Technical Standards in Social Work Education:
What They Are and Why They Matter

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Abstract: Following larger developments within professional education, schools of social work have increasingly adopted technical standards as non-academic criteria for program admission and continuation. This paper examines the emergence of technical standards within schools of social work, articulates the distinction from and overlap with other forms of non-academic admissions and retention criteria, and considers their use in relation to the larger literature on gatekeeping in social work. Drawing on select legal cases, this review paper contemplates possible challenges associated with the implementation of technical standards, including issues related to disability law and due process. We argue that the development and implementation of technical standards in social work education raises complex questions related to inclusion and equity and poses unique challenges and opportunities for a relational and behavioral profession grounded in interpersonal skill development. Despite challenges, development of technical standards in schools of social work is worthwhile and can help manage the delicate and often difficult balance between serving as student-focused educators and professional gatekeepers.

Keywords: Technical standards, social work education, gatekeeping, disability accommodations, professional behavior

Institutions of higher education have a legal and ethical responsibility for developing criteria and standards for admission and retention of students. Standards help ensure inclusion, access, and opportunity for those seeking degrees and protect institutions and communities by ensuring that degree candidates and graduates are well-prepared to enter their fields of study. Such standards and criteria typically include academic markers (such as GPA and test scores), but within many professional and health programs, they include non-academic criteria as well. Technical standards have become an increasingly prominent means, particularly in professional fields such as law, pharmacy, nursing, medicine, and social work, to ensure that students and graduates meet non-academic criteria for program admission and continuation (Kezar et al., 2019). Originating out of disability law, the concept of technical standards includes the mental and physical qualifications and skills that are needed to learn and perform the essential requirements of the educational program with or without disability accommodations (Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016; Ferro-Lusk, 2017).

Despite the adoption of technical standards by many schools of social work (the exact number is not known), social work educators are often unfamiliar with this tool that both protects students' rights and help programs to fulfill a gatekeeping function when standards cannot be upheld. The aims of this paper are to introduce the legal construct of technical standards, examine the meaning of technical standards within schools of social work, and

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explore the possible challenges associated with their development and implementation in the context of social work education. The first section will define technical standards, discuss their origins within disability law, and describe their emergence within professional schools across varying disciplines. We also examine the differences and intersections between technical standards and other common non-academic standards related to professional behavior or conduct which are often simultaneously evoked during gatekeeping processes. After reviewing this larger context, we will explore the adoption of technical standards specifically within social work education, including a more comprehensive look at gatekeeping concerns and their relation to technical standards. Select relevant legal cases are reviewed, identifying issues for schools of social work to consider in implementing technical standards. Finally, the discussion synthesizes salient areas for consideration in the development of technical standards. We argue that the development and implementation of technical standards in social work education pose unique challenges and opportunities for a relational profession grounded in interpersonal skill development and associated behaviors. In sum, this paper explores important ideas around the need for technical standards in social work education, and the complex questions related to gatekeeping, inclusion, and equity that schools of social work should deliberate as they become more engaged with employing technical standards as part of their professional programs.

Defining Technical Standards

Per federal guidance, technical standards in education refer to non-academic criteria, meaning mental and physical qualifications and skills, that are considered "essential" for a student to be admitted to and participate in the program (Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016; Kezar et al., 2019; Shannon, 1998; Rehabilitation Act, Section 504, 1973). Technical standards include the attitudes, experiences, and physical requirements needed to learn and perform the essential requirements of the educational program and are typically separated into five key areas: "Perception/Observation; Motor/Tactile; Cognition; Communication; and Professionalism" (Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016, p. 7). For programs with clinical components (i.e., counseling/social work, nursing, medicine), these standards may need to be met at multiple points – at the time of admission to the program, when clinical experiences begin, and throughout program participation (Babbitt & Lee, 2016).

The concept of technical standards originated within Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, including in educational settings. The federal regulations implementing Section 504 define(s) a qualified individual *[for an academic program]* as one "who meets the academic and technical standards requisite to admission or participation in the [school's] education program or activity" (34 C.F.R. § 104.3(l)(3) as cited in Ferro-Lusk, 2017, p. 7). Collectively, protections under both the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 (1973) and the later Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to education as well as "reasonable" accommodations that do not impose undue hardship to the educational institution providing the accommodation (ADA, 1990). Contemporary disability law thus mandates that "reasonable accommodations"

must be extended to applicants and degree candidates when assessing their ability to meet technical standards.

Following federal guidance, accrediting bodies, whose mission is to ensure that programs are adhering to a set of standards in terms of curriculum and delivery of education, have increasingly encouraged programs to adopt technical standards. In 1979, the Association of American Medical College developed guidelines for technical standards for medical schools (Kezar et al., 2019). Since then, technical standards have become more prominent in professional educational programs to ensure that candidates are capable of educational and professional success; disability accommodations are met; individuals with disabilities who can meet these standards with accommodations are not excluded; and schools protect themselves from discrimination claims when an individual with a disability is denied admission or an accommodation or separated from a program (Shannon, 1998). In 1997, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing published a study entitled "Functional Abilities Essential for Nursing Practice," encouraging the adoption of technical standards. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE, 2015) followed and required the development and use of technical standards for pharmacy school admissions in 2016.

What Technical Standards Are Not

As discussed earlier, technical standards are distinct from academic standards which usually include typical markers of academic achievement required for admission such as GPA and standardized test scores as well as standards which need to be maintained to continue in and graduate from the program (Shannon, 1998). Understanding technical standards further necessitates differentiating them from related sets of non-academic requirements and/standards, which are often confused. Distinct from technical standards, meaning the apriori mental and physical qualifications and skills considered "essential" for a *student to be admitted to and participate in the program*, are the "essential requirements" of a program. Often inappropriately used interchangeably, essential requirements refer to the skills and knowledge *obtained as a result of participation* in the program, which all students must demonstrate in order to graduate from a program and cannot be "fundamentally altered," with or without reasonable accommodation (ADA, 1990; Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016).

Educational competencies can be confused with technical standards given that they have may have a skills or behavioral component. Increasingly prevalent in professional education programs such as social work, such competencies denote dynamic and synthesized learning outcomes comprised of multiple dimensions (in the case of social work, knowledge, values, skills and cognitive and behavioral processes and achieved thorough program participation) (CSWE, 2015). Finally, technical standards are sometimes confused with but distinct from essential functions. Defined through disability law (including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Section 504), essential functions are employment duties that employees must be able to perform, with or without accommodations (Matt et al., 2015; Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

Technical standards, insofar as they address behaviors and attitudes, can also be confused with and intersect with student codes of conduct and professional codes of ethics. Student codes articulate both student rights and responsibilities in relation to expected behaviors, while professional codes of ethics typically speak to both values and professional behaviors. Professional schools typically expect adherence to professional codes at a level appropriate to a student (Babbitt & Lee, 2016).

While technical standards are legally and administratively distinct from the related standards noted above, it is not uncommon to find conflation or concurrent presentation of these various standards and codes within a technical standards document (Zerden et al., 2019). While this overlap is not inherently problematic, professional conduct and behavior concerns often arise in situations related to student dismissal, and schools need to ensure they are carefully articulating each set of standards and associated policies and procedures, including their distinction and potential overlaps, in order to effectively craft and communicate the necessary requirements for program participation. As we further discuss, this clear articulation protects both students' rights and allows programs to fulfill a gatekeeping function when standards cannot be upheld.

Social Work and Technical Standards

In its 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) specifies that programs are responsible for evaluating "academic and professional performance" and providing policies for advisement, retention, and termination within these areas (CSWE, 2015). While social work's accrediting body does not specifically use the term "technical standards," CSWE nonetheless requires schools of social work to articulate what they require of students at admission and for continuance and completion of the program from a professional or "non-academic" standpoint. Despite the growing use of technical standards and the mandate to articulate non-academic criteria in the EPAS, there is a dearth of publications addressing technical standards in the social work literature.

In one of three extant discussions of technical standards found in the social work literature, Zerden et al. (2019) reviewed technical standards or related criteria for admissions and continuance at 14 U.S. schools of social work. Their analysis identified a number of themes typically included in such standards, such as: "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; and academic and professional standards" (Zerden et al., 2019, p. 537). The prominence of communication skills, emotion management, and a commitment to social justice is predictable for social work educators but notable in comparison to technical standards in other professions, which may focus more on physical abilities (i.e., nursing and medicine that require a variety of motor skills and physical abilities). As Zerden et al. (2019) acknowledge: "many of the tasks or skills needed for professional social work practice such as building empathic relationships and emotional regulation are difficult to articulate and objectively evaluate in the same ways a predetermined task or skill (e.g., lifting 20 pounds or using a device to detect a heartbeat)" (p. 535) that are more

commonplace in health professions. The sometimes imprecise nature of these attributes and skills poses a unique set of challenges for social work.

While the literature specific to technical standards in social work is extremely limited, many social work scholars have addressed the related concept of "gatekeeping" within social work programs – from the point of admissions through course work, field work, and graduation with a focus on professional behaviors (Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013; Hylton et al., 2017; Sowbel & Miller, 2015). A significant strand of this literature — although failing to address technical standards — nonetheless emphasizes the behavioral aspects of non-academic criteria, such as communication skills, maturity, self-awareness, boundary setting, problem-solving skills, and emotional health/regulation (Bogo et al., 2006; Dillon, 2007; Holmstrom, 2014; Hylton et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2006; Sowbel & Miller, 2015). Some attempts have been made to operationalize the aforementioned gatekeeping criteria (see, for example, Hylton et al.'s [2017] consideration of the core competencies as behaviorally-specific gatekeeping criteria as well as Tam and Coleman's [2009] Professional Suitability Scale). Yet this literature largely suffers from the same challenges as technical standards discussions: gatekeeping criteria are difficult to define and assess.

Many of the behavioral criteria used in social work, such as emotional regulation, implicitly speak to issues of behavioral health. The use of emotional well-being as a potential gatekeeping and technical standards criterion, which some recommend (Huff & Hodges, 2010), is potentially problematic from both a legal and ethical perspective if it results in bias and discrimination. The ADA (1990) as well as the National Association of Social Work's (NASW, 2017) Code of Ethics promote inclusion and protect individuals with psychiatric disabilities and behavioral health conditions against discrimination (Holley et al., 2020). The extant social work literature addresses the possible over-representation of students with behavioral health conditions in social work (Regher et al., 2001; Thomas, 2016). The existing literature also explores the potential ethical and educational challenges social work educators face in supporting these students (Collins, 2004; Dykes, 2011; GlennMaye & Bolin, 2007; Mazza, 2015) when and if their behavioral health concerns interfere with successful program participation or when an "impairment that is due to personal problems, psychosocial distress, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties…interferes with practice effectiveness" (NASW, Code of Ethics, Section 2.08, 2017, para. 1). These concerns may arise in any professional program, but they constitute a particularly salient tension in social work given the centrality of relational skills to competent practice. Moreover, the emphasis on a vague "professionalism" or "professional demeanor" or suitability in gatekeeping and technical standards criteria further complicates objective assessment, as this term is subject to significant variance, including cultural and racial norms and biases, in interpretation (Davis, 2016; Hylton et al., 2017; Marom, 2019). Collectively, these complexities reinforce the import of articulating clearly defined behavioral standards to protect students from nebulous or discriminatory claims while assisting educators in upholding gatekeeping standards to ensure competent professional practice. The legal cases discussed below further elucidate these dynamics, including the responsibilities of professional schools and the role of technical standards and related behavioral standards in navigating these complex issues.

Legal Background

Technical standards are a legal construct, originating out of and codified within federal law. Both challenges to their definition and questions of their application occur within the courts. While we do not present an exhaustive review of legal challenges to technical and related behavioral standards, we have selected oft-cited and/or precedent- setting cases or those particularly relevant to social work programs. An exhaustive count of cases related to technical standards within social work or other disciplines is not known as many cases may be dismissed or turned back to the school for administrative decision- making at various points within the judicial process.

One of the first cases to set a precedent for the use of technical standards in health professional programs was *Southeastern Community College v. Davis* (1979). The first judicial interpretation of Section 504, this case considered the imposition of "reasonable physical qualifications" and in what instances a university can impose such requirements. Davis, who was an applicant with a hearing impairment, sought admissions to a nursing program, but due to the nature and fast pace of the clinical program, her participation was deemed to be a safety risk to her patients even with potential accommodations (*Southeastern Community College v. Davis,* 1979). In this landmark case that helped define the meaning of reasonable accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Babbitt & Lee, 2016), the Court upheld the nursing school's denial of admissions and thus set a precedent for the use of technical standards. It set the stage for later cases to address the behavioral aspects of technical standards or related behavioral and professional codes that social work programs grapple with.

Halpern v. Wake Forest University Health Sciences (2012) demonstrated the salience of well-defined non-academic criteria and a well-articulated standard "professionalism" in particular. In this case, a student in Wake Forest's medical school brought claims against the school after he was dismissed, arguing his dismissal violated the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act. The student, Halpern, acted in a very abusive manner – behaviors that violated a "fundamental educational goal" of the medical school's curriculum and were outlined for students in the Medical School's Student Bulletin. Prior to his clinical rotations, Halpern exhibited unprofessional conduct with faculty and staff and had attendance issues – which he attributed to side effects of the medication he was on at the time. After starting his clinical rotations, Halpern continued to exhibit problems (i.e., rejected feedback, lacked interpersonal skills, and was frequently absent), though he did pass several rotations, but still found himself before the school's Student Progress and Promotions Committee which dismissed him. The United States District Court for the middle district of North Carolina granted summary judgement in favor of the University. The student appealed the ruling and the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected Halpern's argument and held that the student's unprofessional behavior deemed him as "not otherwise qualified" to participate in the program, and his requested accommodations were unreasonable (*Halpern v. Wake Forest University Health Sciences*, 2012). In its consideration of how to uphold professional behavior standards, the court noted that it would defer to the university in this case and found that the school clearly outlined "professionalism" as an essential requirement of the program – one that Halpern could not

meet, regardless of accommodations (*Halpern v. Wake Forest University Health Sciences*, 2012).

Lee v. Seton Hill University (2017) similarly supports the import of transparent and well-disseminated non-academic standards and procedural fidelity. Here, the plaintiff, Lee, filed breach of contract due to his dismissal from Seton Hill's Physician Assistant program. The federal district court for Western Philadelphia dismissed Lee's claims, as he was unable to show clearly what terms of the contract were breached. Seton Hill, a private university in Pennsylvania, provides students with a "Technical Standards Form" upon admission to the physician's assistant program. This form outlines the factors in which admissions and retention decisions are made, and outlines both academic achievement and non-academic factors as playing a role in students' retention in the program. The technical standards for this program articulate the differences between academic standards (i.e., grade point average) and technical standards, specifically bringing in professional qualities required for the field. The standards policy also notes that students may be dismissed from the program for failing to maintain "technical standards" or for violating the profession's ethical standards and provides opportunity for appeal and challenge to disciplinary action such as suspension or dismissal. While Lee met academic standards in terms of his GPA, faculty raised concerns around a number of inappropriate professional behaviors, including absenteeism and lack of participation. Lee was placed on academic probation, but he did not improve his behavior and the university provided notice of his dismissal. Lee claimed he was not given appropriate notice to remediate his behaviors. However, letters provided to him by faculty and administration (between May 2015 – May 2016) refute this, along with the Technical Standards Form that he signed upon admission. In a letter from the Dean and Provost in May 2015, Lee was informed of faculty concerns related to inappropriate professional behavior that included falling asleep in class, being absent/missing class, missing an exam, failure to participate in labs, and not following up with faculty and advisors. The student was then placed on academic probation and clinical rotations were delayed until a future semester. A few months after he was removed from probation, concerns were expressed about "several inappropriate/adverse events," and it was recommended that Lee be dismissed from the program (*Lee v. Seton Hill University*, 2017). This case illustrates the need for well-articulated non-academic standards and effective dissemination and written documentation around remediation efforts.

In another case that elucidates the importance of compliance with due process procedures, in *Warters v. Laura et al.* (2013), the plaintiff, Jessica Warters, claimed that she was deprived "due process of law" after she was dismissed from a Master's of Social Work program for failing the Field Instruction course. Just prior to starting her field instruction course, Warters was involved in a car accident in which she sustained serious neck, back, and eye injuries (*Warters v. Laura et al.*, 2013). After receiving a mid-term evaluation from her field instructor that indicated she was doing "satisfactory" in her field work, Warters began having difficulty meeting field hour requirements and she received notice from her field instructor and faculty field liaison (who was also the Director of Field Education) that her performance fell below satisfactory. The school suggested that she take a medical leave of absence, which Warters declined. At the next evaluation period she received a score of "Needs Improvement." A few months later the field instructor informed

Warters to not return to her field placement and that she would receive a failing grade. The Director of Field Education then informed Warters that she was terminated from the MSW program. Warters then filed three unsuccessful appeals to the Director of Field Education, an Ad Hoc Hearing Committee, and to the College Grievance Committee, to overturn her grade/dismissal. After these appeals, an Associate Dean of the Graduate School decided (against the recommendation of these committees) that Warters' grade should be changed to an Incomplete and she should be given an opportunity complete the course requirements, resulting in a change of her grade to an Incomplete. The school determined it did not appropriately follow its own disciplinary procedures and provide due process to the student, hence the grade change. In providing a "second chance" for Warters, an Advancement Committee convened and determined that she would be provided with another opportunity to complete her internship, but that her continuation in the program also relied on her maintaining better communication with the school. As the school set up a new opportunity for her, Warters failed to meet the requirements, as she did not communicate properly with the school, arrived late for her interview, and did not attend required orientation sessions. As a result of her actions, the university decided that Warters should in fact be given a failing grade for the course she had previously grieved (and given an Incomplete in), and was dismissed from the program. The school ultimately allowed Warters to apply for a retroactive medical withdrawal, which would allow her to reapply to this or other programs. In reviewing her claims, the U.S District Court for the Northern District of New York found that Warters *continually* did not meet the academic performance and professional expectations of the MSW program and that the decision made to dismiss her was sound (*Warters v. Laura et al.*, 2013).

Professional and technical standards are further complicated when students present with behavioral health issues that are potentially addressed through disability law, creating tensions between program standards and disability claims. In *Neal v. University of North Carolina and East Carolina University* (2018), the student's behaviors led to her dismissal from her professional program. Here, the plaintiff (Olivia Neal), a young woman with Bipolar Disorder, claimed that her dismissal from an MSW program violated the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, as well as a breach of contract claim under state law. Neal further argued that her dismissal resulted in economic damages due to her inability to find employment, as well as non-economic damages related to the emotional distress and embarrassment she suffered as a result of her dismissal from the MSW program. Importantly, and unique to most of these cases, is that the court did find viability in some of the plaintiff's claims.

In this case, faculty and a field instructor raised concerns about Neal's behaviors and mental health, including her ability to complete the program successfully, as they witnessed manic episodes. During an interaction with a professor, it was noted that Neal "experienced a degree of mania, and her communications were dissociative and garrulous" (*Neal v. University of North Carolina and East Carolina University*, 2018). The defendants did not claim that her psychiatric disability played a role in her dismissal, but rather, her unprofessional conduct. However, the federal court for the Eastern District of North Carolina ruled in favor of the plaintiff and found that the school considered the plaintiff's mental health status as a "motivating factor" in the decision to dismiss her from the

program. The defendants claimed that they dismissed Neal because of her unprofessional conduct, not her disability. Faculty correspondence in this case revealed that Neal's mental health concerns were one of the reasons for her dismissal, and that faculty who shared similar concerns about students without documented mental health issues would not necessarily dismiss those students (for the same behavioral reasons). The court ruled for the plaintiff and determined that based on feedback Neal received from both her field placement and others within the school of social work, that she could meet the school's expectations for professionalism.

The court also agreed with Neal's claim that her rights under ADA may have been violated and did not dismiss these claims, as the plaintiff was able to return to both her field placement and courses without relapse or any other incidents after being diagnosed with and receiving treatment for Bipolar Disorder. Finally, the court also permitted Neal's breach of contract claim, but specifically focused on the processes that should have been followed (and were not) by the Academic and Retention committee (*Neal v. University of North Carolina and East Carolina University*, 2018). This demonstrates that schools must ensure that standards have clear associated policies and procedures outlined and implemented with fidelity, including due process for students.

Discussion

Collectively, the above cases as well as extant discussions of technical standards demonstrate the need for: 1) appropriate and legally sound and behaviorally focused standards; 2) effective dissemination of and fidelity to clearly articulated procedures around admittance and dismissal, which include the procedural due process rights of appropriate notice, the opportunity to be heard, and decision-making by a neutral body (Wayne, 2004); and 3) the provision of reasonable accommodations when appropriate.

In their review of challenges and strategies for accommodating students in professional clinical programs, Babbitt and Lee (2016) argue that programs should include behavioral components in their academic and technical standards. This involves both training students in the professional and ethical behaviors required for certain professions, as well as assessing that such behavioral standards are met (Babbitt & Lee, 2016). As described in the *Neal* case, the school focused on the student's mental health and psychiatric disability, rather than on problematic behaviors, leading to upheld discrimination claims. Hylton et al. (2017) emphasize that the focus of a remediation plan/process for students must be on the identified performance or behavioral issue – not necessarily the "cause" or reason for the behavior (i.e., not an underlying mental health condition). As previously discussed, technical standards in social work typically encompass behaviors, such as emotional management, or professional communication, or commitment to social justice that are difficult to operationalize; yet in order to protect due process and guard against bias due to mental health (Holley et al., 2020) and other forms of bias and predictive thinking, operationalization of concrete and specific behaviors is key. These are essential to upholding professional ethics, including the profession's commitment to social justice.

Ensuring procedural fidelity which helps ensure due process (i.e., notice, the right to be heard, and decision-making by a neutral party) for students is critical for the successful

implementation of technical standards in professional programs including social work. In many of the cases discussed above, some level of committee or administrative review was present and claims emerged charging schools with failure to follow their own internal process particularly when faced with remediation steps or program dismissal. Social work's professional focus on individualization, including the individualization of student needs, can inadvertently undermine due process procedures. Recognizing distinctions between technical standards,professional codes of ethics, professional standards, and other student codes of conduct also need to be considered. While technical standards are the non-academic criteria needed for a student to participate in a program (Blacklock & Montgomery, 2016), there still seems to be some level of disagreement regarding what other components might be referenced within a technical standards document, and when each may be applied. As seen in the cases above, professional conduct and behavior often arise in situations related to student dismissal. Schools of Social Work need to ensure they are carefully crafting the necessary requirements for participation in programs – with a clear process for what occurs when various standards are not met.

Staff/faculty training as well as the designation of an internal monitor can help ensure procedural fidelity and due process. Effective and consistent dissemination of policies and related procedures are also fundamental to due process and for the protection of students' rights (Wayne, 2004). For example, students might acknowledge standards upon admission, prior to the start of clinical components, and at varying points in the program through orientation, student handbooks, website content, and other communication channels. Administrators tasked with developing technical standards, policies, and processes should consult with university legal, disability services offices, and other clinical schools within the university to ensure development and implementation of such processes is sound (Babbitt & Lee, 2016).

As educational institutions and social work programs seek to be inclusive, they will need to closely consider both the legal and ethical implications of developing technical standards that may exclude classes of individuals, particularly those with disabilities. In their review of existing technical standards in nursing programs, Ailey and Marks (2016) argue that technical standards may create barriers for individuals with disabilities. They propose a new model of technical standards for nursing education, focusing on diversifying applicant pools to consider students with disabilities and their role in rehabilitative nursing. Looking at technical standards in allied health professions, Ferro-Lusk (2017) and Kezar et al. (2019) similarly argue for inclusive language that is welcoming to students with disabilities. Gonzalez and Hsiao (2020) explore how one nursing program, in consultation with disability experts, adapted their technical standards for admission to the program, focusing more on standards of performance that focus on the skills needed to practice nursing safely, rather than individual physical or mental qualifications. They also identify several nursing settings where those with disabilities could meet standards, arguing that nursing programs need to think more broadly about who can be awarded admission, and the different settings they may thrive in with appropriate accommodations (Gonzalez & Hsiao, 2020). Schools of social work may ask themselves similar questions: should technical standards and associated qualifications be the same across settings or might they

differ, perhaps, across different settings (for instance, micro/clinical vs. macro field education settings).

Insofar as social work technical standards address interpersonal relations and skills, standards need to refrain from invoking reference to vague concepts such as "emotional well-being" that may serve as a euphemism for a behavioral health diagnosis and instead articulate observable behaviors. Todd et al.'s (2019) review of social work educators' response to students with behavioral health disabilities employs a critical disability studies framework. Arguing that US social work programs are overly reliant on a medical model of disability and overly reactive in their response to students' mental health issues, they advocate for a set of inclusive practices, beginning at admissions, that can uphold the rights of students with mental health disabilities and support them while balancing program's gatekeeping functions. However, the authors fail to address technical standards policies in their critique. We believe technical standards policies, when well-crafted and appropriately implemented, can fulfill social work programs' gatekeeping role while simultaneously reflect the profession's commitment to inclusivity and social justice**.**

Finally, as alluded to earlier, there is also a critique of professionalism that suggests arguing that cultural, gendered, and racial power relations underscore this construct (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). A recent well-publicized case surrounding the (eventually reversed) dismissal of a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee's Health Sciences Center's College of Pharmacy due to personal social media posts unrelated to her program participation raised a national conversation as to whether Black and white students are held to differential standards of professionalism and whether a white, female student would have faced dismissal for similar actions (Anderson, 2021). Carefully developed standards that are vetted and implemented by a diverse group of faculty and administrators and define professionalism through concrete, observable behaviors can potentially guard against racial and other forms of biases and enhance equity and inclusion.

Moving forward, additional research can more systematically examine the presence and use of technical standards at schools of social work, including common challenges around their development and implementation. Further discussion and examination of "professionalism" and the term's operationalization within social work is also needed to ensure transparent technical standards. While CSWE currently requires schools to articulate policies and procedures for evaluating and terminating students based on professional performance (CSWE, 2015), it does not explicitly require or recommend that programs develop technical standards. Given the salience of technical standards in upholding non-academic criteria and protecting students' rights to reasonable accommodations, CSWE may also want to consider requiring technical standards like some other accreditation bodies in health professions or through providing more explicit guidance. The development of technical standards is surely a challenging and complex task that involves many layers of higher education administration. Investment in their development is, however, likely worthwhile. Technical standards are one of the most important tools that social work educators can draw on to manage the delicate and often difficult balance between serving as student-focused educators and professional gatekeepers.

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