

Practicing Professional Values:

Factors Influencing Involvement in Social Work Student Organizations

Dorothy Martindale¹, Ren é Olate² & Keith A. Anderson³

¹ National Association of Social Workers – Ohio Chapter, Worthington, Ohio, USA

² The Ohio State University, College of Social Work, Columbus, Ohio, USA

³ University of Montana, School of Social Work, Missoula MT, 59812, USA

Correspondence: Keith A. Anderson, University of Montana, School of Social Work, Missoula MT, 59812, USA

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Abstract

One of the most promising avenues for the development of professional values is involvement in professional student organizations. A convenience sample of baccalaureate social work students ($n = 482$) was drawn from 15 institutions. Regression analyses revealed several predictors of involvement in social work student organizations, including student mentorship, involvement in other student organizations, and type of institution (public/private). These results suggest that involvement in professional student organizations (e.g., social work, nursing, law) may be amenable to interventions such as structured educational/social events and peer mentorship programs which, in turn, may help in the development of professional values.

Keywords: Student organizations, Social work values, Professional values, Student involvement

1. Introduction

Social work is a profession that is both defined and driven by values and a shared identity (Bisman, 2014). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) clearly spells this out in the Code of Ethics – “The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values” (NASW, 2008, p. 1). These core values include: service; social justice; dignity and worth of the person; importance of human relationships; integrity; and competence. This focus on values is also reflected in the undergraduate curricula of social work programs and in the accreditation standards and requisite competencies set forth by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE). As stated in the 2015 CSWE Education Policies and Standards (p. 10): “These values underpin the explicit and implicit curriculum and frame the profession’s commitment to respect for all people and the quest for social and economic justice”.

While classroom instruction certainly plays a strong role in educating students on the values of the profession, observing and experiencing professional values typically takes place in applied activities (e.g., field education, volunteer opportunities). Social work student organizations (SWSOs) may be another venue in which students can take part in applied activities. SWSOs can be defined as groups that are (a) affiliated with schools of social work and (b) engage in service, social, educational, and advocacy-related activities. SWSOs provide students with opportunities to participate in applied activities, such as mobilizing and advocating for social justice and volunteering to promote change in individuals, families, and communities. These supplemental experiences can further shape understanding and implementation of the profession’s core values and engender involvement in the future. In this study, the researchers examined factors related to participation in SWSOs. Findings suggest that there are avenues by which social work programs can facilitate engagement with SWSOs and provide opportunities for students to experience professional values in action.

1.1 Literature Review

Prior to examining participation SWSOs, it is important to understand whether a problem exists in professional social workers’ commitment to and practice of social work values. Professional opinion scales suggest that social workers tend to have common and strongly accepted values, including respect for basic rights, support of self-determination, sense of social responsibility, and commitment to individual freedom (Abbott, 2003). While social workers espouse their commitment to these values, ascertaining whether social workers are actually practicing certain professional

values remains a challenge. “Integrity”, “Competence”, and the “Importance of Human Relationships”, for example, are difficult to measure, yet most social workers probably feel that they are practicing these values in their work. On the other hand, the core value of “social justice” can be measured in practice and behavior. This value calls for social workers to “challenge social injustice” and to “pursue social change” (NASW, 2008). One way of exercising this value is through political action. Although the research is sparse, it does not appear that social workers are exercising this value to the degree called for in the Code of Ethics. Researchers in one study found that over 50% of licensed social workers could be categorized as ‘politically inactive’ (Ritter, 2007). Another study found that few social workers go beyond simply voting and fail to engage in more impactful social justice-related activities, such as “campaigning, personal meetings with government officials, and presenting testimony to legislative bodies” (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001, p. 330). This is not to say that social workers are not committed to the profession’s values, rather this raises questions as to demonstrated or active commitment.

There is some evidence that this lack of active commitment to professional values may stem from the education that social workers receive. In the same study that found a lack of political activity among licensed social workers, the participants indicated that their social work education programs did not prepare them adequately to actively participate in the political system (Ritter, 2007). This may be related to a skewed focus on the development of clinical skills, resulting in the “withering moral and political bases of social work” (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009). Others have lamented that the social work profession has lost its quest for social justice in the search for recognition and legitimacy within the helping professions (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). Some have tabbed this shift from a values-driven profession to a service-driven profession as a “crisis of identity” and a “legacy lost” (Stoesz, Karger, & Carrilio, 2010). Research provides evidence of this disparate focus on clinical skills and the “professionalization” of social work. Studies have found that students are quite capable of recognizing client needs but they are not well-versed in systemic and macro issues, such as poverty, discrimination, and inequality. In response, scholars propose that social work curriculums increase supplemental learning opportunities in macro practice to better meet the requirement of competencies across all system levels (Deweese & Roche, 2001; Mendes, 2007; Nandan & Scott, 2011; Swank, 2012).

Fortunately, supplemental learning opportunities can be provided by student organizations. Extensive student affairs research highlights the benefits of student organization involvement with long-term effects including civic membership throughout adulthood, increased dedication to one’s field, and a continued influence on leadership skills. In general, students who are involved in campus activities experience greater gains in cognitive and affective development, achieve greater academic success, report higher life satisfaction, and build more life skills. (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013; Montelongo, 2002; Strapp & Farr, 2010). In general, students who are involved in campus activities experience greater gains in cognitive and affective development, achieve greater academic success, report higher life satisfaction, and build more life skills. A landmark study conducted by Astin (1996) identified what components of college most influence cognitive and affective development—academic engagement, connection with faculty, and participation in student peer groups. Furthermore, Strapp and Farr (2010) documented a relationship between club participation and job market preparedness, indicating that student organizations are a viable resource for skill building. McCannon & Bennett (1996) identified rationales for student involvement, including the desire for experience, resume building, and meeting people with shared interests. Reasons for not being involved included lack of time and being unaware of the opportunities. Other researchers found that availability and being minority status were associated with a lack of involvement in student organizations (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2001; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Pace & Kuh, 1998; Powell & Agnew, 2007). Others have found that the students attending public universities had more opportunities for student groups and are more likely to be involved in student organizations (Montelongo, 2002). Finally, researchers have found that peer connections are associated with student involvement in organizations (Astin, 1996; Mendes, 2007).

In every social work program, there are opportunities to engage in SWSOs. In fact, CSWE mandates that each social work program “provides opportunities and encourages students to organize in their interests” (2015, p. 15). Some universities offer a range of different SWSOs. In one large Midwestern university, for example, students may join the Social Work Student Association, the local chapter of the National Social Work Honor Society (provided they meet the academic standards), the Social Work Action Alliance, the local student chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers, and the “Out in Social Work” organization for LGBTQ students and allies. These groups engage in education, socialization, and organization and mobilization around policy and political issues. Most importantly, they help students to find commonality and to develop their professional identities as social workers. It may seem like a leap of faith in linking participation in SWSOs with a greater commitment to social work values in practicing professionals. In education, linking college experiences with professional practice is commonplace and

may be one of the most effective methods for preparing students in applied professions such as social work. The social work practicum, for example, has been identified as the “signature pedagogy” in social work education (CSWE, 2015). As such, the link between participation in SWSOs and professional practice of social work values may not be as spurious as it initially appears.

1.2 Specific Aims

Despite the stated and demonstrated importance of SWSOs, no formal resources exist to assist educators in facilitating student involvement. The first step in developing these resources is to understand the characteristics related to student involvement and lack of involvement in SWSOs. To do so, the following three specific aims were developed for this study:

- (1) To identify demographic variables related to involvement in SWSOs.
- (2) To determine whether volunteering, engagement in other organizations, and mentor relationships are related to involvement in SWSOs.
- (3) To understand the role that motivation may play in involvement in SWSOs.

The results of this study have potential importance on two levels: (a) to aid in the development of interventions that increase student involvement in SWSOs; and ultimately (b) to increase social workers’ understanding and active engagement in the values of the profession.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

Prior to sampling, this study received approval through the university Institutional Review Board. Convenience sampling for this study was a multistep process. First, administrators (e.g., Program Directors) at each accredited baccalaureate social work (BSW) program in one large Midwestern state were contacted via email. The researchers explained the purpose of the study and asked administrators if their program would be interested in participating. Administrators were contacted several times if there was no response to the initial email. Out of the 26 accredited BSW programs in the state, 15 agreed to participate (participation rate of 57.7%). The administrators then forwarded the link for the online survey to undergraduate social work students. The sole eligibility criterion for students was enrollment in at least one social course. This was a conscious decision on the part of the researchers as number of social work courses was included as a variable of interest in understanding involvement in SWSOs. As an incentive, students could submit email addresses into a random drawing for one of ten \$25 gas cards. Electronic consent was obtained by checking a box after agreeing to three statements: (a) the participant read the consent form; (b) the participant voluntarily agreed to participate in the study; and (c) the participant was at least 18 years-old.

2.2 Data Collection

A brief online survey was developed based upon existing knowledge about participation in student organizations. Prior to distribution, the survey was pilot tested with 20 undergraduate students to ensure clarity in the language and to establish face validity. This testing revealed that the survey could be completed within 15 minutes and that the wording was clear and understandable at the undergraduate level. The following variables were included in the survey:

Demographics – Students were asked to report on age, gender, racial or ethnic identity, status in BSW program (full-time/part-time), number of social work courses taken, and enrollment status in practicum (enrolled/not enrolled).

Activities and Mentors – Students were asked to report on involvement in volunteer activities and involvement with student organizations outside of social work, such as Greek organizations and religious organizations. Students were also asked to identify mentors, such as professional social workers, other professionals, fellow social work students, non-social work mentors, and family members. Response categories were dichotomous (Y/N).

Motivation – Motivation has been theorized to be a central contributing factor in student engagement in organizations (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Motivation to be a professional social worker was measured by students’ intent to pursue an advanced degree and/or a career in social work. Response categories were dichotomous (Y/N). The 13-item Activity-Feeling States (AFS) Scale was also included to measure intrinsic motivation. The AFS contains three subscales – autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of this measure, autonomy refers to freedom to decide and do what one wants to do. Competence refers to feeling capable and feeling that one is developing skills. Relatedness refers to belonging to a group and feeling involved with and emotionally close to

friends and acquaintances. The AFS has been tested and used extensively with students and the psychometric properties have been found to be acceptable (Reeve & Sickenius, 1994).

Student Involvement in SWSOs – The dependent variable in this study was whether or not the student was actively involved with SWSOs. This variable was broken down into four categories: active member of SWSOs, non-active member of SWSOs, former member of SWSOs, and never involved with SWSOs. Response categories were dichotomous (Y/N).

2.3 Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the data were downloaded from the online survey into IBM SPSS® Statistics, Version 22.0 software. Data were cleaned and coded for analysis by researchers trained in quantitative data analysis methods. Descriptive statistics were generated to help define the sample. Bivariate analyses were then conducted to examine relationships between the variables. Finally, multiple logistic regression analyses were run to identify predictors of both active involvement and lack of active involvement in SWSOs. Only those variables that had significant relations ($p < .05$) with involvement and lack of active involvement were included in each multiple logistic regression model. Since it was not hypothesized a priori the relative importance of each predictor variable and its relation to student involvement, variables were entered simultaneous into the multiple logistic regression models (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013)

3. Results

A total of 482 students ($n = 482$) responded to the survey. Ages ranged from 18 to 71, half of the sample was between 18 and 22, and the mean age was 28.87(SD 11.77). The vast majority of the sample identified as white (76%) and female (80%). Almost three-quarters (74%) of the students were enrolled in public universities and full-time students made up 87% of the sample. Most students (71%) reported that they had completed or were in the process of completing four or more social work courses and 39 % were in their field practicums.

In terms of other activities and relationships, 33% of the students reported active membership in a non-SWSO and 55% reported that they had never been involved with a non-SWSO. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the students reported that they actively volunteered. Approximately two-thirds (63%) of the students reported having a mentor (see Table 1 for details).

In terms of motivation, 93% declared their pursuit of a career in social work with 72% intending to continue onto an advanced degree program (i.e., MSW). Items on each of the three subscales on the AFS scale ranged from 1 to 7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with higher scores indicating higher levels of intrinsic motivation. The mean scores on the autonomy subscale ($M = 5.08$; $SD = 1.17$), the competence subscale ($M = 5.82$; $SD = 1.07$), and relatedness subscale ($M = 5.16$; $SD = 1.28$) were all moderately high. Reliability of the subscales was also acceptable with Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.68 to 0.76.

The dependent variable, involvement in SWSOs, was broken down into four categories: active member, non-active member, former member, and never involved. Twenty-six percent (26%) of students reported being active members of SWSOs; 17% reported being non-active members of SWSOs, 4% reported being former members of SWSOs; and 53% reported that they had never been involved with SWSOs. In order to examine our specific aims in this study, only the first (active member) and last (never involved) were included in the logistic regression analyses.

Table 1. Variables ($n = 482$)

Variable	Frequency	%	$M(SD)$
Age			28.87(11.77)
Race			
White	351	76%	
Black	85	18%	
Latino	12	3%	
Other	12	3%	
Gender (Female)	406	80%	
Institution (Public)	337	74%	
Status (Full Time)	390	87%	
Number of SW Courses			
1-3	122	29%	
4-6	88	21%	
7-9	65	16%	
10-12	70	17%	
13+	73	18%	
In Practicum	172	39%	
Active in Non-SWSOs	124	33%	
Volunteer (Yes)	287	73%	
Mentors (Yes)	244	63%	
Family Members	116	25%	
SW Faculty	101	22%	
Friends	94	20%	
Professionals	79	17%	
SW Staff	59	13%	
Religious Leaders	56	12%	
Fellow SW Students	47	10%	
Supervisors	38	8%	
Pursue Career in SW (Yes)	374	93%	
Pursue MSW (Yes)	285	72%	
Intrinsic Motivation			
Autonomy			5.08(1.17)
Competence			5.82(1.07)
Relatedness			5.16(1.28)
SW Organization Member			
Active Member	102	26%	
Non-Active Member	68	17%	
Former Member	15	4%	
Never Member	210	53%	

In the first logistic regression model, the outcome variable was “active member” in SWSOs. As seen in Table 2, students who had a social work student mentor were 2.46 times more likely to be involved in a SWSO in comparison to students without a social work student mentor (Odds Ratio [OR] = 2.46; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.27, 4.78). Students involved in other organizations were 1.87 times as likely to report active membership within a SWSO (OR = 1.87; CI = 95%, 1.44, 2.42). Additionally, students who volunteered were 1.02 times as likely to be active members (OR = 1.02; CI = 95%, 1.01, 1.02), just as students in field placement were 1.01 times as likely (OR = 1.01; CI = 95%, 1.00, 1.02). Never being involved in other organizations was a significant negative predictor of active

membership within SWSOs: the likelihood of being an active member decreased to 0.54 (OR = .54; CI = 95%, .42, 0.70).

Table 2. Logistic Regression Model 1, Predicting Active Involvement in SWSO

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio	P > z	95% Confidence Interval	
SW Student Mentor	2.46	0.008	1.27	4.78
Active Member in Non-SWSO	1.87	0.000	1.44	2.42
Volunteer Involvement	1.02	0.000	1.01	1.02
In Practicum	1.01	0.039	1.00	1.02
Never a Member in Non-SWSO	0.54	0.000	0.42	0.70

In the second logistic regression model, the outcome variable was “never been involved” in SWSOs. As seen in Table 3, students enrolled in public institutions were 5.68 times more likely to never be involved in SWSOs (OR = 5.68; CI = 95%, 3.07, 10.52). Lack of involvement in other organizations was also a significant predictor of never being involved in SWSOs (OR = 1.59; CI = 95%, 1.22, 2.08). Higher scores on the competence subscale of the AFS, involvement in other organizations, and having a social work student mentors were negative predictors of lack of involvement in SWSOs (OR = 0.77; CI = 95%, 0.61, 0.97); (OR = 0.64; CI = 95%, 0.47, 0.83); (OR = 0.29; CI = 95%, 0.14, 0.61), respectively.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Model 2, Predicting Never Being Involved in SWSO

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio	P > z	95% Confidence Interval	
Type of Institution (Public)	5.68	0.000	3.07	10.52
Never a Member in Non-SWSO	1.59	0.001	1.22	2.08
Competence	0.77	0.000	0.61	0.97
Active Member in Non-SWSO	0.64	0.039	0.47	0.83
SW Student Mentor	0.29	0.000	0.14	0.61

4. Discussion

4.1 Specific Aim 1

This study aimed to parse out the factors associated with student involvement in SWSOs and to gain a better understanding of facilitators and barriers to engagement with these “pre-professional” organizations. In the first specific aim, the researchers sought to identify demographic variables related to involvement and lack of involvement in SWSOs. The only significant demographic predictor of involvement or lack of involvement in SWSOs was type of institution. More specifically, students attending public institutions were over five and a half times more likely to be not be involved in SWSOs. This was the strongest predictor of lack of involvement in this study. This finding contradicts previous assertions that public universities are typically larger and are therefore able to offer more and greater diversity in opportunities for students (Montelongo, 2002). Students attending public institutions may have less monetary resources compared with their counterparts at private institutions. These students may be working to pay for their school and the lack of time may preclude them from joining SWSOs. In 2014, 41.1 % of full-time students attending public institutions were employed compared to 37.8% of full-time students attending private institutions. Students at public institutions also tended to work substantially more hours per week than their counterparts at private institutions (NCES, 2015). In prior studies, lack of time was identified as the leading reason why students don’t join groups, in general (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). Contrary to prior studies, minority status was not significantly correlated with student involvement in SWSOs (Kuh, 2001; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Powell & Agnew, 2007). It could be the case that additional non-social work organizations have formed over the recent years that appeal to and are inclusive of students of minority status.

4.2 Specific Aim 2

In the second specific aim, the researchers explored whether engagement in volunteer activities, other student organizations outside of social work, and mentor relationships were related to involvement in SWSOs. The strongest predictor of student involvement with SWSOs was having a fellow social work student who was viewed as a mentor. In parallel, the lack of a peer student mentor was associated with not being involved with a SWSOs. Peer relationships have long been viewed as strong forces on behavior, including motivation and academic achievement (Antonio, 2004; Wentzel & Muenks, 2016). Peers who are viewed as mentors may be especially influential as students hold them in high esteem and may emulate their behaviors and decisions. As reflected in the literature on

peer relationships and discussed later in this article, this finding has implications for the development of peer student mentorship programs within BSW programs (Astin, 1996; Mendes, 2007). Involvement in other organizations and the converse, never being involved in other organizations, were also predictors of involvement in SWSOs. This was anticipated as students who enjoy groups and find benefits in organizational membership are mostly likely to be inclined to join groups. Additionally, some students may simply not have the time to join groups. Finally, volunteering and being in a field practicum were positively related to active membership in SWSOs. This may speak to exposure to professional values and early experiences of identifying as a social worker (Mendes, 2007). The notion being that the more one identifies as part of a group, the more likely that person may be to actively participate in organizations that promote the interests and positions of that group.

4.3 Specific Aim 3

In the third specific aim, we examined whether motivation played a role in involvement in SWSOs. Only one indicator of motivation, competency, was found to be related to involvement in SWSOs. Students who felt less competent were more likely to have never been involved with SWSOs. As previously mentioned, competence was defined as feeling capable and feeling that one is developing skills. This may be a reciprocal relationship. Students who are active in SWSOs may gain confidence in their abilities as they engage in activities and with each other. Students who feel less confident and capable, may feel that they have little to offer to a pre-professional group and may be reluctant to engage with other students. This question has been asked in the literature, whether organizations cultivate more developed and competent students or if more developed and competent students gravitate to organizations (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Additional research is needed to disentangle this complex relationship. Interestingly, intentions to pursue an MSW degree and to become a practicing social worker were not significantly related to involvement with SWSOs. It may be the case that undergraduate students do not appreciate the role and benefits (e.g., networking, building resumes) that involvement in SWSOs can have in their future as social work professionals.

4.4 Limitations

Certain limitations in the present study should be considered prior to discussing the implications for social work education. First, there may be some degree of response bias in the sample. Social work students who were more engaged and therefore more likely to be active in SWSOs may have been more likely to participate in the survey. However, only 26% of the sample reported that they were active members of SWSOs, so response bias may be a limited concern. The researchers also relied upon program directors and administrators to forward the survey link to students. This limited the ability to contact students directly and multiple times to encourage additional participation. Finally, a substantial percentage (29%) of the participants had taken or were actively enrolled in one to three social work courses. While this variable was not significantly related to involvement with SWSOs, including students who have not declared the social work major may have clouded the results of this study. There may be little rationale to join SWSOs if a student is not a social work major. Limiting this study to students who have declared their social work major may have provided a clearer picture.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings from this study suggest avenues by which social work programs could increase involvement with SWSOs. This, in turn, could bolster students' commitment to and active practice of social work values. Students attending public institutions were less likely to be actively engaged with SWSOs. As discussed, these students may have fewer resources (including time) and greater outside commitments (e.g., employment) than students attending private institutions (NCES, 2015). Social work programs at public institutions should look toward incorporating opportunities for participation in SWSOs into the regular class schedule. This could include sponsoring lunch and learn sessions during the day. Opportunities for online participation could also be explored. Students could attend virtual meetings held at times that outside of the school day and more convenient for non-traditional students. Social work programs at public institutions (and really all institutions) could consider awarding class credit for participation in projects run through SWSOs. There is growing diversity in higher education and more non-traditional students are attending college, including BSW programs. Valutis, Rubin, and Bell (2012) suggest that teaching social work values and the development of a social work identity should be tailored to individual students who may be in varying states of personal and professional development. Older students may be more prepared to identify as a professional social worker, while younger students may require more attention, greater exposure, and increased socialization within the profession.

Peer mentorship also played a strong role in predicting active involvement in SWSOs. Social work programs should look to establish formal processes and programs to link students with peer mentors. While there is variability in the

conceptualization and implementation of mentorship programs, research suggests that mentorship programs (including peer mentorship programs) can have a positive impact on several important educational and professional outcomes. These outcomes include positive adjustment to college, student retention, academic achievement, and professional development (for a review, see Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Peer mentorship may be especially important to students who come from minority backgrounds or for first-generation college students who may lack available mentorship at home. Some schools of social work have recognized the importance of peer mentorship and have established formal programs. Such programs could serve as models for other schools and the CSWE may look to mandating peer mentorship programs in the future (for an example of a peer-mentorship program, see <https://www.socialwork.vcu.edu/student/peermentor.html>).

Service learning programs and courses may also hold promise in the development of and commitment to social work values. Service learning can be defined as a teaching and learning strategy that provides experiences intended to address communal needs, foster civic engagement, and engage students in discourse, reflection, and personal and professional growth (Kerins, 2010). A growing body of literature suggests that service learning courses in social work programs can increase understanding, commitment, and practice of professional values (Ericson, 2011; Maccio & Voorhies, 2012). In a recent study, researchers designed a service-learning course that combined classroom learning and assignments focused on developing professional values and skill-building along with 30 hours of service-learning in community agencies. After completing the course, students reported slight or significant increases in the degree to which they “valued” each of the core values of social work (Levy & Edmiston, 2015). While social work programs all have practicums, service-learning courses such as this may provide a more focused strategy for promoting the importance of professional values and the eventual practice of these values following graduation.

Finally, scholars have suggested that social work educators shift from cognitive to affective learning strategies in order to stress social work values. “Affective learning involves changes in feelings, attitudes, and values that shape thinking and behavior” (Neuman Allen & Friedman, 2010, p. 2). These same scholars propose an alternative taxonomy for affective learning that includes the following levels for students: (a) identifying their own values; (b) clarifying their values through affirming and acting upon their choices; (c) exploring implications and comparing their values with alternative views; (d) modifying values as they accommodate and assimilate new information; and (e) internalizing the values and behaving in a manner that is consistent with the values (Neuman & Friedman, 2008). Teaching in the affective domain requires faculty to allow students to openly explore their values, to share and compare their views in a respectful climate, to integrate personal and professional values, and to provide space to exercise these values. By creating this affective learning environment, students may be more inclined to identify as social workers, to engage with groups that represent the values of the profession (such as SWSOs), and to put social work values into action as students and eventually as practicing professionals.

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