

Students' Perceptions of Social Work: Implications for Strengthening the Image of Social Work among College Students

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***** Tables 1-6 are omitted from this formatted document. *****

Abstract:

This study, inspired by the efforts of NASW to improve the public perception and understanding of social work, focused on the perceptions and attitudes of college students regarding the profession of social work. The sample included 678 undergraduates at a state university who represented a wide variety of majors. Findings indicate that students' affiliation with a social worker, whether a family member, friend, or work or volunteer experience, positively influenced both their perception and understanding of the profession. Furthermore, regardless of demographics, respondents generally had a negative perception of the salary range of social workers, implying that this aspect of the profession could limit or deter students from choosing social work as a profession. Implications for improving the image of social work among college students are delineated along with issues that require further study.

Keywords:

college students | NASW campaign image | public perception | social work image | social work

Article:

Headnote

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social work as a profession. Implications for improving the image of social work among college students are delineated along with issues that require further study.

Currently, NASW is in the midst of an education campaign, with the primary goal of increasing the public's awareness of social work roles and the social work profession (NASW, 2005). This campaign is in direct response to concerns that the image of social work continues to be haunted by the specter of the friendly visitor or the person who takes away children. NASW has launched phase one of the campaign and has conducted some research surrounding public perception of the social work profession and the roles filled by social workers. The results of the effort conducted by NASW in cooperation with Crosby Marketing Communications demonstrate that the public seems to hold social workers in higher esteem than was originally thought at the outset of the study, although public understanding of the diversity of roles and services is not strong (NASW). Inspired by the efforts of NASW to assess and improve public knowledge of social work, this study focused on the perceptions of college students regarding the social work profession. As the demand for social workers grows larger, particularly with the aging population (National Institute on Aging, 1987; Pasztor, SaintGerman, & DeCrescenzo, 2002), schools of social work continue to struggle with recruitment. In an effort to increase the number of students choosing social work as a major, it is essential to begin to understand how students making career choices view the profession of social work. College students' perceptions of social work influence their career choices. Exposure to accurate information about social work broadens knowledge about the field, even if other career choices are made.

In reviewing the literature, NASW's recent efforts, as mentioned earlier, and a study conducted by LeCroy and Stinson (2004) stand out in addressing the public's perception of social work. Studies concerning the perception of social work as a profession are scarce; however, the literature contains two other significant studies related to public perceptions of social work. A study conducted by Condie and colleagues (1978) examined public perception of social work and pointed out earlier studies conducted in the 1950s, which concluded that the public was very unclear about what social workers did at that point in time. Furthermore, the study by Condie and colleagues concluded that there was more awareness of social work roles in the 1970s than there was in the 1950s, citing that more respondents recognized that social workers performed a variety of roles. Despite the increased awareness of the variety of social work roles, Condie and colleagues concluded that the public was not able to identify social work roles accurately. For example, the stereotyped image of the "child protector" was dominant, as were other inaccurate roles such as legal adviser. Condie and colleagues found that 94 percent of respondents indicated reluctance to seek help from a social worker, and if the person knew a social worker, his or her reluctance decreased by only 3 percent. Condie and colleagues attributed this finding to a lack of prestige for social work compared with other helping professions. The Condie et al. study concluded that respondents did not recognize professionals in certain situations as social workers, particularly when the settings were atypical (other than a public agency). Condie and

colleagues asserted that steps must be taken to assist the public in recognizing social workers when they have contact with them.

LeCroy and Stinson (2004) described finding only one other study that addressed public perceptions and knowledge about social workers and social work roles. Kaufman and Raymond (cited in LeCroy & Stinson) surveyed 452 adults in Alabama, targeting knowledge about social work education, credentialing, types of settings, types of clients, presenting problems, and public attitudes. This study reported that, overall, attitudes toward social workers were negative. Noting that the study was limited by cultural influences and poor visibility of social workers in Alabama, LeCroy and Stinson pointed out that Kaufman and Raymond were surprised by the following: Higher levels of knowledge about social work and social work settings predicted more positive attitudes, and involvement in social work services in the past predicted greater knowledge about social work but not more positive attitudes.

LeCroy and Stinson (2004) cited studies that have compared different disciplines in the helping professions. An Australian study conducted in 1986 found that the Australian public generally perceived social work as more valuable than psychology, psychiatry, and counseling (Sharpley, 1986). In the United States, a study by Fall and colleagues (2000) found that social workers, when compared with master's-level counselors, clinical psychologists, and doctoral-level counselors, ranked consistently at the bottom regarding respondents' confidence in treating mental health issues, despite the fact that 33 percent of the respondents had seen or had a family member who had seen a social worker (more than any other discipline represented in the sample). Given that social workers provide more mental health services than any other discipline in the helping professions, this finding does not inspire a positive public view of clinical social workers, particularly in light of the fact that so many of the respondents had some contact with a social worker.

LeCroy and Stinson's (2004) study suggested that social workers are, overall, viewed positively. In fact, the results indicated that the majority of respondents perceived that only nurses were viewed as more valuable in the community of helping professionals. Most of the respondents agreed that social workers made a difference in the community. Moreover, nearly 75 percent of respondents indicated that more social workers were needed. LeCroy and Stinson reported that compared with some earlier studies, there is more public awareness of social work roles. LeCroy and Stinson's study points out that some of the data indicate that the public does not reflect the high regard for the profession held by social workers themselves. Furthermore, the public does not seem to recognize the full range of current social work roles. Several respondents in the LeCroy and Stinson study did not recognize that social workers provide psychotherapy, and they saw psychologists as more helpful than social workers in relation to most problem types.

Comley (1985) asserted that one of the major reasons the public does not have a more positive perception of social work is the lack of effort by social workers to educate the public about the profession and professional roles and activities. Certainly, social workers must advocate for and

educate others about the profession that they practice. College and university settings offer an opportunity to better inform the public about social work. Jones (2005) quoted Carol Nessler Doelling, director of the Career Service Center at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, as follows:

When a field is well established in the market, has an identity, and has a clear niche, then the education side does not need to address those issues. But when the field is more diffused and there is plenty of competition from other disciplines that also have some skills and knowledge to contribute, then on the education side you really have to work at preparing your students to articulate their education, to talk about their differentiating factors, including the type of degree they have, their specific education, their degree program, and their own particular experience. (p. 33)

Tower (2000) asserted that the social work profession has historically depended on the media to educate the public about what social workers do. Brawley (1995) said that media attention toward social work is not largely positive and that this is why social work is not widely known and respected by the public at large. Tower gave this charge: "Social workers are responsible for debunking myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it. . . . If social work is dissatisfied by its image in television, movies, and popular literature, it must cease its dependency on people outside the profession to portray it fairly" (p. 575). Biggerstaff (2000) said that it is essential for the profession of social work to continue to attract new professionals into the field so that professionally educated social workers can occupy current and expanding social work positions. Le-Doux (1996), in a study that focused on assessing factors that influenced career choices in social work among Hispanic and African American doctoral-level professionals and students, concluded that factors that influenced choosing social work included interaction with a social worker, employment with exposure to social work, academic exposure, and socialization with a social worker early in life. In addition, Le-Doux pointed out that a sense of alignment with social work values was influential in choosing a social work career. Clearly, social workers have a responsibility to become engaged and invested in educating others about the profession, not only regarding direct practice, but also including indirect practice with communities and organizations. Social workers must claim their role in the public policy arena as advocates and policymakers. The public must be informed about social work as a profession, which, at its roots, gives voice to those who have been silenced through oppression, social injustice, and unfair policies.

The literature supports the need to continue educating the public, including college students, about social work and the social work profession. For this reason, the current study addressed the following research question: What are undergraduates' knowledge and interest in the field of social work? We believe that this study will demonstrate the need to develop specific public awareness campaigns that target college-age people, especially at the time in life when they are making significant career choices and are forming lasting opinions about professions and professional roles.

METHOD

The convenience sample for this study was identified from undergraduate students in sophomore-level liberal arts courses at a mid-size state university in North Carolina where Institutional Review Board approval for this research was received. We contacted instructors and asked if they would be willing to have a survey administered at the end of one of their class sessions. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and in no way affected their grade in the class. In addition, students were offered snack packs as incentives for their participation in this survey. We identified large-section (that is, 100 students or more) liberal arts classes that typically attracted students from a wide variety of majors who either had not started classes in their major or were just beginning such classes. These students were seen as being more likely to be unbiased or neutral in their attitude toward the field of social work or, for that matter, toward any other profession.

Data were collected using an instrument developed by us. Potential survey respondents were given a brief explanation as to the purpose of the research, emphasizing that the study was examining undergraduates' knowledge and interest about the field of social work. Participants were informed ahead of time that there were no correct or incorrect answers for the survey questions and that their confidentiality would be protected because they were not to put their names on the surveys. The research assistants also routinely requested that students who had taken the survey in another class not take it again.

We developed a 45-item survey with the first five items involving demographic data, the next four items reflecting the respondents' affiliation with a social worker or exposure to a social work setting, and one item on respondents' perception of their knowledge level about the field. The next 34 items composed the three subscales of the survey: (1) Knowledge about the Social Work Profession (11 items), (2) Interest in Social Work Job Settings (18 items), and (3) Interest in Social Work Positions (five items). The last item on the survey asked respondents to rate their interest in majoring in social work.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on the Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree. The 11 items on this subscale (see Table 1) were selected because they are facts or common misunderstandings about the profession of social work. Six items on this subscale were reverse scored (items 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, and 19) because they were determined to be incorrect or uncertain statements about the profession. By including a mixture of facts and inaccuracies, we hoped to more accurately measure the respondents' level of knowledge about the social work profession.

The items on the Interest in Social Work Job Settings subscale, Interest in Social Work Positions subscale, and the one item on interest in majoring in social work all used a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 5 = very interested to 1 = not interested at all. The 18 items on the

survey that composed the Interest in Social Work Job Settings subscale (see Table 2) included a listing of common employment settings for social workers. Respondents were asked to indicate, even if they were not interested in being a social worker, how interested they would be in working in each of these 18 settings. The five items on the survey that composed the Interest in Social Work Positions subscale (see Table 3) included a list of common roles within the social work profession. Summing each of the individual items on the subscales determined composite scores for each of these three subscales.

Cronbach's alpha was used as a reliability measure. Reliability on the Interest in Social Work Settings subscale was .92; on the Interest in Social Work Positions subscale it was .88. However, reliability for the Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale was not as high-.41, which may mean that some of these items should have been worded differently or additional items added to this subscale.

RESULTS

There was a wide representation of majors among the respondents ($N = 678$), with 25.1 percent ($n = 170$) science majors, 17.2 percent ($n = 117$) education majors, 16.4 percent ($n = 111$) humanities majors, 10.9 percent ($n = 74$) arts majors, 10.6 percent ($n = 72$) business majors, and 9 percent ($n = 61$) social work majors; 10.8 percent ($n = 73$) of the respondents were either undecided about their major or left that item blank. The highest percentage of respondents were women (77.9 percent, $n = 528$); 58.6 percent ($n = 397$) of the total sample were 20 years old or younger, 19.6 percent ($n = 133$) were 21 to 24 years old, and 7.2 percent ($n = 49$) were 25 years or older (14.6 percent [$n = 99$] of the respondents did not provide their age group). Almost 70 percent (66.1 percent, $n = 448$) of the respondents were in either their freshman (36.1 percent, $n = 245$) or their sophomore year (30 percent, $n = 203$); the remaining respondents were juniors (19.0 percent, $n = 129$) and seniors (14.9 percent, $n = 101$). The ethnicity breakdown of the respondents was 64.9 percent ($n = 440$) white, 24.9 percent ($n = 169$) African American, 2.4 percent ($n = 16$) Hispanic, 4.7 percent ($n = 32$) other, and 3.1 percent ($n = 21$) did not provide this information.

In terms of previous contact with a social worker, 7.5 percent ($n = 51$) of the respondents had an immediate family member who was a social worker, 16.4 percent ($n = 111$) had an extended family member who is a social worker, 21.5 percent ($n = 146$) had a close friend who was a social worker, and 26.1 percent ($n = 177$) had worked or volunteered in a social services agency. Some respondents (19.3 percent, $n = 131$) perceived that they were either very knowledgeable or knowledgeable about the field. For the following results, in cases where p values are reported, t tests were run on the involved comparisons.

Knowledge about the Social Work Profession

When comparing composite scores on the Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale, significant differences were found between some variables. Social work majors were

more likely to have accurate knowledge of the field when compared with non-social work majors ($p < .000$). Older students (21 years or older) appeared to have more accurate knowledge than younger students ($p < .004$). Interestingly, even though the field is composed of approximately 77.7 percent women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), there was not a significant difference in the two genders' knowledge about the profession ($p < .67$). None of the three types of affiliation with a social worker significantly affected respondents' knowledge about the profession. However, the variable that seems to have had the most influence on respondents' knowledge about the profession was having had either work or volunteer experience in a social work setting ($p < .000$). (The means and standard deviations for respondents' Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale scores with respect to the demographic and previous social work contact variables are presented in Table 4.)

In regard to individual items on the Knowledge subscale and on the item (question 10) that asked respondents their perception of how knowledgeable they were about social work, a number of significant differences emerged. Older students (21 years or older) were likely to perceive themselves as more knowledgeable about the profession compared with younger students ($p < .001$). All age respondents tended to perceive that the salary range for social workers is low compared with that of other helping professions (mean scores for three age groups ranged from 3.22 to 3.29). On the variable of ethnicity, African American students were likely to view themselves as more knowledgeable about the profession than white students ($p < .018$). If a respondent had an immediate family member who was a social worker, then he or she perceived himself or herself as being more knowledgeable about the profession ($p < .001$). If a respondent had an extended family member who was a social worker, he or she was more likely to perceive himself or herself as knowledgeable about the profession ($p < .001$) and believed that there are a wide variety of jobs within the social work profession ($p < .012$). It is important to note that no item on the Knowledge subscale addressed macro-level social work practice, and to more fully assess respondents' knowledge of the profession, this oversight should be corrected in future research.

Respondents who reported having a close friend who was a social worker viewed themselves as more knowledgeable about the profession ($p < .001$) and believed there is a wide variety of job settings for social workers ($p < .02$) and a wider variety of roles available for social workers in agency settings ($p < .005$). This same group, when compared with those who did not have such a social worker friend, also believed that the salary range for social workers is low compared with that of other helping professions ($p < .001$). Respondents who had either work or volunteer experience in a social work setting were found to view themselves as more knowledgeable about the profession ($p < .001$), believed that the job market is good for social workers ($p < .001$), believed that there is a wide variety of job settings ($p < .001$) and roles for social workers ($p < .001$), realized that not all social workers work with families and their children ($p < .003$), and perceived that not all social workers often have to take children away from their families because

of abuse or neglect ($p < .009$). These same students were more likely to believe that the salary range for social workers is low when compared with that of other helping professions ($p < .001$).

Significant differences were found between social work majors and non-social work majors in regard to individual items on the Knowledge subscale. Social work majors were more likely to believe that the job market is good for social work ($p < .000$), that there are various social work settings in which to work ($p < .000$), and that there are various roles for social workers ($p < .000$). However, social work majors were more likely to believe that the salary range for social workers is low compared with that of other helping professions when compared with nonmajors ($p < .001$).

The item "I am very knowledgeable about the field of social work" was found to have a .31 correlation value with respondents' scores on the 11 other items on the Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale. The positive correlation between this subscale and this survey item was significant ($p < .000$).

Interest in Social Work Job Settings

Older students (21 years or older) had more interest in social work settings when compared with younger college students ($p < .05$). With regard to ethnicity, African American students indicated higher levels of interest in social work settings when compared with white students ($p < .004$). Affiliation with a social worker, whether an extended family member ($p < .05$) or a close friend ($p < .001$), consistently had a positive effect on respondents' interest in social work settings. In addition, if respondents had worked or volunteered in a social work setting they were more interested in social work settings ($p < .001$). Social work majors were more likely to be interested in social work settings when compared with non-social work majors ($p < .004$). (The means and standard deviations for respondents' Interest in Social Work Job Settings subscale scores with respect to demographic and previous social work contact variables are presented in Table 5.)

Regarding individual items on the Interest in Social Work Job Settings subscale, having an immediate family member who is a social worker appeared to have a significant influence on respondents' interest in only one (Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers, $p < .008$) of the 18 settings. Having an extended family member who is a social worker appeared to have a significant influence in respondents' interest in working in prison or detention settings ($p < .02$), and VA Medical Centers ($p < .05$). Respondents who reported having a close friend who is a social worker indicated significantly higher levels of interest in 13 of the 18 settings (department of social services, $p < .007$; employment assistance program, $p < .001$; juvenile detention centers, $p < .002$; prisons, $p < .002$; hospice, $p < .01$; immigrant programs, $p < .003$; substance abuse programs, $p < .02$; mental health centers, $p < .03$; psychiatric hospitals, $p < .008$; youth residential homes, $p < .05$; adult group homes, $p < .04$; college setting, $p < .01$; and medical outreach programs, $p < .002$). Respondents who had worked or had volunteer experience in a social work agency were significantly more interested in working in 15 of the 18 settings

(department of social services, $p < .002$; employee assistance program, $p < .002$; juvenile centers, $p < .001$; prisons, $p < .001$; hospice, $p < .008$; immigrant programs, $p < .001$; VA Medical Centers, $p < .005$; substance abuse programs, $p < .003$; mental health centers, $p < .001$; psychiatric hospitals, $p < .001$; youth residential homes, $p < .004$; adult homes, $p < .004$; nursing homes, $p < .004$; rehabilitation centers, $p < .05$; and medical outreach programs, $p < .001$). Social work majors were more interested in seven of the 18 settings when compared with non-social work majors (medical settings, $p < .018$; department of social services, $p < .000$; juvenile centers, $p < .010$; prisons, $p < .000$; substance abuse treatment programs, $p < .018$; community mental health centers, $p < .006$; and psychiatric hospitals, $p < .032$).

Interest in Social Work Positions

Social work majors had more interest in social work positions when compared with non-majors ($p < .000$). Older students (21 years or older) were more interested in social work positions than were younger students ($p < .001$). Regarding ethnicity, African American respondents were more interested in social work positions than white respondents ($p < .001$). (The means and standard deviations of respondents' Interest in Social Work Positions subscale scores with respect to demographic and social work contact variables are presented in Table 6.)

In regard to individual items on this subscale, association with a social worker influenced respondents' interest in social work positions, with those having an extended family member who is a social worker indicating more interest in four of the five positions (administrator, $p < .001$; consultant, $p < .05$; case manager, $p < .001$; and caseworker, $p < .002$). Having a close friend who is a social worker had a significant influence on interest in all five positions (administrator, $p < .002$; consultant, $p < .002$; counselor, $p < .001$; case manager, $p < .001$; and caseworker, $p < .04$). In addition, those respondents who had worked or volunteered in the field were more likely to be interested in all five positions (administrator, $p < .001$; consultant, $p < .001$; counselor, $p < .005$; case manager, $p < .001$; and caseworker, $p < .001$). Social work majors indicated more interest in all five roles (administrator, $p < .000$; consultant, $p < .000$, counselor, $p < .000$; case manager, $p < .000$; and caseworker, $p < .000$). African American respondents were found to be more interested in administrative positions ($p < .001$), training ($p < .002$), counseling and therapy ($p < .002$), case management ($p < .007$), and caseworker ($p < .003$) when compared with white respondents.

Interest in Majoring in Social Work

The last item on the survey elicited respondents' interest in majoring in social work, and social work majors indicated more interest in the major than non-social work majors ($p < .000$). Older respondents (21 years or older) were found to be more interested in majoring in social work than younger respondents ($p < .001$). African American respondents were more interested in majoring in social work than white respondents ($p < .001$). Surprisingly, having a family member who is a social worker resulted in no significant differences on interest in majoring in social work ($p <$

.755). However, if respondents had an extended family member ($p < .008$) or close friend ($p < .005$) who was a social worker, then they were more likely to be interested in majoring in social work. Those respondents who had worked or volunteered in a social work setting were significantly more interested in majoring in social work ($p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

The findings from the current study that were interesting and unexpected involved older college students (21 and older) who perceived themselves as more knowledgeable about the field of social work, possessed more accurate knowledge of the profession, indicated more interest in working in social service settings and roles, and were majoring in social work. Some of these results are in contrast to NASW's National Social Work Public Education Campaign research in which the public was found to hold social workers in higher esteem than expected and still had little understanding of the diversity of the field and levels of training (NASW, 2005). Could the current study findings mean that older college students are more likely to acquire accurate knowledge of the field? Given that 26.8 percent of the study respondents were 21 years or older, it would be important to see whether there would be similar findings from replication of this research with a larger group of older college students. It would also be informative to replicate this research with young adults who are not involved with college to see if there are similar or different results.

It was interesting that African American college students perceived themselves as more knowledgeable about the field of social work, were more interested in working in social work settings and roles, and were majoring in social work. Why did these students indicate more overall interest in the field? Also, why did these same students not possess more accurate knowledge of the field even though they perceived themselves as more knowledgeable? These questions need further investigation.

Regardless of differences on demographic variables, respondents consistently indicated that they believe that the social work salary range is low when compared with other helping professions. Unfortunately, the survey did not indicate which helping professions were to be used in the comparison of salary range with social work; consequently, it is unclear whether respondents were using similar or different helping professions as comparison groups. However, this finding still points out the need to further examine college students' knowledge of the average salary range of social workers, particularly because we found no related studies on this issue. Finding this same belief across all respondent groups suggests the need to further educate college students about the typical salary range of social workers. Has the profession deterred people who want to be paid well for their work by giving limited or inaccurate information on this aspect of the profession? Could the perception of low salaries be one of the reasons why there are so few men entering the field? Heckert and colleagues (2002) found in their study of pay expectations among college students that more female than male students indicated that salary had less influence on their career choice. This finding seems to indicate that more detailed and accurate

information on social work salaries may be particularly important to men in terms of considering this profession as a career. With the ongoing shortage of men in social work, it would be important for gender-sensitive marketing strategies that include salary ranges be developed to encourage more men to become social workers.

Perceiving oneself as knowledgeable of the profession and having interest in social work settings and positions appeared to be greater when a respondent had an extended family member who is a social worker, had a close friend who is a social worker, and worked or volunteered in a social work setting. Respondents' interest in majoring in social work appeared to be positively influenced when they had an extended family member who is a social worker, had a close friend who is a social worker, and had worked or volunteered in a social work setting. These findings point out the valuable role social work professionals can have in educating those individuals with whom they interact on a daily basis. The variable that most consistently influenced respondents' knowledge and interest in social work settings and positions was having worked or volunteered in a social work setting. This latter finding may point to the important role of service learning in terms of more fully educating and providing a more positive image of the profession for college students.

Although this study differs substantially in the construction of the questionnaire and the characteristics of the sample from earlier studies, some comparisons can be made. In this study, only 15.7 percent of the respondents possessed a high level of knowledge and understanding of the field (average score of 3.5 or above on items 11 through 21). These results support the findings of LeCroy and Stinson (2004) and NASW (2005) in the assertion that the public does not fully understand the range of social work roles and levels of training.

The present study found that the capacity in which the respondents knew a social worker made a difference in their knowledge and interest in the field. These findings support those of Le-Doux (1996), which found that interaction with a social worker, exposure to social work through employment, academic exposure, and early life exposure influenced choosing a career in social work.

There were some limitations to this study. First, a convenience sample was used rather than a randomized sample of undergraduates; however, the demographic data seem to indicate that a cross-sample of college students is represented. Second, the reliability of the Knowledge about the Social Work Profession subscale was not as high (.41) as the reliability for the other two subscales, which could limit confidence in the data obtained from this subscale. Replication of this survey would probably require additional items or language revision to increase reliability. For example, the Knowledge subscale could have included more accurate items (only five of 11 items were facts on this subscale); more items regarding macro-level social work, including policy making and community organization; comparisons with specific helping professions regarding salary levels of social workers (for example, "The salary range for social workers is lower when compared with the salary range for teachers"). The item on being able to be a social

worker without a degree may need to be eliminated in states that do not have title protection for the profession, which was the case for the present study. Including more survey items on macro social work practice could enhance the research tool, identify areas of practice that may be of more interest to men, and serve to provide a more accurate assessment of what respondents' perceive they know or do not know about all system levels of social work practice.

IMPLICATIONS

The literature suggests that social workers must take the lead in educating the public about the profession and its many roles (Comley, 1985; Tower, 2000). As college students are choosing career paths, it is vital for the growth of the field and for the benefit of society for social work to become a visible and highly respected profession.

The results from this study support the potential value of service learning both in high schools and early college years in terms of more fully educating young adults and more positively influencing their attitude toward the field of social work. Social work educators may want to consider having more involvement in service learning programs at their respective universities. Findings from this research point to the valuable contribution these field experiences can provide in furthering students' understanding and positive image of the profession.

Results from this study also suggest a re-examination of our view of salary. What information are we giving to college students about the salary range in social work? For example, are we giving students limited or inaccurate information about the money they can potentially earn? Do social workers help to perpetuate the idea that social work is mission work rather than a profession that deserves compensation? These questions warrant further study to more fully understand to what degree knowledge of social work salaries has an influence on the image of the field for both college students and the public. The findings from this study not only cause us to rethink the importance of salary for the field, but also indicate that we may need to provide more information and marketing regarding the salary range for social workers because earlier studies have indicated many individuals determine the value of a profession by its potential salary range.

The current study points to the value of educating college students about the field of social work as the college years are when lifelong impressions of various professions are formed. Findings from this research indicate that some of the inaccuracies and misunderstandings about the field are present even during these early adult years. As NASW continues with its image campaign, it is essential that college students be included as one of the groups to be targeted for further education about the profession. In addition, results from this study point out the need for each social worker to take a more proactive role in helping to educate both the public and the people they have contact with in their daily lives. To be successful in promoting a more accurate and positive image of social work, we must combine our efforts and see this image campaign as the responsibility of each member of this very worthy profession.

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