

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT/ANTI-DISCRIMINATION IN  
FIELD PLACEMENTS: POLICIES & PROCEDURES  
School of Social Work, McMaster University**

McMaster University School of Social Work is opposed to any form of harassment or discrimination. Discrimination or harassment on the basis of age, economic status, ethnicity, gender, language, marital status, national ancestry, physical appearance, political affiliation, race, religion, or sexual preference is unacceptable in the School and its field settings.

Students have a right to learn in an environment where they feel safe and to be protected from sexual harassment and discrimination. The School of Social Work recognizes its obligation to ensure these rights are respected.

Two university-wide policies are in place that seek to create an environment that is safe and non-discriminatory. The **McMaster University Policy and Procedures on Sexual Harassment** (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/senate/hrgenrl/sxharass.htm>) and the **McMaster University Anti-Discrimination Policy** (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/senate/hrgenrl/antidisc.htm>) apply to all members of the university community as well as to “students engaged in University-sanctioned academic activities on premises off campus” which includes social work field placements.

**Assurance**

The policies entitle students to an educational environment that is free from harassment and discrimination. Some key points from both policies are set out below. Read them carefully so that you are aware of this entitlement and, should you ever feel that it is compromised, are informed about the procedures available to you to raise your concerns. Copies of the full policy are available at the website above or at the office of Human Rights and Equity Services.

**Sexual Harassment – Definition**

Sexual Harassment is comment or conduct of a sexual nature directed at an individual or group by another individual or group of the same or opposite sex where it is known, or ought reasonably to be known, that this attention is unwanted. In this context, sexual harassment includes but is not limited to:

1. sexual assault;
2. any reward or promise of reward, whether explicit or implicit, for complying with a sexual solicitation or advance;
3. any reprisal or threat of reprisal, whether explicit or implicit, for refusing to comply with any sexual solicitation or advance;
4. any harassing behaviour of a sexual nature, verbal or non-verbal, directed at one or more individuals or groups, that creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment or interferes with academic or work performance, in a manner that exceeds the bounds of freedom of expression and academic freedom;
5. discriminatory action based on sexual stereotyping; and
6. other harassing behaviours of a sexual nature, whether verbal or non-verbal. Such other harassing behaviours may involve one incident or a series of incidents. The following list of examples, while not exhaustive, may constitute sexual harassment depending on the context in which the incident(s) take place, the frequency and severity of the incidents and whether it is known, or ought reasonably to have been known, that the conduct was unwanted:
  - an unwanted sexual solicitation or advance;
  - sexist jokes causing embarrassment or offence;
  - leering;

- the display of sexually offensive material;
- sexually degrading words used to describe an individual;
- derogatory or degrading remarks directed towards members of one sex or of one sexual orientation;
- sexually suggestive comments or gestures;
- inquiries or comments about a person's sex life;
- repeated offensive sexual flirtations, advances, propositions;
- demands for sexual favours;
- unwanted touching or patting; and
- verbal abuse or threats of a sexual nature.

(Excerpts from **McMaster University Policy and Procedures on Sexual Harassment**)

### **Anti-discrimination - Definition**

Discrimination means differential treatment of an individual or group of individuals which is based, in whole or in part, on one or more than one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination, and which thus has an adverse impact on the individual or group of individuals.

Harassment means engagement in a course of vexatious comments or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known, to be unwelcome. "Vexatious" comment or conduct is comment or conduct made without reasonable cause or excuse.

Prohibited grounds of discrimination include all of the following, as defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code, taking account of those exceptions listed in the Ontario Human Rights Code.

- Age
- Ancestry
- Citizenship
- Colour
- Creed
- Ethnic origin
- Family status
- Handicap
- Marital status
- Place of origin
- Race
- Receipt of public assistance
- Record of offenses (provincial offenses or pardoned federal offenses)
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

Prohibited grounds of discrimination also include such other types of discrimination as are prohibited in the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Prohibited grounds of discrimination also include language, accent, or dialect, except as language, accent, or dialect may interfere with legitimate requirements of education or employment.

Prohibited grounds of discrimination also include discrimination because of political belief; membership or non-membership in a political organization; or membership or non-membership in a trade union, or employee or employer organization.

(Excerpts from **McMaster University Anti-Discrimination Policy**)

## **Guidelines for Dealing with Harassment and Discrimination in the Field**

Any student who feels harassed or discriminated against in field placements (by a field instructor or any person employed in the field agency) is encouraged to discuss the situation with someone they feel they can trust. This may be a friend, family member, student, faculty member, or someone in the **Human Rights and Equity Office. This office is located in the McMaster Student Centre (905)525-9140 ext. 27581.**

Students are encouraged to document circumstances and dates of incidents where they have been harassed or discriminated against, as well as the impact the harassment and/or discrimination has had on them. This will be helpful in the event that they later choose to lodge a complaint.

Students who feel they have been harassed or discriminated against in placement are encouraged to bring the situation to the attention of a faculty member of the School. Students may elect to bring another person (a trusted friend, family member, faculty member) to this meeting to act as a support and advocate.

### **Confidentiality**

The School recognizes that because of the power imbalance that exists between students and field instructors, confidentiality is often a primary concern of students wishing to discuss their concerns about harassment and discrimination. The School feels strongly that the safety, confidentiality and self-determination of students who have been harassed or discriminated against must be its main priority. At the same time, the School recognizes its responsibility to ensure that alleged perpetrators are made aware of the accusations made against them. The faculty member must consult with the director before contacting agency personnel.

In developing its response to the problem, the School has also struggled in its attempts to balance the individual student's need for confidentiality with the School's obligation to protect future students who might otherwise be placed with a harassing field instructor.

**i) Disclosures to Faculty:** Wherever possible, faculty members will offer confidentiality to students.

Students should, however, be aware that the above-mentioned considerations place limits on the faculty's ability to provide an absolute guarantee. For example, assurances of complete confidentiality might place other students at risk in that it constrains faculty members from confronting the alleged perpetrator or terminating his role as field instructor.

Faculty will offer confidentiality during the period of the field placement and until after final grades have been submitted. After the end of the academic year, particularly if the placement was terminated, the faculty member, after consultation with the director, may choose to approach the alleged perpetrator to initiate a discussion of the student's concerns. The exception will be when there is more than one student at risk in the same placement setting. In this situation, the faculty member may approach the alleged perpetrator at the time of the initial disclosure. During this process the student will not be involved in the discussion unless she so desires and only relevant information about her or his concerns would be included. The student has the right to know what information was disclosed during this meeting, if she chooses not to be present.

**ii) Disclosures to staff at the Human Rights and Equity Office:** Students who prefer to speak to someone who can assure complete confidentiality may prefer to go to the university Human Rights and Equity Office for advice and counseling.

### **Informal In-School Responses**

The School's ability to respond to the student's concerns is limited in situations where no formal complaint is lodged. There is, however, a variety of informal responses which may be available in these situations. The list which follows describes some of these responses. It does not represent an exhaustive list; other options may be possible. The student has the right to reject any suggested informal arrangement.

**i) confronting the alleged perpetrator:** The student may wish to confront the field instructor/agency staff member without lodging a formal complaint or before lodging a formal complaint. In these circumstances, she may: (1) request a meeting with the field instructor/staff member, the seminar leader, and/or a third party; or (2) meet privately with the field instructor/staff member. If the alleged perpetrator is a staff member other than the field instructor, the student may wish to involve her/his field instructor.

**ii) maintaining the placement:** The student may choose to remain in her or his placement despite her or his concerns about harassment and discrimination. A meeting may be necessary to confront the field instructor/staff member to ensure the harassment and/or discrimination ceases and to develop a plan for monitoring the placement. The student may ask for the seminar leader, another faculty member, or an agency employee to help monitor the situation in the field setting.

**iii) transferring placement setting/field instructor:** The student may request a change in placement or field instructor without initially telling the field instructor of the details of her or his concerns. At the end of the academic year, however, the student and/or the seminar leader may meet with the field instructor to discuss the circumstances surrounding the transfer of placement.

Wherever possible, students will not be penalized as a result of having to change placements because of sexual harassment and or discrimination. Based on an assessment of the student's performance and her or his learning contract, the student, new field instructor, and faculty member may need to negotiate an extension in the number of hours/week or in the number of weeks the student will spend in the field. The student, new field instructor, and faculty member may informally agree that the student will extend the number of hours in placement or extend the placement beyond the end of the academic year without penalty in grade.

In some circumstances, it may be necessary to assign a course grade of "incomplete" in order to allow the student sufficient time and opportunity to complete learning objectives. As with any other "incomplete" grade, a final grade will be assigned when the course work is completed. The student can appeal a grade/evaluation to the Chair of the Undergraduate Studies Committee.

**iv) requesting a meeting of the Placement in Difficulty Committee:** The Committee may be requested to meet to discuss other options available to the student (see page 12 of the Field Placement Manual).