

## **Social Media Policy, School of Social Work, Lakehead University**

### Background Context

Social Workers are increasingly reliant on online communication (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) in both their professional and personal lives. The following social media policy and guidelines are intended to help Social Work students understand and navigate some of ethical issues that arise from their involvement in online media, and to provide guidelines for safe, ethical, online communication.

Whether you are using social media as a vehicle to advance your professional activities and to advocate for social justice, or to maintain contact with friends and family and to engage in other personal activities, you are developing an online public presence and professional image that reflects not only on you, but also on the profession, and on the School and the University. Whether you are at your Field Placement or at home, you should be aware of how your online conduct might be viewed by society/service users/colleagues/other agencies/the media/governing bodies. Our legal and ethical responsibilities as Social Workers extend beyond our offices and into the online world of social media sites.

The image we want to portray as Social Workers is that we are trustworthy and that the profession is honorable. As faculty members in the School of Social Work, we hold ourselves accountable to a standard that maintains that public trust and respect, and we ask our students to do the same.

### Policy Statement

The Lakehead School of Social Work is committed to maintaining an academic culture of freedom of inquiry and expression, in both oral and printed communication, including in electronic format. Faculty, staff, and students acknowledge the important role of electronic social media in supporting the values and principles of the profession and in promoting social change, and commit themselves to using social media knowledgeably and wisely. All members of the School community are accountable for their actions and statements in public forums, including online media.

As future members of the profession, students are expected to learn and understand the importance of intelligent, wise, and ethical use of social media, and to engage in social media practices that are consistent with human rights legislation, the ethical standards of the profession of Social Work, the mission of CASWE-ACFTS, and with the mission of the Lakehead School of Social Work. Students are encouraged to use social media to exchange ideas and knowledge, and to promote the Social Work profession. Students should apply the same principles, expectations and standards for interacting and communicating with people online as in other areas of practice.

Violation of this policy and guidelines may result in an informal and/or formal review of the student's suitability for professional practice (see School of Social Work *Professional Suitability Policy*).

### Guidelines

Students are expected to adhere to Social Work values and ethics, and to engage in professional conduct as outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics when using social media communication tools, whether using a personal site, agency site, or University site.

The CASWE Code of Ethics 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

### *Confidentiality*

Our ethical obligations to our clients are the same whether it is through written communication, email, texting, or through Facebook, Twitter or any other social media. Social Workers are responsible for setting and maintaining clear boundaries, and for maintaining the confidentiality of information related to clients, employers, colleagues, and supervisors. Social Work students are responsible for understanding how to use social media, and for checking personal security settings.

### *Dual relationships*

Social Work students should maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries in their relationships with clients, supervisors, and colleagues. Allowing clients or former clients to cross into your personal life will complicate and blur your professional boundaries. This is particularly tricky when managing your Facebook account. It is your responsibility to manage your privacy settings, friend requests, and level of self-disclosure, and to monitor all interactions, including wall posts, on your site.

### *Privacy*

There really is no such thing as privacy or security of information on the internet. Everything you post online becomes public information and is potentially permanent and available to anyone with access to the internet, even if you attempt to modify or delete your post.

Messages you have created, as well as third party material you have used in a message, may end up being used in ways you did not originally foresee. You cannot anticipate how what you say might reverberate throughout social media to people you did not intend. For example, a comment you make on a colleague's Facebook wall is visible to anyone that person is connected to. People can see when you are tagged in photos, view comments made by others, note your status updates, and see who you've friended. Search engines can turn up posts years after they are created, and comments can be forwarded or copied.

You are legally liable for everything you write or post online. Comments and images that are defamatory, pornographic, proprietary, harassing, libelous, or that can create a hostile work environment can open you to legal action by an individual or organization, and to dismissal from the School.

### Guidelines for responsible, safe online conduct

- Be thoughtful about all your interactions online. Your posts and your profile can help you build a good reputation in your community.

- If you wouldn't say it at a conference or to a member of the media, consider whether you should post it online.
- Be aware that employers and volunteer organizations are increasingly running online searches and even asking for permission to gain access to your online identity, before making a job offer. A good guideline is to not put anything on a social networking site that you would not want to see on the front page of the paper. Try running a google search on yourself to see what image you've created.
- Be vigilant about the safety of your identity that of your friends and family. Consider the implication and risks of putting any personal information on social media sites. You may want to ask family and friends to bear this in mind when posting information that includes you (photographs, or family information, for example).
- Even when you assume you are speaking for yourself, your comments can be understood as representing the profession, the School, the Agency where you are working, and the University.
- Be knowledgeable, accurate, and respectful when referring to others, including the School, professors, supervisors, your Placement agency, the University, and colleagues.
- Refrain from any online comment that could reflect negatively on the School of Social Work or your placement's reputation.
- Never reveal identifiable content or privileged information about work or individuals unless you have permission to do so.
- Avoid harassment, intimidation, abuse or threats (both when posting and responding to posts).
- Know and understand your agency's policies regarding the use of social media.

#### Sharing information (adapted from Renison University College School of Social Work)

Unless given permission in writing by the Director of the School of Social Work you are not authorized to speak on behalf of the School. Unless given permission in writing by the Field Supervisor and your agency supervisor you are not authorized to speak on behalf of your Placement agency.

If you are developing a Website, social networking group or writing a blog that will mention the School of Social Work, your Placement and/or their employees or clients, you must identify that you are a student and that the views expressed on the blog or website are yours alone and do not represent the views of the School of Social Work and/or the Placement agency.

If you are developing a site, group or writing a blog that will mention the School of Social Work, your Placement and/or their employees or clients, please let the School of Social Work and/or your Placement supervisor know that you are doing so, and clearly explain your purpose in mentioning or writing about the School and/or agency. Representatives of the School of Social Work and/or your Placement supervisor may choose to visit from time to time to understand your point of view.

You may not share publicly any confidential information about the School of Social Work, your Placement setting and/or clients and colleagues. If you have any questions about whether information has been released publicly or doubts of any kind, please speak with the Director of the School or Social Work, or with the Field Placement Coordinator.

Taking and sharing photographs without consent is a breach of confidentiality. Know your agency's policy regarding photography, including any limitations on its use.

#### Guidelines for Interactions with Clients on the Internet (adapted from Renison University College School of Social Work)

- Do not “friend” your clients (current or past) and do not allow your clients (current or past) to “friend” you.
- Do not use messaging on websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to contact your clients or respond to clients who may have contacted you. These sites are not secure.
- Always use your professional (work/placement) email, not your personal email address to communicate with clients.
- All email communication with clients should be of a professional nature. Never have personal discussions or make personal disclosures of any kind.
- Do not discuss details of your work with clients.
- If you choose to communicate with your clients by email, be aware that all emails are retained in the logs of your and their Internet service providers. While it is unlikely that someone will be looking at these logs, they are, in theory, available to be read by the system administrator(s) of the Internet service provider.

#### Tips for Responding to Social Media Requests from Clients (From Renison University College)

Here are examples of what you can say to clients who request or attempt to contact you through any form of social media:

##### *Friending*

“I do not accept friend requests from current or former clients. This holds true on Facebook, LinkedIn, and all other social networking sites. My reasons for this are that I believe that adding clients as friends on these websites can compromise confidentiality and blur the boundaries of our working relationship. If you have questions about this, please feel free to bring them up when we meet and I will be happy to talk more about it.”

##### *Interacting*

“Please do not use messaging on websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to contact me. These sites are not secure and 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 someone will be looking at these logs, they are, in theory, available to be read by the system administrator(s) of the Internet service provider. You should also know that any email I receive from you and any responses that I send to you will be printed out by me and kept in your file.”