

## **“What is Going on with New Social Workers?”: Concerning Decreases in Professionalism**

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**Abstract:** *Professionalism is part of ethical social work practice; however, the presence of professionalism and soft skills in new social workers appears to be decreasing. This creates negative effects that extend to clients, coworkers, agencies, and the discipline itself. The influence of social media, aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ineffective self-care appear to be related to lack of professionalism displayed by new social workers. The thematic analysis involving participants from five large, multi-campus, not-for-profit social service agencies (n = 148) and their apprehensions regarding new social workers are discussed. The study explores two research questions. First, do new social workers display an appropriate level of professionalism, both professionally and personally? Second, where specifically do gaps in professionalism exist for new social workers entering social service employment? Significant concentrations of concerns involving lack of professionalism, specifically decreased professional behaviors and displayed soft skills, commitment to self-interest above service, and appropriate displays of personal/professional boundaries are discussed. Implications to social work education programs and social service agencies are explored, as well as innovative interventions to instill and increase professionalism in new social workers.*

**Keywords:** *New social workers, professionalism, soft skills, personal and professional boundaries, self-care, social media*

Social workers are part of a developed discipline that is guided by a robust set of ethical principles and standards that are steeped in six core values: (a) service to others above self-interest; (b) attention to issues of social justice; (c) honoring the dignity and worth of the person through support for self-determination; (d) recognizing the importance of human relationships in a partnership for change; (e) use of integrity in behaviors with and on behalf of clients; and (f) practicing only in areas of social work where one is competent. These established dynamics comprising of the six core values, principles, and standards are commonly referred to as the Code of Ethics (COE) and are a vital part of social work practice and serve to protect clients, social workers, colleagues, social service agencies, the profession, and the discipline as a whole (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2024). Additionally, the COE sets social workers apart from other social service professionals and remains the backbone of the profession (Reamer, 2022).

Professionalism is part of ethical social work practice, yet in recent years, there have been growing concerns that professionalism is eroding in the discipline (Liu et al., 2023;

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Street et al., 2019). The term *professionalism* is equivocal, but for the purpose of this paper, it refers to embodying the expected behaviors and ethical principles of one's profession (Jenoff, 2023). *Soft skills* are more concrete proficiencies that fall under the umbrella of professionalism, and demonstrate one's ability to work independently and collectively with others (Sheldon & Ware, 2023). Commonly listed social skills needed to be effective in the workplace are communication skills; ability to work with others as a colleague and leader; time management—including punctuality and the ability to complete tasks on time; ability to adapt to change; strong work ethic; and healthy emotional intelligence. Additionally, soft skills are transferable to future positions as they are part of one's personal characteristics (O'Reily, 2025). The protection and insistence of professionalism in social work is a necessity due to the considerable positive effect it has on the quality of service clients receive (He et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2021), as well as job satisfaction of workers and the workplace environment of agencies (Jenoff, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Tilo, 2024).

Unfortunately, formal complaints to social work licensing and regulatory boards and client-led litigations have increased in recent years (Reamer, 2023). While there are several possible contributors to this trend, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and social media's influence correlate with decreased professionalism and soft skill effectiveness (Bauer, 2021; Hora et al., 2018; Jenoff, 2023; Masutani, 2022; Nino, 2023; Sheldon & Ware, 2023). Further complicating these issues for social workers are occupational hazards such as vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout that can result in negative outcomes to mental health and wellbeing, thereby increasing the stress load practitioners experience in the field (Copeland et al., 2021; Gogarty, 2021; Henshaw, 2022). Although self-care is frequently recommended for social work students and practitioners to help offset the rigors of obtaining one's education or the hazards of practice, research indicates that self-care is a poorly understood concept, and when ineffective practices are used, it further reduces exhibited professionalism in the field (Butler et al., 2019; Ogden & Rogerson, 2021; O'Neal, 2023).

This article discusses the results of a mixed methods research project in the Midwest concerning new social workers and noted changes in professionalism. Specifically, we focus on the following two research questions:

(RQ1) Do new social workers display an appropriate level of professionalism, both professionally and personally?

(RQ2) Where specifically do gaps in professionalism exist for new social workers entering social service employment?

Resulting identified themes of decreases in professionalism, commitment to service above self-interest, and personal/professional boundaries will be discussed, along with implications to social work education programs and social service agencies. Because the use of online education and social media is likely to increase, social work programs must identify methods to teach, model, and practice professionalism in traditional and online settings that transition to face-to-face and agency-based settings as a means of protecting the profession and services provided to clients.

## Professionalism

Decreases in professionalism and the struggle to find employees with developed soft skills is not specific to social work. Over 40% of employers report difficulties in finding employees who exhibit quality soft skills, dependability, and the ability to collaborate well with others (Nino, 2023). Jenoff (2023) noted a significant increase in new lawyers struggling with professionalism, resulting in negative behaviors and unethical practices with clients and colleagues that ended with an increase in complaints to the American Bar Association. New medical doctors (Sattar et al., 2023) and nurses (He et al., 2024) also reported increased problems with professionalism in practice, resulting in challenges to patient care, compliance with institutional policies, and longevity rates in employment, as well as a rise in formal complaints and threats of litigation.

Today's employers report that new graduates struggle with a variety of workplace behaviors that are related to lack of professionalism and apathy concerning job performance. Tilo (2024) revealed that 57% of employers struggle with new graduates and professionalism, listing the following concerns: 61% reported problems with time management and lack of punctuality; 53% reported inadequate quality of work provided; 52% reported paucity of work ethic; and 50% reported overall lack of motivation. Furthermore, 63% of employers reported that new graduates were unable to manage the rigors of the workload. These issues resulted in 60% of companies having to dismiss new graduates from their workplace due to unsatisfactory job performance (Intelligent, 2024).

Research indicates that a lack of professionalism is correlated to dangerous consequences, such as poor client care, high employment turnover, premature departure from the profession, and damage to the discipline's reputation (DeMarchis et al., 2021; Derr & Bourgerie, 2024; Howells & Bald, 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Fortunately, the opposite is also true. Elevated levels of professionalism are related to increased client care, primarily through amplified job satisfaction and self-efficacy toward skills and work performance. Increased professionalism encourages a community of consultation with colleagues and a sense of belonging within the agency (Liu et al., 2023). Additionally, professionalism enhances clinical performance, flexibility of workers, and adaptability to the demands of the job (He et al., 2024). These positive repercussions benefit clients, colleagues, agencies, and social workers themselves across clinical, environmental, and administrative domains (Kim & Park, 2023). However, to ensure professionalism, supplementary attention is needed for the development and maintenance of these behaviors by educators and social service agencies (Jenoff, 2023; Sattar et al., 2023). The need for preparatory programs to increase their instruction to specifically include professionalism is often cited as a method to counteract negative trends, as programs cannot rely on independent and personal development of these concepts moving forward (Shen et al., 2021). Identifying contributing factors, such as online and social media's influence and ineffective self-care, has the potential to increase effective efforts moving forward.

## Online and Social Media Influences

In March 2020, the daily lives of Americans changed significantly with the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. What began as a 2-week initiative to eliminate the spread of the illness turned into months of personal protective equipment use, isolation, and disconnection from community. Furthermore, educational instruction had to make radical changes almost overnight, with steep learning curves for learners and teachers alike (Jenoff, 2023). While the pandemic made online learning essential, it also reduced educational attainment levels and opportunities to observe and practice professionalism in face-to-face situations (Ashcroft et al., 2022). Additionally, students that missed two years of face-to-face traditional education delivery also missed opportunities to participate in social clubs, internships/practicums, and summer job-readiness opportunities, creating gaps in their employment readiness (Tilo, 2024). This resulted in graduates struggling with deficits in knowledge, skills, and preparedness for real world application (Jenoff, 2023), as well as an increase in workplace anxiety, deficient teamwork skills, and resistance to feedback or constructive criticism (Tilo, 2024). Although a trend in widespread immature behavior and decreased professionalism was noted before the pandemic, secondary and higher education instructors reported significant increases in these dynamics when education began to return to face-to-face (Kim & Park, 2023; Sheldon & Ware, 2023). Since online education and service provision is likely to increase in demand and practice, educational and training programs must assist students and practitioners with developing skills to provide effective services in a manner that also communicates professionalism and competence.

Research indicates an inverse relationship between interpersonal skills and professionalism with the prevalence of social media (Bauer, 2021; Pan & Cheng, 2020). Maltby et al. (2024) reported that social media significantly affects younger adults in both positive and negative ways. While social media can drive a feeling of social connectiveness, it can also lower self-esteem, while increasing mental health symptoms of depression and anxiety. Social media is inversely correlated with soft skills, most appreciably interpersonal communication skills (Sheldon & Ware, 2023). These issues are noticed by today's workforce, as 44% of employers report deficits in communication skills of new employees, which appears to be directly associated with their decrease in teamwork and collaboration skills with colleagues (Nino, 2023). While females have customarily been better than males at using and interpreting verbal and non-verbal communication (Adler, 2023; Jardim et al., 2022), overall interpersonal communication seems to have been damaged by the indirect loneliness produced by social media and the lack of personal interaction with others (Moeller & Seehuus, 2020). Without developed soft skills, career fields that are demarcated by practitioners being able to make connections with their customers will be negatively affected.

In social work, a core value is the importance of human relationships in a partnership for change (NASW, 2024). Therefore, it is essential that social workers have well-developed soft skills and professionalism to accompany their education and practice skills to be an effective helper and deliver quality services (Bajjal & Saunders, 2023; Skoura-Kirk et al., 2021). An additional factor in remaining proficient is a social worker's ability

to offset the stress of rigorous education programs and the occupational hazards of working with clients (Branson, 2018). Unfortunately, self-care has come to represent feel-good behaviors rather than intentional and reflective self-corrective practices that may augment professionalism (Derr & Bourgerie, 2024).

### **Self-Care**

*Self-care* is defined as the intentional engagement of physical, cognitive, mental, and spiritual activities that enhance well-being through reflection, assessment, and purposeful actions for sustained renewal (Myers et al., 2022; O'Neill et al., 2019). Genuine self-care incorporates four principles: (a) using personal boundaries that accompany professional boundaries and learning how to live within these margins successfully; (b) being compassionate with oneself, even in times of mistakes and failures; (c) assessing personal and professional values and exhibiting congruent behaviors; and (d) taking responsibility for oneself and exercising assertiveness (Lakshmin, 2023). Self-care is a buzz word in social services and a relatively new topic of discussion that has come about with the understanding of the negative effects of occupational burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious trauma (Branson et al., 2019). Traditionally, self-care was not discussed with students or employees working in service agencies. However, as trauma has become more of a guiding factor in client presentations and subsequent clinical interventions, attention has turned to the necessity for those who partner with traumatized clients to develop specific approaches that encourage resiliency in their practice (Branson, 2018).

Unfortunately, research indicates that self-care is a poorly understood term by many students, and that students commonly engage in non-productive behaviors they consider to be self-care that actually winds up escalating problems in their personal, educational, and professional lives (Butler et al., 2019; DeMarchis et al., 2021; Derr & Bourgerie, 2024). For example, expensive treats and feel-good activities, such as spa services, visual entertainment, and retail purchases, are mistakenly considered to be “self-care,” even though these activities actually serve more as distractions that do not truly provide care for the self. Indeed, these “self-care” activities often place students in financial hardship which results in the need to work more hours and adds additional stressors to their daily lives (O’Neal, 2023). Ogden and Rogerson (2021) found that these so-called “self-care” activities among student social workers did little to help with feelings of depression or anxiety, indicating that students were not engaging in effective self-care practices. Real self-care is a reflective practice that results in changes to enhance one’s efficacy in various areas (Butler et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2022). Without effective self-care, the chances of engaging in unprofessional and unethical practices increase, potentially resulting in negative outcomes for client care, work environment, administrative issues, the discipline of social work, and the individual practitioner (DeBenedectis, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2022). Therefore, educational programs and social service agencies need to respond with increased attention to teaching these skills that are often considered innate. This article seeks to explore problematic themes of professionalism in social work practice noted by social service agencies, as well as discuss implications to social work programs, practitioners, and organizations. Recommendations and innovative ideas and direction for future research will also be reviewed.

## Methods

Data were collected from several southeast Missouri social service agencies concerning professionalism in *new social workers* (defined as social workers with three or fewer years of experience). IRB approval was granted before this mixed methods research was collected ( $n = 148$ ). The aim of the study was to explore professionalism of new social workers in the field based on the observations of colleagues who work with them. The motivation for the study came from repeated anecdotal evidence noticed by the faculty of a social work program at a public university. At this university, senior-level bachelor of social work students complete a minimum of 448 hours of practicum experience in a social service agency during their final semester before graduation. Since the COVID pandemic, the faculty have noticed an increase in students struggling with professionalism in the classroom and complaints from agencies concerning social work students in their practicum settings. Additionally, these same anecdotal themes appeared to be present in other social work programs and across various other disciplines.

### Study Design and Participants

A 17-item survey with comments per item was used as an affordable and realistic means of gathering data in a semi-naturalistic inquiry (Ninan, 2020). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected using a modified version of the Professionalism Assessment Tool (PAT) via SurveyMonkey. The PAT was initially developed for medical students with questions intended to evaluate professional standards that included the areas of integrity, communication, appearance, and respect. The survey is applicable to other disciplines and can assess the following 11 standards of professionalism (a) honesty and integrity; (b) communication (written); (c) communication (verbal); (d) punctuality; (e) appearance, hygiene, and dress code; (f) confidentiality; (g) collaboration; (h) respect for clients; (i) personal responsibility; (j) collegiality; and (k) personal boundaries (Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities, 2012). Using the PAT, participants completed 12 items specific to the professionalism of new social workers using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) with additional fields for comments per question with a concluding section for other/final comments. Additionally, three demographic items concerning years of practice, self-identified gender, and identified race/ethnicity were collected.

Administrators and directors of clinical research at five large social service agencies were contacted concerning participation in the study. Of the five agencies, four were considered comprehensive behavioral health agencies, providing mental health, substance use disorder treatment, rural medical services, housing, and other social services through the Missouri Department of Mental Health. The fifth agency provides many of the same services, with specialized services dedicated to alternatives to foster care, adoption, and crisis pregnancy services. All five agencies are not-for-profit and receive numerous government, private, and third-party payment of service contracts.

In order to preserve privacy and integrity of agency staff members, contact persons at each agency provided electronic links to clinical employees (program directors, therapists,

clinical supervisors, case managers, and residential support aids) at their agency, complete with a letter of consent. Using Braun and Clarke's (2021) directives, it was determined that this sample was appropriate for the theoretical aims of the study. Agency staff members were invited to volunteer to complete the survey and supply comments. No incentives were provided for completion of the survey. Due to this method of survey delivery, it is unknown how many study participants were approached to complete the survey. However, 148 surveys were completed ( $n = 148$ ), and mechanisms were in place to ensure that participants could not complete more than one survey.

From the 148 surveys completed, a total of 107 meaningful open-ended qualitative comments were gathered. Not counted in this total were non-meaningful comments, such as "N/A," "No comments," or "Nothing to note here." This was deemed an adequate amount of data for thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021), allowing for thematic analysis. The grounded theory data analysis approach was used to systematically analyze the comments obtained from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Two researchers were tasked with identifying themes through the following steps prescribed by Cullen and Brennan (2021); (a) detailed reading of qualitative data; (b) coding the emerging themes; (c) identifying themes throughout participant comments; (d) reviewing data and codes; (e) determining appropriate labels for theme categories; and (f) recording written analysis of themes with direct quotations, keywords, and key phrases from participants. These steps are commonly used in social science to research and identify qualitative data, especially in preliminary research studies (Al-Eisawi, 2022).

Analysis of the quantitative metrics gathered during the survey were also conducted. Specifically, Questions 1 through 12 of the survey instrument were aggregated into a composite scale by adding together the questions and then dividing by the total number of questions present. This process allowed retention of the original measurement metric of very dissatisfied (coded as 1) to very satisfied (coded as 5) within the aggregated scale. Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was excellent at 0.953. It should be noted that the composite scale was designed to operationalize a respondent's level of satisfaction with new social work graduates.

The composite scale was then regressed onto three demographic factors: a respondent's gender (dichotomized as 1=female and 0=other than female due to the distribution of the variable), a respondent's race/ethnicity (dichotomized as 1=White and 0=other than White, again due to the distribution of the variable), and a six-category ordinal level variable that captured a respondent's years of service as a social service provider. Prior to the regression analyses, missing data substitution for six of the questions that formed the composite scale was handled through a multiple imputation via chained equations (MICE) procedure (van Ginkel et al., 2020; White et al., 2011). This procedure is appropriate given that all missing data was missing completely at random as indicated by Little's MCAR test ( $\chi^2 = 54.331$ ,  $df = 69$ ,  $p = .902$ ) and given that only six of the 148 respondents (or 4.1% of the dataset) had randomly missing data.

## Results

### Quantitative Data

All 148 participants indicated they were over the age of 18 years old. The majority of the sample identified as female (80.4%). The sample was also comprised mostly of members of the dominant racial group (White, 84.5%). When reviewing years of service as a social service provider, the sample was heterogenous as the vast majority of participants had at least 3 or more years of experience in social service work (89.2%), with 20.3% reporting 3-5 years of service, 18.9% reporting 5-10 years of service, 17.6% reporting 10-15 years of service, 14.9% reporting 15-20 years of service, and 17.6% reporting 20 years or more service. The mean of years of service was 3.58, suggesting that the typical respondent fell somewhere between 10 and 15 years of service. The average score on the dependent variable, which was the respondents' level of satisfaction with new social work graduates, was 3.81. This suggests that the average respondent was slightly less than satisfied with new social work graduates. Table 1 presents descriptive statistical information for study participants.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics, Study Variables (n=148)*

	n (%) / Mean (SD)
Length of time in social service settings	3.58 (1.63)
Less than 3 years	16 (10.8%)
3-5 years	30 (20.3%)
6-10 years	28 (18.9%)
11-15 years	26 (17.6%)
16-20 years	22 (14.9%)
21 years or more	26 (17.6%)
Gender (Female)	119 (80.4%)
Race (White)	125 (84.5%)
Satisfaction with new social work graduates*	3.81 (0.68)
*Dependent variable	

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple linear regression analyses. The overall model in Table 2 is significant ( $F_{(3, 144)} = 3.317, p < 0.05$ ). Approximately 6.5% of the variation the respondents' level of satisfaction with new social work graduates is explained by the three predictor variables ( $R^2 = .065$ ). Being White increased a respondent's satisfaction with new social work graduates, ( $B = .360, p < .05$ ), while length of time in a social service setting decreased a respondent's satisfaction with new social work graduates ( $B = -.072, p < .05$ ). Gender was not a statically significant predictor in the model.

Table 2. *Multiple Linear Regression of Satisfaction With New Social Work Graduates Onto the Independent Variables*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	3.819	.204		<.001
Length of time in social service settings	-.072	.034	-.171	.035
Gender (1=Female)	-.067	.139	-.039	.630
Race (1=White)	.360	.152	.192	.020

*Note: n=148; R<sup>2</sup>=.065; F<sub>(3, 144)</sub>=3.317, p=.022*

While minimal and preliminary at best, the quantitative analyses indicate that being White influences levels of satisfaction with new social workers. This finding is interesting given that 70.7% of all social workers self-identify as White (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025b). As such, it should be expected that a respondent's race may influence the expectations of professionalism in the discipline. Results also suggest the possibility of a 'burnout' effect among social workers, as satisfaction with new social work graduates does decrease the longer a respondent had worked in a social service setting. Burnout is documented to occur among social workers (Gómez-García et al., 2020; Lloyd et al., 2002), and this fact may have influenced the findings in this investigation.

Table 3 shows that when looking at the individual items that comprised the dependent variable, those items that received the most positive endorsements concerned new social workers demonstrating honesty and integrity, with 82.4% of participants indicating that they were very satisfied or satisfied, and general appearance at 77.0% of respondents being very satisfied or satisfied with new social workers. Verbal communication skills with clients (76.4%), taking responsibility for self and work (75.7%), and confidentiality skills (75.0%) were ranked third, fourth, and fifth. When looking at the lowest ranked endorsements, it was teamwork skills and maintaining boundaries (specifically, being able to separate personal from professional boundaries) that received the lowest rates of satisfaction, with 64.2% and 60.1% of respondents (respectively) endorsing very satisfied or satisfied. Due to professionalism being a foundational component of the discipline's Code of Ethics, there is an expectation that social workers will possess proficiency in professional behaviors. A review of literature across social work and other career fields show that new practitioners commonly struggle with a lack of and/or eroding sense of professionalism, despite practicums and experiential learning opportunities (Brown et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2017; Petersen & Bennich, 2025). It could be argued that professionalism is a skill that can be academically learned, but is behaviorally developed in practice. Therefore, a realistic benchmark of what percentage of new social workers should be expected to possess confidence in professionalism is unknown. Interestingly, when looking at the qualitative themes, the most common reported problematic behavior with new social workers involved lack of proper boundaries; most specifically, their ability to compartmentalize the personal from the professional.

Table 3. *Breakdown of Items Comprising the Level of Satisfaction with New Social Work Graduates Scale*

How satisfied are you with their...	n (%)
level of honesty and integrity in the workplace?	122 (82.4%)
general appearance and choice of work appropriate dress?	114 (77%)
verbal communication skills with clients?	113 (76.4%)
level of responsibility for themselves and their work?	112 (75.7%)
confidentiality skills?	111 (75%)
punctuality?	110 (74.3%)
respect for clients and their comments concerning clients?	110 (74.3%)
respect for other colleagues?	107 (72.3%)
verbal communication skills with colleagues, referral sources, or multidisciplinary teams?	105 (70.9%)
written communication skills, specifically with client documentation?	104 (70.3%)
teamwork, specifically taking on extra work when needed?	95 (64.2%)
ability to separate their personal from their professional lives?	89 (60.1%)

*n*=148; percentage and frequency shown reflects very satisfied or satisfied responses.

### Qualitative Data

With the use of thematic analysis of the qualitative data, several themes concerning new social workers in the field emerged from participants' comments, particularly (a) professionalism seems to be eroding, specifically in terms of punctuality, frequency of spontaneous sick and mental health days, and disparaging interactions with clients, colleagues, and multidisciplinary teams; (b) lack of overall dedication to the service of client over self-interests; and (c) poor personal/professional boundaries, most notably oversharing personal information with clients, coworkers, referral sources, and stakeholders. Additionally, participants shared similar statements involving new social workers and their inability to compartmentalize personal lives and mental health struggles. These challenges are increasingly being used by new social workers as excuses for lack of effectiveness in practice. Although these challenges may have been present in the past, there has been a noticeable increase recently. This served as an overall issue, but not a specific theme. Statements such as the following were common:

*Over the last 2-3 years, we have had more new graduates falsify information, develop inappropriate personal relationships with recipients of services and most disturbing, expend a significant amount of energy telling others (supervisors, peers, clients, outside stakeholders...etc.) why their own mental health struggles are negatively impacting their ability and/or willingness to provide basic work ethic principles to their daily interactions.*

*The last 2-3 years our new SW grads are less confident and more timid— often citing personal anxiety as a debilitating reason for not being able to strengthen in these areas.*

*Our agency struggles GREATLY with finding, hiring, and keeping quality social workers...They have the passion...but not the ability to compartmentalize their private lives, mental health issues, past trauma, and COVID leftovers.*

### ***Theme 1: Eroding of Professionalism***

When exploring the theme of eroding professionalism, participants mentioned new social workers struggling with various elements that constitute soft skills and professionalism. Poor work ethic and time management were soft skills components that were noted in several comments from participants:

*Punctuality is an ISSUE—getting to work on time and constantly wanting to leave early. They also seem to think that it appropriate to do personal business on company time. Paying bills and shopping online, running personal errands.*

*Staff coming to work late, taking multiple sketchy sick days, and leaving work early. While our agency strives to be flexible because the majority of our staff are women and several have children or other family obligations, the reasons for leaving early are becoming ridiculous! “I have to leave work early to get to the bar to decorate for my friend’s birthday party,” “I just need to go home and take a nap,” “I need to go to the grocery store”...not what I would call valid reasons to take off early.*

*Timeliness seems to not be a priority.*

*Late, late, late, call off, take mental health days on a regular basis, leave early.*

*The increase and rate of "calling off sick" has skyrocketed over the last 2-3 years with new graduates. They do not seem to have a strong understanding of how inconsistent work attendance not only negatively impacts their clients, but peers, other internal programs and community stakeholders.*

*New workers don't think deadlines apply to them. Reports and daily documentation get done on their timetable. This is the number one reason we dismiss new workers at our agency.*

Communication is another vital soft skill that is important in professional behavior, which includes interactions with others, but also is about how one uses social media. The majority of new social workers likely have extensive experience with online learning platforms from their formal education and social media outlets. NASW has provided guidelines to help navigate the social worker’s online presence, but it would appear that this continues to be an area of struggle. Perhaps more concerning is the reasons behind using social media inappropriately. Comments noted by participants speak to problematic social media use by new social workers due to negative judgements of clients:

*They do not seem to understand that social media is not a private place to talk about work, clients, or workplace. New grads seem to think that it is ok to look clients up on the internet for fun. We commonly have new grads who look up to see who is in county jail while at lunch to have something to gossip about...it is like exhibitionism for entertainment.*

*It seems like since COVID, people skills have decreased.*

*Between loose lips in the conference rooms and hallways and social media, new hires really struggle with this [confidentiality].*

*Looking clients up on the internet to see if they can find dirt on them—very unethical.*

These themes are associated to another essential set of soft skills: teamwork with colleagues and clients and being able to establish a trusted alliance of collaboration and accountability. Negative judgements toward other coworkers are destructive to this development, as noted by participants' comments:

*New workers like to trash clients. When you are working with clients who struggle with persistent mental illness, why are you surprised that they have symptoms of their diagnosis? Judgement and stigma towards clients is dangerous and unhelpful and too many new workers do not get this!*

*New hires seem to be judgmental towards staff and not honoring of cultural or value differences*

A final section of note under eroding professionalism is appropriate dress. Participants noted that too many new social workers struggle with professional business attire and personal hygiene, which is a reflection on the social service agency and the discipline as a whole:

*We have on going issues with lack of professional dress. Not inappropriate, but far too casual.*

*...issues with unprofessional dress (Crocs, leggings with t-shirts, jeans with holes—all of which are not allowed per company HR policy)*

*New graduates often do not dress appropriately in business casual attire for the office.*

*We have more issues with personal hygiene than clothing choice. Coming to work with no make-up and dirty hair—like they just rolled out of bed.*

## ***Theme 2: Lack of Dedication in Services to Clients Over Self-Interests***

Service is a core value of the social work profession and includes the selfless partnering with clients to help them achieve their goals without an agenda or expectation of something in return. Therefore, a common characteristic in social workers is an altruistic generosity toward others. Comments were noted of some new social workers working too much and too hard when they first begin their practice, which can be problematic for burnout and lack of longevity in the field. However, other comments from participants noted the lack of dedication to clients above the new social workers' self-interests:

*I have noticed a change in their overall dedication to clients and passion to the profession. Additionally, our first value is service to our clients, and there seems to be a growing apathy to this value.*

*New graduates are so focused on themselves and their problems they can't seem to put clients first...or second...or even third. It seems like new grads think that their jobs should conform to them...not to the needs of the clients.*

*They [new social workers] will not do one extra thing, will not stay late, will not come in early, especially if there is no compensation.*

*Our first core value, service to others, new grads seem to struggle with this. It seems more like service to self, and if I have anything left over--maybe service to clients.*

These comments reinforce the literature concerning changes in sense of community in response to social media and COVID. Although social media allows global connection, it also generates self-created silos of personal interest and belief systems. The importance of self and immediate gratification found in social media may be contributing to augmenting internal focus, decreasing motivation, and diminishing commitment to be available to help others that is being noted in some new social workers. Additionally, the increase of online learning due to available technology and in response to COVID may have dampened interdependence with others. This unavailability to clients has the potential to create significant problems with client care and to the mission of the agency, as noted in participants' comments:

*In order for someone to change, they need unconditional positive regard from a professional who is going to have the right approach and keep it positive when it gets difficult. Not much change occurs when your change agent is apathetic and comes across as self-centered with very little leftover to give a client.*

*They [new social workers] are academically prepared for the most part, but they are too wrapped up in their needs and wants to be the worker we need for our clients.*

### ***Theme 3: Poor Personal and Professional Boundaries***

In order for someone to be an effective social worker, they must have proper discernment of their personal and professional boundaries, which is a lifelong endeavor. A considerable portion of the social work education curriculum set forth by the Council on Social Work Education involves self-reflection and critical application of standards in order to assist students with recognizing their personal biases and values, the values of the profession, and learning how to navigate between the two (Lanzieri et al., 2025). Personal boundaries involve emotional intelligence through self-awareness and taking responsibility for one's mental health. This means being able to control one's emotions, compartmentalize personal challenges and life events, and engage in preventive practices to maintain positive mental health. Without proper personal and professional boundaries, social workers risk engaging in unethical and harmful practices (Hepworth et al., 2017). Comments from participants indicate that some new social workers are exhibiting questionable boundaries and that this takes them away from their duties to clients and agencies:

*New grads seem like they are an "open book" to everyone and about everything—even clients. No personal boundaries*

*Those that struggle with this [boundaries], struggle hard with the idea that if something is going on in their personal life (family issues, relationship issues, mental health issues) it becomes an excuse at work for not getting work done to the expected level.*

*While self-care is very important, you can't need the level of self-care that takes you away from your work responsibilities on a weekly basis!*

*Whatever is going on in their personal life becomes the excuse as to why they can't do their job. The excuse-making for "personal reasons" is off the chart.*

These comments clearly demonstrate concerns surrounding professionalism in new social workers and the need for a collective response by training programs, social service agencies, and the social work discipline. Not all comments provided by participants were negative, with some casting a positive light on the academic preparedness of new social workers and dedication to the profession. Nevertheless, for the purposes and focus of this paper, those comments regarding negative concerns were highlighted.

The profession of social work should not expect that professionalism and soft skills will intuitively emerge from new workers. University-level social work programs and social service agencies should consider providing explicit training and instruction concerning the professionalism that is expected of social workers to equip new practitioners to be successful, derive a sense of efficacy in their work, and enjoy longevity in the discipline. Ensuring that new social workers are prepared to deliver professional services provides system-wide benefits to all parties involved: clients, colleagues, agencies, the discipline, and social workers themselves.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Although preliminary in nature, the data from this research study create important implications for social work programs and agencies moving forward, as this study provides important insights into the erosion of professionalism in new social workers and the negative outcomes this could create for client care, colleagues, social service agencies, and stakeholders. By building on previous research from other professions and educational institutions, the current investigation shows that there is a consensus that without intervention, the consequences of eroding professionalism will create harm to clients and the discipline of social work, which is antagonistic to the values of the profession. Professionalism not only helps to ensure quality of services to clients, but also to increase job satisfaction and longevity of social workers (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, the relationship between professionalism and positive outcomes should be cultivated for best practices across all levels.

In order to address this need, university social work programs should reevaluate their curriculum to determine where to increase their emphasis on professionalism in students. Potential ideas are to add course material specifically focused on professionalism, and

intentionally increase the monitoring of students in their course work and practicum experience for these skills. Ideally, university social work programs have professionalism and soft skill development as an overall part of their implicit and explicit curriculum, introducing and cultivating these elements throughout the knowledge- and skill-building portions of their programs. Even with fundamentals in place, increased attention is warranted. Programs should consider including their practicum agencies to assist with identifying problematic behaviors and attitudes, while collaborating ways to address these issues in a meaningful manner to elicit change. Research indicates that the generational culture that used to instill these qualities of professionalism is dissipating; therefore, the onus of teaching these skills is on educational institutions, training programs, and social service agencies (He et al., 2024; Jenoff, 2023; Sattar et al., 2023).

While there is a demand for high schools to do a better job of introducing professionalism and soft skill training (Kim & Park, 2023; Masutani, 2022), social work programs at the higher education level need to determine how to instill components of professionalism that are social work discipline specific while also honoring diversity (Hora et al., 2018; McSweeney & Williams, 2019). The benefits to clients, colleagues, agencies, stakeholders, and social workers themselves demand this. Professionalism and soft skill development need to be an increased focus in training programs, but also should be demanded, modeled, and rewarded by university faculty and social service agencies. Unfortunately, current agencies struggling with staff shortages have resorted to accepting lackluster professionalism from some employees due to the difficulties of finding replacements (Howells & Bald, 2022). While this might create a solution in the short-term, it creates long-term problems by setting up a vicious cycle of unprofessionalism decreasing job satisfaction of agency employees. This results in increasing job turnover rates, morale issues, and ultimately, ineffective client services (He et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). In addition to cultivating professionalism and soft skills, it is also important for students and new social workers to learn effective self-care techniques, resulting in a reciprocal effect of successful practice.

Self-care is a set of reflective practices that should result in positive and purposeful changes in attitude, cognitions, and approaches to intentionally offset the rigors of work (Myers et al., 2022). Due to the established hazards of social work, such as vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout, self-care is a vital part of a social worker's arsenal to stay emotionally healthy and clinically effective (Branson, 2018). However, much like professionalism and soft skills, quality self-care techniques are not intuitive, and what may seem like self-care due to temporary enjoyment may actually create more problems than it alleviates (Isabel, 2020; Sauer-Zavala, 2025). Therefore, social work training programs and agencies need to teach effective self-care techniques and mindsets, while also providing space and encouragement to engage in these activities. Professionalism, soft skills, and self-care have the potential to substantially increase job satisfaction, retention of practitioners, efficacy of skills, clinical performance, flexibility, and adaptability, while also reducing professional hazards of social work. The benefits of an increased focus and demand for professionalism in new social workers are far reaching. While this means an increased burden to training programs and agencies, the outcomes are worth the investment.

## Limitations

When looking at the limitations of the study, there are important caveats to consider. First, the Professionalism Assessment Tool (PAT) was modified for use with professionals assessing new social workers. Although the PAT allows for such modifications, its use outside medical students is limited, and evidence supporting its reliability and validity in this study population is insufficient. Future research should work to operationalize the survey and allow for reportable reliability and validity measures.

Second, the survey used to collect data was provided to a single contact person at cooperating social service agencies and distributed to their email listserv for clinical and administrative staff. Although this was done to protect staff from having their email addresses shared outside the agency, it makes it impossible to know the response rate for the survey. This also opens the data to participant bias, as the motivation to complete the survey is unknown. While the letter of consent served to inform participants of the goals of the research study and reduce harm, it could have also affected the way participants viewed the survey questions and their answers. Unfortunately, these factors affect validity of the data collected. Future research could improve on this bias by hosting focus groups to allow participants to provide more discussion on their views of new social workers and professionalism to determine more robust and reliable themes.

Third, while the definition of “new social worker” was provided to the participants in the letter of consent and on the survey, due to some of the participants’ comments, there is concern that the definition may have been broadened to a larger audience, including all social workers and all social service workers in general. Future research endeavors could benefit from providing more emphasis on what a new social worker is and stressing the importance of keeping this specific population in mind when answering survey questions.

## Conclusion

The employment forecast for social work is to grow substantially in the future, especially in medical settings, mental health and substance use disorders treatment agencies, older adult populations, and in schools (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). Therefore, the need for professional social workers with effective soft skills will also increase. This study indicates that there is a concern of eroding professionalism in the discipline, with considerable consequences to client care, agency operations, comradery of colleagues, community stakeholders, and to the reputation of the discipline. Fortunately, the evidence of positive benefits from professionalism should unite social work training programs and agencies in a collective effort to teach, model, enforce, and reward the development of soft skills that demonstrate professionalism. Further, the need for genuine self-care is a vital part of maintaining professionalism and preventing occupational hazards that can decrease a practitioner’s effectiveness. The findings of this study may provide evidence that changes to curriculum and skill-based practice should be considered to enhance the development of professionalism and effective self-care techniques, resulting in overall success of new social workers, their clinical continuation, and longevity in the discipline.

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