

Utilizing Technical Standards as a New Tool for Gatekeeping in Field Education

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Workshop Agenda

- Introductions
- What are Technical Standards and why do we need them?
- Gatekeeping responsibility
- Review Technical Standards
- Development and implementation considerations
- Case examples: Applying Technical Standards to field scenarios
- Discussion



Definition

Technical Standards are the nonacademic criteria essential for the student to participate in the program; they include the attitudes, experiences and physical requirements the student must possess to learn and perform the essential requirements of the program.

Technical standards are usually divided into five key areas: Perception/ Observation, Motor/Tactile, Cognition, Communication and Professionalism.

(Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016)



Why Do We Need Technical Standards?

- Increasing need to articulate minimum expectations of students in professional programs and provide:
 - Transparency to applicants and students
 - Clarity for institutional partners such as the Graduate School, Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS), and University Counsel
 - Shared language and terms to ground discussions
- Fulfill gatekeeping role of profession



What is Gatekeeping?

“The professional obligation of social work educators to ensure that graduates are fit to practice social work by screening out unqualified students who may cause harm to clients.”

- Moore and Urwin 1991

Social Work Education and Gatekeeping Role

- Gatekeeping is **challenging**...
 - Institutional difficulty dismissing students for non-academic reasons likely due in part, to ill-defined criteria around student suitability for profession (Lafrance & Gray, 2002).
 - Social work values including capacity for students to change and the right to self-determination (Lafrance, Gray, and Herbert, 2004)
- ...but **necessary**
 - Consideration of the student's ability for and timing of their pursuit of the social work degree
 - Obligation to clients and field agency partners
 - Ethical responsibility to the social work profession



Field Education and the Gatekeeping Role

- Without consistent guidelines, decision-making about students can be ambiguous, making discussion between faculty, field instructors and students challenging
- Inherent conflict:
 - Assumption that the primary gatekeeping role is in field education (Miller & Koerin, 2001)
 - Field Education assessments may be unreliable due to differences in agency settings, field instructors and available learning opportunities
 - Leniency bias in field instructors



Field Education and the Gatekeeping Role (cont'd)

- Lack of clarity about how field faculty grades consistently based on field evaluations
- SW core values of acceptance, non-judgment, self-determination and inherent worth in the profession
- Basic belief that all people have internal resources to change
- NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers prioritize clients' well being above all



Getting Started

- Request from ARS to create clear standards
- Literature review in social work and other professional programs
- Examples obtained from schools across campus, via the CSWE Associate Dean listserv, and other professional associations
- MSW Administrative team reviewed examples, highlighted elements and language to emulate, and drafted their own Technical Standards
- Draft was iteratively shared with stakeholders that included students, faculty, administrators, and campus partners such as University Counsel and ARS



Technical Standards

- Communication
- Physical and Cognitive Ability
- Emotional Stability, Management and Regulation
- Self-Awareness and Reflective Listening
- Respect for Diversity and Commitment to Social Justice
- Ethical Conduct
- Interpersonal Skills
- Academic and Professional Standards



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Implementation

- Admissions application, reference and review
- Curriculum and field manuals
- Orientation overview
- Administration's discussions with faculty
- Faculty and field instructors' discussions with students
- Committee on Students referral process
- Role of Accessibility Resource and Service
- Training of Field Instructors



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Technical Standards and Field Education – Case Examples

- **Discussion Questions**

- On a scale of 1-10, (1 not concerned, 10 extremely concerned) how concerned are you about this situation?
- Which Technical Standard(s) apply?
- How would Technical Standard(s) be helpful in addressing this situation with the student and the field instructor?



Lessons Learned (Overall)

- Provide context for students and solicit their input
- Iterative process was time intensive but helped create buy-in and shared vision for what our Technical Standards were as a SSW
- Consult with campus partners such as University Counsel and ARS
- Development and implementation planning are a parallel process
- Update and enhance Technical Standards every 1-2 years based on lessons learned
- Include Technical Standards in program overview during recruitment sessions and in the welcome material to newly admitted students



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Lessons Learned (Field Education)

- Think about the difference between competence and technical standards
- Focus on the behavior of the student and not a clinical diagnosis
- Communicate with field faculty and field instructors about how and when to use the Technical Standards



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Discussion

- Questions
- Thoughts
- Comments

Thank you!



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Presentation Powerpoint:

<https://sww.unc.edu/programs/masters/fieldeducation>

Technical Standards:

https://sww.unc.edu/files/web/2019-2020_school_of_social_work_technical_standards.final_.pdf

Journal of Social Work Education: Look for forthcoming article

