MSW VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND COLLABORATION: PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO BETTER COPE WITH COMPASSION FATIGUE

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of Master of Social Work

By
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

To the Stan State MSW Professors who respectfully challenged me and modeled what social justice and collaborative learning environments are; Jane, Jen, John, Paul, Robin and Yvonne; so much gratitude from the bottom of my heart! To my Chair, Dr. John Garcia: You deserve a life-sized thank you card! And cake! Dr. Leyva: Much appreciation to you for being my reader. To my project partner, Samantha: It was an honor and privilege to work with you on this virtual community. To my MSW cohort: I have learned from and with so many of you. Let's keep the passion that we have for social justice and social work burning bright. I look forward to connecting with you in the years to come via our new Virtual Community of Practice & Collaboration: www.socialjusticemsw.com and out in the field. They call us the 3 Musketeers: Dixie & Samantha: I have made two lifelong friends. Thank you for all of the support, laughs, and moments I will always cherish. Leaf angels anyone?! To my twin sister Laurie (Laura): I can still hear your voice telling me that it is okay to be different: to feel things deeply. I carry your memory and love with me.

To my grandparents Rose & Frank: You inspired me to be authentic, curious, feisty, and kind. Your love and stability gave me wings. Sometimes, I even fly. To my Tribe: My husband Stan, my partner and best friend for the past 30 years; and my children Shane and Lauren, my heart, my dance dance dance party: wherever you are have always been and will always be *home* to me.

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ABSTRACT

This graduate project was created from identified needs of students from a Masters of Social Work (MSW) program at California State University at Stanislaus. Unmet student needs stemming from time demands and multiple life and work obligations led to the creation of a virtual community of practice and collaboration: www.socialjusticemsw.com. This community is a place where students and alumni will meet asynchronously while still benefitting from a built-in peer support community to function as an adaptive response to compassion fatigue. It is crucial that social work students have the tools, opportunities, and support required to do their best out in the field and in the classroom. The virtual community of practice and collaboration will feature student and alumni-run forums with such varied topics as wellness, social work research, and community resources and events in one collective space online. As social work students and future practitioners, it is vital that we acknowledge the strength that we find in each other. We are stronger and can affect more positive change through shared and collaborative efforts in our ongoing quest for social justice.

CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this Graduate project was to create a virtual community of practice and collaboration for Masters of Social Work (MSW) students that would address multiple identified needs. This graduate project had the objective of creating a built-in peer support community to function as an adaptive response to the compassion fatigue or secondary trauma stress that California State University, Stanislaus MSW students may experience during their field practicum and while participating in this graduate program. The project was the creation of a website that includes various forums where MSW students can connect, collaborate, and expand their knowledge. The project created a space for MSW students, where community would thrive from anywhere, at anytime. Prior to this project, students did not have a place where we could easily meet or engage after and away from graduate classes and field practicum.

A virtual community is defined as, "An aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms" (Porter, 2004, para 10). As MSW students, we shared a unique experience that others, including our usual social support, may not have understood. Therefore, reaching out to our peers and having logistical constraints addressed through a virtual

community will positively impact the experience of Stan State MSW students and add a dimension of support that was previously lacking.

This project was created with collaboration as the centerpiece. Informal discussions with MSW students brought to light the need for a virtual place where students could connect easily and on their own timeframes. Through those informal channels, the project grew with vital feedback about the needs of MSW students in regards to specific focal areas of the virtual community. The community will operate asynchronously through the sharing of resources and support outside the constraints of time and place. The virtual community was built on the concept of forums and the forums are based upon identified needs that MSW students have stated are important to them. This project was undertaken in collaboration with another graduate student (Carballo 2016). Carballo (2016) focused on design and usability of the virtual community, which is a vital concept when growing and sustaining an asynchronous community online. Carballo (2016) examined the research on virtual communities that are user-friendly and which would function as accessible to all students' regardless of their technological expertise**.** Carballo (2016) additionally focused on community resources that would assist students and practitioners as well as including social justice community events within the virtual community. We both focused on the types of information that MSW students wanted included in their virtual community through communication with students. In addition, I examined research on compassion fatigue to better understand and articulate how the community would benefit our colleagues.

The social work profession is vital to the well being of society. Social workers operate on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. According to Reamer (2016), "In practical terms, today's social workers must demonstrate their ongoing commitment to both "case" and "cause," including both service to individuals and pursuit of broad social reform" (para 11). Social work is both a challenging and rewarding profession. The MSW program can feel demanding and all encompassing. As such, it is crucial that social work students have the tools, opportunities, and support required to do their best out in the field and in the classroom. Vicarious trauma (VT) or compassion fatigue (CF) is a real concern during our careers as social workers beginning with field placements during our MSW education. In one study on the effects of VT and CF, Knight (2010) reported that, "Students who felt unprepared by their education or reported they did not learn about negative reactions in class experienced more CF and VT, as did those who reported they were unable to talk about their reactions in their classes" (p. 47). Peer support has been identified as one adaptive way that social workers and social work students might engage in self-care. It is important that social work students are given as many adaptive coping strategies as possible, as soon as possible. As such, this virtual community will be a place where Stan State MSW students can: a) engage in peer support, b) gain integral information regarding classes and field, and c) can keep connected with alumni of the MSW program and vital resources.

The goals of this Graduate project were to: a) engage fellow MSW students and understand what they would like to see in their virtual community; b) identify

current and future adaptive social supports for students; and: c) bring a virtual community to the Stan State MSW community by May 2017. This Graduate project utilized information gathered by talking with and emailing MSW students to best articulate what members would like to see in their virtual space. This virtual community ultimately seeks to provide social support to MSW students. Collins (2008) spoke to the idea that people seek social support for two main reasons: we require practical advice or resources to perform our jobs and to receive emotional support. The Stan State MSW virtual community was built with the understanding that social support is vital when addressing vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue and will deliver on both crucial reasons for students seeking social support, which is an adaptive coping strategy.

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

This graduate project included four main objectives, which consisted of: a) creating a virtual community established upon stated needs from Stan State MSW students; b) designing this virtual community based upon existing research gathered regarding the importance of peer support as an adaptive coping mechanism against compassion fatigue and vicarious/secondary trauma: and, c) bringing a virtual community to Stan State MSW students by May 2017 to better support student needs in multiple defined areas.

The objective of creating a virtual community for the Stan State MSW community evolved from multiple conversations between two and three year students in the Stan State MSW program over the 2015-2016 academic year. During those conversations, students indicated a desire to have more information available to them in a central location. Some students spoke of how helpful it would be to have a place to vent about and gain support for our fieldwork outside of the college environment. The idea of a virtual space came about when students indicated that due to schedules and time constraints, meetings in person, outside of campus, presented multiple time and logistical barriers. In addition, the Human Behavior in a Social Environment (SW 5010) course in our MSW curriculum presented the idea of virtual community as another viable strategy to work together and build community through an empowerment theory and social justice lens. According to Schriver (2011), “A

nonplace perspective on community allows us to create individualized communities that have meaning for us personally. Such perspectives are subjective and interpretive, but very valuable ways to think about community" (p. 468). This project purposefully moved an academic discussion to a tangible community transformation.

The importance of designing a virtual community that was flexible and specific enough to address student needs was a main objective of this graduate project. Towards this end, informal conversations and requests for feedback were made to both two year and three year MSW students regarding what they would like to see in a virtual community. Themes emerged from these informal discussions that lead to the types of forums initially created on the Stan State MSW website.

Compassion fatigue and indirect trauma are two serious consequences of careers, such as social work, that require much empathy from the provider. According to Davis (2009) empathy consists of, "…the ability to understand another person's inner experiences and feelings…"(p. 77). Secondary trauma stress (STS) has been looked at by researchers in regards to social workers who work in a fast paced workplace attending to client's pain, trauma, and feelings. The compassion work that social workers are called upon to perform can take its toll on social workers' health. According to Badger, Royse, and Craig (2008), "The consequences of indirect trauma exposure may negatively affect the health and functioning of the social worker" (p. 63). This project will utilize peer forums with the objective of allowing MSW students the opportunity to engage in mutual support. Badger (2008) spoke to the importance of social support in negating harmful effects of secondary trauma stress:

"A review of the literature exploring social support in relation to trauma recovery found it to be a strong and critical component of adjustment…" (p. 65). This virtual community will be available to Stan State MSW students with the objective of creating a safe place where students can share, reflect, and support each other throughout the program and as alumni.

A final objective for this project was that it was completed by May 2017. Multiple steps were taken to ensure that this project stayed on track. The objectives stated above included timelines and deadlines. In addition, this virtual community will require ongoing maintenance and support from the MSW student body. This support will include the Stan State MSW student association (MSWA). Working closely with the MSWA will ensure a smoother transition once the initiators of this project have graduated. Adhering to timelines and deadlines set with this Graduate Project Chair ensured that the Stan State MSW virtual community was active May 1, 2017.

CHAPTER III

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

Previously, a central and private virtual community for Stan State MSW students to collaborate, share resources, and support one another did not exist. Other social media platforms, such as Facebook, had serious limitations such as a lack of privacy that was needed within our scope of learning and practice. As MSW students, we share a unique experience that other social supports may not fully understand. The support that students can find in each other through shared experience is vital and has often been informally explained by MSW students as making "the biggest positive difference" during their time in the program. The obstacles to maintaining those powerful connections away from campus have also been informally described as "difficult" and as "hard to get together once class is over for the day." As such, multiple Stan State MSW students began discussing the idea of creating a virtual community that would overcome logistical barriers and would feature a central location for resources, and importantly, social support.

Social justice is the core of the Stan State MSW program. Social justice can be broadly defined to include the importance of colleague social support for overall wellness. As social work students and future practitioners, it is vital that we acknowledge the strength that we find in each other and that we are stronger and can affect more positive change through shared and combined efforts. Promoting social justice provides a lens to view micro, mezzo, and macro levels of interactions that we

have as students in the field and also as social supports to each other. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2016) provides the following apt description regarding social workers and social justice, "Social work is a practical profession aimed at helping people address their problems and matching them with the resources they need to lead healthy and productive lives" (para 1). Those are key goals that MSW students are learning during their field practicum while coping with multiple other responsibilities. The analogy of the oxygen mask on the airplane becomes crucial to the significance of this project: to be most effective, social workers should practice self-care so that they will be able to most effectively and compassionately help others. We are also called to utilize praxis within the scope of our social justice practice. According to Spade (2011) when discussing the importance of social justice: "It also requires thoughtful, reflective strategies about how to build leadership and mobilization in ways that reflect those commitments" (p. 68). Towards this goal, this graduate project seeks to become a place where Stan State MSW students will gain vital community knowledge to assist others while having a safe virtual community of other MSW students and alumni to seek social support and can utilize reflection without time and place constraints.

Another significant factor of this graduate project was to be aware of compassion fatigue or secondary/vicarious trauma to students within this MSW program as they seek to open the doors of opportunity for those who need it most. Pace (2014) spoke to the idea that compassion fatigue is a growing concern within the social work profession. Addressing the issue of compassion fatigue or

secondary/vicarious traumatic stress during the Stan State MSW program will be beneficial to students as they go into the field and as they graduate into social work professionals. Pace (2014) stated, "Compassion fatigue is an issue that deserves greater attention…" (para 11). In that same NASW article, the author spoke to the idea that social work students sometimes express feeling overwhelmed when presented with self-care practices. It can feel like a burden to them or as just one more assignment to attend to. However, a virtual community by virtue of its availability can remove some of the feelings of being burdened and, most importantly, provide a space that is constantly available when the student or alumni needs the vital resources or social support to begin a habit that will serve students well once working in the profession.

Social support has long been recognized as one way to effectively counteract compassion fatigue. Lahad (2000) mentioned a model to " help helpers help themselves" that included social support as a vital component when addressing the subject for Community Stress Prevention for the NASW in 2000 (para 64). The Stan State MSW virtual community will fulfill multiple currently unaddressed needs, supporting students as they practice social justice during their field practicum and after graduation. One way to achieve these goals is working through the lens of empowerment theory. Empowerment theory can be stated as, according to Perkins and Zimmerman (2005), "an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation…" (p. 570). Empowerment theory guided us in the choices we made

when we designed the community through our dialogue with as many MSW community members as possible.

CHAPTER IV

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Virtual communities, or those that operate via the Internet, can serve many purposes and currently do so for multiple individuals, organizations, and populations. According to van Dijk (1997), "the best definition of the concept virtual in this context is: the ongoing liberation of the restraints of space and time in human communication" (p. 39). Simply stated, individuals can create community apart from their immediate space. They can create community with those whom they may not meet face to face and they can create community with familiar people with time and place barriers removed. In addition, van Dijk spoke to the idea of "organic community" versus "virtual community." The distinction is important because it implies that virtual communities are created from specific shared passions and a common interest and may not encompass the entire persons identity and therefore, raises questions regarding fragmentation and individualization and also speaks to the concern of creating divided community without strong ties to one another that organic communities share. It is crucial to explore both the positive and negative aspects of building and growing a virtual community for this graduate project.

One research project examined social value within online health communities. In this research, Mein Goh, Gao, and Agarwal (2016) explored the idea that up to now, the benefit or social value of virtual communities has been largely researched and reported in regards to its economic value to a firm or corporation. They

undertook their research to examine if, aside from economic value, do members of a virtual community find social value from their participation in said community? Mein Goh, Gao, and Agarwal reported that, "we find evidence for our assertion that online health communities generate social value" (p. 259). Social value is created, in part, when a social concern can be addressed in a new way. Through this research, a virtual community was found to enhance the perceived well-being of participants while positively addressing previously unmet needs of rural patients.

One successful application of a virtual community is in the healthcare field. The organization "Caring Bridge" began their community by allowing individuals to journal about their own or a family members health struggle. From this journaling, came the power of virtual connection and a virtual place for a patient or loved one to privately post about a medical condition and gain support from others (Caring Bridge, 2016). Caring Bridge is a highly monitored virtual community with the added protection of individuals and families sending their information and invitation to join their community to only those people with whom they wish to communicate. Other health and medical virtual communities have support forums that everyone can utilize. For example, the "Healthy Place" virtual community is open to any individual who registers with a name and email. "Healthy Place" offers peer mental health support with forums such as "gambling addiction," "smoking cessation," and "OCD forum," among others. This virtual community lists a set of rules of conduct and forum policies. There are paid and volunteer moderators to remove inappropriate postings. Both of the virtual communities discussed above are examples of large

virtual communities with 80,000 users and more.

Some smaller virtual communities grow from a desire of people who have met face to face to stay connected away from school, work, or conferences. For example, Carney, Dolan, and Seagle (2015) spoke to the creation of virtual community that arose from three faculty members asking the question: "how can those involved in this work benefit from the shared wisdom and operational knowledge of their colleagues in the professional development field" (p. 8)? That question fits within the scope of this graduate projects goals and guiding question. The virtual community that grew from a shared interest and desire for sharing knowledge and supporting one another brought to light the concept of, "cultivating communities of practice" (Carney, Dolan, & Seagle, 2015). Cultivating communities of practice is an idea that as an established community, we can only enrich our understanding and support of our passion through collaboration and shared support. According to Carney, Dolan, and Seagle, "It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people" (p. 9). Social support is an identified goal of this graduate project and one that research has identified that virtual community can provide.

The positive aspects of virtual community have been largely explored up to this point. It was also imperative to understand possible negative aspects as we built virtual community for our graduate project. For example, van Dijk (1997) expressed that, "virtual cultures and identities created are too partial, heterogeneous, and fluid to create a strong sense of membership and belonging" (p. 59). While our graduate

project created a virtual community from membership of an MSW program, it is still important to remember that virtual community will never replace organic community.

While researching social capital and virtual communities, it became apparent that a virtual community cannot and should not be considered the best way to build trust and share knowledge within our MSW program. In fact, the research clearly pointed to the idea that trust is vital within social networking and virtual social interaction. According to Hsu (2015), "the results of the current research indicate that trust among community members was a significant predictor of individuals' knowledge sharing. The higher the degree of mutual trust that exists among members, the lower the misgivings about the risks at stake, such as mutual suspicion, wariness and being taken advantage of" (p. 479). That research was useful as we planned a virtual community for the Stan State MSW community. It reminded us of the importance of regular and engaged contact by community members during face-to-face contact. It also spoke to the opportunities that community manager(s) from the MSWA could utilize to strengthen the Stan State virtual community including posting articles and resources that garner attention. The organic community, according to research, can be strengthened by virtual connection, but should also include in-person contact and trust building. Language usage and robust conversations can be problematic during virtual contact. Van Dijk (1997) importantly remarked that, "Another defect in communication is the poor quality of discussion in a virtual community" (p. 56).

Another potential adverse aspect of virtual community is the idea that the

community itself could become a negative space where people are not encouraged to share or feel supported. Hsu (2015) spoke about some specific challenges in virtual communities that came to light from research on social capital from both positive and negative experiences:

> Because community member participation is spontaneous behavior and is often a part of leisure and entertainment, pressure will result in participants feeling that their involvement is no longer recreational or relaxing, thereby resulting in rejection, resistance, and unwillingness to engage in community-related activities. (pp. 480-481)

Another crucial component to consider countering the possibility of a negative aspect is online and social media safety. Virtual communities must safeguard their members as much as technologically possible and that happens through clear and concise education. To ensure community understanding and safety, we researched best practices for virtual communities including privacy policies, community guidelines, and terms of use agreements. Pogue (2013) spoke to the importance of online privacy and service agreements stating what they mean in clear and concise language. For example, from Autism Speaks (2016) was quite clear regarding what respect means to their community, "Respect is the name of the game. Please extend courtesy and respect to fellow members at all times. This is a place to support each other and engage in meaningful discussion, not to hurt one another" (para 3).

Terms of service were another important safety consideration we considered when creating virtual community. Kasdan and Macedo (2012) spoke to the

importance of clearly telling your community users that they are using the site and while doing so, they are not holding the website liable in the event that a user might engage in conduct that is not appropriate. According to Kasdan and Macedo (2012), "In addition, terms of service may state that the user holds the site harmless and indemnifies it for any liability (para 24).

Both positive and negative aspects of virtual communities were considered when designing the Stan State MSW virtual community. For example, the research demonstrated that there is no replacement for trust that builds over time and face to face through organic community. However, the research also pointed to the idea that individuals do come together online through specific shared passions or concerns and will support one another, which is a substantial negating factor of compassion fatigue and a primary stated goal of this graduate project.

Multiple research studies over the past decade have pointed to the effects of compassion fatigue in persons whose work deals in highly charged and emotional situations. Social workers usually pursue their line of work because they have a desire to improve the life conditions of others. As such, this profession can take a toll on each social worker. Stebnicki (2007) wrote, "In traditional Native American philosophy, it is told that each time you heal someone, you give away a piece of yourself" (p. 801). Stebnicki importantly discussed how counselors (or social workers) are called upon to be empathetic and yet—are quite often unprepared for the toll that active listening within a client relationship can take. Stebnicki (2007) spoke of how Carl Rogers was mindful of counselor empathy fatigue and indicated the need

for counselor rebalancing after periods of empathetic listening. This literature also addressed the idea that social work schools and instructors do not pay enough attention to the signs of empathy fatigue or possible social worker burnout. Stebnicki (2007) stated that, "One of the most troubling aspects of counselor impairment and fatigue syndromes is that counselor educators, supervisors, and professional counseling associations have been slow to prepare counselor trainees/supervisees for cultivating self-care approaches" (p. 804). This graduate project sought to: a) bring awareness to the need for self-care during our MSW education and career, b) create a safe space for Stan State MSW students to engage in social support throughout the program and as alumni, and c) provide resources regarding self care through a virtual asynchronous forum.

Knight (2010) wrote about the effects of indirect trauma on BSW students in the field. In this research, Knight (2010) importantly noted that, "The relationship between education and risk of indirect trauma has received insufficient empirical attention. There is some evidence that preparing clinicians in advance for the challenges associated with working with trauma survivors may have a protective effect" (p. 33). The findings in this study also pointed to the idea that students and field instructors seek outside support from friends and family. The MSW website graduate project had the intention of providing Stan State MSW students with a safe and supportive place to gain social support and self-care information that is available to them regardless of location or time of day.

The field of social work is one that MSW students often describe as "being called to do." From the beginning of an MSW program, students are called upon to engage in field practicum where opportunities for empathetic engagement with clients occur, for many, from day one. Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014) speak to the vital component of social work programs preparing their students for what *they* may face in their education and field practicum. Oftentimes, a social work program readily prepares their students to become social justice practitioners. However, some students and graduates are left without enough understanding of the effects of compassion or empathy fatigue and how to best prevent it. According to Newell and Nelson-Gardell (2014), "In short, a comprehensive social work education should be the first line of preventing and treating these conditions in social work students and future practitioners" (p. 428). This importantly speaks to the current lack and also opportunity for Stan State to more comprehensively address the subject of compassion or empathy fatigue and vicarious trauma for its MSW students.

Peer support has been identified as a protective factor against compassion fatigue. Bourassa (2012) researched social workers in the field and found that coworker support was indicated as achieving a crucial positive boundary between personal and professional life. Bourassa (2012) found that, "…they were able to discuss frustrations and stressful situations with their coworkers for the reason that they were the only ones who could truly understand what their job entails" (p. 1707). While there is a need for additional specific research to be performed on compassion fatigue experienced during an MSW program and field practicum, what research is

available pointed to a central idea: that students should be better equipped to understand compassion fatigue and have tools available to counteract the effects to avoid social worker burnout, which is a concern in our profession. Through this graduate project, we hoped to bring a resource to the Stan State MSW community that would serve as a mechanism for peer support as well as education on the effects of compassion fatigue during the program and after. It was our hope that through an MSW virtual community geared to current students and alumni, we could more comprehensively address compassion fatigue through self-care practices that better prevents student or social worker burnout. In addition, it was our hope and belief that a virtual community that grows from a program that focuses on our shared passion and commitment to social justice would only be enriched by constant collaboration free of space and time and one that could flourish online. Towards that end, the graduate project authors worked with the MSW community, the MSWA, and alumni to identify virtual community facilitators who will nurture the virtual community once the project creators have graduated. Social justice calls for social workers to have and maintain a passionate connection to others and community. As social justice practitioners, we want to ensure that we care for ourselves adequately so that we might continue the crucial work we engage in daily.

CHAPTER V

METHODOLOGY

The stages of work involved when creating a viable and sustaining virtual community were multiple. The first important step was that the creators of the virtual community wanted to ensure that as many voices from the community were heard as possible. Towards that end, we invested time in a) informal discussions with both the two and three year Stan State MSW cohorts, b) researched other virtual communities to find pertinent aspects to include or avoid, c) addressed safety, maintenance, and netiquette concerns, and, d) crafted a timeframe for the development and implementation of this virtual community.

Through multiple conversations, suggestions were received from the community regarding what users indicated they would find important in a MSW virtual community. The framing for this community was through a social justice lens. Specifically, the creators of this Stan State MSW virtual community realized that we perform valuable work with individuals and the greater community and as such, we need not only a place where vital resources can be obtained, but also a place to mobilize, reflect, and sustain each other's efforts to in a way that values collectivity, difference, and social justice tenets. Through discussions with the MSW cohorts, we identified themes that students indicated would be the most helpful to them during their course of study and as alumni. The asynchronous discussion forums initially addressed identified needs of current students and will be modified in the future to

better reflect each cohort. Empowerment theory guided our efforts to involve the community as the website was created and continued as we pilot tested the website in the spring of 2017.

A part of understanding what makes a virtual community successful was through research. Research guided this project at each step. For example, the project creators invested considerable time in identifying virtual communities already created. We located websites that contained aspects that we wanted to emulate such as CaringBridge.org and Breastcancer.org. The aspects that this graduate project employed from the previously mentioned sites was that it is member exclusive and features an asynchronous discussion board with multiple and varied forums for asynchronous exchange, dialogue, and reflection. In addition, through attention to the attractive and user-friendly design of the two previously mentioned websites, a blueprint of good design was easier to articulate and create.

In regards to safety and netiquette, we researched best practices for creating a safe online environment through the usage of clear privacy policies, community agreements, and terms of use policies. In addition, this virtual community includes information on safe social networking. There are multiple resources on the Internet to address this subject including articles on “Smart Social Media Tips for Students.”

The first step for creating the website was to carefully examine various website options. For example, we researched various blog sites and hosting companies that featured user-friendly discussion platforms. The goal was to find a hosting company that allowed us to easily add a discussion forum and to maintain the

site with minimal time or monetary investment. Once we identified a platform, we decided on a color scheme and font that was attractive and fit our social justice based community. Again, through the lens of empowerment theory, we encouraged feedback from the community in regards to preferences of website address name, overall design, and forums created. In addition to creating the virtual community, we designed a plan to receive feedback on the virtual community creation throughout the process. The manner in which we received feedback was through discussions with peers, a suggestion box in the MSW lounge, and a pilot-testing program that commenced April 2017.

Through experience and research, the graduate project creators reflected on possible barriers and solutions for creating a virtual community that will thrive long after this project is completed. Our goal was that each cohort would utilize and expand the virtual community. Towards that goal, the graduate project creators enlisted the support of the MSWA. The project creators planned to work with the MSWA to identify an individual to help nurture the virtual community. We planned to start during the current school year by asking the MSWA charter to include a new officer, Communications Liaison. The MSWA underwent changes during the creation of our project; however, the hope is that the MSWA will help to spread the word about the resources and intent of the MSW virtual community, as it is a separate entity from the University. As a part of this separation, the website will be created and hosted independently. The website is funded for five years through May 2022. After that time, cohorts can decide how they would like to raise funds for hosting and

registration fees required. At this time, those fees are $70.00 per annum.

Further, safety and netiquette were concerns that were addressed for this virtual community. The Stan State MSW virtual community is username and password protected. Only current students and alumni have access to the website. In addition, upon logging into the website for the first time, each user is compelled to read and approve a privacy policy, community guidelines, and terms of use agreements. These important steps better ensure that our virtual community operates with safety and respect for each other as a commonly held value. These agreements are featured at the top of the discussion forums so that members are able to re-visit them as needed. There is clarity regarding what the forums are for and are not for and what behavior (netiquette) is expected as social justice practitioners.

The creation of a virtual community of practice and collaboration took multiple steps and a coordination of efforts. Searching for a user-friendly software platform and affordable web hosting was an important consideration that took time and research. Towards that end, this author viewed and considered multiple virtual forums and read help boards to better understand which options might serve our purposes better than others. The creators of this project wanted the virtual community to not only be helpful to the MSW program currently, but also, sustainable for students and alumni in the years moving forward. This author wanted the virtual community to be as close to cost-free as possible as well as the MSW community having ownership of their own data should they decide, in the future, to change hosting platforms. Therefore, the authors of this project decided to go with a

forum hosting company that charged $49.00/per annum, which is an upgrade from the free hosting that they also offer. This fee was deemed low cost as compared to others.

The company that was chosen to host the MSW Virtual Community was ProPhpBB. ProPhpBB offered a number of other benefits that appealed to this author with the paid hosting option, including the ability to have our own domain name. The ability to have our own domain name that we could direct to the ProPhpBB servers will help students to remember our Mission as well as the practical aspect of finding the virtual community forum. The domain name chosen by the project creators was: socialjusticemsw.com. The project creators felt that social justice was such an integral part of our MSW education as well as being intrinsic to our practice and collaboration as student's and professionals. In addition, the paid hosting option allows for us to have a backup of our site as well as ensuring that our virtual community is ad-free. It also gives us the ability to show all (or none) of our content to unregistered guests. We could, for example, have a community resource section open to anyone to view while keeping other forums confidential to registered users (students and alumni) only. We are also able to display our own advertisements and/or photos in the header/footer sections of our virtual community; we have control over what is displayed.

There was a timeframe for completion of this graduate project with milestones built in. For example, the first five written sections of this graduate project were completed and approved prior to October 24, 2016. The UIRB process commenced on October 24, 2016. In addition, this author began utilizing the Graduate School

Project template for her chapters prior to April 24, 2016. The actual design of the virtual community commenced once the UIRB process was complete. The final completion date for the virtual community was May 10, 2017 with pilot testing that began early April 2017. The pilot testing consisted of MSW students utilizing the completed website to assess if it was user-friendly, appealing, and featured discussions that were found to be helpful to them as social justice practitioners. The graduate project creators met with their chair bi-weekly through the duration of the project creation to ensure that milestones and deadlines were on schedule.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This MSW graduate project produced a virtual community (website) with forums that will be seen by students and alumni only. The virtual community was pilot tested by fifteen MSW students in April 2017. The forum is username and password protected for each user. The virtual community features a section at the top where each user can read the expectations and objectives for participating in this virtual community of practice and collaboration. Once users read and agreed to the terms of participating, they were free to post their own applicable videos, photos, and other media to contribute to the virtual community of practice and collaboration. The community will be nurtured by the creators as facilitators as well as some other student's and alumni who wish to facilitate certain forums such as: Merced County Community Events, or mindfulness and wellness. The virtual community creators have and will continue to identify students and alumni with interests in starting and facilitating various forums of the virtual community forums. Once a student or alumni registered with a username and password, the community creators gave the member full access to the website including the ability to add to existing discussion threads and forums as well as the capability to start their own discussion threads, post pictures, or videos. There are support and help forums at the web hosting website and there is a help forum near the top of the virtual community for students and alumni to consult when needed.

In addition, the virtual forums feature student and alumni "facilitators" who volunteer to keep certain sections updated and also in alignment with our community objectives. Any student or alumni can volunteer to be a facilitator and the virtual community creators expect that facilitators will change and rotate as interests do the same. This satisfies the idea of "moderation", but with the lens of social justice and "power with" that we have experienced and practiced during our MSW program. Students and alumni from the MSW program were contacted, via email, with instructions on how to register at www.socialjusticemsw.com. In addition, the forums host provides support forums that anyone can access to learn, for example, how to do special coding or to insert videos and images. The helpfulness of the forum owner and support pages was another main consideration for hosting the virtual community with ProPhpBB.com. Design-wise, we have an ad-free environment where we were able to create our own logo with college colors.

Many lessons were learned during the creation of this project. Trusting the process was the most important lesson learned by this author. A part of trusting the process included the vital component of engaging in praxis. This author learned and re-learned how crucial it was to identify and engage stakeholders in dialogue about a community *for* them. Having informal one on one conversations with MSW students and alumni led to many hours of reflection prior to taking action on the building of this virtual community. For example, one insightful conversation challenged the author's reluctance to have "moderation" within the virtual community. Through praxis, this author was able to listen and reflect upon the idea of "power with" and

how that might look within the scope of a virtual community for MSW students. This author was able to recognize collaborative-shared power between faculty and students in some classes and understand that a facilitative role could be shared between members of the community of practice and collaboration that has been built. Having conversations about what this facilitative role might look like further assisted this student in understanding that students and alumni may feel more connected to the virtual community if they felt a stake in its success or felt as if they did have an active role.

The next steps will involve identifying more students to take active roles in both joining and contributing to the MSW Community of Practice and Collaboration. To do this, continuing conversations and actions will occur. The project creators plan on attending orientation events as well as asking MSWA committees to keep the virtual community on their agendas as well as moving some MSWA resources and event announcements to the new Stan State MSW Virtual Community of Practice and Collaboration. There is an option of sending out monthly reminder emails with news to current students and alumni to encourage registration and usage of the community. The overall goal was that the community would become an integral part of the MSW experience and a place that students would utilize after graduation. Through the providing of community news, resources, and wellness, we will provide a community that encourages social justice practice and collaboration with others as we begin and continue our careers as social workers. (See Appendix B)

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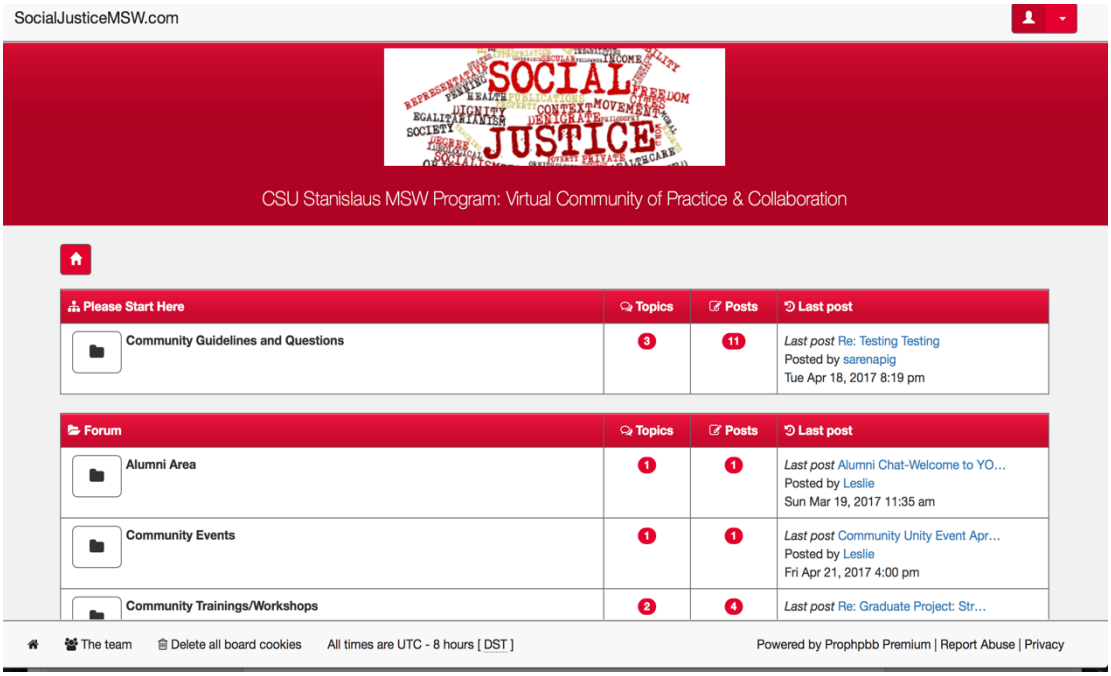
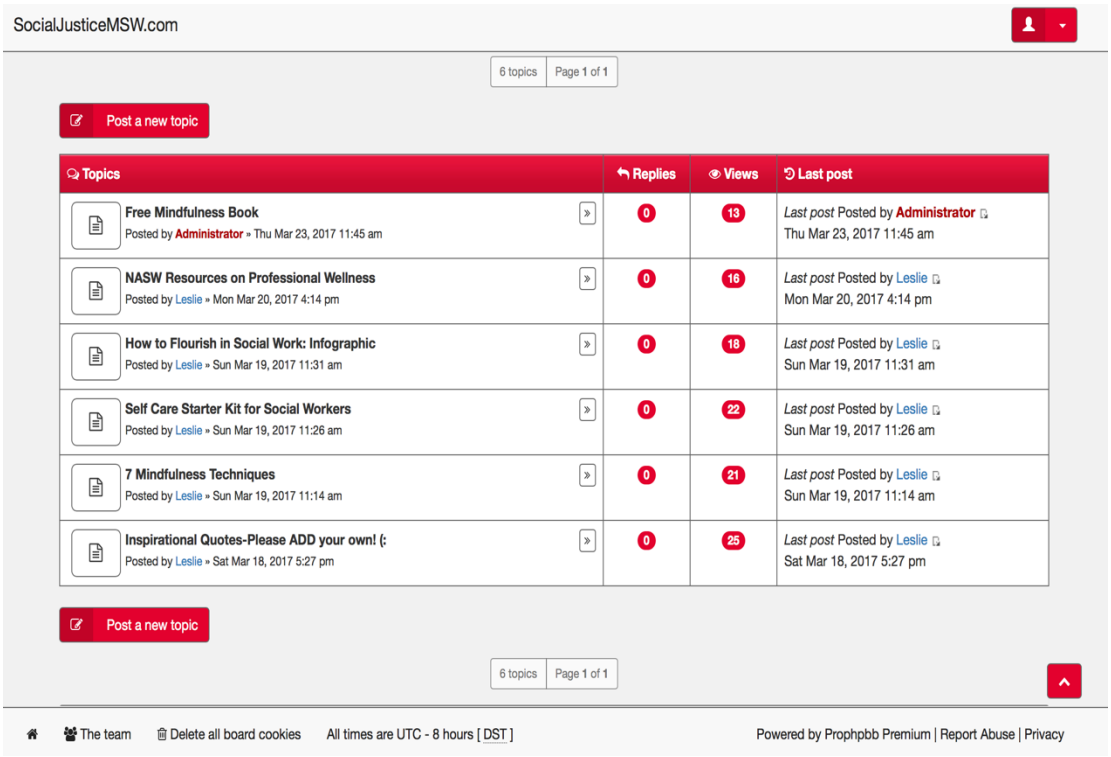
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CSU STANISLAUS MSW PROGRAM: VCoP & COLLABORATION



APPENDIX B

FORUM: WELLNESS AND PREVENTING COMPASSION FATIGUE