

# Ten Emerging “Communities” for Social Work Education and Practice

*Jerry Don Marx*

Recent research (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011; Rothman, 2012) has documented the decline of community organization content in social work education curriculums. There are several factors that contribute to this trend. Among them is the fact that most social work faculty members have little experience in community organization and do not feel prepared to teach such content. In addition, and perhaps more important, most students are unaware of or uninterested in community organization. In any case, they do not see it as a primary career path and are choosing not to concentrate their study in this area. Faculty members may contribute to this student disinterest, but in any case, where there is little demand (that is, students), there will be little supply (that is, content). Social work has survived as a profession in part because of its broad applicability in an ever-changing world. If community organization is to survive as a social work intervention method, then a broader conceptualization of community organization is needed. With the premise that “communities” should be broadly defined as groups of people who form a distinct social unit based on location, interests, or identification, this article delineates 10 emerging communities for social work education and practice and, in so doing, offers a means for reconceptualizing and reinvigorating community organization in professional social work.

1. **The Online Community:** Social work education programs need to revise their community organization curriculum content to emphasize the knowledge, values, and skills required for effective organizing in online communities. Online advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org and DoSomething.org are well known to young people. The effectiveness of using Facebook and other new technologies such as Twitter to organize social action activities has been demonstrated by the Arab

Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements. Given this track record and social media’s appeal to young people, classroom readings and assignments need to emphasize their potential use by social workers in community organizing.

2. **Green Communities:** Global warming and the aim of preserving a healthy environment are primary topics of interest of students today. Surprising research is showing that the “greenest” communities are densely populated urban areas where dwellings are relatively small, recreation areas are shared by many, and people use bicycles, subways, trains, elevators, or their legs for transportation. New York City is a prime example. Social work education needs to better define and illustrate the potential role of social workers in organizing their communities to promote greener and therefore healthier environments. These roles include work with neighborhood organizations, city planning boards, citizen advisory committees, and land preservation trusts.

3. **Gray Communities:** The “graying” of the baby boomers is one of the most significant social welfare challenges facing the United States today. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau \(2012\)](#), the population of U.S. citizens ages 65 and older is expected to double by the year 2060. This trend, along with full implementation of the Affordable Care Act, will produce increased employment opportunities for social workers in senior centers, community mental health centers, substance abuse treatment, and assisted living communities. Social workers in the role of community organizer can be on the front lines of community needs assessment, service development, and advocacy for this growing population of older adults.

4. **Devastated Communities:** Changing weather patterns resulting from global warming increasingly are contributing to natural disasters, such as

hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, and frequent tornadoes affecting multiple U.S. states. The result is devastated communities in need of disaster relief. Social workers have a role to play in organizing relief services through their local faith-based organizations, the Red Cross, and United Way. Specific macro social work roles in the aftermath of a disaster include assisting with community damage assessments, community resource inventories, fundraising, food drives, service coordination, establishment of temporary shelters, and local volunteer recruitment. Social work students, like all of us, are no doubt concerned for the victims of these disasters but, unless informed otherwise, may not discern a role for macro social workers in such events.

5. **Hispanic Communities:** Another major demographic trend is the growing Hispanic population in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2060, one in every three U.S. citizens will be Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Consequently, more and more social work students will find employment in Spanish-speaking communities. The need for developing and coordinating services that are sensitive to the culture of these communities is one that can be met by social workers in the role of community organizer. Because of these trends, faculty advisors in social work education programs must point out to current social work students the utility of taking Spanish courses as double majors or minors.

6. **International Communities:** Solutions to global poverty, disease, and infant mortality will require social work knowledge, values, and skills in communities internationally. At the macro level, social workers will have special opportunities running international nonprofit organizations (that is, nongovernmental organizations) and organizing community services across poverty-stricken regions. I know, in part, because social work students and colleagues of mine have taken part in the organizing of community efforts to build schools in the Dominican Republic.

7. **Innovative Communities:** It seems that everyone has heard of Silicon Valley, but do we have social versions of Silicon Valley? To some extent, the answer is “yes,” and macro social workers should be more involved. Social innovation often takes place internationally and has taken several forms. “Social businesses” are those that primarily

exist to address social problems and have been used to launch the “microcredit” movement around the world. A second entrepreneurial model is Vision-Spring, a nonprofit organization that works to reduce poverty around the world through the sale of affordable eyeglasses in remote communities. Its distribution vehicle is the “microfranchise,” a business toolkit that supplies local entrepreneurs with the needed information to start a small business selling eyeglasses in poor communities. These are just two examples of social innovation. Macro social workers, including those who hold second degrees in business or public administration, can be innovators and entrepreneurs in their communities, but social work education will need to do more to incorporate this material.

8. **Electoral Communities:** In the period 2011–2012, there were 164 social workers holding public office at the local, state, and national levels. All but 13 of these officials held an MSW or a DSW. The current 113th Congress has nine social workers among its members. In fact, Senator Barbara Mikulski from Maryland is a social worker who this year became the first woman to chair the Appropriations Committee (NASW, 2013). The knowledge, values, and skills involved in community organization provide a solid foundation to social workers for running campaigns for elected office. Most incoming social work students do not understand this possibility at first. They have to be educated to the fact. The experience of Barack Obama offers a great case example.

9. **Cinematic Communities:** Film and other visual arts happen to be some of the most effective public education and advocacy tools available today. Witness the success of documentaries such as *Roger and Me* (1978) about the community impact of General Motors factory shutdowns and *Wal-Mart: The High Costs of a Low Price* (2005) about the negative effects of big-box discounters on main-street communities. And now, anyone who owns a smartphone is a potential filmmaker. Given its new “Virtual Film Festival” for student filmmakers, the Council on Social Work Education evidently sees the student appeal and advocacy potential here.

10. **Business Communities:** In the Alinsky (1971) model of organizing, business is frequently cast as the bad guy, a target to be attacked and embarrassed. In some cases, social justice requires this strategy. There are more consensual models of

community organizing, however, that involve business leaders in a collaborative fashion. United Way is the most well-known model, with its long history of serving as a community organizing mechanism, bringing business and nonprofit groups together to solve community problems. There are hundreds of local United Way agencies across the United States that hire macro social workers, and with the forming of United Way Worldwide in 2009, there are now over 1,800 United Way organizations around the world (United Way, 2013).

In summary, there are many new communities offering exciting educational and practice opportunities for community organization. Social work must take note. **SW**

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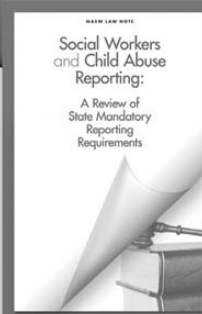
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