Undergraduate social work programs are responsible for preparing students who will practice in accordance with the NASW Code of Ethics. Such preparation is not simply limited to developing a body of knowledge or set of skills but extends to adoption of a professional identity. Several research studies point to religious values as a significant motivational factor in choosing social work as a profession, yet little research has been conducted to investigate the integration of religious identity with an emerging professional identity. The current study sought to explore the experience of professional identity formation in undergraduate Christian social work students for whom religion was a central part of life. Narrative interviews were conducted with nine BSW students, aged 19-24, enrolled at public universities in the Midwest. Sociological and psychological identity theories, along with developmental theories, were utilized to examine challenges to professional identity and methods utilized for overcoming challenges. Data analysis revealed common storyline and themes in professional identity development, as well as in integration of religious identity with professional identity. This study demonstrated that conflict with religious identity, among other factors, can pose a threat to emerging professional identity. Participants, however, employed a variety of coping mechanisms to manage conflict between professional identity and religious identity while ultimately voicing a commitment to uphold values and ethics of the social work profession. Further
research of undergraduate professional identity development, with religious and non-religious students, is recommended to better understand how social work faculty may assess, support, and intervene in this professional development.