Human Services Identity Development: Exploration of Student Perceptions

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Abstract

Helping students to develop a strong professional identity is an essential function of human services education. The literature on professional identity development shows that new professionals have long term success when they feel connected to the profession and are competent in their ability to perform their assigned roles and duties. Although there is a large body of literature related to professional identity development, there are gaps in the literature related to professional identity development among human services professionals. This qualitative study used an exploratory grounded theory approach to learn about professional identity development of senior human services students from a large Southern university in the United States. Authors used feedback from participants to establish five themes that participants felt were key to their development as human services professionals. Recommendations are provided for human services educators on ways to develop foundational skills in entry level human services professionals.

Human Services Professional Identity Development

Human services professionals are viewed as generalists and often take on a wide variety of roles in diverse settings (Bayne, Pusateri, & Nganga, 2012). In these settings, human services professionals establish helping relationships with individuals and families to support and foster self-sufficiency among client populations. To establish effective helping relationships, human services professionals must possess a breadth of knowledge and skills including empathy and cultural competency while working in administrative, clinical, and advocacy positions (National Organization for Human Services [NOHS], 2016). While the professional and ethical guidelines for human services professionals clearly outline what is expected of professionals in the field, there appears to be a lack of research conducted illuminating the identity development process among both human services students and professionals (Council for Standards in Human services Education [CSHSE], 2013; NOHS, 2015). Seeking input from current undergraduate human services students, the researchers were guided by the question: What are the perceptions of human services undergraduate students regarding essential components of human services professional identity development? The intent of the current study is to contribute to the gap in the literature by exploring the development of professional identity among human services undergraduates, discover trends in professional identity development, uncover perceptions of students, and address possible gaps in curriculum.

Literature Review

Professional identity is a broad concept that seeks to describe how individuals define themselves within a professional context and how this is then proclaimed to others (Neary,

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2014). The general consensus from a review of professional identity development literature asserts that professional identity development is a lifelong process (Borders & Usher, 1992). Professional identity has been referred to in the literature as professional socialization, professional formation, professional education, and professional development (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). Identifying what factors contribute to professional identity development has also been a much-debated topic. Over the years, professional identity development has been conceptualized and defined several ways. In 1978, Schien defined professional identity as the "relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (as cited by Ibarra, 1999, p. 2). Although the literature on professional identity development has often concluded that new professionals develop their identity on the job, in recent years, theorists who study identity development have challenged this idea. Ibarra (1999), asserted that much of an individual's professional identity development happened when new professionals tried out different professional personas until they had the knowledge and skills they believed they needed in their professional role.

As the professional identity conversation continues to evolve, there has been more focus on the role higher education plays in students' professional identity development. Barbara-i-Molinero, Cascon-Pereira, and Hernández -Lara (2017) believe that students begin to develop their professional identity before they enter the workplace. Guided by these beliefs, the researchers worked to develop a conceptual framework of professional identity development based on the higher education literature. They found that factors influencing professional identity development fall into two groups, professional identity and degree characteristics. Some of the results suggested that students' professional identity and degree choice are influenced by their social experiences, educational experiences, and work experiences.

Developing professional identity includes learning professional roles, learning theories related to one's chosen profession, and understanding the culture of the workplace and professional socialization (Trede et al., 2012). A wide variety of theories have been used in the literature as theoretical frameworks to guide how individuals develop as professionals including learning theories, activity theories, developmental theories, and personal epistemologies. This highlights the lack of available evidenced-based literature for professional identity and the disagreement among identity theorists.

Trede et al. (2012) found in their review of professional identity development literature as it occurs in higher education that an integral aspect of professional identity development is "the role of self" (p. 375). As students developed their personal knowledge of self, their professional identity also grew. In order for this to happen, students had to be challenged and put into situations where they were encouraged to reflect deeply on their professional experiences. Deep reflection is a process that must first be facilitated by the instructor until students are able to do it on their own. The researchers also found that gaining professional experience by being in a professional role was also an integral part of professional identity development.

Of the literature reviewed on professional identity development in higher education, Trede et al. (2012) found that there was not a consistent working definition of professional identity development. The research team found that although "personal, professional and social identity is often discussed, there is not an explicit connection made between them" (p.376). Knowing that the literature on professional identity development in higher education often

focuses solely on the role of the university to teach students theory related to professional identity, there is a gap in the literature related to how personal, professional and social identity intersect. Human services educators know even less about how human services professionals develop professional identity, as this has yet to be explored by the field. However, other helping professions like counseling and social work have begun to work to define professional identity development in their respective fields which lends insight beneficial to human services.

In the field of counseling, extensive research has been conducted to learn more about the professional identity development of professional counseling students and counselor education students. Findings have indicated the importance of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of professional identity including skills, values, problem solving, and integration into the professional culture (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2012). Additionally, professional identity development research in counseling emphasizes that it is a process during which students vacillate between dependence and autonomy as they grapple with new ideas, skills, and receive constant feedback. Counselor educators in leadership positions, who were participants in a qualitative study intended to describe perceptions of professional identity development, revealed the importance of mentorship, intrinsic values, professional engagement, and opportunities for leadership and scholarship as important influences to their professional development (Woo, Storlie, & Baltrinic, 2016).

Similar to individuals working in human services, social workers find themselves increasingly in multidisciplinary environments and in diverse settings (Moorhead, Bell, & Bowles, 2016). This increase in the variety of roles has the potential for disrupting the distinct professional identity within a field due to an unclear territory of practice (Beddoe, 2013). However, literature in the field of social work discusses the importance of active leadership, public recognition, and positive practice outcomes which have contributed to the solidarity of the social work profession (Mitchell, Parker, & Giles, 2011). In a study which included participants who were social work students in non-traditional placements, it was found that students identified areas of skill and knowledge, as well as personal qualities, as essential to the social work professional identity. These factors included communication; listening; group work; awareness of services available for clients; social work theory; knowledge of legislation; knowledge of human development; and values such as empathy, patience, non-judgmental attitude, and respect of individuals (Scholar, McLaughlin, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2014).

It is clear that other helping professions have laid a foundation of understanding professional identity development. However, it is still unknown if professional identity development in human services is consistent with findings of other helping professions. The goal of this qualitative study is to address this gap by exploring professional identity development in the field of human services through student perceptions.

Method

Qualitative inquiry is a form of research that aims to understand and explore the subjective experience of individuals. Qualitative research includes inductive analysis which requires constant reflection of both the research process and findings (Patton, 2002). The current qualitative study used an exploratory grounded theory approach to generate an explanation of the views of human services identity of undergraduate human services students with the ultimate goal of identifying the perceptions of undergraduate human services students regarding essential

components of human services professional identity development. This method was chosen for this study because it focuses on providing insight and understanding of professional identity development of human services undergraduate students. Additionally, this exploratory analysis was conducted with the intention to develop a meaningful guide to action for human services educators. All participants in this study were human services undergraduates who had taken several human services courses and could therefore describe their views regarding their perception of professional identity as a human services student. In accordance with guidelines for a grounded theory data collection process and data analysis, researchers began by reviewing and analyzing larger domains of data and continued the analysis by reduction and clustering of the data into thematic labels to represent core themes of experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Trustworthiness

Maximizing trustworthiness is a vital consideration in all qualitative designs (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, the researchers implemented strategies to maintain the integrity of the data including careful consideration of questions used for the data collection, personal and collaborative reflection of the data collection and analysis process, frequent debriefing sessions, and peer scrutiny of research methods. The researchers put intentional care in deciding what means they used to maximize trustworthiness. During the discussion of trustworthiness, the researchers agreed on the importance of bracketing researcher bias and assumptions about the focus of the study. As an additional measure to maximize trustworthiness, researchers reviewed themes individually and together to ensure that consensus was reached in the coding process.

Due to the nature of qualitative investigations, researcher biases are inherent. All researchers are professionals in human services or related fields, as such, professional identity development is something that is considered to be important by all researchers. In a step to aid in removing this bias when designing the study, researchers constructed questions that were open-ended to facilitate broad and in-depth responses. The researchers acknowledged biases and were all involved in the coding process to enhance reliability of the resulting data. Each researcher examined data individually to determine preliminary codes, after which, those codes would be reviewed by the other researchers. Discrepancies and possible biases were identified, and the process was repeated until consensus was reached.

Participants

Since the purpose of this inquiry was to concentrate on the formative period of professional identity development, undergraduate human services students would be the most suitable to provide rich information central to the importance of the research question. As such, researchers implemented a purposeful sampling method based on specific criteria which allowed researchers to obtain information-rich cases for in-depth analysis. With access to information from this sample, researchers hoped to gain a vital understanding to the phenomenon of identity development in a specific population rather than solely making generalized observations (Patton, 2002).

In total, there were 41 students who were invited to participate in this study. One student declined, resulting in a final total of 40 (*N*= 40) student participants. Participants included in this study were undergraduate students 18 years of age or older. All participants were upper level human services majors from a large Southern university. To ensure anonymity of students,

demographic information was not obtained from the participants. However, during the time of data collection there were 441 full-time and 93 part-time students with majors in human services studying on campus. Human services majors are predominantly female (89%). The racial makeup of the students consists of the following: less than 1% Native American, 2% Asian, 3% unknown, 9% Hispanic, 7% two races, 27% White, and 51% African American. At the time of participation, students were enrolled in a required writing intensive course, as part of the core requirements towards a Bachelor of Science in Human Services. Any identifying information provided within the context of participant responses was removed. Participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and were provided with information detailing the confidential nature of the research. Researchers obtained exempt human subjects committee approval from the affiliated institution.

Data Collection

The questionnaire in this study was designed to elicit students' perspectives and experiences regarding views of themselves in the context of the human services profession. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire titled, "My Human Services Professional Identity," which contained five separate prompts. The questionnaire modeled resources commonly used in "person centered planning" (Wells & Sheehey, 2012). Person centered planning is based on the empowerment of individuals with disabilities by focusing on their individual goals and needs rather than the systems which serve or marginalize them. This approach promotes individual identity development and encourages individuals to define their own goals and the paths to achieve them. Questions targeted domains regarding self-assessment of personal strengths and characteristics of effective human services professionals. The following are the five prompts included on the questionnaire: (a) What do people like and admire about you?; (b) What are the characteristics of a good human services professional?; (c) What are your strengths as a human services professional?; (d) What are the supports I need to grow as a human services professional?; (e) How do I want the clients I serve to experience me?

The goal of collecting the data in this manner was to allow the participants to feel comfortable with disclosing their thoughts and feelings without the pressure of sharing in a group setting or with time constraints. The researchers believed that this would increase the likelihood of participant involvement and provoke more thoughtful responses. These prompts were chosen because professional identity is a constellation of self-identified traits based on skills, personal values, beliefs, experiences, and how individuals see themselves in relation to the profession in which they are working in (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). The progression of the prompts was intended to guide students in their consideration of overall personal qualities and how those qualities relate to the human services profession. In addition, the questions were designed to discern what students believed human services professionals should be and how they desired to be viewed once they are in the professional role. Researchers were guided by the assumption that the resulting data might highlight both congruence and discrepancies between the participants' views of the human services professional identity and the competencies necessary for successful human services work (Creswell, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

In preparation for data analysis, questionnaires were collected and reviewed one at a time. As researchers reviewed an individual questionnaire, answers were recorded verbatim in a separate document according to each prompt. This was repeated for each subsequent questionnaire to result in the creation of a master list. Since no identifying information was recorded for use, each questionnaire was assigned a pseudonym to identify the individual participant's response corresponding to each of the five questions.

In analyzing participant responses, the researchers first utilized an open coding method consistent with the initial steps of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The collected data was divided into segments and then scrutinized for commonalities that could reflect common conceptual themes. These themes were organized into categories and then subcategories to capture the depth of each emerging concept. After categories were generated, researchers engaged in a selective coding process to integrate and refine categories (Hays & Singh, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers carefully examined category identification and discussed any inconsistencies in coding, as well as how each researcher was managing his or her bracketing of bias. As a result, discussions required further analysis and re-organizing of several thematic codes. Revisions to the coding structure are a natural occurrence in the coding process and add to the authenticity and meaningfulness of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Findings

An open coding analysis of the data led to the identification of the following themes: (a) self-identified personal strengths; (b) characteristics of human services professionals; (c) self-identified professional strengths; (d) identifying supports, and; (e) self-perception of clients' experiences. For each theme, researchers were able to identify commonalities among participant responses. Researchers identified eight commonalities among participant responses for prompt one (*What do people like and admire about you?*). The following were the thematic codes agreed upon by all researchers: helpful, caring, humorous, compassionate, friendly, empathic, honest, and genuine. For prompt two (*What are the characteristics of a good human services professional?*), researchers identified ten thematic patterns which were the following: helpful, caring, honest, empathic, nonjudgmental, genuine, communication skills, open minded, trustworthy, and respectful. Researchers identified five prevalent thematic patterns for prompt three (*What are your strengths as a human services professional?*): caring, openness, listening skills, empathy, and helpful. For prompt four (*What are the supports I need to grow as a human services professional?*), four prominent themes were identified: family, continued education and experience, self-care, and other professionals. For the final prompt (*How do I want the clients I serve to experience me?*), five thematic patterns were identified: dedicated, caring, accepting, supportive, and trustworthy.

Overall, findings show that participants believe that others view them as empathic and able to establish connections, which is one of the most salient characteristics of an effective helper and human services professional (Neukrug, 2017). The remainder of the codes are personality traits or strengths which can contribute to building rapport with others and creating safer interpersonal spaces. In order to provide illustrative examples, direct quotes from participants have been weaved throughout the findings section to represent each of the themes

using participant voices (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identity.

Self-Identified Personal Strengths. Each student's response highlighted the high value placed on interpersonal skills in human services. Of the traits identified by the participants, there were eight that they all felt contributed to their personal strengths as a human services professional: helpful, caring, humorous, compassionate, friendly, empathic, honest, and genuine. Ashley responded, "I'm honest. I'm helpful. I'm loyal. I'm loving. I'm a good listener," which was a similar response of other participants. Brittany shared, "People like that I am a good listener and that I am empathetic to others' situations.'' Similar strengths were also echoed in other participant responses. Tanner believed his personal strengths were, "My ability to always put others first and how caring and nice I am." As previously mentioned, interpersonal skills were consistently highlighted by participants as their strength. When asked to identify the strengths or characteristics of good human services professionals, the student participants had a similar perspective with a strong focus on interpersonal skills.

Characteristics of Good Human Services Professionals. Students' views of competent human services professionals seemed directly related to interpersonal skills such as the ability to express empathy, build rapport, and actively listen. Payton responded, "Characteristics of a good human services professional are: having the ability to demonstrate empathy and questioning skills, providing feedback, expressing openness, using silence, continuing or further studies and training in human services, and so much more I have yet to learn." This finding was not surprising as human services students' interactions with competent human services professionals are often limited to a short internship while in school if students do not have previous work experience. Another participant, Lisa, responded "I feel that characteristics of a good human services professional is a nonjudgmental attitude and someone that is a good listener," which closely echoed Payton's sentiments. For these pre-internship students, much of the identity of competent human services professionals was placed on interpersonal skills and not foundational skills like writing and time-management. Participants also recognized that human services professionals also must possess intrinsic motivation to work in the human services field which can be challenging. Brian captured this in the following statement, "Trustworthy, empathetic, good listening skills, compassionate, capable, and they want to help people." This focus on interpersonal skills, with a desire to be a helping professional, is also captured in the participants' views of their professional strengths.

Self-Identified Professional Strengths. Professional strengths identified by students followed this theme and highlighted strong interpersonal skills that could be used to develop rapport with clients. Participants wanted their clients to view them as trustworthy, helpful, and confident in their abilities. From the responses, it seemed that students recognized that working from a strength-based perspective was critical in human services work. Michael captured this theme with his response, "I am caring and open minded. I believe that it is a privilege to work with people. I am flexible." Participants also recognized the importance of resourcefulness as a human services professional. Kesha shared, "My strengths as a human services professional are my ability to listen and I am very resourceful when necessary. I am honest but know how to

handle different situations that are presented to me. At least so far." Interpersonal skills, intrinsic motivation and resourcefulness were strengths captured by participants. It also seemed that even in the pre-internship phase, students were beginning to recognize the importance of working objectively with clients and avoiding biased interaction. Lamar believed it was important to, "Be able to put all my personal problems to the side and listen to only my client. Give great advice even when my beliefs are different from my clients. Having the strength to be tough for a client who needed me." Student participants also recognized the need for continued support as they work to develop their professional identity.

Identifying Support. Students recognized the need for family, friends, and other professionals to encourage and guide them as they continue to grow as human services professionals. Participants believed that experience in the field and continuing education would also help to contribute to their identity as human services professionals. Participants expressed that they are looking for mentorship and guidance from faculty members as they work to develop their knowledge about the field and their professional identity. Jackson responded, "Membership in professional organizations. One or more mentors in the field. Access to research and professional literature. Continuing education courses. A structured training program at my first job. Ways to manage compassion fatigue and burnout," were all things he would need to be successful as a new professional. The need for continued training and knowledge as a human services professional was also evident in other participant responses with Derrick sharing, "To continually grow my knowledge in all subjects of the human services field. I feel that the field is constantly changing with the times around us and although school may be close to finishing, I should take the initiative to continue learning for the sake of my clients." There also seemed to be an underlying theme related to the importance of self-care for human services professionals. Michael shared, "It is important to take care of myself emotionally, physically, and mentally. It is also essential to continue learning the new information pertaining to the line of work I choose."

Self-Perception of Client Experiences. Students wanted to be seen as competent, compassionate, and trustworthy by their clients. Taylor responded, "I want my clients to feel comfortable with me so that they will know that I am there for them and they will open up to me so that I will be able to help them. I want to earn and keep their trust." This finding was consistent with previous themes as it was directly related to what students believed to be characteristics of strong human services professionals. As human services professionals are often seen as "helpers," holding jobs like case managers, counselors, and liaisons, it is important to possess helping skills. Ashley shared, "I want my clients to feel that I have empathy for them all and an unconditional positive regard for them. I want them to feel comfortable and open to me and feel safe when they are with me." Ashley captured rapport building skills needed to effectively work with clients. Remaining participants shared similar views of how they would like to be perceived by clients, with Sharice stating that she would like to be seen "as someone who is genuinely interested in their well-being, supportive, unconditionally accepting and willing to match their level of commitment and effort."

Discussion

This study examined the professional identity development process of current human services undergraduate students. The results of this study identified that personal strengths, professional strengths, and internalized beliefs about the role of human services professionals strongly influenced the way the students in the sample viewed their professional identity development. Overwhelmingly, the future human services professionals in this study stated that their interpersonal skills would be most important in their future roles. Students' views of human services professionals seemed in some ways one dimensional, only accounting for interpersonal skills while neglecting other important skills such as the ability to problem solve, multitask, locate community resources, or properly document interactions with clients (Chang et. al, 2018). This one-dimensional view of human services identity is consistent with students' views of human services professionals, which, in the pre-internship phase, is characterized by excitement, idealism, and high motivations to serve clients (Diambra, Cole-Zakrzewski, & Booher, 2004).

A strong focus on interpersonal skill development was anticipated by the researchers as interpersonal skill development is a large focus of human services education. The Council for Standards in Human Services Education (CSHSE) specifically outlines this skill in Standard 17 of the National Standards for a Baccalaureate degree (2013) in human services which reads as follows: "Learning experiences shall be provided for the student to develop his or her interpersonal skills (pg. 8)." Although most programs offer stand-alone interpersonal skills courses, interpersonal skills are also usually highlighted in all courses delivered to students as they are essential to direct services with clients.

Although there is limited literature related to professional identity development in the field of human services, there is an abundance of literature available in related helping professions. In a study of counselor professional identity development, Prosek and Hurt (2004) found a statistically significant difference between the professional identity development of novice counseling professionals and advanced counselor trainees. Prosek and Hurt attributed these differences to real world experience. Like the participants in the aforementioned study, the undergraduate students in our sample have not yet entered practicum or internship. The authors believe lack of exposure to the day-to-day tasks of human services professionals has skewed the views of the skills needed to be a professional helper. Li and Liu (2015) reported similar findings in their study of social work students in China. From their sample of undergraduate students enrolled in social work programs, they found that students' professional identity was most influenced by professional training and practice in the social work field. Knowing that many pre-professional helpers have idealistic views of what is required of professional helpers has implications for the field of human services.

Implications for Human Services

Findings from this study suggest a need for human services education that is focused on developing the professional identity of students during the critical formational period of identity development, which is in the undergraduate education years (Barbara-i-Molinero et al., 2017). Trede et al. (2012) and Barbara-i-Molinero et al. (2017) identified a need for mentorship in professional identity development in higher education settings. Human services educators can help students feel connected to the field by inviting professionals into the classroom, helping

students find internship sites, encouraging students to join professional organizations, and collaborating with students on projects focused on human services.

Findings suggest that undergraduate students are aware of the interpersonal skills needed to be successful in developing and maintaining rapport with clients and they can identify these skills within themselves. However, there seems to be a lack of awareness of the importance of foundational skills that are characteristic of good human services professionals. Foundational skills include the ability to write, analyze, problem solve, and utilize critical thinking to make assessments and solve problems (Chang et. al, 2018.).

Human services education has a focus on developing these foundational skills through course content for baccalaureate education outlined by CSHSE (2013). Standard 11G of the national standards for a baccalaureate degree in human services highlights the importance of students possessing skills needed to analyze and interpret data: "Skills to analyze and interpret historical data for application in advocacy and social change (p.6)." However, there seems to be a gap in students' understanding that these foundational skills are characteristic of competent human services practice and at the core of human services professional identity. Similarly, standard 14D, "Disseminating routine and critical information to clients, colleagues, or other members of the related services system that is: 1. Provided in written or oral form, and 2. Provided in a timely manner (p. 7)," highlights the importance of students knowing how to disseminate information in written form to clients, colleagues, and other related service systems. Standard 14D also emphasizes communication that is timely as prompt communication is often essential in the field of human services.

Human services educators can foster a more accurate image of good human services practice by challenging limited perceptions that focus solely on interpersonal skills and expand the understanding of the importance of foundational skills and competencies required for effective human services practice. Bridging the gap between student perceptions of what it means to be a good human services professional, and actual competencies needed to be effective, is the first step in developing a professional identity that is more accurate to practice in the field.

In addition, participants identified the need for established human services professionals as supports in their development as "good human services professionals." Human services educators can create opportunities for students to be exposed to competent human services professionals by inviting professionals working in the field to speak about their roles in the classroom. Human services educators can also provide students with opportunities to be mentored by seasoned professionals and teach students how to network and seek out mentorship in the field. Exposure to good human services practice could also help to give students an understanding of the importance of foundational skills that are required to be effective professionals.

Human services education that combines theory and practice is essential to human services identity development. Participants in this study focused on the importance of key interpersonal skills, supports, and characteristics that would positively influence how clients experienced them. Human services educators can foster the development of human services identity by making sure students understand that basic foundational skills such as professional writing skills, the ability to read to gather information, working collaboratively, time management, and problem-solving skills are just as important as interpersonal skills. Human services educators can create opportunities for students to gain exposure to competent

professionals and teach students how to seek mentorship and make professional connections (Perrin, 2011). Mastery of these foundational skills would positively influence how students are ultimately experienced by the clients they serve which is an important aspect of identity development.

Limitations

This study adds significant value to human services education, but there are limitations. First, all of the participants included in the study were from the same mid-size Southern university. For future research, it is recommended that participants be purposefully recruited from a variety of human services baccalaureate programs at different institutions in order to gain understanding of student perspectives from various institutions and programs. Another limitation of this study relates to the lack of available literature on human services professional identity development. The majority of the literature on professional identity referenced in this paper is from other helping professions such as counseling, nursing, social work, and higher education (Barbarà-i-Molinero et. al., 2017; Moss, Gibson & Dollarhide, 2014; Neary, 2014; Trede et. al., 2012). As the literature on professional identity for human services professionals continues to evolve, it will be important to revisit this study to compare the findings.

Conclusion

Interpersonal skills are key traits in human services practice. However, in developing human services professional identity, it is important to note foundational traits that extend beyond interpersonal skills. Confidence in service delivery, personal strengths, and having the support of human services practitioners also contributes to the development of a competent human services professional. This study explores students' perceptions and lends insight to how educators can use students' perceptions to improve curriculum and training opportunities in human services education. Being that research is limited in exploring how students develop professional identity in human services, this study begins to establish the research on professional identity development of human services students while also bridging gaps in the human services literature.

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