Political Diversity Among Social Work Students

Robin Ringstad, Ph.D.
California State University, Stanislaus
RRingstad@csustan.edu

Abstract

This article explores the political ideologies of graduate social work students and examines whether political views differ based on political party, religious affiliation, or other demographic characteristics. Results of surveys completed by 127 MSW students reveal that most are moderate or liberal. Political views do differ on sense of social responsibility based on political party and on respect for basic rights based on religious affiliation. No evidence was found that religious affiliation or political ideology changed during students' time in the educational program.

Keywords: Political ideology; Political diversity; Social work student attitudes; Religion and political views.

1.   Introduction

Diversity and social justice are typically thought of within the social work profession as concepts indicating value, interest, respect, and inclusion of a wide range of views, experiences, and realities. Both are rich areas of exploration, discussion, and study in social work and in social work education. In recent years, however, there have been objections to the profession's focus on diversity and social justice, with claims that diversity and social justice are politicized terms referring to particular social policy positions (National Association of Scholars [NAS], 2007). Some have asserted that the focus on diversity and social justice within social work education programs results in social work students being silenced in terms of expressing their personal opinions and beliefs

(Balch, 2008). Most objections seem embedded with the assumption that social work is, by definition, a liberal profession, and that the value-base and ethical underpinnings of the profession mean that all social work students are required to be liberal, as well. In fact, however, whether or to what extent social work is a liberal profession or that social work students are expected to be liberal are relatively unexplored areas.

Little empirical data are available about the political ideology of social workers, and what does exist is somewhat contradictory. Even less is known about the political ideology of social work students. Exploration of the self-reported political views of social work students is needed to inform discussions about the assumed liberalism of the profession as well as to respond to allegations that social work education programs force students to adopt particular political stances. The current study examined the political views and beliefs of graduate social work students in terms of the liberal–conservative ideological continuum, explored whether their beliefs differed based on demographic characteristics, and examined whether beliefs differed between students entering and exiting a social work education program.

2.   Background and Context

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation standards explicitly require that social work education programs prepare students to "engage diversity and difference in practice" (CSWE, 2008, p. 4) and "advance human rights and social and economic justice" (CSWE, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, National Association of

Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states that "social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients"… [and]… "are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice" (NASW, 2012, Preamble, para. 2).

The NASW Code of Ethics (2012) provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the terms diversity and social justice as used in the social work profession. The Code of Ethics describes the value of diversity as relating to cultural competency and social diversity. This is explained as recognizing the strengths that exist in cultures, providing services that are sensitive to differences among people and cultural groups, and seeking to understand social diversity "with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability" (NASW, 2012, Ethical Standards, item c). Similarly, the Code of Ethics provides a conceptual definition for social justice, stating

> Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people….Social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice….Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people. (NASW, 2012, Ethical Principles, para. 3)

The National Association of Scholars, in its objection to NASW and CSWE positions on diversity and social justice, has stated that NASW Code of Ethics standards regarding promoting social justice represent "partisan declarations… about policy" (NAS, 2007, p. 2-3) and that CSWE accreditation standards are "ideologically loaded and mandating political advocacy and action" (NAS, 2007, p. 7). Will (2007) argued that "in 1997, the National Association of Social Workers

(NASW) adopted a surreptitious political agenda in the form of a new code of ethics [by] enjoining social workers to advocate for social justice" (para. 3). In a 2008 letter to the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, NAS President Stephen Balch stated that "one CSWE prerequisite for graduation is that social work students must endorse and even lobby for a particular set of ideological, social, and political positions [and that] in order to succeed in a social work program, students are forced to keep silent about their personal opinions or beliefs" (Balch, 2008, p. 2).

The terms diversity and social justice have been broadly used and there is lack of agreement about what exactly is meant by the terms. While no specific definitions have been offered by NAS, it is clear that they object to the focus on these issues by the social work profession. The concerns expressed by the NAS and others are primarily presented as concern for respecting the individual beliefs of social workers and social work students, particularly in regard to political and religious views. The objections appear to be based on the belief that social work values and ethical principles related to diversity and social justice serve to constrain the voice of conservative and/or religious social work students. If true, this would imply that social work not only is a liberal profession, but more importantly, a profession unaccepting of non-liberal or conservative views, and that social work education programs coerce students into following or adopting liberal views. Similarly, the objections would seem to imply that religious individuals automatically have different political opinions on areas of interest to social work than non-religious individuals, and that the profession will be non-accepting of the views of religious students.

Past research has called into question the assumption that all social workers hold liberal views on social, political, and religious issues or that conservative or religious views among social workers are unwelcome. Actually, prior research has indicated that there is considerable variation in political ideology and religious views among social workers (Hodge, 2003; Rosenwald, 2006;

Rosenwald & Hyde, 2006; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992). For example, Rosenwald (2006) reported that 40.6% of the licensed social worker participants in his study were liberal and 34.4% were moderate. Just over half (55.2%) of Rosenwald's sample ranked themselves "left of center" (liberal) compared to 10.4% who ranked themselves "right of center" (conservative). Sheridan et al. (1992) found that about a third of social workers reported a belief in a personal God and over a third believed in a transcendent or divine dimension in nature. Only 9% of the Sheridan et al. sample believed that notions of God were only human imagination. Smith-Osborne and Rosenwald (2009) reported that 83% of a 2003 sample of licensed social workers reported a religious affiliation, and that the "average strength of religious affiliation level endorsed was 'fairly strongly religious or spiritual'" (p. 397). Smith-Osborne and Rosenwald also found that "strength of religious/spiritual affiliation was not significantly correlated with…political ideology…nor with beliefs about liberal ideological requirements for the profession" (p. 399).

The current exploratory study was intended to expand on the knowledge base related to political diversity among social work professionals. Specifically, the study was intended to examine the nature of social work students' political opinions and to examine whether their political views differed based on political party, religious affiliation, or other demographic factors. Results contribute to the exploration of diversity in student opinions, add to an understanding of how diversity and difference are managed in social work education programs, and inform discussions about the potential impact of social work education on students' views.

3. Methods

3.1 Design and Procedures

A survey design was used to investigate the political views of graduate social work students, to examine whether their views differed based on religious affiliation or other demographic characteristics, and to examine whether views differed between students who were just beginning their social work education program and those who were into the advanced coursework portion of the social work program. Most students entering the particular Master of Social Work (MSW) program where the study was conducted had very little, if any, prior social work education as few had undergraduate degrees in social work. Many did, however, have varying degrees of social work practice experience as a result of prior employment or volunteer work. All students in the program were surveyed during a single academic year. Entering (1st year) students were surveyed during a new student orientation event. Continuing (2nd and 3rd year) students were surveyed in a required advanced year class. All continuing students had completed their foundation practice and policy coursework at the time of the survey.

A written questionnaire was used to collect responses. The questionnaire was divided into sections related to topical areas and asked about students' views on a range of social issues. Only responses related to political views were included in the current study. All surveys were completed in hard copy. Participants were advised that the completion of the survey was voluntary, and were advised to not include any identifying information on the questionnaire. Informed consent was provided prior to administration of the questionnaire. The research was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board prior to the study being conducted.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

The sample was made up of Master of Social Work (MSW) students in one social work program in a politically and socially conservative region (McGhee & Krimm, 2012) of a liberal-leaning (solidly Democratic) western state (Jones, 2009). The sample included 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year MSW students, thereby including students who were in the foundation and advanced portions of their academic program. A total of 127 responses were received. With an 88.2% response rate, results are believed to be highly reflective of student views at the point in time during which they completed the survey.

Survey respondents were predominantly female (83.5%). Just over half (52.8%) were between the ages of 25 and 34 years. Approximately a quarter (26%) were younger than 25 years old and nearly a quarter (20.5%) were age 35 or older. Over two-thirds of the students reported either Hispanic (36.2%) or White (33.1%) ethnic identifications. The remaining one-third included Asian (11.8%), African American (7.9%), Native American (2.4%), and Other (6.3%) ethnic identifications. Students were equally divided between being in the beginning (foundation) portion of their academic program (48.8%) and the concluding (advanced) portion of their academic program (51.2%). Survey respondents were demographically reflective of students in the program as a whole.

Participants were asked to report on their political party affiliation and their religious affiliation. In terms of political party affiliation, over half (55.9%) indicated they were Democrat. In comparison, approximately a fifth of participants identified themselves either as Republican (9.4%) or Independent (7.9%). Another fifth (19.7%) indicated they had no political party affiliation and 2.4% indicated another political party including Libertarian, Green, and Other. In terms of religious affiliation, the vast majority (78.9%) reported a religious affiliation. Over a quarter (26.6%) of participants indicated they were Catholic, 10.9% were Protestant, 5.5% were Evangelical Christian, and 35.9% were some other religious affiliation. Other religious affiliations identified included Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Other. Only 16.4% of participants indicated they had no religious affiliation, with 7.0% reporting they were Atheist and 9.4% reporting they were Agnostic.

3.3   Instrumentation

Political ideology was measured using an existing instrument, the Professional Opinion Scale (POS) (Abbott, 2003). The POS, originally developed in 1988 and revised in 1998, was constructed based on NASW Public Policy Statements and was designed to be a measure of commitment to social work values (Abbott, 2003). The NASW policy statements are consistent with the social work value-base and reflect a "philosophy committed to social action, social justice, human rights, client self-determination, and a general commitment to social responsibility" (Abbott, 2003, p. 646).

Rosenwald (2006) used the POS to measure political ideology among licensed social workers and indicated the instrument "appeared to be the most comprehensive and reliable scale that gauged political ideology by examining policy statements linked to the social work profession" (p. 121). The POS has good evidence of internal reliability, with a Cronbach alpha of .85 (Rosenwald & Hyde, 2006). Embedded within the POS are four value dimension subscales intended to measure different elements of the social work value-base. These subscales include Support for Self-Determination, Sense of Social Responsibility, Commitment to Individual Freedom, and Respect for Basic Rights. The subscales have been found to have acceptable levels of reliability, with Cronbach alphas of .68, .76, .79, and .77, respectively (Abbott, 2003). In the current study acceptable levels of reliability were found for three of the four subscales with Cronbach alphas of .70 for Support for Self-Determination, .70 for Sense of Social Responsibility, and .73 for Respect for Basic Rights. A lower alpha coefficient of .53 was found, however, for Commitment to Individual Freedom in the current study. This may have been due to an error in instrument construction by which only 38 of the 40 items of the POS were included on the questionnaire. The failure to include these two items represents a limitation to the study and decreases the strength of comparison of study results with prior research.

The current study combined the POS items (38 of 40) with an additional 12 items. Three of the additional items were from prior research and 9 items were newly added for this study. With the inclusion of all items, a total of 50 political views statements were included on the questionnaire. Individual items were scored on a five-point Likert scale with participants indicating their level of agreement with each statement (strongly agree to

strongly disagree). Reverse coding was conducted on relevant items during data analysis to result in a score of 1 representing a conservative political viewpoint and a score of 5 representing a liberal political viewpoint for each item.

4. Results

4.1 Political Views

Evaluation of the political ideology of participants was conducted four ways. First, participants' responses on individual items were computed. Secondly, total POS scores using answers on the 38 POS items were calculated. Thirdly, the four value dimension subscales of the POS were examined. Finally, overall scores of participants' ideology using all 50 items related to political views was computed.

Mean scores and standard deviations for each individual survey item, accounting for reverse scoring, are reported in Table 1. Table 1 also identifies the items making up each of the POS subscales. Mean scores on each item could range from 1 to 5, with lower scores indicating conservative views and higher scores indicating liberal views.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Professional Opinion Scale + Twelve Items (N = 127)

Item	M	SD
Support for Self-Determination Subscale		
Women should have the right to use abortion services if they choose.	4.28	.96
Confidential family planning/birth control should be available to all adolescents.	4.15	.88
Family planning services should be available to individuals regardless of income.	4.55	.71
Older persons should be sustained to the extent possible in their own environments.	3.61	1.20
The child in adoption proceedings should be the primary client.	4.06	.90
A family may be defined as two or more individuals who consider themselves a family and who assume protective, caring obligations to one another.	4.27	.89
When they are old enough, children should have the right to choose their religion, including the option to choose none.	4.42	.84
Counseling should be required for women who ask for abortions.	3.40	1.20
Couples should decide for themselves whether they want to become parents.	4.47	.73
Terminal (dying) individuals have a right to be informed of their prognoses.	4.60	.65
Sense of Social Responsibility Subscale		
There should be a guaranteed minimum income for everyone.	3.34	1.20
The federal government has invested too much money in the poor.	4.10	.90
The government should NOT redistribute the wealth.	3.70	1.10
The government should provide a comprehensive system of insurance protecting against loss of income because of disability.	4.05	.79
Unemployment benefits should be extended, especially in areas hit by economic disaster.	4.10	.90
The gap between poverty and affluence should be reduced through measures directed at redistribution of income.	3.57	.97
Efforts should be made to increase voting among minorities.	4.38	.75
Local governments should be monitored on the enforcement of civil rights statutes.	4.05	.83
The government should have primary responsibility for helping the community accept a returning criminal offender.	3.25	1.20

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Professional Opinion Scale + Twelve Items (N = 127), continued

Item	M	SD
"No-knock" entry, which allows the police entrance without a search warrant, encourages police to violate the rights of individuals.	3.75	1.20
Commitment to Individual Freedom Subscale		
All direct-income benefits to welfare recipients should be in the form of cash.	2.24	.87
The employed should have more government assistance than the unemployed.	3.44	.95
Welfare mothers should be discouraged from having more children.	3.21	1.20
Capital punishment should be abolished.	2.94	1.18
The death penalty is an important means for discouraging criminal activity.	3.59	1.19
Welfare workers should keep files on those clients suspected of fraud.	2.35	1.13
It would be better to give welfare recipients vouchers or goods rather than cash.	2.54	1.08
The FBI (government) should keep files on individuals with minority political affiliation.	3.80	1.07
Corporal punishment is an important means of discipline for aggressive, acting-out children.	3.94	1.07
Respect for Basic Rights Subscale		
Retirement at age 65 should be mandatory.	3.81	1.00
The mandatory retirement age protects society from the incompetency of the elderly.	4.00	.92
Mandatory retirement based on age should be eliminated.	3.56	1.01
Seniors/elderly require only minimum mental health services.	4.15	.87
Only medical personnel should be involved in life and death treatment decisions.	4.22	.87
Pregnant adolescents should be excluded from regular school.	4.42	.87
Juveniles do not need to be provided with legal counsel in juvenile courts.	4.60	.64
Abduction by parents who do not have custody should be viewed as a family, not a legal, matter.	4.04	.93
The government should not subsidize family-planning programs.	3.65	1.03
Additional Questions		
Faith-based delivery of social services is an effective method of helping people in need.	2.41	.91
Special laws for the protection of lesbians' and gay men's equal rights are not necessary.	4.24	.96
Social services should be provided to illegal immigrants.	2.24	1.16
Mandatory sterilization is acceptable to prevent pregnancy among the severely mentally disabled.	3.90	1.16
Mandatory sterilization is acceptable to prevent pregnancy among the severely physically disabled.	4.07	1.03
Counseling should be required for teenagers who ask for abortions.	2.28	1.19
The FBI (government) should keep files on individuals with radical political affiliation.	3.40	1.17
Government is inefficient and wasteful.	2.91	1.10
Elected politicians lost touch with the pubic pretty quickly.	2.05	.87
Government controls too much of daily life.	2.96	.94
Regulation of business does more harm than good.	3.29	.95
Government should be run for the benefit of all people.	4.43	.77

The 38 POS items were combined to determine a total POS score. Total possible scores on the POS ranged from 38 – 190. With a mean of 145.17 (*SD* = 12.93) results indicated moderately liberal views among participants. When scores for subscales were examined, results on three of the four subscales also revealed moderately liberal attitudes. Specifically, with a range of possible scores of 10 – 50 on both the Support for Self-Determination and the Sense of Social Responsibility subscales, results revealed a mean score of 41.70 (*SD* = 4.71) on Support for Self-Determination and 38.39 (*SD* = 5.12) on Sense of Social Responsibility. Both of these mean scores indicated fairly liberal views. Similarly, with the range of possible scores being 9 – 45 on the Respect for Basic Rights subscale, a mean score of 36.45 (*SD* = 4.72) indicated that participants held liberal views. The fourth subscale, Commitment to Individual Freedom, also had a range of possible scores of 9 – 45. A mean score of 28.18 (*SD* = 4.59) on this subscale, however, indicated participants' views were neutral (neither liberal nor conservative), meaning participants were more conservative in their views about individual freedoms than in other areas. When all 50 political ideology items included on the survey were combined to determine an Overall Political Ideology Score, results revealed that participants scored slightly liberal. With a possible range of 50 – 250, and a neutral score equaling 150, participants in the current study had a mean score of 182.91 (*SD* = 15.48). To further aid in understanding where participants fell on the liberal–conservative continuum of political attitudes, Overall Political Ideology Scores were categorized into "liberal," "moderate," and "conservative" score levels by dividing possible scores into thirds. Using this approach a score of 50 – 117 was considered conservative, 118 – 183 was considered moderate, and 184 – 250 was considered liberal. Viewed in this context, approximately two-thirds of the participants (67.9%) scored in the liberal range and one-third (32.1%) in the moderate range of the continuum. None of the participants scored in the conservative range.

4.2   Ideological Differences Among Groups

Bivariate analysis was conducted to determine whether there were differences in political views based on demographic characteristics. All total scale scores and subscale scores were analyzed in relation to each demographic characteristic. No statistically significant differences were found on any of the measures of political views based on gender or age. Scores on a single subscale were found to differ based on students' level in the program and scores on two subscales differed based on ethnicity. In addition, statistically significant differences among groups based on political party affiliation and religious affiliation were found.

Statistically significant differences in participants' scores on the Sense of Social Responsibility and the Respect for Basic Rights subscales were found based on ethnicity. Results of a One-Way ANOVA (*F* = 3.83, *p* = .033) revealed that with a mean score of 32, Native Americans reported neutral views regarding Sense of Social Responsibility while all other groups reported varying degrees of liberal views. With a mean score of 43.22, the most liberal views were reported by African Americans. Scores of other groups were very close in range. Specifically, group scores on Sense of Social Responsibility based on ethnicity were as follows: Asian (*M* = 39.38); Hispanic (*M* = 39.14); Caucasian (*M* = 36.80); and Other (*M* = 37.50). Similarly, with an *F* = 2.85 and a *p* = .019, One-Way ANOVA results revealed differences among groups on the Respect for Basic Rights subscale. The most liberal views were reported by African Americans (*M* = 38.20) and Caucasians (*M* = 38.17). These were followed by Other (*M* = 36.88), Asians (*M* = 36.00), and Hispanics (*M* = 35.13), then by Native Americans (*M* = 31.50) with the lowest score.

In terms of level in the program, a single difference between beginning and advanced graduate students was found regarding their views on the Commitment to Individual Freedom subscale. With a mean score of 28.98 (*SD* = 4.66) advanced students were slightly more liberal than foundation students (*M* = 27.33, *SD* = 4.39). With a *t* = -2.00

and a corresponding *p* value of .048, Independent Samples T-test results revealed this difference to be statistically significant.

Although scores for all participant groups tended to be moderately liberal on the Sense of Social Responsibility subscale, scores did differ among groups based on political party affiliation. With an *F* = 3.72 and a corresponding *p* value of .007, One-way ANOVA results revealed that Democrats (*M* = 39.42) had the most liberal views, followed closely by Other political party (*M* = 39.33) and No political party (*M* = 38.03) participants. In contrast, Republicans (*M* = 33.73) and Independents (*M* = 36.30) had the least liberal views on Sense of Social Responsibility. There were no significant differences on any of the other scale or subscale scores based on political affiliation.

The final area of difference among groups was based on religious affiliation. While no statistically significant differences were found for scores on the POS, the POS subscales, or the Overall Political Ideology Scores based on particular religious affiliations, differences in participants' views on Respect for Basic Rights were found based on whether participants reported having a religious affiliation or not. Religious affiliation data were recoded to include all participants who reported being affiliated with a religious denomination into a religiously affiliated group and those who reported being atheist or agnostic into a non-religiously affiliated group. An Independent Samples T-test (*t* = 2.23, *p* = .027) revealed that with a mean score of 38.63 (*SD* = 4.28) non-religiously affiliated individuals were more liberal than religiously affiliated individuals (*M* = 36.04, *SD* = 4.71). Importantly, even though these differences did rise to a statistically significant level, both religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated scores were solidly in the liberal area of the liberal–moderate–conservative continuum of scores. There were no other differences in scores based either on being religiously affiliated or based on particular religious faiths.

5. Discussion

Overall, the results of this study lend support to the idea that social work is a liberal profession although results would indicate moderately liberal rather than very liberal views among participants. Similarly, while most scores were in the liberal range, a full third of participants could be more accurately described as moderate, calling into question the assumption that the social work profession is a liberal monolith and supporting the idea that a range of views are tolerated by the profession. Similarly, as all participants in this study were students enrolled in a graduate level social work education program, results appear to indicate social work students have fairly liberal views overall. Little evidence exists, however, that these liberal views are the result of the educational program. Rather, results may more accurately reflect who chooses to come to social work education rather than what social work education does to students. Two-thirds of the student participants in this study scored in the liberal range, one-third in the moderate range, and none in the conservative range on overall political ideology, and beginning and advanced students reported few differences in their political views.

No conclusive explanation for the higher percentage of liberal views found in the current study as compared to prior research is possible from the available data. The sample in the current study did differ in that social work students rather than social work practicing professionals made up the sample. Additionally, differences in social, economic, and political environments may exist between the time frame of the current and previous studies. Political ideology is influenced by social political environments and worldview (Buila, 2010; Koeske & Crouse, 1981), and American's values and beliefs currently are more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the past 25 years (Pew Research Center, 2012). In any case, participants in the current study reported more liberal views than found in prior research, and did so at the time of entering the profession (at the beginning of their educational program). These results do not support the idea that the social work professional standards or social work educational programs coerce individuals into liberal views.

The overwhelming majority (78.9%) of

participants in this study reported they had a religious affiliation of some kind. Only 16.4% of participants reported no religious affiliation. These results are consistent with religious affiliation among the adult United States (U.S.) population as a whole. According to the Pew Research Center (2008) 83.4% of adults in the U.S. report some sort of religious affiliation compared to 16.1% who report no religious affiliation. Interestingly, in spite of concerns identified by NAS and others about social work ethical guidelines and accreditation standards not respecting political and religious views of individual social work students, no differences were found in political opinions based on participants' religious faith, and only a single difference in the area of Respect for Basic Rights was found between religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated students. Even with this difference, however, both religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated participants held liberal views. While it is certainly possible that opinions may differ between religiously affiliated and non-religiously affiliated social workers on specific social issues or specific social policies, the social work value-based policy areas examined in this study provided little evidence of this. In contrast, opinions and attitudes among students regardless of religious affiliation were remarkably consistent.

Very public complaints and concerns have been expressed about the profession of social work in terms of the professional focus on diversity and social justice, and alleging that students in social work programs have been mistreated based on their political or religious views (NAS, 2007; Will, 2007). Participants in this study were similar in their political views across demographic groups. Participants also tended to express moderately liberal political views so may be unlikely to provide much information about the experiences of those who might have conservative ideologies. Likewise, while most participants in this study indicated a religious affiliation, no information was collected about the degree or level of participants' religious beliefs or involvement. These factors could have an impact on individuals' opinions, and it is unknown whether individuals could feel that their personal religious

values are discrepant with social work professional values, ethics, or practice guidelines. In the current study, however, data were examined to determine whether there were differences in political views between beginning and advanced students as such differences might indicate a particular type of impact by their experience in the social work education program. Only a single difference in views (on the Commitment to Individual Freedom subscale) was found, with advanced students being slightly more liberal in this area. Data were also examined to determine whether religious affiliation differed between the beginning and advanced students in this study. Although not statistically significant, it was interesting that a higher percentage of advanced students (86.9%) reported being religiously affiliated than foundation students (78.7%). If, in fact, social work educational programs influence or coerce students to change or deny their own personal opinions or values in order to fit into the profession or to succeed in the educational program, one might expect religious affiliation to decrease during students' time in a social work program. This was not the case for participants in the current study.

6.   Conclusion

This study provides evidence of significant agreement on political values issues by students entering the social work profession regardless of political party or religious affiliation. According to social work professional standards and ethical guidelines, respect for diversity and the pursuit of social justice include respecting political and religious differences (CSWE, 2008; NASW, 2012). The profession of social work is clearly committed to these ideals. Three decades ago Koeske and Crouse (1981) aptly stated that "social workers, as individuals and as a group, have been characterized as both 'liberal' and 'conservative,' depending upon who is rendering the characterization and when it is rendered" (p. 194). They went on to state that applying labels to an entire profession is, of course, dubious, but that people, nonetheless, tend to act on such beliefs (Koeske & Crouse, 1981).

Acting on assumptions about the entire profession of social work may be the explanation

for recent attacks on social work education and the social work profession. No evidence was found in the current study to support the idea that participating in a social work education program swayed political ideology among students. While it is obviously important to examine complaints, concerns, or particular experiences of any students alleging inappropriate pressure or exclusion based on their beliefs, fears of such occurrences may be overstated. It is generally unhelpful to make allegations or draw conclusions about an entire profession or academic discipline based on unsubstantiated assumptions or discontent related to perceived political agendas. Such may be the case in the current debate about the values and ethics of the social work profession.

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