participating parties.

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

Students shall:

- Not approach field instructors, faculty, staff, service users, or their family members to connect on social media sites.
- Not connect with their clients (current or past), nor allow their clients to connect with them using social media: e.g., they shall not "friend" them on Facebook or "follow" them on Twitter. They shall use only their professional (work/field placement) email address to communicate with clients.
- Possess a working knowledge of the privacy controls on the social media networks they use.
- Use only their professional (field agency) email address when communicating electronically 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.

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 is an example of what students can say to service users or participants who request or attempt to contact them through any form of social media. Students need to familiarize themselves with field agency policies related to the use of social media when they commence their field placements.

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.”

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.

Complaints about MSW/BSW students using social media in an unsuitable, unethical, or inappropriate manner will be addressed by the Director using the University’s *Policy on Non-Academic Misconduct* (2015), and/or the Schools’ *Policy Governing Professional Suitability in the School of Social Work* (2014; rev. 2017).

(Adapted with permission from the Memorial University Newfoundland (MUN) School of Social Work, *Social Media Policy and Guidelines*, 2016)