SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

In the age of technology and information, social media (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, SMS/texting, etc.) can be particularly helpful in building connections with colleagues and maintaining relationships with friends and family; however, as a result, the boundary between personal and professional matters has become increasingly blurry. Due to social work’s professional standards and the obligation to follow the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp), social workers need to continually assess the ethical implications/complications of social media use, not only as practicing social workers but in the training of social work students.

While social media tools obviously present many useful and exciting opportunities, the features that enable these benefits also present potentially serious challenges in a professional setting. Privacy, confidentiality, and the establishment of professional boundaries in particular, can be hindered when the necessary precautions to protect the student/employee and clients have not been taken.

If the fieldwork site/agency already has a policy on social media use, this policy should be shared with social work students as part of their orientation to the fieldwork site. Even without its own formal social media policy, the fieldwork site should have clear guidelines and expectations for students regarding social media use at home and at the fieldwork site.

Because of the diverse needs and settings of fieldwork sites and the perpetually changing nature of the online social media world, the School of Social Work Office of Field Instruction does not have a formal social media policy. In lieu of an overarching social media policy, these guidelines have been developed to aid fieldwork agencies in determining appropriate online conduct within the context of their field work sites.

Here are a few important issues to explore and discuss:

1. **What type of information is okay to share on a personal social media site?**
   
   a. It seems that it should be inappropriate for students (or employees) to refer to any fieldwork site/agency, client, or client situation, etc. on their personal social media pages (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Blog), no matter how many security settings have been invoked.
   
   b. Should students/employees share their personal contact information including email, cell number, address, etc. with a current or former client or client group?
   
   c. While social workers have an ethical obligation to protect the privacy of their clients, no such restrictions prevent a client from searching online for information about a student...
or employee. Any photos, videos, written comments, and other postings can serve to undermine a social worker’s personal safety and/or professional competence.

d. Students (and employees) should be expected to exercise great care in how they represent the social work profession as a whole in any online activities. It is very easy for an outsider to misinterpret statements or images out-of context. (See NASW Code of Ethics Section 4.06a: Misrepresentation.)

2. **When, if ever, is it permissible to conduct an online search for information about a client?**
   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. (See NASW Code of Ethics Section 1.07a: Privacy and Confidentiality.)

3. **What is the policy on “friending” current or past clients?** Are there contexts in which this might be acceptable? (See NASW Code of Ethics Section 1.06c: Conflict of Interest.)

4. **How can social media be used to further the goals of the fieldwork site?** How does a student or employee present information on a social media page in a professionally-appropriate manner?

5. **What types of information should not be sent via email?** Because the privacy of email can never be completely ascertained, students and employees should take precautions to ensure they are not sending sensitive information in an email. (See NASW Code of Ethics Section 1.07e: Privacy and Confidentiality.)

It is in the profession’s best interest to remind students that social media sites are public domains and any and all information can be accessed by anyone. Once information is in cyber space, it never goes away.

The challenges of social media use are particularly important as they relate to a few of the established social work competencies listed below:

1. **Values and Ethics**: Demonstrates how the value base, ethical standards and principles of the social work profession are applied to social work practice.

2. **Professional Identity and Professional Behavior**: Identifies as a professional social worker and conducts oneself as a representative of the profession, its mission and core values.

3. **Organizational Context**: Demonstrates an understanding of the organizational structure of the fieldwork setting, how it operates, the services offered, and its service delivery system.

4. **Critical Thinking**: Demonstrates ability to analyze, process and implement decisions within the context of professional social work practice.

5. **Engagement**: Demonstrates ability to connect to a client/constituent base, colleagues, community, etc. in a professional manner.

When reflecting upon the importance of preparing students to function as solid, ethical, social work professionals, it seems that supervision/discussion/consultation regarding the social work competencies is critical in navigating the challenges social media presents in practice.