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### **Tips for a strong application to the MSW Program**

When you apply to our MSW program, please note that we look at a combination of factors to assess your potential as a student and social worker. This document offers a description of our application review process with suggestions for submitting a strong application.

Each *completed* application is forwarded to the School of Social Work (SSW) by the Office of Graduate Admissions for review by the SSW Admissions Committee. The Admission Committee consists of SSW faculty members and professional staff. Each application file is assigned to two separate readers from this committee for thorough review. Using a rating form, each application is scored by these readers independently. The score is a total that is determined by adding the ratings on likert scales that assess the candidate's essay content, essay quality, reference letter quality, work experience, and, if applicable, undergraduate field work experience. The reviewer also examines transcripts to ensure the applicant has the requisite undergraduate liberal arts foundation as well as introductory courses in sociology and psychology, and a statistics course. Once reviewers have assessed and scored applications, the Admissions Committee convenes to examine the rating scores of each reader for each applicant. A final rating is calculated and candidates are added to a pool. Once all applications are read and rated, the final incoming class is selected based on the scores, so those with the highest ratings are admitted first until we reach our class capacity; others might be denied admission or placed on a wait list. The two-reader rating system keeps the application review process unbiased and fair to everyone. We rely solely on the materials you submit to us to make our decision.

Because the success of your application relies on its quality, we provide the following to assist you by offering some tips on making your application as strong as it can be. Take a look before you submit your application.

1. **Your undergraduate performance.** You must have an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 or better to qualify for application. If your GPA is lower than this, we may still review your file and you may be admitted if you otherwise have a strong application. We also require that applicants have a liberal arts foundation in their

undergraduate work: at least 18 liberal arts credits, one introductory course in psychology and one in sociology, and a statistics course. If you have some but not all of these courses, you may still be admitted on the condition that you complete the requisite courses before beginning the program. We encourage people from diverse undergraduate programs to apply—we have had people in our program with backgrounds in all kinds of fields, such as music, english, journalism, biology, education, and even accounting!

2. **Past and Current Work Experience.** People apply to social work with diverse work backgrounds and we honor this—many people are changing careers entirely or are making a life transition. Certainly, work or volunteer experience of some kind that is related to social work is an asset to your application. But if you have no social work related experience, we also recognize that skills from other fields or life arenas may be transferable to social work and we take this into account in rating this area of your application. In any case, we want to know about you as a worker, in whatever form. It is a good idea to speak to this as part of your essay. It is also recommended that you have at least one of your 3 references from someone who has knowledge of your work capacity and skills (for instance, a supervisor) and can discuss this in a letter.
3. **Reference Letters.** As noted, we require 3 reference letters and we urge you to select your references carefully. People who know you well enough to speak about your work, your character, reliability, judgment, etc. and your ability to perform academically are good potential references. While friends, family members, and therapists (especially if they are social workers) might know you well, and it may be tempting to request references from these people, these are not usually the most credible reference sources. We are interested in learning from your references about your potential as a professional social worker and your capacity to withstand the rigors of graduate school as a student. As a general rule, it is a good idea to provide the Admissions Committee with references from select people who know you academically and professionally or in some work capacity.
4. **Your personal essay.** The essay is weighted heavily in the application assessment process. This is your single opportunity to let us know who you are,

why you want to be a social worker, and why you want to come to USM specifically. What you choose to share with us and how you share it is very important. We examine and rate both the *content* of your essay and the *quality* of your writing as these are critical aspects of social work training and practice. Take a look at our program mission and objectives first to make sure that what we offer in our program fits with your interests and career goals. Please do not copy material from our program documents into your essay but rather speak to how our program is suited to you—we want *your authentic voice* to come through in your essay. Make sure you follow the instructions for the essay (instructions can be found at the Graduate Admissions web site), and as you write, think of the readers and what you want them to learn about you and your decision to apply to the social work program at USM. The essay is used in the review process, in addition to other materials, to assess how well your goals fit with what we offer, and whether it is evident that you are suited for the profession and capable of meeting the academic and practice demands you will face. Do take the essay seriously write it well and with honesty and clarity. A solid, well crafted essay is one of the most important aspects of this application—quality is more important than quantity for the essay, so please stay within a 3-6 page range.

5. **Previous Social Work Field Training.** If you are applying to the Advanced Standing Program (applicants with a BSW degree within the past 7 years), your fieldwork evaluations are a critical part of your application. You must include these evaluations and your application will not be complete until they are received. These evaluation forms are rated along with your other application materials.

We hope that making the Admissions Committee assessment process more transparent will help you as you construct your application. With attention to the areas above, you will improve the quality of your application and increase the likelihood of admission to the program. Good luck and feel free to contact the MSW program coordinator, Jeanette Andonian, if you have further questions ([andonian@usm.maine.edu](mailto:andonian@usm.maine.edu)).