

# On Becoming a Professional Social Worker: Stressors and Successes

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**Abstract:** Social work is an honorable profession, but it may also be a difficult profession considering high caseloads, low salaries, and numerous opportunities to experience stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma. The process of becoming a professional social worker at the graduate level requires considerable time, energy, money, and stamina. Four first-semester MSW students and I, their professor, share our lived experiences and challenges during the Fall 2021 semester at a historically Black university in the midst of the pandemic. Time management, work-life balance, coursework demands, self-care, social support, social justice, and advocacy surface as primary concerns. Our narratives suggest that self-care for graduate social work students is as important as self-care for professional social workers. Graduate social work programs are advised to consider implementing courses or programs that teach social work students how to engage in self-care rather than presenting it as a topic for discussion. Implications for research are discussed.

**Keywords:** social work, social support, resilience, self-care

New technology and new knowledge will equip aspiring social workers with better skills to address problems of the 21st century and beyond. Looking back over our history as friendly visitors with no specific training or educational background other than a desire to help those in need, social work has evolved into a highly respected profession via a standardized curriculum, accreditation, specializations, practicums, certifications and/or licensure, and a varied collection of course offerings. During the infancy of the social work professions, Abraham Flexner (1915) decreed that social work was not a profession because social work lacked the following: decision-making authority in the critical thinking process, a definite purpose, and a purposefully organized educational discipline. The literature today identifies the high educational requirements for the job as a factor contributing to the shortage of social workers (The Realtime Report, 2020). I (Val) have observed the process of becoming a graduate-level professional social worker to be rigorous: one to two years of graduate instruction, 765 hours of internship, two years of post-MSW supervision to sit for the licensure exam, and requirements for continuing education (Ravalier et al., 2022; Wilfong, 2024). Social workers wear many hats and execute a variety of roles at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels while utilizing research (science) to inform their practice decisions (Dubois & Miley, 2019).

## Educating the Next Generation (Val)

As a social work professor, I view educating next-generation social workers as an awesome opportunity. Social work is an honorable profession, but it is not an easy profession. There are times when I actually view social work as a tough job. I believe many people are attracted to the profession out of a sincere desire to help disadvantaged populations, but I am also aware that some individuals are attracted to the field due to personal traumatic experiences (Livingston et

al., 2022). In executing our jobs as social workers, we encounter numerous opportunities to experience stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma. Social work practice in the public service arena frequently presents opportunities for unmanageable caseloads with limited resources and staffing shortages (GB News, 2022; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2019; The Realtime Report, 2020). And, depending upon what part of the country you live in and whether you have a license or certification for private practice, the salary may not be great. Considering these limitations of the profession, why would anyone want to pursue a career as a social worker? I believe that reverts back to the social work values of service, dignity and worth of the individual, the importance of human relationships, and social justice (NASW, 2021).

Like social work practice, graduate-level social work education can be demanding. Whether students are entering an advanced standing, full-time, or part-time program, the course work is intense for many. Social work education involves a plethora of moving parts: understanding and applying theory to practice, assessing client needs, engaging in critical thinking, conducting and/or evaluating research data, engaging in field practice, developing goals and evaluating outcomes, and completing weekly assignments. These tasks are not accomplished easily, and considerable time has to be devoted to acquiring skills in each of these arenas.

For those interested in a clinical career as a social worker, graduate social work education requires a commitment to learning as well as an ongoing thirst for new knowledge. Social work is not easy because human behavior is not easy. Human behavior does not change simply because we desire it, and our clients probably don't care what we read in a textbook or what research reports about a particular situation. Ingrained behaviors may take as long to change as they did to acquire because change is emotional. Change triggers emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, and stress, and these emotions function as forms of resistance (Forsell & Åström, 2012). But, what does it take to commit to and become a professional social worker? How difficult is the path to the MSW?

In my companion position as the admissions director for our MSW program, I am often asked various iterations of the previously mentioned questions by prospective applicants. I provide an honest overview of the need for time management, the need to make sacrifices in time previously devoted to socializing, the need for self-care, and the need for a supportive social network. Additionally, potential applicants are also advised of the need to adopt and exemplify social work core values such as service, social justice, integrity, competence, importance of human relationships, and dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2021). Despite the honesty of my responses, I think prospective students prefer to obtain the information directly from students actively involved in the process. Based on that assessment, I decided to ask new MSW students to share their concerns. The publication of the student narratives would provide a hint of what potential students might experience during their quest to become a professional social worker.

I teach a course known as “Social Work Profession” to first-semester MSW students. This course traces the development of the profession from good intentions to professional standards, mission, and values; to licensure and private practice; and everything else in between. During

the first few weeks of this class in Fall of 2021, I could see my students struggling to adjust to the academic rigor as well as the dark cloud of COVID-19. Their energy level was low—some questioned whether they could succeed in a graduate program, and if they should return for the Spring semester. I needed a mechanism to help move my students away from sadness and/or despair to hope and determination. I thought it would be a good idea to have students discuss their experience as first-semester MSW students regarding their challenges and successes. I offered my students an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences related to their quest to obtain an MSW. Borrowing from the concept of journaling as a self-care tool (Gursansky, 2010), I considered that the simple act of writing about their experience could function as a means of catharsis while also providing helpful information for my students and future applicants considering entry into the field of social work. The following narratives reflect the lived experiences of four first-semester MSW students. The narratives are presented in the students' own words.

### **Balancing Act: Helen's Narrative**

My first week of graduate classes included two online courses and one in-person night class. I remember feeling both nervous and excited to embark on my educational journey. Two years had elapsed since my last classroom experience as a student. I remember the start of my online courses feeling anticlimactic. I have always held a preference for in-person learning, and receiving my assignments virtually made me feel slightly disconnected. My first in-person class was a different story entirely. Suddenly I was surrounded by a room full of students who shared my passion for helping people. We went around the room and talked about our backgrounds and our goals, and it felt as though we all had one mission to make the world a better place. After my first week of classes, I felt reinvigorated and motivated to further my education. My in-person class had to go virtual twice as a result of someone in the class testing positive [for COVID-19]. The switch back and forth between in-person and virtual was not ideal. Initially, I did not want to take online courses, but I realized after the first week that they fit into my life more effortlessly. Working 10-hour shifts and attending a three-hour night class directly after was exhausting. When I started school, I did feel slightly behind because my bachelor's degree was in neuroscience and not social work. However, after a month, with the ongoing support from my peers and professors I felt up to date on the information I needed to comprehend about social work. While I was very optimistic, it is pertinent to mention the workload for my three classes did feel daunting.

My friends were a huge source of support for me during my graduate experience. Even though they could not lighten my workload or solve my scheduling dilemmas, the listening ear they provided was very therapeutic. I was also blessed to find a very close friend in one of my new classmates that semester. It was nice to speak with someone who was experiencing the same trials and tribulations. I also found studying and doing work with her made it far more enjoyable for me. Additionally, I was able to speak with my graduate advisor about my concerns. She listened actively to my predicament and provided empathetic and helpful advice. She recommended an internship I could apply to that might work with my schedule and emphasized the importance of self-care. This was a breath of fresh air in comparison to some of the

professors I had for my undergraduate degree in neuroscience. I expected her to emphasize putting education first, but she prioritized my well-being, which was greatly appreciated.

There were many extraneous factors this semester that impacted my experience. COVID-19 definitely added additional stress for me. It made seeing my family and getting social support more difficult. My family lives in New York and the multiple visits planned had to be cancelled due to a rise in COVID cases. At the time of writing, I have not been able to see my family in almost a year, which impacts the social support I felt during this experience. The pandemic also simply sat in the back of my mind as a looming source of continuous worry. Were my elderly grandparents going to be okay? If my family got sick, how would I support them when they lived in New York?

COVID also caused constant changes that required flexibility at work. The prison at which I worked would go on lockdown, and all my classes would be cancelled. It also created additional stress and more work at my job. I had to continuously re-write my curriculum or take on extra work to teach correspondence classes to my students during outbreaks. The added stress of fearing for my students, friends, and family members' safety had a negative impact on my ability to focus. Overall, I have been lucky to have immense sources of social support to get through these stressful times.

The most challenging aspect in the pursuit of my MSW has been balance and managing stress. My current job as a workforce development specialist is very demanding. I have to manage about 50 clients every month and ensure they have employment and resources. Additionally, I am teaching six different classes. I often found myself worrying about work when I should have been focusing on school. On top of that, I generally work 10-hour shifts and my job is 45 minutes from my apartment. It was very challenging mentally for me to come home and then immediately do schoolwork. This often resulted in my staying up very late into the night and only sleeping a couple of hours. When I prioritized my career and my education, I was not able to spend enough time on my personal life or doing self-care. This was very challenging for me mentally because I did not feel I had a release during the semester.

Political unrest was also a source of stress for me. I actively followed and supported Black Lives Matter 757 of Hampton Roads, Virginia, and the feminist movement. While it was great to be a part of groups I felt made a difference, it was eye-opening and alarming to see how much opposition those groups encountered. I remember learning about critical race theory in class and then the next day hearing on the news it may be banned from schools. It seemed like all the evidence-based practices and tireless work of social workers wasn't being supported. Regardless it was comforting to be surrounded by others who were fighting for ethics and equality.

I was very excited about how closely my classes related to my professional interests. My goal for my career is to help reduce recidivism and end discrimination within the prison system. I was permitted to write multiple papers and presentations that were directly related to this goal. I also learned valuable knowledge about related theories of development, research methods, and social welfare policies. I found it very rewarding to be surrounded by professors and other

students who shared my same interest in making the world a better place. Overall, I felt a lot of pride to be a part of the social work profession and to be learning and improving over the semester.

I think my main positive self-discovery was simply that I can do what I put my mind to. I was really worried about returning to school after a two-year gap. There were multiple days or specific assignments that felt impossible to complete. But I always managed to come out on the other side. I don't think I could have done this without my friends and support system. It really helped having friends in my classes that understood what I was going through. I also learned that I liked online classes. I had previously been very opposed to taking classes online, but I found that asynchronous courses were much easier to manage time-wise.

While graduate school is stressful, it is also very rewarding. I feel much better now about my ability to balance my schoolwork, social life, and career than I did at the beginning of the semester. I definitely needed ongoing assistance from my friends, professors, and classmates to reach this point. I can say quite confidently that I feel I have what it takes to be a social worker. Having "what it takes" to be a social worker does not mean you have to be the smartest person or even the most experienced or knowledgeable person. The best social worker is the person that is willing to continuously learn and keep a non-judgmental disposition and an open mind. I would have significantly more anxiety and stress about this situation if it weren't for my graduate advisor. Overall, I was very proud of myself this semester. While I did spend a good part of my first semester stressed and overwhelmed, I learned that I could do it, and the sense of accomplishment I felt at the end far outweighed the temporary stress and sacrifice.

### **Find Time to Believe in Yourself: Carly's Narrative**

I would describe my reaction to the first day of graduate classes as overwhelming, anxiety-inducing, and filled with self-doubt. I felt disadvantaged because I did not have an undergraduate degree in social work. My professors helped me gain confidence in understanding the social work values, mission, and philosophy because it was constantly integrated into our class assignments and discussions. In addition, interning at an agency significantly influenced my confidence because it allowed me to implement the values, mission, and philosophies. At the beginning of graduate school, it was very challenging for me to tell my family and friends that I could not spend as much time with them or to decline attendance at certain events. My time during the week was consumed with classes and my internship, so my weekends were allotted for completing assignments.

I knew going into graduate school that I would be spending the majority of my time doing schoolwork. However, I underestimated just how much time I would actually be spending. In the beginning, I wrote everything down in my planner to ensure no deadlines were missed. It is essential to know when assignments are due, but it is more important to ensure you have enough time to complete them adequately. Honestly, some days it was a challenge to find the energy to complete my assignments after coming home from a long day in classes or my internship. If I did not complete my work during the week, my weekends were consumed with schoolwork. I

spent less time with family and friends and more time focusing on my assignments, because this degree was important to me.

I spoke with my family about my concerns regarding my time constraints. My family began to understand that graduate school would be my top priority for the next few years. However, it was hard for them to fully understand what I was going through because no one in my immediate family continued their education through to graduate school. I also spoke with a few of my friends about my concerns. I was the friend who always said yes to hanging out and going to new places. However, it was an adjustment for all of us because a lot of my free time was now spent studying. Therefore, I could not see my friends, especially the few that lived out of town, as often as I usually did. It was nice to make friends in the program that had been experiencing the same challenges. I planned out my week in advance to allow time for school, friends, and family. However, some of my weeks were busier than others, so it was nice to have the support and understanding of my friends and family when I had to reschedule.

I learned how important it was to have a good support system of family, friends, and colleagues when handling stress. There were good days and bad days, but I was comfortable expressing my feelings and worries to my friends and family. I have developed a good group of friends in the program who have been tremendously supportive of one another. It is nice to know that you are not the only one stressed out and to be able to learn from one another about different ways to handle stress. Personally, I tried to prioritize self-care to help relieve some stress. It was important for me to take some time for myself and not sit at my computer all day, every day, completing assignments. I learned how important it was to prioritize my own mental health regarding multiple priorities. I quickly realized that some things that I thought were a priority in my life were less important than focusing on what I needed to do in order to earn my degree.

The most exciting aspect of pursuing my MSW has been my time at my internship. In the beginning, I was hoping to be placed at an agency that worked with children and families. Honestly, I was a little disappointed when I found out I would not be working with children. My past experiences had been with at-risk youth, so I was looking forward to working with the same population. However, I began to enjoy my time at the homeless shelter and looked forward to spending time there each week. A positive self-discovery experienced that semester was my ability to work with the homeless population. I had previous perceptions about this population based on the people I had interacted with on the street. My internship allowed me to try new things and better understand the problems this population faces daily. I was able to identify my abilities and biases, which helped confirm that I chose the right career path. I am thankful that the semester challenged me to step outside of my comfort zone and gain new experiences.

As a white, Jewish female, I did not foresee any challenges regarding my decision to attend an HBCU. I understood I would be the minority on campus, but as a social work student, I was looking forward to the new experiences and relationships this opportunity would provide. However, I occasionally felt like I had to prove that I belonged on this campus and in this specific program. My feelings could have influenced the way I experienced my first semester in the MSW program compared to my African American classmates. I believe privilege was a

protective factor and positively affected my progress throughout the MSW program because my parents provided me with emotional and financial support which helped influence an environment that was conducive to learning.

### **I Really Need Self-Care: Alijhanae's Narrative**

On my first day of graduate school I was nervous; however, I was confident that I would be able to succeed as this was something that I wanted to accomplish. In undergrad, I was able to maintain five classes, work, and complete an internship so I believed that I would be successful with maintaining such a schedule in graduate school as well. After my first few weeks of classes, I began to doubt myself as the workload was much different than undergrad. I was also juggling trying to make time for self-care because it is extremely important, especially when your life becomes busy. At times it was very overwhelming; however, time management was a major factor in completing assignments and still having time for myself. Using a planner helped keep me on the right track during this difficult time.

My confidence is high when it comes to understanding the social work values, mission, and philosophy. I felt like I had a slight advantage because I did have my bachelor's degree in social work while other students in the program had their degrees in other fields. This allowed me to be familiar with some of the topics being discussed in my classes. However, I believe that I need to continue enhancing my knowledge and skills in order to become a better social worker: the main reason why I made the decision to further my education.

I believe the most challenging aspect of my graduate education was trying to have a social life outside of school, work, and internship. It was an adjustment for me. I tried to remember that self-care was important. Also, adjusting to a new school environment, new professors, and the expectations they had for their papers and other assignments was a challenge. Having the support of my family, friends, and coworkers encouraged me to keep striving for greatness and put my health first. In undergrad, I believe COVID had a large effect on my learning, but I do not think it had much of an effect in graduate school. The only struggle I had was wearing masks in class. At times it was difficult to wear a mask for three hours straight. As time progressed, I adjusted to new restrictions and daily updates on hospitalizations and COVID-related deaths.

I believe the most challenging aspect for me in the pursuit of my MSW was adjusting to classes, handling a different school setting, and learning time management skills. At first, when I started the program, I thought my time management skills were pretty effective; however, I slowly started to realize they needed work. I learned that at times the workload was overwhelming for me; I also learned the importance of taking time out for myself and allowing myself to have a self-care day. This is important when balancing school, internship, homework time, work, and time for yourself. I only had one day to myself throughout the week, and that was a Saturday. Each Saturday my goal was not to look at, think about, or do homework and to take that day to do something I enjoyed. During stressful times I think it was important for me to remember to

take a deep breath and calm down. Also making a list of assignments was very helpful for me as I was able to see the progress I was making when completing my assignments.

I did experience a few disappointments, such as not doing as well I thought I did on some of my assignments, like papers. I believe I need to work on my procrastination; however, at times I do feel like I work better under pressure. With that being said, I do not like having the feeling of that anxiety rising when I'm rushing to do an assignment the day of the deadline. Within my next semester, I plan to prioritize my assignments better and not procrastinate as much.

What I found exciting was being able to meet new people and being able to connect knowledge learned previously in my undergrad to learning in the semester. Being able to understand how information learned in class compared to my experience within the field made me feel as though I was actually learning, thus increasing my confidence in becoming a great social worker. Other positive self-discoveries during the semester included just being motivated and determined. There were times I doubted my capabilities, but seeing how well I performed this semester despite everything that had been going on around me has really made me feel proud of myself. Overall, the semester taught me a lot. It was challenging for me, but it enhanced my ability to go into next semester knowing what improvements I need to make, as well as the strengths I already possess.

### **The Personal Unfolding When Obtaining Your MSW: Precious' Narrative**

My initial reaction on the first day of graduate school was that of being overwhelmed. I experienced intense anxiety, self-doubt, self-manipulation, guilt-tripping, and imposter syndrome when attempting to balance my schoolwork and social life. I felt this way because I was not sure of what to expect. I questioned whether I was equipped and prepared. Everything was new to me. Like many other students in my program, I was new to the university, and to Hampton Roads as a resident; I was carrying the stressor of adjusting to a new living environment along with entering an intense graduate-level program. My move and transition were huge challenges and adjustments for me, along with the difficulty of balancing being active, attentive, and present in all five classes and an internship that required maximum effort.

As the semester progressed, I started to feel at ease because I found a pattern that helped me to balance and complete my assignments without cramming or interfering with the work from my internship. For example, I dedicated four to five hours on Monday and Tuesday afternoons of each week to begin and/or complete my lengthiest and most significant assignments and readings. Taking these two afternoons at the beginning of the week allowed me to focus on the minor assignments as well as my internship later in the week without the worry of being behind on my most important assignments.

My professors and cohort contributed a lot to my confidence because I felt a sense of belonging. My professors offered an open-door policy for questions and concerns, which not only made it comfortable for me with any rising concerns that I had, but it was also reassuring to know that they were present and reachable. Within my cohort, we formed a community and established a



support system. I credit my classmates along with myself and professors for my perseverance this semester. While I still had moments of uncertainty and doubt, I intentionally practiced affirmations daily to help motivate and build my confidence.

The greatest difficulty I faced daily was my lack of time-management skills. I found it very difficult to balance my personal life and the many assignments, discussion boards, and projects that my professors assigned. Throughout this semester, it often seemed as though all of my assignments and responsibilities were being thrown at one time; the due dates for all of my classes were usually compiled into the same week. Meanwhile, I was trying to manage my workload and maintain my inner peace and a positive mindset. Due to the many stressors of graduate school, I talked to family, friends, peers, and professors about my personal concerns and my exhaustion. I was told to stay positive, work hard, and strive to do my best no matter the circumstances. I noticed that when they would say, “You got this, just hang in there,” that did not bring any comfort or peace; instead, it brought added stress and pressure. Also, I saw this statement as a discredit to how I was feeling at the time because instead of helping me process my feelings, I was told, “You got it.” However, given this and other advice, I took it upon myself to continue facing my adversities and striving to excel in the program. I decided to stay positive and push through.

I learned that I am hardworking and determined, despite the overwhelming feelings of stress and doubt. I learned that it is vital to be organized when having to apply yourself to multiple things like an internship, a job, and school; it can be very overwhelming, resulting in burnout and lack of motivation. I learned that it is essential to show self-compassion and practice self-care. As I advance through the program, I have to make sure that I am being intentional about the time and love that I give myself because I discredited my abilities, confidence, and faith academically and personally throughout the Fall semester. I also learned that it is vital to build and have a support system in place while in graduate school.

I found it very exciting to attend an HBCU for its culture, community, and familiarity. It was comforting to know that the majority of my professors and staff look similar to me. I not only felt comfortable but safe and secure when expressing my concerns, especially when having in-class discussions on complex and controversial topics and matters. Lastly, I felt understood and related to by my professors and peers. I discovered that if I really put my mind, heart, and time into something, then I could obtain it despite the challenges.

Prior to entering graduate school, I had a lot of family and friends attempt to prepare me for the lack of time and opportunities to socialize while being in graduate school, but I underestimated all that they were telling me. All that was said in preparation for me was very accurate, and I struggled with balancing both organization and time. This first semester showed me how unsettled I was and its impact on my ability to perform academically and socially. Although we all still have concerns due to the persistence of COVID-19 and other societal factors such as racism and inequalities, this semester was just the first successful stop on a long, rewarding journey.

### **Lessons Learned (Val)**

A number of students reported feeling ill-prepared for graduate-level work compared to undergraduate work. This may suggest that students could benefit from some type of bridge program between the undergraduate and graduate years. Graduate social work education is demanding. Learning about theory is one thing, but applying theory to actual cases requires a thorough understanding of the theory in question. A number of students were unable to manage their time well, suggesting the need to provide students a variety of practical techniques for managing their time. As the time demands for academic success increased, students' feelings of well-being appeared to decrease. Under difficult environmental conditions, faculty are advised to conduct student wellness checks at the start of each class. The opportunity for social comparison allows students to know they are not alone in their journey and promotes the development of peer support networks.

Social work education can be very intense, but the practice of social work is even more demanding (Ravalier et al., 2022; Wilfong, 2024). As previously mentioned, social work is not easy, and social workers will have a number of opportunities to experience burnout, vicarious trauma, disappointment, and earnings that may influence pecuniary instability. The social and/or professional life of a social worker is unlikely to be filled with glamour, fame, or fortune, but that was never the goal. Some things are more important than a six-figure salary. The average inexperienced social worker will likely enter the public social service arena via local departments of social services (Ravlier et al., 2022; Wilfong, 2024). These new social workers will likely encounter large caseloads and unrealistic demands on their personal and professional time as well as disappointments in the types of services and resources available (Ravalier et al., 2022). Such conditions may lead to burnout and a high social worker turnover rate for local departments of social services. Where are the incentives to retain and develop new social workers? Where is their return on investment?

My moment of enlightenment came as I drafted the implications for this discourse and reconsidered the question, "Why would someone want to pursue a career as a social worker?" Indeed, the commitment to social work values, mission, and philosophy provides considerable motivation for students to pursue this profession despite challenges. A strong commitment to social justice and the opportunity to "right some wrongs" provide additional fuel for many social workers. But, are good intentions and a good heart sufficient to buffer the adversities social workers may experience? Is it selfish for social workers to expect favorable working conditions, manageable caseloads, and a salary commensurate with the importance of our work? Are schools of social work adequately training their students on how to engage in self-care?

### **Implications (Val)**

During my thirty years in the field, I have always held the belief that social workers talk about self-care but do not always engage in self-care. If we truly believe there is a need for self-care, I think all schools of social work should provide a course that teaches students what self-care is and how to actively, not passively, engage in a variety of self-care initiatives. Self-care should

not be a topic for periodic discussion but should be infused throughout the curricula and other school activities. The danger of vicarious trauma exists. Burnout is real and has real mental and physical health consequences.

The student narratives have implications for practicum supervisors, MSW program directors, student success administrators, and faculty. The narratives suggest the need for institutions of higher education to routinely solicit feedback from their students regarding factors impacting their mental health: such feedback is particularly helpful under unusual environmental conditions such as COVID-19. Most of the students reported value in having faculty periodically check on how they were coping during the pandemic. This suggests an opportunity to conduct research with students regarding the need for and value of student wellness checks during class not as an afterthought but as an intentional act.

While I don't believe the average social worker expects to get rich helping the disadvantaged, I do believe we should be advocating for higher salaries in the public sector to help mediate some of the financial stress these social workers may experience. I believe our self-care should include advocating for salaries commensurate with our skill level and duties. We are working to enhance, protect, develop, and maybe even save the lives of those individuals who appear confined by a social structure that does not permit everyone equal access to resources and services. In this vein, social workers could be viewed as not having equal access to a wage commensurate with our contribution to society, hence the need for self-advocacy.

Social work is a traditionally female occupation, and salaries are reflective of this, suggesting gender-wage discrimination (Data USA, n.d.). According to The Realtime Report (2020) the median pay for social workers across the country is \$50,390 per year. The United States is currently experiencing a shortage of social workers despite an increase in the need for social workers (Social Work Resource, n.d.; NASW, 2019). The need for social workers is also present on an international level as the United Kingdom reported that their children's social worker shortage reached a five-year high in 2022 (Local Government Agency, 2022). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) projects a seven percent increase in the need for social workers between 2020 and 2032. These conditions reflect a call-to-action to address salary inequities, working conditions, and the current shortage and projected future need for social workers. NASW launched the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act/H.R. 1532 (2019) to support the recruitment, retention, and enhanced compensation of current and future social workers. The bill was introduced to the 116th Congress on March 5, 2019 but was not passed. Social workers are good at providing a voice for the voiceless; we must now advocate for the social workers of today and tomorrow by promoting enhanced working conditions and pay for those individuals willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to complete graduate level education in order to help make the world a better place. It is important for current social workers, professional social work organizations, and social work students to mount a collaborative effort in securing Congressional support for the passage of bills similar to H.R. 1532 in 2019 (<https://www.socialworkers.org/Advocacy/Policy-Issues/Social-Work-Reinvestment-Act>).

## Conclusion (Val)

There were several common themes among the students: time management, need for self-care, excessive work demands, self-doubt, and the importance of support systems. Time management was a huge factor in terms of meeting academic deadlines and work obligations, practicing self-care, and socializing with family and friends. Most of the students experienced difficulty adjusting to multiple tasks as well as the academic rigor required for graduate-level work.

In addition to the stress of pursuing a graduate degree, COVID-19 and new variants were frequent topics of concern. Over time, it became clear that students had to mobilize their resources and access their social and familial capital in order to achieve academic success (Bottrell, 2009; Strayhorn, 2014; Van Breda, 2018; Yosso, 2005). The student narratives provide an additional research opportunity with regard to assessing the value of social support, including the source of that support and the frequency of that support, as well as the nature of that support: institutional, instrumental, or emotional.

Faculty played an important role in encouraging students to engage in self-care and students appeared to appreciate this expression of concern regarding their mental health especially during this time of COVID-19. The pursuit of the MSW certainly required juggling skills, huge amounts of determination, a considerable amount of mental stamina, and unlimited wells of resilience. Students' methods of successful coping were supported by social and familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Both forms of capital appeared to facilitate students' ability to be resilient (Palmer, 2014; Reddick, 2017; Strayhorn, 2014). Most importantly, students were able to exercise agency in how they responded to the stressors associated with graduate social work education.

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