

## Toward A Community-Informed Social Work Curriculum: Responses from Local Social Workers

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### Abstract

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As part of its effort to refresh its curriculum to meet the 2015 EPAS competencies, the Department of Social Work Education (DSWE) at California State University, Fresno carried out an engaged research project during the 2017-18 academic year. The project involved undergraduate and graduate social work students, and community stakeholders (i.e. field instructors). Through student-conducted interviews ( $N = 40$ ), focus groups ( $N = 13$ ) and surveys with stakeholders ( $N = 91$ ), we were able to uncover the most pressing needs in surrounding communities, the skills and knowledge social work professionals most value, the skills and knowledge they wish they had received more training on during their time at as a social work student, their understanding of the relationship between DSWE and the communities it serves, and their ideas for increasing DSWE's level of engagement and impact. In this paper, we discuss our findings and their curricular implications as well as lessons learned about community-informed curriculum development.

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**Keywords:** community, curriculum, engagement, semi-structured interviews, participatory action research, social work

### 1. Introduction

The Department of Social Work Education (DSWE) at California State University, Fresno was undergoing a revisioning process that involved making changes to its curriculum so that it may both address the updated accreditation standards and better serve the region. The first step was developing a new mission statement, which focused on inclusion and building skills needed for dismantling systems of oppression. Following the recommendations of Holosko, Winkel, Crandall, and Briggs (2015) we developed a mission statement that was less than 30 words in length and included several themes common to other social work programs (i.e., service, leadership, community, and oppression). Through this process we realized that we needed to gain a better understanding of how our program was perceived by the agencies most likely to employ graduates from our bachelors (BASW) and masters (MSW) programs.

The next step was to look at each of our required courses to look at its relevance for both the new mission and the Council of Social Work Education's (CSWE) most recent accreditation standards. Faculty raised concerns about not being able to move forward with the work of syllabi refresh without getting input from our stakeholders. If we wanted to build a curriculum that really addressed community needs, then we needed to gather data on those needs.

At the same time, we wanted to model community-engaged program design for our students. To this end, we decided to have students in our research courses collect and analyze data from our community stakeholders. The vision was to create a community-wide conversation including faculty, student, and community voices. The DSWE faculty had a growing sense that as disparities persisted in the Valley and our community relationships needed additional attention. The students of DSWE were disproportionately multi-lingual, first-generation college students, who had immigrated to the US or were refugees.

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Specifically, our university was classified as both a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) at the time the data for this paper was collected.

Comparatively, the DSWE faculty had fewer of these intersections and we hoped to understand the gaps in our curriculum to better understand how to strengthen our programs.

The opportunity for refresh came during a particular time in the DSWE's history. The two faculty who spear-headed the project had just been hired and a new faculty course release was provided. Three new faculty were hired the following year. Also, faculty were able to take advantage of funding from their college to support student success. This money was used to hire student research assistants, provide incentives to interview and focus group participants, and pay for materials. New energy, release time, and funding made it possible to go big in our vision of community-engaged curriculum development.

## **2. Participatory Curriculum Development**

We created a participatory process through which the DSWE students designed, conducted, and analyzed information, following a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. PAR is a methodology commonly practiced within community-based social change projects. It can take the form of large-scale community organizing (Stringer, 1999; Horton, 1993), agency-wide participatory program evaluation (Whitmore & McKee, 2001), or smaller-scale cooperative inquiry among groups of people who share some sort of affiliation, like co-workers or neighbors (Baldwin, 2001). It is an epistemological approach that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most productive when produced collaboratively through action (Stringer, 1999).

In PAR, the group is constantly engaged in an endless three stage cycle: look, act, think (Stringer, 1999). In the first phase (look), the group figures out what issue they want to study or address and begin gathering information. In the next phase (act), the group uses the information they have gathered to inform some type of collective action and engages in that action. In the third phase (think), the group reflects on the action taken and its effects, asking what additional information needs to be gathered and what new action should be taken. Knowledge about the social world is built and used by the group as needed for pursuing their collective goals. In our project, students engaged in the 'look' phase, designing and using information gathering tools. During the second phase the DSWE began to use insight gained from phase one to inform changes to our curricula and structure. In the third phase, we reflected on the changes we made, and the cycle restarted as we reached out to the community to help us understand our curricular impact. The purpose of the proposed project was, therefore, to lay the foundation for an ongoing feedback loop that better connected the DSWE to community needs.

We found very little research on community-based curriculum development or even on the social work curriculum development process in general. However, Lewis, Kusmaul, Elze, and Butler (2016) outlined a university-community partnership model they used to design and implement a trauma-informed curriculum with greater emphasis on human rights. This model (i.e., interviewing key informants, holding focus groups, and collecting surveys) provided important guidance for social work programs interested in developing a research-informed and community engaged curriculum.

### **2.1 Student-Led Research**

There are many benefits to having students participate in every stage of the research process. Anxiety of learning about research has been documented among social work students (Cameron & Este, 2008; Maschi et al., 2013). Traditional research classes can help reduce some of this anxiety but often fail to help students make a connection between research and practice (Maschi et al., 2007). Drisko (2016) recommended project-based approaches that transform didactic learning into practical skills. Several models have improved student research skills and attitudes (Harder, 2010; Lowe & Clark, 2012; Natland, 2016). For example, in Blakemore and Howard (2015), students designed, developed, and delivered practice-relevant research to local service agencies. Results showed enhanced research engagement and a clearer understanding of the connection between research and practice.

## **3. Methods**

DSWE's curriculum presented a somewhat unique opportunity in that all of our students in both the BASW and MSW program take a full semester of Quantitative Research and one of Qualitative research. In Fall 2017 students in a senior level undergraduate qualitative courses drafted interview questions while students in a foundation year graduate quantitative course drafted survey questions. Those drafts were then passed on in the spring to students in the undergraduate quantitative courses and the graduate qualitative to finalize and make uniform across the course sections. The student research assistants helped with the unification process.

One of the student research assistants built the stakeholder survey in Qualtrics and emailed the link to our field instructors, and the interview questions were given to the graduate qualitative students to begin their stakeholder interviews.

Stakeholder participants were recruited based on their membership in the professional social work community in the San Joaquin Valley. The survey link was sent to a list of our current and recent field instructors who were encouraged to forward it to other local social workers. The same email list was used to recruit for the focus groups. Interview participants were selected by the student conducting the interview. An interview guide was designed by the students with 10 items aimed at understanding the interviewee's perspective on local needs, social work education, and the connection between the two (Figure 1). Students were instructed to find someone with a BASW or MSW who was currently working as a social worker in the Valley. Each student conducted and transcribed their own interview. In addition, the same interview guide was used to conduct focus groups. These focus groups were initially led by the faculty, and transitioned to co-facilitation by students after the student had observed and felt comfortable with the process.

Figure 1

Community Stakeholder Interview Script
1.From your perspective, what's the role of the social work profession in the Valley.
2.Describe the most pressing social need in the Valley.
3.Explain what community means to you.
4.Describe what social work skills or theories you most value.
5.How well did DSWE help prepare you for your SW career?
6.Describe any skills and theories you wished you had further training on back when you were a social work student.
7.Describe anything you would change about DSWE's curriculum. (If person is not an alum, you can ask them anything they would change about the social work program they attended)
8.Looking back on any sacrifices you made during your social work training (time, money, etc.), was it worth it? (or however you want to word this question)
9.Describe anything DSWE does well in the Valley.
10.Describe anything DSWE could do better in the Valley.
11.Anything else you want to say about the DSWE that we haven't talked about?

Participation was completely voluntary, surveys were anonymous, transcripts were deidentified, and stakeholders were reassured that choosing to or not to participate in an interview or survey would not impact their relationship with DSWE. An IRB approval was sought and received for the community interviews and surveys as well as the assessment of student learning outcomes.

### 3.1 Sample

The survey sample consisted of participants ( $N = 91$ ), 66 (72.5 %) of whom were MSW alums of the DSWE and 53 (58.2%) of whom were BASW alums; however nearly a quarter of the participants ( $n = 21$ ; 23.1%) did not attend the DSWE for either of their BASW or MSW degrees. The median practice experience of the participants was 12 years, with a range of 6 months to 42 years. Most (73.6%;  $n = 67$ ) worked in the public sector, and a few less than half (46.2%;  $n = 42$ ) worked in child welfare/family preservation. The participants were predominantly female (74.7%;  $n = 68$ ). This sample was ethnically diverse. Nearly half of the participants (47.3%;  $n = 43$ ) identified as Latinx/Hispanic, about third of the sample identified as non-Hispanic/White (35.2%;  $n = 32$ ), while the remaining participants identified as Asian American/Native American (8.8%;  $n = 8$ ), and Black/African American/Afro-Caribbean (7.7%;  $n = 7$ ). One participant did not share their racial/ethnic identity.

In addition, students conducted a total of  $N = 40$  one-on-one interviews. Four focus groups were also held, though each was quite small, for a total of  $N = 13$  focus groups participants. Overall, there were 53 social workers who provided in-depth answers that assisted the research team to understand the survey results. Gender and ethnic information were not collected for the one-on one interviews nor for the focus groups. Given that the pool of participants for the interviews and focus group was the same as the survey participants it is likely that some or most of these participants ( $N = 53$ ) also participated in the survey ( $N = 96$ ). We cannot accurately report the amount of overlap between these two samples, but we assume there was substantial overlap. Therefore, the gender and racial/ethnic identities of these participants were likely similar to the survey participants.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Initial analysis of the survey data was conducted by the students in the quantitative research course. Course instructors brought the data set in and had students work in small groups to run frequencies and other basic statistical tests.

The research team ran correlations to discover if any meaningful differences arose from gendered and racial/ethnic perspectives. Years of professional experience, and work setting were also used during the quantitative analysis.

Students in the qualitative courses brought their transcripts to class and traded with a classmate so that students who had to transcribe long transcripts got to code short ones, to balance out the work. Students worked in small groups to develop a code list, and those code lists were then combined within and across course sections to create a unified code list. A list of 27 codes were agreed upon and organized into six themes (i.e., political/personal change, community, the DSWE, challenges, practice, and recommendations). Students then used the code list to code their assigned transcript. Some preliminary work was done in class to identify themes and to discuss implications so that students could understand coding. The coded transcripts were then collected, and given to the lead faculty for a second round of coding in NVivo.

The research team organized the analysis performed by the students and compared it to the second round of analysis. Within the student data coding there was some level of disagreement between coders and this was expected as 43 students participated in the coding process. However, when the research team conducted the second round of analysis there was substantial evidence to support the codes identified by the students. Two new codes were identified during the research team's analysis (i.e., support, social change). Both of the new codes were assigned to the community theme. No additional themes were identified during the second round of analysis. We found substantial overlap between the student coding and the coding by the research team.

## 4. Findings

The surveys, interviews, and focus group data were summarized to provide a broad overview of the results. Given the design of this study and the analysis that was performed the most meaningful quantitative data were the frequencies. The qualitative data helped to provide a rich description as support for the quantitative findings.

### 4.1 Survey Results

The survey results ( $N = 91$ ) likely had substantial overlap with the interview and focus group findings ( $N = 53$ ) because many of the interviewees were recruited through the survey, and they were recruited through the same list of current and former field instructor email addresses for the DSWE. The research team was unable to discern how many of the interviewees participated in the survey due to the anonymous nature of the survey.

#### 4.11 Challenging Items

Some of the results from the survey were challenging to interpret given the survey design. For example, four items prompted participants to select multiple answers from a long list of categories and also allowed participants to create their own categories if they were not satisfied by the categories that were provided. The range of categories provided across these four items ranged from 10 - 22. However, we were able to run frequencies to identify the areas that were most popularly endorsed by participants. Keep in mind that the frequencies simply represent that a participant identified the a given category as one of three to best answer the prompt. The survey did not ask participants to rank their answers.

#### 4.12 Local Needs

When asked to identify the three most pressing social needs in the (local area), 59 participants identified mental health/substance abuse in their top three. Child abuse ( $n = 33$ ; 36.3%), affordable housing ( $n = 30$ ; 33%), human trafficking ( $n = 26$ ; 28.6%), and healthcare access ( $n = 16$ ; 17.6%) were the most popular responses. Eighteen categories of local need were provided for this item.

#### 4.13 Social Work Skills

When asked to select three skills that social workers need the most popular responses were critical thinking ( $n = 41$ ; 45.1%), assessment ( $n = 35$ ; 38.5%), ethics/social work values ( $n = 34$ ; 37.4%), listening/empathy ( $n = 30$ ; 33%), self-awareness ( $n = 19$ ; 20.9%), and cultural competence ( $n = 17$ ; 18.7%). Twenty-two skill options were listed on the survey.

#### **4.14 Desired Education**

When asked what skills they wished they had more training on during their social work education the most popular responses were crisis intervention ( $n = 42$ ; 46.2%), supervision ( $n = 24$ ; 26.4%), applying theory to practice ( $n = 21$ ; 23.1%), and documentation/case notes ( $n = 18$ ; 19.8%). Twenty-two skill areas were listed for this item and consisted of the same list as the social work skills item.

#### **4.15 Most Beneficial Educational Activities**

When asked to identify three activities that were most beneficial to them when they were a student the most popular responses were internship ( $n = 63$ ; 69.2%), in-class exercises ( $n = 41$ ; 45.1%), and relationships with peers ( $n = 34$ ; 37.4%). Ten activities were listed for this item.

#### **4.2 Likert Scales**

Participants were asked a series of five-point Likert-scale items ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with neither agree nor disagree as the middle point of the scale. These items focused on a range of areas relevant to whether the participants felt adequately prepared by social work education to become professional social workers and about the DSWE performance.

##### **4.21 Adequate Social Work Education**

The three items with the strongest agreement included overall preparation to become a social worker ( $n = 74$ ; 81.3%), training to practice with individuals ( $n = 71$ ; 78%), and training to work with families/groups ( $n = 62$ ; 68.1%). A majority of this sample agreed that they had received adequate social work education for working with communities/organizations ( $n = 57$ ; 62.6%), program evaluation/research ( $n = 53$ ; 58.2%), and professional writing ( $n = 48$ ; 52.7%).

On a less optimistic note, less than half of the participants agreed that they had been adequately prepared their social work program to engage in self-care ( $n = 45$ ; 49.5%), to engage in policy/advocacy ( $n = 42$ ; 46.2%), and crisis intervention ( $n = 33$ ; 36.3%).

##### **4.22 DSWE Performance**

Most of the participants agreed that the DSWE had a good reputation in the local area ( $n = 74$ ; 81.3%), that graduates were adequately trained to positively impact local communities ( $n = 69$ ; 75.8%), and that the DSWE alums gave back to the community ( $n = 64$ ; 70.3%). However, less than half of the participants agreed that DSWE's faculty were adequately engaged in issues facing local communities ( $n = 44$ ; 48.4%). A strong majority ( $n = 63$ ; 69.2%) indicated that the DSWE programs needed to increase their engagement with local communities. Despite a call for more engagement by the DSWE faculty and their programs only a slight majority of participants ( $n = 47$ ; 51.6%) expressed a desire to have more contact with the DSWE. These findings seem to suggest an overall approval of the alums from the DSWE, yet a desire for improved leadership from the DSWE.

#### **4.3 Open-Ended Qualitative Survey Findings**

An open-ended item was provided to allow participants to provide ideas about how DSWE could better serve Valley communities. Fifty-six participants (61.5%) provided a written response to this prompt. The themes of this data included a desire for increased community engagement by the DSWE, suggestions for curriculum development, comments on the perceived weakness of the DSWE alumni, and strengths and weaknesses of the DSWE generally.

##### **4.31 Increased Community Engagement**

A number of ideas fell under this theme. Many called for an increased number of DSWE sponsored courses, service projects, community walks, the formation of an advisory council, travel by DSWE faculty to rural communities, collaborations with community agencies, higher levels of visibility in the communities, increased internships, research on social work practitioners, assistance with high stress/burnout, regular check-ins with community leaders, increased visitations by field liaisons, and involving students in social action. As one participant wrote, "There is a need for students to have the opportunity to work along with community leaders to change social and economic conditions for marginalized people in the Central Valley." Outreach to churches and "all ethnicities" was cited as well. One participant called on the DSWE to advocate for an increase in pay for social workers in the field.

##### **4.32 Curriculum Development**

Many called for a strengthened clinical component including a focus on preparing future LCSWs to address a shortage in mental health providers. Some specifically called for a focus on trauma-informed care.

Others expressed a desire for DSWE to offer classes focused on medical social work. A few comments were made about wanting a stronger emphasis on policy/advocacy/program evaluation while another participant suggested that there was too much emphasis in these areas.

Online courses and the development of a doctoral program were mentioned by a couple of participants. Some pointed to the need to help students to develop treatment planning and other case management related skills. Other suggestions made by individual participants included: faculty working more with students to prepare them to enter the field and to focus on specific skills such as linking theory to practice, building rapport quickly, applying appropriate interventions, and resolving workplace concerns.

### ***4.33 Weaknesses of DSWE Alumni***

The clearest concern about the DSWE alums was the writing skills of the students they encountered as field instructors. Many of the comments about writing expressed a concern that the DSWE does not prepare its students well enough to communicate in writing at a professional level. One participant expressed a concern about a perception of a lowered bar with specific concerns about the ethics of the DSWE alums. Another participant mentioned the need for improvement in the area of respecting the right to self-determination. Direct service skills, including crisis-oriented skills and working with people with mental illness, and a drive for professional development were mentioned as perceived weaknesses.

### ***4.34 General Strengths/Weaknesses***

The Conseco program was mentioned twice as an important strength of DSWE. This was a program that was supported by a federal grant and was designed to support MSW students in their development of cultural and linguistic skills with regard to working with Latinx children and youths. This program helped to make important connections in the surrounding communities, but the program was not sustained due to a lack of infrastructure support.

One participant commented that the reputation of the school was stronger in the past and wanted to see it return to its former place of honor in the community. Some wanted to see more emphasis on field, and less obligations on traditional coursework. One participant described having a bad experience in the field as a student. Some cited specific collaborations with DSWE or expressed the view that DSWE is doing a good job. There was a call for a radical social work and decolonization courses. One participant called for increased use of technology to improve communication between DSWE and social workers in the community. Several expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide feedback.

## **4.4 Interviews and Focus Groups**

The 40 interviewees and the 13 focus group subjects ( $N = 53$ ) underscored the findings of the survey and provided important insights into the perspectives of local social workers regarding social work education. Specifically, the themes that were identified were the DSWE (i.e. connection/disconnection with faculty, curriculum, frameworks, student organizations, sacrifice, flexibility, self-care, skills, staying current, theories), resilience (i.e. challenges during school that were overcome on the way to a career in social work), community challenges (i.e. needs while in school, faculty, lack of opportunities, lack of awareness, cultural differences, limited services), and recommendations (i.e. ideas, quality education, coping strategies, recruitment, practice models).

### ***4.41 The DSWE***

These interviews provided a mixed review regarding the state of social work education. When asked about the theories they learned in school that had applicability in their work as social workers, a several of the subjects identified systems theory ( $n = 24, 45.3\%$ ) and/or mindfulness ( $n = 21, 39.6\%$ ); however, the most common response to the question about theories was discomfort and humor as articulated by these focus group participants:

Star: Wow, we're going just theories! \*Everyone laughs\* You're always bringing me back to theories.

Leroy: Just skip that question. \*chuckles\*

Rosie: That's why I'm a macro social worker. \*laughs\*

Beyond the responses of discomfort some participants were critical regarding a focus on evidence-based practice and teaching about theories. One subject explained:

So the book smart isn't going to get you to very far, and I think a lot of programs have forgotten that. They think that "oh yeah we're providing all this science-based evidence-based, research behind it." It may be true, but if you're not teaching social workers how to interact, how to interact how to build rapport, then you've failed them. That's basically what you did there. Going to go out into the world and be like "oh I'm going to apply this theory and that theory, but how do I start a conversation?"

Overall, the subjects were far more comfortable discussing the skills they learned in school comparative to theories. When discussing useful skills, the subjects often discussed relationship building skills (i.e. listening, building rapport, interviewing skills). As one subject summarized, "So um the skills I guess are really just those interviewing, assessment, you know dialogue kinds of skills." Many subjects clarified that the useful skills they gained occurred in their internships, not in the classroom. One subject explained, "I [was] well prepared because of the [field] placements that I worked, that helped me a lot because they can teach you through textbook, and through the essays, and through all that, and all that is really good too. But the placement is really important because that's the real world."

Strategies for improving student writing were often discussed from the participant's perspective of the writing they were assigned to do when they were students. One social worker mused that the formal papers assigned during their schooling could have been replaced by a course on case notes:

You know what, it is good to be a good writer. Seventy to eighty percent of what you do is documenting and it is very important. And I think they should have a class on case notes. I am not writing the papers they had us do. I could have gone through my school without the papers they had us do, be placed here and still do a good job. I think some actual sample of what we were going to write.

Another subject found that her social work education included a lot of formal writing, but indicated that after her schooling was over, she had better writing skills that she was able to use out in the field:

The writing really helped. It's a lot of writing but I can say that that was helpful. I hated it and dreaded it when I was in school, but now that... because when you do this there's a lot of writing like reports and we have to write them all. Being very descriptive and detailed, because that's what they expected with our work was to be very detailed. You couldn't just fluff it all up, it was all real information. Like when you write court reports it's very like factual. And that's how writing was when I was in school.

#### **4.42 Resilience**

The subjects discussed several aspects of their experience as social work students, including the sacrifices they made during their time in school and what it means to them now. Financial concerns, disconnection from faculty, personal distress (e.g., family responsibilities) and a high workload were common reasons discussed as dissatisfactions of their experiences studying social work, "I remember staying up days ahh, I would bust all-nighters, and I wouldn't sleep just to do my work." A few social workers qualified their discontent with their educational experience by indicating their discontent with their undergraduate training in social work while praising their MSW experience. One subject described her challenge of an unsatisfactory experience at an undergraduate level followed by satisfaction in graduate school:

When I graduated with my Bachelors in social work, I felt as though I wasn't prepared. Many of my cohort and I did not feel as though we were ready to be social workers. We were nervous, scared in fact. Because we felt as though we lacked the skill and knowledge. I don't know, maybe it was because it was too easy and chill. I would say at the Masters level is great because it is much more intense and challenging than the undergrad in social work.

A mother of four children described how she quit her job after gaining two years of post BASW experience in order to focus on her studies in the MSW program:

So I decided at that time, if I'm in, I might as well just quit my job! Do it full time, get it done with, and then find a job after that. It was really hard because I, I have, um, at that time I had four kids, [my] husband was also working, and my kids were all under seven or six at that time. And so I knew it was a big sacrifice to just quit my job and to do this full time. It was very stressful, crying sometimes. But yeah, and I really just pushed myself to it.

These exemplars underscored the challenges the subjects often faced and the resilience they demonstrated on their way to success.

One common source of support mentioned was faculty. “I think that umm I think that the teachers that I had were really in it to help us. They’re really passionate and by having passionate teachers, I think that it really umm..just helped me learn more because they’re so willing to help me.” Supportive faculty was a common factor for subjects who described the challenges they overcame in order to succeed in their education. Another common support came from peers within the program, “My cohort were very supportive and I feel, like, a very close bond. Ummm . . . Just having a bond with them was very helpful and helped me get through the program because it was pretty intense.

Overall, there was broad agreement that the sacrifices to become a social worker were worth it. One social worker summarized that getting her MSW helped her to transition Yes, 110% worth it! I sacrificed time with my family, time from weekends, gained some weight from sitting in class, and spending so much time sitting writing papers. But having a Master’s in Social Work has fulfilled one of my biggest desires in my life and increased my employment opportunities. I was able to quit a stressful and low paying job to a high paying and very rewarding social work career.

#### **4.43 Community Challenges**

All of the subjects ( $N = 53$ ) who participated in an interview or a focus group referenced systemic oppression with the most popular reference being the local challenges of systemic poverty ( $n = 44$ , 83%), including shelter, food, clothing, employment insecurities. One social worker described the local condition this way, “I think poverty is definitely a big one I know Fresno has a really big need, um, in terms of the homeless population, um, there’s definitely some great services out there. I think there could probably be more you know, um and even for families that are just barely making it you know.” Several subjects identified specific lack of access to health services ( $n = 30$ , 56.6%) including mental health, substance abuse, health disparities, and lack of health care insurance. When asked about the most pressing challenges in the communities she served, this social worker explained, “Medical care, basic medical care, because there is a shortage of doctors. That I think is big. But I would say mental health services too. It is a big one.”

While the issue of identifying the most pressing issue was uniformly focused on systemic oppression, the responses to this question were also diverse. Some subjects identified the lack of multi-lingual and culturally humble social workers ( $n = 8$ , 15.1%), and others named government programs including education, law enforcement, and child protective services ( $n = 9$ , 17%) as part of systemic oppression. Interesting challenges that were less common included issues of poor air quality, high social work caseloads, social work positions being filled by people without a social work degree, and anti-Latinx immigration policies.

#### **4.44 Recommendations**

The findings regarding recommendations were woven throughout the social worker’s responses, but most of this data was given when subjects were asked about what DSWE was doing well or what they could do better and the “anything else?” question. The most common recommendation from the social workers was to increase DSWE’s community connections ( $n = 30$ , 56.6%) or to continue with the community connections already in place ( $n = 21$ , 39.6%). There was substantial overlap between the call for better community relationships and for the community relationships that were already strong. One participant put it this way, “Yeah, I think the university is too isolated, and I think they (the professors) could do more research and collaboration with counties about the population we serve . . . I just really enjoy interacting with the professors there, and uhh, there is always room for growth.”

Some of the social workers called for better outreach to alumni and many reported that they were less aware of DSWE’s community involvement than they would have liked to be. Recommendations for improved and sustained community involvement included a call for ongoing newsletters, local low-cost training/conferences, agency-based research, and an expansion of the program (two participants specifically called for an advanced standing option to retain local students, and several others discussed a compromised relationship with DSWE because some online programs from far away universities were more responsive than DSWE just down the street, which they found troubling).

Several of the social workers who wanted to see increased community involvement from DSWE faculty enjoyed and valued their experience with faculty and staff while they were in school and praised the universities efforts to recruit and retain professors who, “have vast experience, but are also relatable. If they [the students] need assistance or they discuss about sensitive issues, that the faculty is sensitive to the working student.” On the other hand, social workers who reported undesirable experiences with faculty and staff ( $n = 7$ , 13.2%) were less likely to recommend increased community involvement,



“I guess the only thing that a lot of us struggled with was that teachers held us accountable for turning in assignments on time, but we would then wait fooooooever to get anything back . . . there were a lot of professors that is was like the end of the semester and we were getting back everything we did.” These subjects were more likely to suggest internal improvements to the curriculum.

Several participants explicitly mentioned how much they appreciated their experience as MSW students, and how much they valued the work of the MSW graduates from DSWE. On the other hand a few explicitly reported dissatisfaction with DSWE with regard to undergraduate preparation. Some of this dissatisfaction was related to limited local job prospects with a BASW.

## 5. Discussion

The perspectives and experiences of the social workers gathered in the surveys and interviews provided us with much useful information to bring into dialogs on making our programs more responsive to the communities we serve. Areas identified for improvement included: focusing on specific skills and competencies, doing more to support student learning in field education and the classroom, connecting curriculum to community needs, increasing community engagement, and revising/adding degree programs. Each of these areas for improvement will be discussed in turn with specifics on actions taken so far.

### 5.1 Skills and Competencies

Looking at the survey and interview data combined, several key skills and competencies were highlighted including critical thinking, assessment, ethics, listening, empathy, supervision, applying theory to practice, crisis intervention, documentation, self-awareness, and self-care. All of these are already common staples of professional social work education and CSWE accreditation competencies, and most were already well covered in our curriculum. Content was added into the theory and practice courses to strengthen our attention to preparing our graduates for crisis intervention.

While not a primary focus for most participants, the need to improve writing and documentation skills were raised in the data, reflecting current research (Cronley& Kilgore, 2016; Miner, 2018). As a result, we developed a second student success project in 2019 specifically on looking at how we teach writing in our BASW and MSW programs, and whether we need to change how we do it to avoid sending a message to students that they belong in the program less than others because of how much their writing conforms to traditional academic writing, which may not correlate with the skills they need in the field.

A third area we realized we could do more to improve student learning is helping students bridge the connection between theory and practice. Despite the fact that many participants were uncomfortable being asked about theories, it was clear that many of the subjects retained the person-in-environment framework and used systems theory language. Specifically, most social workers discussed systems and described micro, mezzo, exo, and macrosystem applications of their work even if they did not name systems theory when asked about theories directly. This may indicate the need for continuing education on the links between theory and practice to improve social worker confidence that the work they are doing is rooted in relevant theories. Since this data was collected, the textbooks used for the theory heavy classes (both BASW and MSW) have been updated to reflect a clearer and more in-depth focus on specific theories with direct relevance to social work practice.

### 5.2 Student Support

Respondents underscored what prior research has already told us about the importance of field education in student learning (e.g., Wayne et al., 2010). Field placements are a rich source of learning for social work students, and long after they leave school, they continue to report the value of field education is paramount in social work education. Several of the participants in this study who pointed to the value of field placements had graduated more than 20 years ago. The primary opportunity for social work programs is to design their curriculum with this in mind. Specifically, the data from this project helped the research team to encourage the DSWE to do more in terms of centering student field experience into their other courses.

In addition to field placements, participants described the importance of in-class exercises, faculty support, and peer learning/support during their social work education. Participant comments, combined with the emerging trend in social work education toward simulated practice (e.g.Kourgiantakis et al., 2020), pushed us to learn more about how to teach and measure practice-related competencies through in-class experiences.

The interviews illuminated the ways our alumni navigated their own set of challenges while they were pursuing their BASW and MSW degrees with regards to managing a heavy course load, field placement, family obligations, often part- or full-time jobs.

Many of the students who attend this university are the first in their families to go to college and are first- or second-generation immigrants. Many learned English as a second, third, fourth, or fifth language. The interviews helped to flush out the resilience of social work alums who had to overcome substantial challenges to join the profession, as well as the role of faculty and peer support in their success. To better support our students, we have discussed how to improve student access to faculty and provide institutional support for peer relationships through student club advising, recruiting students to participate in curriculum decisions, hosting social mixers, and increasing the number of interactive activities during class (although the COVID-19 crisis certainly complicated these efforts).

### **5.3 Community Needs**

The data collected also helped create a picture of the needs in the nearby communities. Mental health/substance abuse was identified as the number one need by survey respondents. As a regional university with the mandate to serve the Valley, we must do more to address this pressing need by providing an avenue for MSW students to enter into behavioral health. Child abuse was the second most commonly selected category of social problem, which made sense given that half of the survey participants worked in public child welfare settings. It may also account for the strong interest in trauma-informed care, a model currently being promoted in child welfare settings. DSWE already has a large Title IV-E program and many ties to county and private child welfare providers in the Valley and must continue to maintain its presence in this important arena.

Though the survey data highlighted discrete social issues practitioners face in their day-to-day work on the front lines, the interview data revealed an understanding of systemic issues such as poverty and its connection to needs such as housing and health care access. The gaps in essential services they reported were consistent with the documented realities of life in the Valley. According to the Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health (2020), the California county with the highest rate of children living in concentrated poverty (47%), and the county with the third highest rate (40%) were both in the university's catchment area (the other two counties in the catchment area were also high (29% and 28% respectively). For comparison, the average US county averages 11.6% of children living in concentrated poverty. In addition, Alcalá, et al. (2019) found concentrations of childhood poverty correlated with health disparities, environmental pollution, and ethnic segregation. In short, the social workers who participated in this study are working in some of the poorest communities in California and are aware that larger changes are needed. Given this context, it would be unethical for us not to provide our students with the knowledge and skills needed to disrupt systems of oppression.

### **5.4 Community Engagement**

The clearest finding from this study was a desire for the DSWE to sustain its current level of engagement with the surrounding communities and find ways to improve upon this. Many of the field instructors reported that they were unaware of the work the DSWE was doing in the community. This does not mean that the DSWE faculty were not engaged in the community at the time of the study, but it may mean that the DSWE could improve upon its communication with alums and field instructors. Suggestions for improvement included communication about faculty led training/workshops, newsletters, fundraising, and research collaborations with local agencies. When faculty served as field liaisons, they seemed to either build the confidence of the field instructors or erode their desire to work with our students. As a department, finding ways to better support our faculty liaisons is a fairly easy way to strengthen ties with community partners, stay informed of community concerns, and potentially create the type of engagement called for by the subjects of this study.

### **5.5 Curriculum Redesign**

Participants made larger scale suggestions about addressing fields of practice, providing an advanced standing option, offering a DSW, and making workload manageable. As a result, the DSWE curriculum committee has substantially revised the MSW curriculum program. While a DSW program is not feasible at this time, we are working towards an advanced standing program. To address the identified need for more practitioners trained in mental health, medical social work and trauma-informed care, we created an integrated and behavioral health track that began in Fall 2020. Students will now pick from three tracks (the other two are child welfare and school social work), allowing for more in-depth focus in policy, theory, and skills related to specific practice areas. We have also added new courses in community/advocacy and program evaluation to elevate practitioner impact on structural issues. The faculty now turns its attention to our BASW curriculum to assure its alignment with the changes to the MSW program.

### **5.6 Strengths and Limitations**

The survey, interviews, and focus groups recruitment targeted local social workers who had some working relationship with the university conducting this study. Therefore, this study lacked input from local social workers who did not know about this study. While this study included a reasonable sample of local social workers, the participants and subjects were not randomly selected. Those who participated in a survey, interview, or focus group may have different perspectives or experiences comparative to those who did not participate.

This study was participatory in nature designed to incorporate students and practitioner voices in our program evaluation process; however, this study did not include the perceptions and experiences of the people who received direct services from our alumni in our local communities. Understanding the perspectives and experiences of people on alumna's caseloads would have certainly improved the value of this study.

This study was not time bound, so some of the feedback about DSWE may no longer be relevant. Some of the social work practitioners in this study had graduated 30 years prior to this study, while others had less than a year since they had graduated. The variation of the subject's experiences and perceptions were likely influenced by time since graduation and subsequent time in the field. Specifying time since graduation may have helped the research team to have confidence in which findings likely apply to the current state of the DSWE.

The collective experience and effort of helping with this study led one student-researcher to proclaim, "I feel like I am part of something important. I feel like I am part of a positive change process." Having qualitative and quantitative research courses in both our BASW and MSW program allowed us to include almost our entire student body in this project. While it allowed us to gather a lot of data in a relatively short period of time (all 43 interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded in some semester), the courses ended before we finished the analysis and identified the study's findings and implications. Given student workloads, it was difficult to keep them engaged in the program revision process once their research course ended. It would have been helpful to bring the data into the courses the following academic year, but with new faculty taking over those courses, it was not feasible.

A key strength of this study was its ability to include 43 MSW students in our qualitative research course in the data collection and the initial analysis of the interviews, helping us to incorporate not only practitioner but student voices in the analysis. Students had engaging conversations about the themes and what various findings meant for how the MSW could look in the future. But the reliance on students to create the interview script and carry out the interviews also required giving up some rigor and depth due to variation among the students' interviewing skills. For example, some students stuck stiffly to the script and did not ask any follow up prompts to keep the conversation going, resulting in very short interviews. Likewise, was true for the 120 students in our quantitative research course who developed the survey questions and conducted preliminary analysis. The process of having multiple sections of the course work on one survey was clunky, and it was difficult to balance including students' ideas across sections with the need to have one survey that would gather analyzable data. The resulting instrument was useful, but not perfect.

Perhaps the biggest limitation was the failure to get more commitment across the faculty before the project started to stay engaged in the participatory nature of the project and take data collected by students seriously. Given the political nature of social work curriculum discussions, we were not prepared for the uneven reception of the data by our colleagues. The design of the project was rushed to meet the internal funding deadline, and not enough conversations were had with the faculty as a whole about the participatory design. In hindsight a more careful planning process was needed. Furthermore, the research team could have done more to include additional faculty in the PAR process. Some faculty expressed reservations about implementing changes to the curriculum based upon the findings from this study, citing methodological shortcomings. Perhaps if we had included additional faculty, we could have strengthened both the study and the ability to use the findings to improve our curriculum.

## 6. Conclusion

Several of the social work practitioners who were interviewed for this study, as well as the students who interviewed them, were hopeful about the change this study may have on DSWE programs and curricula. With the proliferation of social work programs (Council on Social Work Education, 2019) and periodic updating of the CSWE accreditation standards, this study provides a model for faculty wishing to include multiple stakeholders in processes of curriculum renewal. The data gathered by DSWE students from our local practitioners lead to concrete adaptations designed to improve our programs' responsiveness to local communities. These included adding training on specific skills, adding a focus on behavioral health, revising the course plan, and finding realistic ways to increase faculty engagement in challenges facing local communities.

We learned the hard way that a truly participatory process requires time and preparation setting the stage for faculty buy-in and institutional commitment to turn stakeholder feedback into real change.

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