

FITNESS TO PRACTICE POLICY AND PROCEDURES

This policy applies to all graduate students enrolled in the M.S. in Counseling program. As part of meeting the program objectives set forth in the Counseling Program Student Handbooks and Graduate Catalog and Policies, students are expected to conduct themselves in an ethical, responsible, and professional manner. This conduct is evaluated through the Fitness to Practice (FTP) policy as a core component of students' academic performance. Section F.9.a of the [ACA Code of Ethics](#) states that "Counselor educators clearly state to students, prior to and throughout the training program, the levels of competency expected, appraisal methods, and timing of evaluations for both didactic and clinical competencies. Counselor educators provide students with ongoing feedback regarding their performance throughout the training program" (2014, p.15). The purpose of the FTP review process is to regularly monitor students' professional and personal development and to provide structured feedback to students (CACREP, 2024) to ensure students demonstrate appropriate progress towards developing the necessary behaviors, attitudes, and professional competencies to practice as a counselor-in-training. Student progress is routinely monitored, addressed and assessed during regular academic terms at faculty meetings, and if warranted, then by further evaluation with an action planning to remediate the FTP concern.

At the onset of their academic program, students are directed to review these standards and seek clarification when needed.

In order to successfully complete the program and be endorsed for any relevant certifications or licensure, students must demonstrate academic performance meeting or exceeding department standards in all settings, including classes, advising sessions, clinical sites, and all verbal and written communication, including:

1. Demonstrate fitness in their interactions with others as measured on the Fitness to Practice Standards, which include the following competencies:
 - Follows ethical and legal considerations
 - Displays multicultural competence
 - Open to new ideas
 - Aware of own impact on others
 - Responsive, adaptable, and cooperative
 - Receptive to and uses feedback
 - Responds to conflict appropriately
 - Accepts personal responsibility
 - Expresses feelings effectively and appropriately
 - Dependable in meeting obligations,
 - Promotes self-care practices, and
2. Conform to the codes of ethics of professional associations in counseling ([ACA](#), [ASCA](#), etc.) and all related national and state licensure and certification boards.

Understanding Fitness to Practice (FTP):

The Fitness to Practice (FTP) process involves three tiers of evaluation.

- *Standard FTP* involves an ongoing and routine monitoring and evaluation of all students in a minimum of 2 courses per semester throughout their program of study.
- *Incidental FTP* involves an FTP issue within an instructor or faculty member's course within a given semester.
- *Extended FTP* involves an ongoing FTP issue that is not resolved within a single semester. Extended FTP issues continue to be evaluated in a minimum of 1 subsequent semester with evaluation completed either by the original instructor or faculty documenting FTP concern *or* by a different instructor or faculty member in which the student is currently enrolled in his/her course.

Admission to the program or receiving Candidacy does not guarantee fitness to remain in the program. Throughout the program of study, student competence is evaluated using the Standard FTP Process with documentation being made on the FTP Evaluation Form. An Incidental FTP review may be initiated on any student at any time if a faculty member, staff, course instructor, program advisor or field supervisor believes the student has displayed behavior which suggests the student does not possess sufficient competency on one or more FTP criteria. An Incidental FTP is *not* a requirement for a student to have an Extended FTP (for example, in situations when an FTP issue developed within the remaining few weeks of a semester and an ongoing evaluation of FTP is warranted in the future semester(s), thereby creating an Extended FTP). Inability to show appropriate level of competency in a minimum of one FTP standard is sufficient for dismissal from the program. *Examples of failure to meet FTP competencies can be found in the chart following the FTP section of the handbook.* Beyond the use of FTP Evaluation Form for Standard FTP or Incidental FTP purposes, faculty may initiate an FTP review at any time, including but not limited to the following reasons:

- Students who engage in illegal or unethical behaviors,
- Students who present a threat to the wellbeing of others or threat to self, or
- Students who violate the NSU Student Code of Conduct, other applicable NSU policies or procedures (in conjunction with existing university procedures regarding Student Conduct), or any other NSU Department of Psychology and Counseling policies or procedures.

In such cases, depending upon the circumstances, the FTP process may result in the student being dismissed from the NSU Counseling program without the opportunity for remediation.

The Fitness to Practice Evaluation Process:

As a part of training towards counseling competence, faculty members, staff, course instructors, program advisors, and field supervisors evaluate all students according to these standards. Standard FTP is completed on each student each semester. With each tier of FTP, students will have the opportunity to participate and respond at each step of the FTP process.

Performance on the FTP standards will be rated on a scale of 1 (Unacceptable) to 5 (Target) as described in the Fitness to Practice Standards. A rating of 3 (or higher) on all FTP standards will indicate competence. The FTP Evaluation Form then will be shared with the student and a copy placed in the student's file. A rating of 1 on any of the FTP standards will initiate the following procedure for an Incidental or Extended FTP process:

Step 1 -- The student will be contacted to schedule a meeting to review the FTP Evaluation Form. It is expected that the student will receive formal notification prior to the meeting that the scheduled meeting will address an FTP concern. The meeting will be held with the issuing faculty member, unless the FTP process was initiated because the student engaged in illegal or unethical activities, presented a threat to the wellbeing of self or others, or violated the NSU Student Code of Conduct (in conjunction with existing university procedures regarding Student Conduct) or any policy(ies), in the Counseling Student Handbook, or Clinical Handbook (in which case, the meeting will be held with a faculty review committee, as outlined in Step 3 below). It is also at the discretion of the issuing faculty member to have another faculty member/student advisor present in the FTP Evaluation meeting. All Extended FTP meetings are expected to have the initiating faculty plus the student's advisor or another faculty member present; Incidental FTP meetings may have only the initiating faculty member or another faculty member present if requested. The function of the additional faculty member/student advisor in the meeting will be to serve as a witness to the FTP process. In cases where an additional member is present, the student will be notified of the additional witness at the time of the initial notification of the FTP meeting. Witnessing faculty member's role is to act as an observer of the process to enhance impartiality and efficient process of presenting the concerns noted in the FTP.

The student has five business days to respond to the request to schedule a meeting. If the student does not respond by the close of business on the fifth business day, the matter will proceed to step 3 below.

Step 2 -- At the meeting, the issuing faculty will review the FTP Evaluation Form with the student and complete the FTP Action Plan form, defining measurable objectives. The FTP Action Plan will include: (a) Specific competency(ies) from the FTP Standards which require(s) remediation; (b) specific recommendations to achieve remediation; (c) specific requirements to demonstrate remediation efforts have been successful, and ; (d) a specific timeline and ultimate deadline for subsequent monitoring to evaluate progress.

Both the student and issuing faculty may retain copies of the signed FTP Evaluation Form and FTP Action Plan and copies will be placed in the student's folder. At any time during the FTP evaluation, the issuing faculty member may refer the student to a faculty review committee.

Step 3 -- A faculty review committee will be convened if: (a) the FTP process was initiated because the student engaged in illegal or unethical activities, presented a threat to the wellbeing of others, or violated the NSU Student Code of Conduct (in conjunction with existing university procedures regarding Student Conduct) or any policy(ies) in the Student Handbook; (b) a student fails to respond to the issuing faculty's request to schedule a meeting to review the FTP Evaluation Form within 5 business days of the request; or (c) a student fails to show reasonable progress in the original FTP Action Plan addressing an Incidental FTP concern (at which time an Extended FTP will be discussed and outlined).

The faculty review committee will be comprised of the instructor or faculty issuing the Incidental or Extended FTP concern and the student's advisor. It is expected that a minimum of one faculty member present at the meeting is a tenured or tenure-track faculty member. The student will be required to meet with the faculty review committee in accordance with the procedures described in #1 and #2 above. The faculty review

committee may consult with any of the full Department of Psychology and Counseling faculty regarding the development of alternative remedial strategies and/or evaluation of the student's fitness for continuation in the Department of Psychology and Counseling.

The faculty review committee is beholden to the development of a student FTP Action Plan consistent with present concerns, to the establishment of a timeline for monitoring the student's progress toward completion of the established plan, and to the clarification of requirements necessary to achieve resolution of the remediation plan. These requirements will be stated as measurable objectives that are documentable. If at any time the student is determined not to be making satisfactory progress, the faculty review committee may either modify the remediation plan or recommend dismissing the student from the program. Additionally, if at any point the student has an FTP initiated due to FTP policy 3.a, the student may be required to suspend course activities immediately until the FTP process has been fully instated and due process completed.

Step 4 -- All faculty review committee decisions for a student's dismissal from the Department of Psychology and Counseling will be forwarded to the Department Chair for maintaining student records and involvement in the Fitness to Practice process. The Department Chair will forward the committee's decision to the Deans of Graduate College and the College of Education. The student may appeal the committee's decision to the Dean of Graduate Studies. Decisions by the Dean are final.

Due Process -- Students who have concern about the FTP process are expected to first discuss their concerns with the faculty issuing the FTP Evaluation and Action Plan. It is expected that students will email or contact the faculty requesting a meeting *after* the initial FTP Evaluation meeting to discuss this concern. Students have 5 business days to contact the initiating faculty member to inform them of this Due Process Step 1.

In the event that this meeting does not lead to a mutual agreement on the needed remediation, the student is then able to contact the Department Chair of Psychology and Counseling, at which time a meeting will then be scheduled between the Department Chair, faculty issuing the FTP, and the student. The student has 5 business days following Due Process Step 1 to contact the Department Chair to initiate Due Process Step 2.

In the event that the meeting between the Department Chair, initiating faculty member, and student does not lead to a mutual agreement on the needed remediation, the student is then able to contact the Dean of the Graduate College at Northeastern State University. The student has 5 business days following Due Process Step 2 to contact the Dean of the Graduate College to initiate Due Process Step 3.

Students will be reminded of their due process rights at the time of the initial FTP meeting.

Demonstration of Student Understanding of FTP:

All students will complete a Student Learning Outcome in the Professionalism and Ethics in Counseling (COUN 5033) course. This SLO will demonstrate that students have had the opportunity to develop an understanding of the FTP process.

FITNESS TO PRACTICE STANDARDS

All standards are evaluated based on student performance in programmatic, academic, clinical, supervisory, and interpersonal contexts.

1. Follows ethical and legal considerations

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Displays inappropriate and/or disrespectful boundaries with clients, faculty, supervisors, and peers	- Maintains appropriate and respectful boundaries with clients, faculty, supervisors, and peers.
- Does not demonstrate awareness of personal values or imposes personal values on others.	- Demonstrates awareness of personal values and does not impose personal values on others.
- Breaches applicable professional counseling ethical codes and laws.	- Follows applicable professional counseling ethical codes and laws.

2. Displays multicultural competence

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Discriminates or expresses prejudice towards those of a different race, culture, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, ability status, gender identity, marital status/partnership, language preference, or socioeconomic status than self.	- Demonstrates sensitivity to diversity.
- Does not demonstrate multicultural counseling competencies.	- Demonstrates multicultural counseling competencies.

3. Open to new ideas

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Dogmatic about own perspective and ideas.	- Openly discusses and respects perspectives other than own.
- Unable or unwilling to consider others' points of view.	- Considers others' perspectives and points of view.

4. Aware of own impact on others

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Shows little or no concern for how others are impacted by them.	- Recognizes how own words and actions impact others.
- Blames others for problems without self-examination.	- Avoids blaming others and examines own role in problems.
- Disrespectful toward peers, supervisors, and/or instructors (e.g., monopolizes discussion or gossips).	- Respectful toward peers, supervisors, and/or instructors.

5. Responsive, adaptable, and cooperative

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Shows little or no effort to adjust behaviors in response to changes in professional & interpersonal contexts.	- Shows reasonable effort to adjust behaviors in response to changes in professional & interpersonal contexts.
- Expresses intolerance of changes in programmatic, academic, clinical, or supervisory settings.	- Expresses tolerance of change in programmatic, academic, clinical, or supervisory settings.
- Reactionary and defensive in response.	- Thoughtful and reflective in response.
- Shows little or no engagement in cooperative activities.	- Appropriately cooperates in cooperative activities.
- Monopolizes cooperative activities.	- Compromises in cooperative activities.

6. Receptive to and uses feedback

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Responds to feedback with defensiveness, anger, and/or denial.	- Responsive, open, and receptive to feedback.
- Shows little or no evidence of incorporating feedback.	- Appropriately incorporates feedback.

7. Responds to conflict appropriately

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Shows minimal willingness to examine own role in conflict.	- Actively examines and acknowledges own role in conflict.
- Shows minimal effort and/or ability at problem solving.	- Actively participates in problem solving efforts.
- Displays hostility when conflicts are addressed.	- Appropriately expresses emotions when conflicts are addressed.
- Does not address conflict directly with individual(s) involved and addresses with others instead.	- Addresses conflict directly with individual(s) involved.

8. Accepts personal responsibility

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Refuses to admit mistakes or examine own contribution to problems.	- Examines own role in problems.
- Lies, minimizes, or embellishes the truth to extricate self from problems.	- Accurate and honest in describing own and others roles in problems.
	- Accepts own mistakes and responds to them as opportunity for self-improvement.

9. Expresses feelings effectively and appropriately

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Does not express <i>own</i> feelings appropriately.	- Expresses <i>own</i> feelings.
- Does not recognize or acknowledge feelings or <i>others</i> .	- Acknowledges <i>others</i> feelings.
- Acts out negative feelings (through negative behaviors) rather than articulating them.	- Acts professionally while experiencing difficult emotions.
- Expression of feelings is inappropriate to the setting.	- Expression of own feelings is appropriate to the setting.

10. Dependable in meeting obligations

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Absent from scheduled program obligations (e.g., class, supervision, GA, or clinical site) and does not notify others in advance.	- Satisfactorily meetings attendance requirements and notifies others in advance regarding absences.
- Arrives late for scheduled obligations.	- Arrives on-time for scheduled obligations.
- Rarely meetings deadlines (i.e., practicum and internship paperwork, applications, tapes, other assignments) or paperwork is incomplete when submitted.	- Meets deadlines and satisfactorily completes paperwork.

11. Promotes self-care practices

<i>Competence not achieved</i>	<i>Competence achieved</i>
- Neglects wellness and/or wellbeing practices (including physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, etc.).	- Maintains appropriate wellness and wellbeing practices (including physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, etc.).
- Does not maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries.	- Maintains appropriate personal and professional boundaries.
- Does not maintain appropriate work/life balance.	- Achieves appropriate work/life balance.
- Does not monitor self for signs and symptoms of impairment.	- Monitors self for signs and symptoms of impairment.
- Does not acknowledge areas for improvement or self-understanding of blind spots.	- Acknowledges areas for improvement and self-understanding of blind spots.