Standards of Performance in the M.S.W. Program

1. Introduction to Standards

The following standards apply to all MSW students enrolled in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. The standards describe scholastic and professional behaviors necessary for effective and ethical social work learning and practice.

Professional social work performance develops throughout the course of a student’s MSW education. Acknowledging this, the Standards for Performance in the MSW Program provide guidelines for students in order to support them in achieving success in their professional education. These guidelines also support classroom teaching and field faculty in providing clear and relevant feedback to students who are not performing adequately in course assignments, classroom activities, and fieldwork. Finally, these standards outline procedures for addressing serious professional and academic concerns that may, if not corrected or if egregious in nature, lead to disciplinary action, including dismissal from the School of Social Work.

All MSW students are required to view and adhere to the Standards for Performance in the MSW Program. Students are also required to review and adhere to the following:

- Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct, as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, (http://mn.gov/health-licensing-boards/social-work/licensees/standardsofpractice.jsp) and,
- University of Minnesota Board of Regent’s Student Conduct Code (http://www.oscai.umn.edu/conduct/regentspolicy.html)
- Failure to meet required standards may be cause for disciplinary action and could lead to dismissal from the MSW program.

2. Program Performance Standards

Basic Abilities Necessary for Academic Success and to Acquire Professional Skills

A. Communication Skills – Written and Oral

Demonstrates necessary written and oral communication skills to comprehend thoroughly and communicate clearly information, ideas, and feelings.

Written: In writing for academic and professional purposes students demonstrate an understanding of the complex nature of the writing process by generating ideas, writing rough drafts, editing all drafts for surface-level errors, and using the preceding processes to produce final drafts. Final drafts reflect clarity and the use of correct grammar and spelling. In formal academic writing students are able to research, analyze, and interpret academic sources, and apply American Psychological Association (APA) writing and referencing style. Students demonstrate sufficient skills in written English to understand
content presented in the curriculum and to complete adequately all written assignments, as specified by classroom and field faculty.

Oral: Communicates effectively and sensitively with other students, faculty, staff, clients, and professionals. Expresses ideas and feelings clearly and demonstrates a willingness and an ability to listen to others. Demonstrates sufficient skills to understand content presented in the program, to complete all assignments adequately, and to meet the objectives of field placement experiences, as specified by faculty.

B. Interpersonal Skills
Establishes and maintains respectful, collaborative working relationships with peers, colleagues, faculty and other professionals. Establishes rapport and maintains effective helping relationships with clients. Demonstrates the ability to engage in productive conflict resolution.

C. Knowledge and Critical Thinking Skills
Exhibits sufficient clarity of thinking and knowledge of social work as a profession to process information and apply it to appropriate situations in classroom and field. Demonstrates grounding in a liberal arts perspective that includes relevant social, behavioral, and biological science knowledge and research.

Demonstrates the ability to assess differentially. Exhibits ability to conceptualize and integrate knowledge and apply that knowledge to professional practice. Can articulate and use the problem-solving process: plan, monitor, and evaluate practice interventions and social policies.

D. Use of Technology
Exhibits sufficient skill in the use of various technologies, including familiarity with computers, electronic database searches, and the Internet, to engage in scholarship and effective practice.

Emotional Management Capabilities Necessary for Performance in Program and Professional Practice

1. Stress Management
   Recognizes personal needs and acts to meet needs appropriately and in ways that do not have a negative impact on professional practice. Handles stress effectively by using appropriate self-care strategies and developing supportive relationships with colleagues, peers, and others.

2. Emotional Management
   Demonstrates understanding of appropriate self-disclosure; identifies and acknowledges one’s own limitations; maintains respectful relationships with peers, colleagues, faculty, and others; demonstrates empathic support to peers; and uses assertive problem-solving strategies rather than aggressive or passive actions. Seeks appropriate help when personal issues interfere with professional and scholastic performance.
3. Professional Performance Skills Necessary to Work with Clients and for Overall Professional Practice

A. Professional Commitment

Exhibits a commitment to the core values and mission of social work and to the ethical standards of the profession, as specified in the NASW Code of Ethics.

B. Ethical Behavior

Behavior in field internships and the classroom demonstrates adherence to ethical expectations and obligations of professional practice, noted in the NASW Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, and the University of Minnesota Student Conduct Code.

See NASW Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, and the University of Minnesota Student Conduct Code for a complete description of expected—and prohibited—behaviors.

C. Professional Behavior

Exhibits behaviors that are in compliance with program policies, institutional policies, professional ethical standards, and societal laws in classroom, field, and community. Appearance, dress, and general demeanor are appropriate to the context and reflect a professional manner when required. Shows potential for responsible and accountable behavior by knowing and practicing within the scope of social work, respecting others, being punctual and dependable, prioritizing responsibilities, attending class and field regularly, observing deadlines, completing assignments on time, keeping appointments or making appropriate arrangements, and accepting supervision and constructive feedback in a positive manner.

Works effectively with others, regardless of level of authority. Advocates for him/herself in an appropriate and responsible manner and uses proper channels for conflict resolution. Shows a willingness to receive and accept feedback and supervision in a positive manner as well as use such feedback to enhance professional development.

D. Self Awareness

Shows awareness of self and how others perceive them. Is willing to examine and change behavior if appropriate when it interferes in working with fellow students, faculty, clients and other professionals. Exhibits knowledge of how one’s values, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and past experiences affect thinking, behavior and relationships. Uses this knowledge to manage differences respectfully and effectively. Is aware of how personal values influence professional practice and relationships and makes referrals to others when appropriate. Accurately assesses one’s own strengths, limitations, and suitability for professional practice. Reflects on one’s own limitations as they relate to professional capacities.

E. Commitment to Professional Learning

Takes responsibility for self-evaluation, setting goals, and actively implementing a plan for acquiring needed knowledge and skills. Seeks feedback and/or supervision from field
instructors, faculty, peers and colleagues. Participates in classroom learning activities and stays engaged in learning. Holds self accountable for work assigned.

4. Scholastic Performance

A. To be an active student in good standing in the School of Social Work, an MSW student must:

   I. Maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) in all graduate course work taken as an MSW student (grades),

   II. Have no more than 6 semester credits (or their quarter equivalent) of incompletes (grade “I”) in all graduate course work taken as an M.S.W. student, and

   III. Maintain active student status by enrolling in classes each fall and spring semester or registering for non-credit/non-tuition using Grad 999 status (maintain active student status).

B. Grades

   I. Instructors in social work classes use the University of Minnesota Grading Policy from the University Faculty Senate policy (http://www.policy.umn.edu/Policies/Education/Education/GRADINGTRANSCRIPTS.html).

   II. The Graduate School grade point average standard for good standing is 2.80, but the standard for the School of Social Work is a 3.0 minimum overall grade point average (A = 4.0).

   III. Students may not use any course, including field courses (SW 8010, 8020, or 8030) in which they receive a grade of D, F, or N (no credit) to meet requirements for the M.S.W. degree.

   IV. Students with less than a 3.0 grade point average or incompletes in SW 8151, 8152, 8153, or 8154 must have the permission of the director of field instruction in order to register for SW 8020.

   V. Full program students must take all foundation course work (except for SW 8010 – Field Practicum I) for a letter grade (A-F) and must earn a cumulative GPA of 3.0 in foundation level course work in order to take required courses in their area of concentration.

C. “I” (incomplete) grades

   I. Incompletes (“I” grades) are discouraged when circumstances prevent a student from participating in a majority of the instructional and learning activities in an M.S.W. course. In those instances students are encouraged to withdraw from the course and re-enroll at a time when circumstances allow for their participation. The School of Social Work may support a student’s request to the Graduate School for a registration exception in certain circumstances (e.g., medical reasons) but cannot guarantee that the request will be accepted and does not have control over decisions related to tuition reimbursement.

   II. Instructors have responsibility for noting in the course syllabus if they permit incomplete (or “I”) grades.
III. If an instructor allows a grade of incomplete, the syllabus should note the following: Circumstances under which a grade of incomplete may be given, including the amount of work and attendance required before a student may be considered for a grade of incomplete; and The deadline by which a student must request and negotiate any agreement for an incomplete.

IV. All instructors have the right to refuse to give a grade of “I” (incomplete).

V. If an instructor allows a grade of INCOMPLETE, a student may receive a grade of “I” only if she/he has negotiated a Contract for Completion of Incomplete Grades with the instructor before the end of the semester.

VI. The student has responsibility for requesting the incomplete from the instructor and initiating the process of negotiating terms for completion of work.

VII. The instructor has responsibility for submitting a signed contract for all incompletes at the time the instructor submits grades for the course. The Student Services Office (140 Peters Hall) maintains copies of incomplete contracts.

VIII. If the student completes the course work during the time specified in the contract with the instructor, the student should notify the director of graduate studies (DGS) that the work for the incomplete is no longer outstanding. The student should inform the DGS that outstanding work has been submitted, even though the instructor may not yet have graded the work and submitted a grade change request.

IX. When a student does not complete the work in the specified time period and fails to negotiate a new contract with the instructor, the director of graduate studies, after consultation with the instructor, will change the “I” to a grade of “F” (failure) or “N” (not satisfactory) after a period of 2 academic terms, with May and summer sessions counting for a single term.

X. Students should be aware that assignments submitted after a semester has ended may not be graded immediately. Instructors may not be able to grade assignments and submit final grades for long periods, especially during the May and summer sessions.

XI. Students should be aware that no instructor is required to grade assignments for incompletes while that instructor is away from University responsibilities due to sabbatical or leave.

XII. Only the instructor of record for the course in question can grant exceptions to the terms of this policy.

XIII. When a student accumulates more than 6 semester credits (or their equivalent) of incompletes the DGS will have a hold placed on the student’s records. The student will be unable to register for any more courses until the director of graduate studies (DGS) receives a copy of a plan worked out by the student and the instructor(s) as to how the incompletes will be eliminated.

XIV. The above policy applies to M.S.W. students taking social work courses. A student who receives a grade of “I” in a course that is a part of her/his degree program but that is taken outside of the School of Social Work is required to follow that department’s policy on negotiating a grade of “I.” Although another department may not require a contract
in order to receive a grade of I, students are encouraged to negotiate a contract that describes plans for completing outstanding work in a course outside of social work. Credits taken outside of the School of Social Work for which a student receives a grade of “I” are included in the total number of credits of “I” allowable in order for the student to be in good standing.

XV. Enrollment and Maintaining Active Student Status

a. Following University of Minnesota policy, a student attending an M.S.W. class must be officially enrolled in the class, whether for grade basis or through audit.

b. Maintaining active status is critical and is required in order to participate in the University community as a Graduate School student. This includes registering for course work, taking examinations, submitting milestone forms, or filing for graduation.

c. According to Graduate School policy passed in 2002, students must maintain active student status by registering in every fall and spring term (summer session registration is not required for active status).

d. Students who are not taking classes can maintain active graduate student status by registering for Grad999 (a non-credit/non-tuition status). Students are limited to two consecutive semester terms registering for Grad 999. After two consecutive terms they must petition the MSW Program Director for an extension of the Grad 999 status, providing an explanation of how Grad 999 status will move them to making timely progress on their MSW degree program requirements. The School of Social Work has the right to deny an extension of Grad 999 status for a student who does demonstrate that such a status will promote progress toward their degree requirements.

e. Students not registered every fall and spring term as described above are considered to have withdrawn; their Graduate School records are deactivated.

f. Those who wish to resume graduate work must request readmission to the Graduate School (and if readmitted, must register) to reactivate their status.

g. Students must complete all degree requirements for the M.S.W. within five years.

5. Accommodations for Disabilities

The School of Social Work will provide reasonable accommodations to persons with documented disabilities to give them an equal opportunity to achieve success in their graduate education. Students seeking accommodations must work with the University of Minnesota’s Office of Disability Services. This office determines eligibility and makes recommendations for reasonable accommodations.

6. Distribution of Standards

A. Distribution

The Standards of Performance are included in the MSW Student Handbook, which available online through the School’s webpage. The Standards are also included in the M.S.W. Field Handbook,
which is required for all field students and distributed to all field instructors. Both handbooks are available online at (http://cehd.umn.edu/ssw).

B. Student Familiarity with the Standards of Performance

The School requires that all new MSW students sign a statement indicating that:

I. They have reviewed the Standards of Performance, the NASW Code of Ethics, the Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, and the University of Minnesota Board of Regent’s Student Conduct Code, and

II. They agree to adhere to the behavioral expectations set forth in these documents, and

III. They understand that failure to meet the standards could lead to disciplinary action, including dismissal from the MSW program and the School of Social Work.

7. Procedures for a Review of Performance

A. Scholastic Performance – Classroom

Annually, each MSW student will receive a letter from the director of graduate studies indicating the student’s standing in the MSW program (e.g., whether the student is or is not in good standing).

When a student fails to maintain the required grade point average of 3.0 or higher, the DGS will place a hold on the student’s registration and instruct the student to meet with her/his academic adviser to develop a plan to improve academic performance within a specified time period – generally one semester.

From that point on, the DGS will monitor the student’s academic record. If the student achieves the required grade point average in the specified time period, no further action is required.

If the student fails to achieve the required grade point average in the specified time period the DGS, in consultation with the MSW program director and the student’s academic adviser, will meet with the student to discuss:

I. the School’s concern about the student’s academic performance,

II. programmatic adjustments (i.e., a reduced course load) that the School may recommend or require if the student is to continue in the program,

III. academic progress the student must demonstrate in order to remain in the MSW program,

IV. a reasonable timetable to achieve that progress, and

V. consequences if the student fails to demonstrate sufficient academic performance in the specified period.

The DGS will provide the student with a written summary of this meeting.

A student whose grade point average falls below a 2.5 may not continue course work in the MSW program. The director of graduate studies will advise a student to withdraw from the MSW program if the student’s grade point average falls below 2.50. Should the student choose not to
withdraw the DGS will advise the director of the School to dismiss the student from the MSW program.

Students have the opportunity to file a grievance under the Student Academic Grievance Policy of the Board of Regents if they believe the School has violated a policy, rule or established practice in taking adverse action against the student based on academic reasons.

B. Scholastic Performance – Field

Field placements are a significant part of student learning in the MSW program, providing students the opportunity to apply classroom learning with social work clients in agency settings under the supervision of an experienced professional who serves in the role of the field instructor. Students who are unable to achieve a satisfactory grade in a field setting are unable to complete the requirements for the MSW degree.

All students in a field placement (SW 8010, SW 8020, and SW 8030) are expected to demonstrate growth in knowledge, skills and implementation of social work values, and are also expected to reach appropriate levels of achievement in key competencies. “Appropriate level of achievement” varies according to the field placement. For example, students in their foundation placement (SW 8010) are not expected to reach the “application” level of competency for all areas, while students in their concentration placement (SW 8020 or SW 8030) are expected to reach “application” or “advanced practice” levels for key areas.

Student progress is evaluated along two axes:

I. Positive movement in identified social work competency areas, and
II. Final achievement level in these competency areas by the end of the field placement.

Assessment of student performance in field occurs continually throughout the field placement by monitoring actual student performance and regularly scheduled supervision of the student by the field instructor. In supervision, the instructor is responsible for:

III. Maintaining clear, accurate, and concise documentation of relevant student performance data and formal supervisory conference proceedings
IV. Providing regular feedback
V. Articulating clear performance expectations; and
VI. Addressing any concerns about the student’s field performance in a straightforward manner.

Every student is evaluated formally at least two times during the course of the field internship: at the midpoint and at the end of the placement. Formal evaluation focuses primarily on the student’s progress in meeting learning goals established at the beginning of the internship by the student and the field instructor, although a field instructor may include in the formal evaluation recommendations on new or revised learning goals, based on assessment of the student’s field performance.
When a field instructor has concerns that a student is not making adequate progress in their field learning, the field instructor will communicate these concerns to the student. The field instructor will:

VII. Clarify expected levels of performance/behavior  
VIII. Outline improvement benchmarks  
IX. Work with the student to develop a specific plan for improvement and  
X. Discuss concerns with the student’s field liaison if appropriate.

When a student’s performance in field is at a level that threatens her/his achievement of a satisfactory grade in the field setting, the field instructor will do all of the above and will also:

XI. Inform and discuss concerns with the student’s field liaison, and  
XII. With the field liaison, outline for the student the consequences for the student’s participation in field and the MSW program if performance does not improve.

The student’s field liaison can be a resource in developing a formal plan for performance improvement and may participate in follow-up meetings during the field term as needed.

A grade of “N” (no credit) may be given at the end of any grading period in which a student’s field performance has not met minimum expectations (see above). A grade of “N” in a field setting prevents the student from using the credits earned at that placement toward meeting MSW degree requirements, but does not necessarily disqualify a student from seeking another field placement and successfully completing the MSW program.

A student who receives a grade of “N” in a field setting (SW 8010, SW 8020, and SW 8030) may seek a new field placement only with approval from the director of field instruction. If the student receives a grade of “S” for the repeated course, she/he will have satisfied the field course requirements.

In cases where the director of field instruction has concerns about allowing the student to be placed in another field setting, the director of field instruction will:

XIII. Inform appropriate School administrators (MSW program director, director of graduate studies) and  
XIV. Meet with the student and appropriate faculty members and administrators to communicate the School’s concerns with the student’s field performance, and  
XV. Provide an opportunity for the student to respond to concerns.

Following this process, if the director of field instruction determines the student should not be placed in another field setting, the director of field instruction will recommend to the director of the School of Social Work that the student be dismissed from the MSW program.

The director of field instruction will give the student information about how to appeal the dismissal. The student may, on her/his initiative, withdraw from the MSW program.
C. Professional Performance—Non-Academic Behavioral Violations

Students who violate the NASW Code of Ethics, the Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, or the University of Minnesota Student Conduct Code may be subject to disciplinary action, including dismissal from the MSW program. Dismissal can occur during any term of registration in the program, including the last one.

Before a student is disciplined for behavioral violations, the student will be given an opportunity to respond to the allegations. Most behavioral concerns can be resolved through the informal processes outlined in steps 1 and 2 below. However, step 3 may be invoked immediately for serious or repeat behavioral violations.

I. When a faculty member (including an agency-based field instructor) or administrator has concerns about an enrolled student meeting any of the standards of performance outlined above, the faculty member should:
   a. discuss her/his concerns directly with the student and seek to work with the student to resolve the difficulties; and
   b. document dates and content of any meeting(s) with the student; and
   c. inform program administrators of concerns and plans for resolving concerns, when appropriate.

In most instances meetings between faculty/administrators and students resolve the concern and do not lead to further action.

II. When informal consultation and planning are not successful in resolving concerns related to a student’s performance, a faculty member should bring the concern to the attention of the relevant program administrator(s) (MSW program director, director of field instruction, director of graduate studies or Director of the School of Social Work) if this has not already occurred. The program administrator will develop a plan to address the concern through meetings with the student, faculty members who are directly involved in the student’s instruction, and one additional faculty member who does not have a personal connection with the student and who is not directly involved in the student’s instruction.

III. The program administrator or other appropriate faculty member (e.g., director of field instruction) will provide the student with a written summary of any meetings and agreements made with the student to modify her/his behavior to conform to the Standards of Performance.

IV. If the behaviors are of a serious nature that raise concerns about the student’s preparedness/ability to engage in their graduate program or in a practice setting, and/or if prior meetings with the student have been unsuccessful in resolving concerns, the program director will ask the DGS to convene a committee of appropriate faculty members (including at least one faculty member who does not have a personal
connection with the student and who is not directly involved with the student’s instruction) who will:

a.  hold a hearing to consider the behavioral allegations against the student;
b.  allow the student and an advocate/adviser to participate in the hearing, question the evidence presented, and offer the student’s own evidence in response to the allegations;
c.  tape record the hearing;
d.  determine if the student is guilty of the behavioral violation(s) and if so, decide the appropriate sanction(s); and
e.  communicate its decision to the student in writing.

In cases where the committee finds that the student’s conduct warrants dismissal from the M.S.W. program, the committee will make a formal recommendation to the director of the School of Social Work.

The student will be given the opportunity to respond to the committee’s findings, including information on how to file a formal appeal. See Section 8 below.

V. All students in the MSW Program are expected to demonstrate academic integrity, which is a component of creating a positive learning environment. The Office for Student Academic Integrity acknowledges that although there are many definitions of plagiarism, basically, it is “generally agreed that when you present the ideas, words and work of someone else as your own, you have plagiarized.” (see the Office for Student Academic Integrity website: http://www1.umn.edu/oscai/). Plagiarism is a violation of academic integrity and when a faculty member encounters an act of plagiarism the following actions will occur:

A faculty member who discovers a student has committed plagiarism will make a written report to the Director of Graduate Studies. All reports will include the following:

a.  Documentation that an act of plagiarism has occurred, including physical copies of the student’s work and the original source if available; and
b.  Copies of any written communication between the instructor and the student about the act of plagiarism and any academic consequences (for example, lowered grade or a grade of 0 on an assignment) for committing an act of plagiarism, or notes taken after a verbal communication with the student about the same; and
c.  Documentation of efforts taken by the faculty member to instruct the student about how the student can learn more about plagiarism in order to avoid plagiarism in the future.
d.  The student will be invited to add comments to the report as representative of her/his perspective on the incident.
e.  The DGS will share the information with the MSW Program Director, and will provide a copy of the report to the Office for Student Academic Integrity. A single copy of the report will remain within the School of Social Work.
f. The report will remain on file with the DGS until the student leaves the program. At that point the written record will be destroyed.

g. The report will not be shared with other faculty members unless there are multiple reports (2 or more) on the same student and the DGS determines that other faculty members and/or the academic advisor have a need to know in order to follow other appropriate disciplinary actions as outlined in steps 1-3 above.

VI. Standards for Documentation in Review

Throughout all levels of a review process the School of Social Work faculty members and/or administrators will provide clear, concise documentation of identified problem areas. Except for serious behavioral violations addressed under paragraph 3 above, the School will document and verify that it has discussed problem areas with the student and attempted to ameliorate them before taking adverse action.

Documentation should specify:

a. dates and content of meetings with the student to notify her/him of concerns;

b. specific expectations for remedy;

c. consequences a student will face if concerns are not resolved;

d. specific recommendations, if any, to the director of the School of Social Work; and

e. University resources available to a student in the event of disciplinary action.

8. Student Right to Respond/Appeal

Students will be given opportunities to respond to verbal and/or written communication from the School concerning behaviors that are not in compliance with the Standards of Performance.

Students have the right to appeal to the President’s Student Behavior Review Panel any disciplinary action based on behavioral violations. Students have the opportunity to file a grievance under the Student Academic Grievance Policy of the Board of Regents if they believe the School has violated a policy, rule, or established practice in taking adverse action against the student based on academic reasons.

9. Dismissal from the M.S.W. Program and the School of Social Work

Dismissal from the M.S.W. program can result from sustained poor academic performance in the classroom or in field, consistent failure to act within the guidelines of the Standards of Performance, or for serious violations of the NASW Code of Ethics, the Standards of Practice and Ethical Conduct as defined by the Minnesota Board of Social Work, or the University of Minnesota Student Conduct Code.

Dismissal can occur during any term of registration in the program, including the last one.

Dismissal can occur only if the student has been informed in writing and has had an opportunity for due process in challenging a decision to dismiss.
Final authority regarding student continuation in the M.S.W. program and the School of Social Work rests with the Director of the School of Social Work on recommendation from the director of graduate studies.