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Applying to the MSW Program: Tips for a strong application

All applications to the MSW Program are processed electronically through the Office of Admissions. The School of Social Work (SSW) Admission Committee reviews the applications. Follow this link to the Admissions office and click on graduate study:

<http://usm.maine.edu/office-of-admissions>. Once all application materials are received--transcripts, three letters of reference, essay, Program Selection Form (and field evaluations for advanced standing applicants only)--the SSW Admissions Committee begins reviewing the application. Do not submit any application materials directly to the School of Social Work.

The SSW Admissions Committee reviews applications with attention to a number of factors to assess your potential as a graduate student and social worker. This document offers a description of our application review process with suggestions for submitting a strong application.

1. Each *completed* application is forwarded to the School of Social Work (SSW) by the Office of 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, BSW field work experience (for those applicants with an undergraduate degree in social work). 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 statistics. Once reviewers have assessed and scored applications, the Admissions Committee convenes to examine the rating scores of each reader for each applicant. A final composite 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 otherwise meet admission criteria and have some but not all of these courses, you can still be offered acceptance on the condition that you complete the requisite courses before beginning the program. We encourage people from diverse undergraduate programs to apply—people in our program come from a range of academic backgrounds and may even be changing careers entirely.
2. **Past and Current Work Experience.** People apply to social work with diverse work backgrounds and we honor this—many people are changing careers or are making a life transition. Certainly, work or volunteer experience of some kind that is related to social work is a great asset to your application. If you have no social work-related experience, skills from other fields or life arenas may be transferable to social work and we take this into account in rating this part of your application. While work or volunteer experience in an area related to social work makes you most competitive in the application process, 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. You are strongly urged to select your references carefully. People who know you well enough to speak about your work capacity, your character, reliability, judgment, etc. and your ability to perform academically are good potential references. While friends, family members, and therapists might know you well and it may be tempting to request references from these people, these are not considered credible reference sources. We are interested in learning the following from your references:

- Your potential as a professional social worker
- Your academic skills and abilities—we want to see evidence that you can succeed given the rigors of graduate school
- The kind of person you are and your fit with this profession

We suggest that you be thoughtful in selecting individuals, inviting people to write letters who have a good knowledge of you in these areas. You could, for instance, choose two employment-based references and one academic, or the other way around.

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 and why you want to be a social worker. Both *what* you choose to share with us and *how* you share it is very important. We examine both the *content* of your essay and the *quality* of your writing. 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. Before you write your essay, examine the social work code of ethics, which is the foundation of the profession:
<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>. Please do not copy material from any documents into your essay but rather speak genuinely about how our program and the profession suits. We want *your authentic voice* to come through in your essay!

Write a single essay in no more than 750 words that addresses the following questions*:

- a. What are the reasons you want to be a social worker?
- b. How do the mission and goals of the M.S.W. program at the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work fit with your career goals?
- c. What is your understanding of the relationship between diversity, discrimination, and/or oppression? If you have had experience with this, feel free to offer examples.
- d. What social issue is of particular concern to you, and why?

*These instructions can also be found at the Graduate Admissions web site.

As you write your essay, 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 that addresses the question prompts is one of the most important aspects of this application. You do not have to list each question separately in this essay—you can write it as an integrated essay and just make sure you cover what is asked in the questions.

5. **Previous Social Work Field Training (Advanced Standing Only).** If you are applying to the Advanced Standing Program (applicants with a BSW degree within the past 7 years), your fieldwork evaluations are an important 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 for more information, feel free to contact the School of Social Work, (207) 780-4120 or Graduate Admissions: <https://usm.maine.edu/graduate>.