

Case Studies in Sustainable Social Work: MSW Students Explore Principles in Practice

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Abstract: In 1999, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States published a policy statement on the environment that acknowledged the social work profession's apparent "lack of interest" in environmental issues, and called for a new urgency among social workers to address the challenges of pollution, environmental contamination, and resource depletion. Despite this call for urgency and the increasing certainty of widespread social and environmental crises due to climate change, the integration of ecological concepts into mainstream social work education and practice has been slow and sporadic. Only recently have some social workers begun to openly discuss a re-centering of social work within a sustainability paradigm, emphasizing the importance of interconnectedness among humans and the natural world, interdisciplinary alliances and partnerships, and holistic justice-focused practice. This paper explores the potential for a case study assignment in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program to help make explicit connections between sustainability concepts introduced in the classroom and the practical application of these concepts in a wide range of social work practice settings. Three sample case studies from students are presented, and advantages and challenges of this pedagogical approach are discussed.

Keywords: social sustainability, social work, case study, higher education, curriculum, pedagogy

Case Studies in Sustainable Social Work: MSW Students Explore Principles in Practice

Social workers have been considering the implications of sustainability for social work theory, practice, and education for more than two decades (Hoff & McNutt, 1994). In 1999, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States published a policy statement on the environment that acknowledged the social work profession's apparent "lack of interest" in environmental issues, and called for a new urgency among social workers to address the challenges of pollution, environmental contamination, and resource depletion (NASW, 2006, p. 136). The NASW statement also recognized the disproportionate effects of environmental destruction on the health and well-being of already marginalized and disadvantaged groups, drawing an explicit link between environmental concerns and social work's stated commitment to promoting social and economic justice.

Despite the NASW's call for urgency and the increasing certainty of widespread social and environmental crises due to climate change, the integration of ecological concepts into mainstream social work education and practice has been slow and sporadic. Only recently have some social workers begun to openly discuss a re-centering of social work within a sustainability paradigm, emphasizing the importance of interconnectedness among humans and the natural world, interdisciplinary alliances and partnerships, and holistic justice-focused practice (Coates & Gray, 2012; Heinsch, 2012; Kemp, 2011; McKinnon, 2008; Miller, Hayward, & Shaw, 2013; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012; and Schmitz, Matyok, Sloan & James, 2012). Coates (2004) called for social workers to abandon the modernist paradigm that pits humans versus nature and celebrates competition, individualism, and dualism in favor of a more ecologically responsive approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life on Earth, responds to the interaction

of systems at all levels, and honors the existence of multiple ways of being and knowing. Mary (2008) suggests that social workers are uniquely positioned to catalyze changes to support more sustainable practices and policies:

As one of the only professions charged with environmental as well as individual change, social work should take a lead in these kinds of dialogues at the community, national, and global levels. We have expertise, in both micro and macro systems, in bringing various interest groups to the table to confront problems and, through dialogues and consensus, to design a strategy to address them (p. 86).

Jones (2010) believes an action-oriented approach to social work education can provide transformative experiences for students that highlight the importance of understanding ecological systems and the potential negative impacts of degrading those systems on human and community health and wellness, as well as the urgency of integrating environmental concerns in social work practice settings. Grise-Owens and Miller (2014) argue that we need to challenge conventional thinking about social work practice and integrate meta-practice into social work education. Meta-practice in social work incorporates, “global social aspects that both overarch and interact with macro, mezzo, and micro practice” (Grise-Owens and Miller, 2014, p. 47). A shift toward a global way of thinking can help propel social work education beyond the relatively narrow focus programs have adopted in response to dominant neoliberal forces that tend to privilege professionalization, market-based solutions, individual concerns, and clinically-oriented work (Reisch, 2013).

McKinnon (2008) identified several barriers that prevent social workers from integrating sustainability principles into practice, including a lack of sustainability-related literature in social

work journals, few professional development opportunities related to sustainable practices, and very few case examples of successful application of sustainability principles. However, despite the slow progress of integrating more ecologically-oriented theories and concepts into social work education, it seems the lack of materials, opportunities, and applications related to sustainability in social work is finally beginning to change (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Owens, 2014; Miller, Hayward, & Shaw, 2013).

In 2010, the theme of the 56th Annual Program Meeting of the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) in the U.S. was “Promoting Sustainability in Social Work,” featuring more than 25 lectures, workshops, and other sessions directly related to sustainability in social work education and practice. Presentations addressed all levels of practice and introduced topics relevant to many different contexts, including global human rights policy (Hawkins, Norton, & Noble, 2010), international graduate education (Decker, 2010), critical indigenous pedagogies (Trinidad, 2010), sustainable practice in gerontology (Mudd & Eastridge, 2010), and the role of youth mentoring in promoting social sustainability (Jones, Keller, & Ossowski, 2010). This event signaled the presence of a significant commitment among some social work faculty and researchers to establish sustainability as a primary area of concern for the discipline and field.

There are a number of compelling examples of recent sustainability initiatives in social work education that show promise for advancing the field’s movement toward sustainability. The School of Social Work at Western Kentucky University is working with their students to more thoroughly consider the global context of social work. To do this, the school expanded on the “Integrative Practice Concentration” to include meta-practice and then implemented a meta-practice curriculum component which requires students to self-assign to one of four meta-practice groups. The groups are then responsible for exploring identified meta-topics (such as

“peace and war” or “consumerism and poverty”) to culminate in a presentation at the end of the semester (Grise-Owens, Miller & Owens, 2014). Two important elements of these efforts are highlighting the ways that sustainability theories, principles, and goals are directly relevant to social work, and providing specific examples of issues and contexts that could and would be addressed by sustainability-oriented practice. Until sustainability initiatives like the ones described here are successfully integrated into all aspects of social work education, it is important to offer focused opportunities for students to have exposure to and experiment with sustainability-related concepts.

This paper explores the potential for a case study assignment in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program to help make explicit connections between sustainability concepts introduced in the classroom and the practical application of these concepts in a wide range of social work practice settings. The following sections provide a description of the class and the assignment, discuss the elements of case study that make it a compelling approach for this project, and introduce the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) G3.1, a sustainability assessment and reporting framework that students used as one frame of reference for their analyses. Then, abridged versions of three student case studies from the Winter 2012 Sustainability and Social Work class at Portland State University are presented to illustrate the potential value and versatility of the assignment for teaching social work graduate students about sustainability. Finally, the discussion section identifies some of the major advantages of the case study assignment for students, several limitations of the approach, and describes some implications for the future of social work education.

The Class

Sustainability and Social Work, a three-credit elective course in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at Portland State University, offered students an opportunity to critically engage with sustainability concepts and their potential and actual applications in social work theory, research, and practice. Students in the course examined the environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability; developed their own working definitions of sustainability in social work; explored a wide range of topics and issues related to sustainability at the local, regional, national, and global levels; and engaged in critical discussions regarding the roles that social workers can play in establishing just and sustainable societies now and for generations to come. For the class's culminating project, each student completed a case study of an organization, program, or initiative using a sustainability assessment framework in a social work context.

The Assignment

Case study has some distinctive features that make it well-suited for social inquiry (Stake, 1978). First, case studies make use of multiple sources of data, including observations, interviews, and document reviews, so a range of perspectives are thoroughly considered as the researcher explores the case at hand (Yin, 2013). Case studies also reflect a researcher's subjectivity and positionality (Chiseri-Strater, 1996), which is particularly beneficial for student researchers who can examine the ways that their personal experiences and beliefs influence their analysis of a case—in this instance, the sustainable practices and potential of a program or agency. Case studies are also often presented in ways that are understandable for general audiences, making the results of the study easier to share with classmates, participants, and community stakeholders when appropriate.

Student case studies in the Winter 2012 Sustainability and Social Work class focused on traditional social work practice settings (e.g. addictions treatment and recovery services, a youth mentoring program) as well as organizations that challenge traditional conceptualizations and boundaries of the social work profession (e.g. an environmental justice organization, a for-profit female- and earth-friendly sex shop). Students were encouraged to explore aspects of each case that exemplified sustainability principles in action as well as those that highlighted challenges in implementing policies and practices that support sustainability in the field. Each case study provided an outline of the case study methods used and included descriptions of the sustainability definitions and frameworks that guided analyses. The result was 15 different approaches to 15 very different programs, and each paper represented a unique contribution to the discussion of what the application of sustainability principles looks like in the field currently, and the promise that more sustainable practices hold for the future of social work practice.

Sustainability Frameworks

Students were instructed to conduct the analysis of their case based on the sustainability concepts presented in class as well as their own evolving definitions of sustainability. The class was also provided a number of formal sustainability frameworks that could be used to plan, organize, and otherwise guide data collection, analysis, and reporting. The first of these frameworks was the Global Reporting Initiative's (GRI) G3.1 framework, which was developed to assist organizations—including corporations, nonprofit organizations, and local and regional municipalities—in providing better transparency and more comprehensive accounting of the social, environmental, and economic impacts of their operations. The G3.1 is the most widely used set of guidelines for assessing and reporting sustainability performance globally (Roca & Searcy, 2012). Several other commonly used assessment frameworks were introduced as well,

including the ISO 26000 from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and AccountAbility's AA1000.

One of the primary advantages of the G3.1, for organizations conducting sustainability assessments as well as for students using it for the case study assignment, is its inclusion of Indicator Protocols, which define specific sustainability indicators across environmental, social, and economic categories, and provide instructions on what and how to measure. Another significant advantage of the G3.1 is the Sector Supplements that address issues and concerns of specific industries, such as media, oil and gas, financial services, and nonprofit organizations, providing additional indicators relevant to operations and stakeholders in those industries. While the G3.1 provides reporting principles *and* indicators, both the ISO 26000 and the AA1000 provide only guiding principles for reporting and rely on organizations to identify assessment categories and metrics. For students previously unfamiliar with sustainability assessment, the G3.1 provides a level of detail and guidance that makes it relatively user-friendly. The G3.1 and the Sector Supplements are also free and available to download from the GRI website (www.globalreporting.org), making access for students convenient and economical.

The Case Studies

The three case studies presented in the following sections are abridged versions of original papers submitted for the final project of the Winter 2012 Sustainability and Social Work class. These papers were chosen based on several criteria, including the interest of the student in sharing their work publicly, the quality of the case study and final paper, and the uniqueness and potential importance of the paper for furthering dialogue on sustainability in social work practice. The agencies considered in the following sections represent a very small fraction of the activities and efforts of social workers and the social work profession, but we hope that the

pieces chosen for inclusion here will inspire debate and discussion about what sustainable social work practice is, what it looks like in action, and what it can do to help social workers, and the clients and communities they serve, to achieve their goals. Table 1 below provides an overview of the three case studies, highlighting how each agency addressed the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability in their programs and practices.

Table 1. Dimensions of Sustainability Addressed by Three Case Studies

		Dimensions of Sustainability Addressed		
	Agency	Environmental	Social	Economic
Case Study 1	<i>Central City Concern</i>	Participates in recycling and composting programs; sustainable retrofit to existing buildings	Employs peer mentor model; culturally-specific programming	Provides employment to clients in recovery; supports and promotes client self-sufficiency; use of interdisciplinary teams to address complex issues that are costly to society
Case Study 2	<i>Get Lucky*</i>	Buy and sell local organic/natural products; recycle packing materials; deliveries are made by bike or personal vehicle	Sponsor sex-positive community events; hold workshops for interested; honors and respects sexual multiplicity	Provide employees with living wage; donate 10% of profits to local organizations
Case Study 3	<i>Emergency Department Consistent Care Program—Legacy Salmon Creek Hospital</i>	Serve organic foods from local farms; participate in recycling programs	Improved access to health care	Employ members of local community

*Name of the shop has been changed to protect confidentiality

Case Study 1: Central City Concern

Submitted by Lindsay N. Merritt, MSW

In the 1970's, Old Town/China Town in downtown Portland, Oregon was a hot spot for alcoholism and cheap rent, making Portland's inebriate problem among the worst in the nation (Central City Concern, n.d.). In response to the growing problem of alcoholism in downtown Portland, the Burnside Consortium was created by the City of Portland and Multnomah County, with the purpose of administering a National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA) Public Inebriate grant (Central City Concern, n.d.). The Consortium's early work focused on alcohol recovery treatment and affordable housing management and rehabilitation. Central City Concern (CCC) adapted its programming accordingly when recovery services were extended in the 1980s to include those addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. Additionally, CCC's affordable housing portfolio continued to increase and they began to offer alcohol and drug-free housing to support the recovery efforts of individuals and their families. To further support increased client self-sufficiency, CCC added employment training and work opportunity programs in the early 1990s (Central City Concern, n.d.).

Social & Economic Sustainability

Equity, diversity, and interconnectedness are key principles of social sustainability that support self-determination and self-sufficiency (McKenzie, 2004). Today, CCC provides mental, behavioral, and medical health care to many of Portland's residents living in the metro area who are experiencing homelessness, poverty, and addiction. The organization's mission, "providing comprehensive solutions to ending homelessness and increasing self-sufficiency," is reflected in their efforts to increase access to integrated health services, safe and affordable housing, and

recovery programming. They also continue to advocate at the legislative and policy levels for expanded services to meet growing demand.

Historically, individuals experiencing severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI) have extensive criminal justice involvement and frequent hospitalizations (Markowitz, 2006; Swartz & Lurigio, 2007). Central City Concern's programs have social and economic implications that promote sustainability by reducing the over-utilization of emergency services and criminal justice involvement, both of which are costly to society (Garske & Williams, 1999; Karp & Tanarugsachock, 2000; Markowitz, 2006; Swartz & Lurigio, 2007). CCC's programming further promotes economic sustainability by supporting client self-sufficiency and self-determination through creative problem solving and skills building. For example, the Community Outreach, Recovery, and Engagement (CORE) team at the Old Town Recovery Center (OTRC) utilizes the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model in their work with clients experiencing co-occurring diagnoses of SPMI and addiction. The CORE team provides a multi-dimensional approach to supporting clients. The team includes an employment specialist, housing case managers, and mental health, alcohol, and drug counselors. This approach is intended to assist clients in stabilization and recovery through employment and/or volunteer opportunities, safe and affordable housing, and guided support in medication and mental health management.

Moreover, the purpose of skill building and problem solving with clients through the CORE team is to encourage self-determination and self-sufficiency by strengthening coping skills. One of the main skill building activities is safety planning to avoid crisis situations. This activity requires the client to find appropriate alternatives to going to the emergency department, calling emergency phone numbers, and having police contact. The major success of CCC

programming is that services focus less on amelioration of problems and more on creating multi-level individual, community, and programmatic sustainability.

Conclusion

Social service organizations like Central City Concern are good illustrations of sustainability in practice because they are intentionally instituting sustainability principles throughout their programming, even if they are not explicitly calling their actions sustainability. This intentionality demonstrates acknowledgement and understanding of the intersectionalities that exist in the lives of the individuals and families CCC serves, and the resources necessary to promote and nurture multi-level sustainability in support of effective and responsive social programming.

Case Study 2: Get Lucky: A Female-Friendly Sex Shop as Sustainable Social Work

Practice

Submitted by Ashley N. Brown, MSW

Sex. A word that holds great power and inspires passionate reactivity. Sex signifies gender expression, identity, femininity, masculinity, personal pronouns, and so much more. In an effort to address the neglected intersection of sexual diversity and sustainability, Get Lucky (name of the shop has been changed to protect confidentiality) is a local sex boutique which caters to the multiplicity of sexual identities found within the general population—and also reflects principles and values through their commercial and community ventures that are consistent with sustainable social work practice.

Mary (2008) outlines several principles that are necessary to practice sustainability from a business perspective, including valuing both human and nonhuman beings, social justice, economic responsibility, community involvement, and environmentally secure practices. Get

Lucky successfully translates many of these tenets into practice. Get Lucky puts sexual health and freedom of sexual expression—critical subject matters too often neglected, marginalized, and exploited by mainstream sex shops—on the forefront.

Case Description and Sustainability Narratives

As a social worker and recent graduate from an MSW program, I feel passionate about sexual health and gender expression, which I believe relate intimately with the flourishing of sustainability principles in social work practice. My sustainability course, which prompted me to find and explore Get Lucky, allowed me to synthesize my personal interest in holistic ideas with my fervor for social work.

My approach entailed exploring the intersection of sustainability and social work through investigating Get Lucky and speaking with an employee and co-owner, Andi. This shop is not only quaint and welcoming of customers, but also inclusive of the diversity of sexual expressions within humanity. Even the product availability illustrates acceptance of multiplicity with the displays of different heating and cooling lubricants, LGBTQI+-friendly pornographic films, and erotic magazines highlighting the beauty of the human form.

Get Lucky strives to sell local, body safe products which meet the needs of a plethora of sexual cravings. Get Lucky, through educational seminars and knowledgeable staff, actively seeks to teach customers about sexual health, including lesser known risks like the toxicity of certain materials often found in sex toys (Andi, personal communication, March 10, 2012). Through a diverse, interactive display, Get Lucky offers opportunities for customers to learn about community resources as well. The mission of Get Lucky is to provide high quality, natural, safe sex toys, kinks, and practicalities to men, women, transgendered, transsexual, and all additional expressions of sexuality, at affordable prices, while simultaneously engaging in

community partnerships and community-building activities. For example, they sell Sir Richard's Condoms, which are non-latex, vegan, non-glycerin, non-spermicidal, paraben-free condoms that benefit condom users around the world with a matching purchase donation.

Get Lucky also engages in both fundraising activities and sponsorships of community partners. 10% Tuesdays are a fundraising effort in which 10% of total sales are donated to a nonprofit organization focused on issues of individual and community health, wellness, education, and equality. In Other Words feminist book store and community center, The Q Center, and Portland Women's Crisis Line are examples of nonprofit organizations that have or continue to benefit from partnerships with Get Lucky. According to Andi, last fiscal year Get Lucky donated over \$3000 in gift certificates and merchandise to a range of fundraising activities and over \$4000 in cash to several community partners (Andi, personal communication, March 10, 2012). Get Lucky participates in a variety of community events, including Pride, Kink Fest, and The Vagina Monologues. With intentionality, Get Lucky achieves the all-important goal of uniting different community factions together with the purpose of promoting sexual health and acceptance of diverse sexual expression in the general population.

Finally, as a for-profit entity, Get Lucky actively engages in sustainable marketing, which means looking at the big picture of economic and community benefits through a holistic lens, rather than assessing value from a narrow capitalistic profit-driven perspective (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008, p. 35). Bridges and Wilhelm (2008) write about various avenues for sustainable development within the business sector:

Necessary changes include lengthening corporate time horizons for return on investment and valuing financial continuity over profit. Product development strategies will need to take means of production and channel members' activities

into account (e.g., suppliers must not pollute or use child labor). Adoption of environmental accounting methods to assess costs associated with product production, ownership, use, and disposal will ensure that environmental and social costs are taken into consideration in product pricing decisions. Marketers must also be willing to manage consumer demand and expectations downward, practicing demarketing, or encouraging when necessary to encourage responsible consumption (e.g., promoting energy conservation or decreased usage of certain ecotourism destinations (p. 35).

Get Lucky is performing sustainable business practices, at both the micro and mezzo levels, while promoting safe sexual practices and encouraging society to include all sexual expressions.

Conclusion

Although Get Lucky does not explicitly state social work ideals in its mission, it does achieve Coates's (2003) three main objectives for social work-oriented sustainable practice. Social work is called to nurture every being while honoring diverse expressivity, recognize the value of all creation, and promote supportive community living with equality as a center pillar of existence (Coates, 2003, p.156). Get Lucky engages in and promotes sustainable social work ideals through the lens of sexuality and human expression. From a learning and growth perspective, writing about a for-profit, sex boutique truly helped me expand my view of social work and sustainability from a traditional outlook to a more innovative and ground-breaking perspective. I believe that this paper inspired me to examine the liberal angles of life, which increases my ability to practice social work in a sustainable fashion.

Case Study 3: Emergency Department Consistent Care Program

Submitted by Diana L. Nulliner, MSW

Western societies, including the U.S., have experienced vast growth and development over the last century and a half, which has resulted in an increased standard of living that creates the illusion that “the good life” is available to everyone (Coates, 2003). However, while some have thrived, others have suffered the effects of environmental degradation and social inequalities that threaten health and well-being on a large scale. The prevailing capitalist laissez-faire ideology in the United States puts each person in competition to attain the best for “individual growth, individual benefit and individual rights” instead of community wellness (Coates, 2003, p. 33). Some people and groups are marginalized, and left to believe they do not fit into society because their identities do not match, or are not valued by, more powerful members of society, and a “dominance-or-submission” paradigm largely defines life’s experiences (Coates, 2003). Those who struggle to belong are subjected to environmental, social, and economic disparities of enormous proportions. People who experience inequalities often resort to desperate measures to get their needs met and stabilize their lives (Mary, 2008). A lack of resources in communities nationwide has left hospitals experiencing frequent and inappropriate use of the Emergency Department (ED) (CHOICE Regional Health Network, 2010).

Several factors have contributed to the rise of inappropriate use of the ED, including exorbitant health care costs, an increase in patients who are uninsured, and declining availability of social service resources. Medical programs for older and lower-income people (Medicare and Medicaid) are limited in coverage, and there is a shortage of service providers who are willing to

accept payments from these programs. In short, the existing health care system makes it difficult to get a patient's needs met (CHOICE Regional Health Network, 2010).

Case Description

It has been shown that people who frequent the ED have complex issues stemming from substance use, mental health, and/or severe and persistent physical health problems (Ovens & Chan, 2001; Sun, Burstin, & Brennan, 2003). In 2004, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services found that 89% of people who frequent the ED had a co-occurring disorder of substance use, mental health, and/or medical health conditions. The lives of people who frequent the ED are often further complicated by poverty, homelessness, chaotic living conditions, unemployment, and social ostracism (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2009). The United States government has encouraged hospitals to become more creative in finding solutions to overuse of ED services (CHOICE Regional Health Network, 2010). Thus, Legacy Salmon Creek (LSC) ED in Clark County, Vancouver, Washington partnered with Portland State University in the summer of 2011 to create the Emergency Department Consistent Care Program (EDCCP). A set of program goals were developed, including "reducing inappropriate use of the ED, improving the health status of individuals who frequent the ED," and increasing coordination and integration of safety net services in the community (CHOICE Regional Health Network, 2010). The EDCCP sought to create sustainable communities by focusing on economic and social relationships that align with a healthy environment, and by basing the efforts upon the principle of equality.

The EDCCP is coordinated by social workers, which is ideal because the profession is committed to endeavors of human wellness for vulnerable and oppressed populations. The Preamble of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2009) states, "The

primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being, and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, 2009). The EDCCP’s core mission is to enhance the well-being of patients by creating care plans with people who are vulnerable and oppressed, and advocating for additional resources to promote their long-term health. Thus, the EDCCP supervisor wanted a social worker to coordinate the program because of the stance social workers have regarding the core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The complex issues of patients involved with the EDCCP required a commitment to ethical and transformative practice to make a difference with vulnerable and oppressed populations--and social work professionals are well equipped to meet those needs.

Conclusion

The EDCCP has been in existence for a short time but has accomplished some positive outcomes. From six months pre-intervention to six month post-intervention, there was a decrease in overall ED visits. While it is not clear if the reduction is due to improved health outcomes, providers in the ED recognize the positive impacts of the program because they find the care plans helpful when working with patients. They have also observed that the majority of patients appear to appreciate the services the care plans offer. The EDCCP, with a focus on reducing disparities and ensuring access to quality health care for society’s most vulnerable citizens, offers an excellent example of how social work practice can work to eliminate social injustices by promoting principles that result in sustainable communities that are healthy and beneficial for everyone.

Discussion

The case studies presented in this paper, and the 12 that were not included, describe the unique contributions of community organizations to a more healthy, just, and sustainable society. The issues they address vary widely—physical and mental health, homelessness, environmental justice, sexual education and expression, domestic violence, and youth development—but with the common framework and language of sustainability, and with the tools and accessibility of case study methods, the participating MSW students were able to provide descriptions and analyses of their cases that helped them (the student researchers) and help us (the readers) better understand what sustainability in social work practice looks like currently, and what it could look like in the future.

The process of conducting the case studies provided several benefits for the student researchers. First, it provided students an opportunity to develop a common language with which to communicate their ideas about sustainability in social work practice. For example, when students addressed environmental sustainability, they no longer felt constrained by the limited ideas about environment that prevail in traditional social work—where environment most often means the social environment—and in popular discourse about sustainability, which tends to focus on pollution, contamination, waste, and resource use. Instead, they felt free to address the natural, social, and built environments, and attend to complexities of context, culture, and other factors that are essential to consider across all aspects of environment. The description of Central City Concern's programs is an excellent example, where a physical and social environment that previously afforded no safe shelter or health care for homeless individuals was transformed to provide a welcoming space for healing, education, social gatherings, support, fresh healthy

foods, and temporary shelter—all of which contribute to the goal of promoting well-being and social justice in an under-resourced and traditionally marginalized community.

The case study project also provided a space for students who had never thought about the relationship between social work and sustainability to try out new concepts and theories. By the end of the term, students displayed an academic exuberance, excited by new ways of thinking about familiar problems. The student that explored Get Lucky said the assignment gave her an opportunity to look at social work in a new way, and to challenge widely accepted definitions and boundaries to find unique and creative approaches amid complex social dynamics. A fundamental shift away from modernism toward a more cooperative and inclusive social work practice will be difficult and uncomfortable, but it will also allow us to use the power of interdisciplinary collaboration and large scale systems thinking to complement or replace the knowledge that has developed and shaped the profession for the last century.

For students with more prior experience thinking about sustainability, the project was valuable in a different way. The author of the Central City Concern case study said the project “validated my previous thoughts about sustainability and elevated my understanding of core principles to further inform my practice. And, it allowed for a practical application of sustainability principles, which afforded me the opportunity to be intentional with my analysis.” Fortunately, the accessibility of case study methods and the GRI G3.1 assessment framework made the assignment manageable for students with little familiarity or experience with sustainability concepts, but the power and flexibility of both the methods and framework also provided ample opportunity for every student in the class to challenge themselves to explore a particular area of social work practice more deeply and comprehensively than they had before.

For the social work field more generally, these case studies demonstrate the advantages of exploring the value and impact of social service and social justice programs through a sustainability lens. In the case of Central City Concern, a range of social, environmental, and economic benefits were identified beyond the program's primary areas of focus. In addition to reducing overuse of hospitalization and providing critical medical and case management services for clients, CCC's programs also incorporated significant prevention components that reduce the economic costs to society of incarceration and hospitalization, provide individuals with the skills and resources to reduce the social, physical, and psychological effects of homelessness, and create a community environment that is safer, cleaner, and healthier for everyone.

Students also reported some significant challenges with the case study assignment that are worth noting and considering. While the breadth of topics and concerns addressed by sustainability frameworks provide opportunities to apply sustainability concepts widely across fields and disciplines, that same comprehensiveness makes it challenging for students to establish parameters for the analyses in their case studies. For example, is an office recycling program as important to describe as sustainable retrofitting of office buildings? And what is the relative value and significance of various social improvements within an agency or a community? If a case study can't include everything, how does one decide what to include and what to exclude? This dilemma is not unique to students or to this assignment. Professionals who assess sustainability performance and make recommendations for improving sustainable practices must continuously make these difficult, value-laden decisions in which some aspects of sustainability are emphasized and privileged over others.

Another challenge students faced with this assignment was the difficulty of collecting information on and becoming familiar with large and complex organizations in a short enough

time to complete an analysis and a paper in one academic term (10 weeks). Because case studies traditionally draw upon multiple sources of data, students had to access archives, review documents, schedule and conduct interviews, among other tasks. Several students voiced frustration that the depth of their analyses suffered because of the time constraints they experienced. It is worth considering possible adaptations to the case study assignment that would ease some of these challenges, such as having students work in small research teams, sharing the responsibilities of data collection and analysis.

One final drawback of the time constraint was that it prevented students from soliciting feedback from the organizations with regard to their findings. While most students included interviews with staff as a key source of data and were able to share their analyses and final papers with the organizations they studied, it would have been instructive to learn how employees of the organizations understood and responded to the final conclusions and recommendations. For example, with more time, students could have explored questions such as: In what ways do employees find a sustainability framework relevant for their work, and why? What plans, if any, do employees have for incorporating ideas and recommendations from the reports into their work? What potential benefits and obstacles would there be to doing so?

Social work educators have an opportunity, and arguably an obligation, to expand the scope of social work curriculum beyond the traditional limits, to acknowledge and address the risks that unsustainable social and economic systems present in our communities. At a time when climate change is exacerbating global social, economic, and environmental crises, and when the world's most vulnerable people are certain to suffer "first and worst" (Ki-Moon, 2013) from the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, social workers must be ready to think bigger and more comprehensively about issues like poverty, health, and justice than they have in

the past. Sustainability concepts offer an attractive and accessible option, and one that is well-aligned with the primary values and goals of the social work profession. On a practical level, social work educators must provide many more opportunities for students to learn the content and processes associated with sustainable approaches to social work practice, and it is our hope that the case study assignment, as well as the case studies presented in this paper, can help inspire some significant movement in the right direction.

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