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Sustaining and Strengthening a Macro Identity: The Association of Macro Practice Social Work

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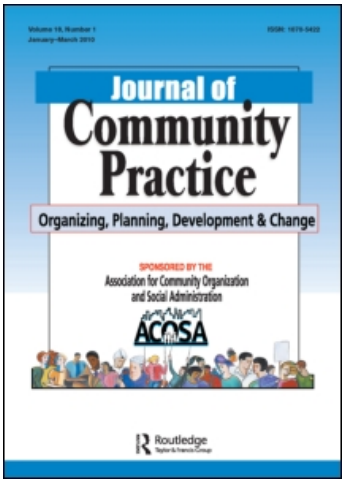

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Sustaining and Strengthening a Macro Identity: The Association of Macro Practice Social Work

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FROM THE FIELD

Sustaining and Strengthening a Macro Identity: The Association of Macro Practice Social Work

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Macro practice focuses on community-level interventions, such as management, organizing, research, and policy advocacy. Despite social work's deep roots in this type of work, macro practice and macro practitioners often practice without support or connections with other macro practitioners, and are underrepresented in the profession. In 2006, a group of social workers, including academics and practitioners, formed the Association of Macro Practice Social Work (AMPSW). AMPSW works to strengthen the professional identity of macro practitioners, elevate the status of macro social workers, and address common concerns within the social work profession.

KEYWORDS macro-practice, professional organizations, social work identity, AMPSW, community practice

Social work practice spans all stages of life, takes place in a multitude of settings, and targets client systems at all levels- from individuals to groups

We thank all of the members of Association of Macro Practice Social Work who have contributed time, energy, and expertise to the creation of this organization.

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to national and international policy. Macro practice social work is aimed at bringing about improvements and changes in the largest of these systems in society. Such activities include political action, community organizing, public education, campaigning, and the administration of broad-based social service agencies or public welfare departments (Barker, 2004). Despite their direct connections to the historical origins of social work in settlement houses (Netting, 2005) and their importance in the current environment of scare resources and widespread oppression, social workers that practice with larger systems are not always supported or well represented within the profession (Moore & Johnson, 2002; Szakos, 2005; Weiss, 2003, 2006). The reasons for this invisibility may include (a) macro practitioners failing to claim a social work identity in their positions, preferring instead to identify as a community organizer, a manager, or a policy analyst; (b) the traditional micro–macro- practice divide; or (c) a social worker's belief that their education does not adequately prepare them for macro practice (Gibelman, 1999; McLaughlin, 2009; Moore & Johnson, 2002; Netting, 2005; Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008). Additionally, the social work profession, as a whole, may fail to claim macro practitioners due to the dominance of clinical social work. This article presents a case study of a local professional organization designed to respond to such concerns.

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1996) Code of Ethics defines social work's mission as "to enhance human wellbeing 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" (p. 1). Without a doubt, social work's mission encompasses practice with systems of all sizes—individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Indeed, it is social work's commitment to social justice and social change, as well as to the *person-in-the environment* approach that distinguishes it from other helping professions (Netting, 2005; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Despite the clear inclusion of all levels of practice in social work's mission, there has been a historical divide among the different levels of practice—micro, mezzo, and macro (Gibelman, 1999). Market forces, such as employment trends and third-party reimbursements, as well as social trends and public policies have moved much of the profession toward a more clinical and direct-practice focus (Gibelman 1999; Schneider & Netting, 1999; Specht & Courtney, 1994). However, social work's roots in community practice and emphasis on social justice requires that both individual social workers and the profession as a whole retain a strong macro practice identity (Mitchell & Lynch, 2003; Netting, 2005; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Social Work Macro Practice

Despite social work's commitment to social justice work, and the centrality of community work to its mission, macro practice is not always viewed as a central component to social work practice and education. Schneider and Netting (1999) pointed to the increasing national conservatism of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as a key factor in the move of social workers and social work education away from advocacy and policy work. Past research has indicated that most students enter social work programs with an eye toward entering psychotherapy, clinical practice, or other direct-service activities (Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008; Weiss, 2006), rather than toward community organizing, administration, policy work, or other macro activities. The number of social work students entering macro practice graduate program tracks is decreasing, and have been since 1982 (Ezell, Chernesky, & Healy, 2004). Starr, Mizrahi, and Gurzinksy (1999) posited that students' belief that systems-change or macro orientation may be seen as detrimental to their employment possibilities as potentially resulting in the shrinking emphasis on community organizing and planning in social work education. Indeed, Schneider and Netting (1999) argued that the very existence of separate tracks of study (e.g., community work, case work, clinical work) reinforces the perception that social work can exist in only one of these arenas, rather than spanning all of them. Out of all current social work students, 10% focus on macro social work practice; 3% to 4% focus on administrative social work practice, and 2% to 5% focus on community organizing and planning (Ezell et al., 2004; Patti, 2003; Starr et al., 1999).

The bias toward clinical practice continues postgraduation as well. For example, Koeske, Lichtenwalter, and Koeske (2005) found that, although social workers associated macro practice activities such as advocacy and community development with greater autonomy, prestige, and remuneration, they prefer to practice within individual and family systems. Other practice literature supports the findings of the underutilization of macro practice skills in social work practice, despite its centrality to social work's mission (McLaughlin, 2009; Mitchell & Lynch, 2003). Ezell and colleagues (2004) suggested several reasons for the decline in macro practice: (a) state licensing laws that require applicants to demonstrate clinical skills, (b) the micro-orientation of previous CSWE-required generalist foundation, (c) competition with other master's degrees in management and public policy, and (d) the difficulty in finding adequate field placements for students interested in macro practice. Finally, schools of social work may be hostile to macro students, with both faculty and other students discouraging students from pursuing their interest in this type of practice (Ezell et al, 2004).

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Interventions to Support Macro Practice

Recent authors have suggested methods to deal with macro social work's marginalization. Strategies include: (a) developing a management based approach to social work (Nesoff, 2007); (b) redesigning educational programs to infuse more macro content into the curriculum, particularly the foundation curriculum (Ezell et al, 2004; Martin, Pine, & Healy, 1999; Patti, 2003); and (c) increasing institutional interactions between social work academic programs and practitioners in the field (Martin, Pine, & Healy, 1999; Patti, 2003). Several authors have indicated that there is need to increase the visibility of community work within the social work profession, through activities such as professional organizations, media events, participation in career fairs, and stronger community connections (Starr et al., 1999; Szakos, 2005).

Finally, macro practice scholars have called upon schools of social work to take the lead to increase the visibility of macro practice within social work in a number of ways: (a) placing a greater emphasis on macro educational preparation; (b) creating macro field placements; and (c) providing social work faculty to act as role models for students in the areas of macro practice activities (Moore & Johnson, 2002; Starr et al, 1999). The research reflects the need for the social work profession to promote macro practice due to macro practice's ability to bring an invaluable social work perspective on management, community organizing and development, and policy work (Martin et al., 1999; Netting, 2005; Patti, 2003; Starr, et al., 1999). Because macro practice's location as a cornerstone of social work, it is critical that social workers, both academic and practitioners, take steps to sustain and strengthen their macro identity.

THE LOCAL SOCIAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

The local social work practice environment also plays a role in the formation and sustaining of macro social work identity and practice. The state licensing regulations often determine the area of practice that the local profession focuses on. In Minnesota, there are four levels of licensure: Licensed Social Worker (LSW) (BSW graduates), Licensed Graduate Social Worker (LGSW) (new MSW graduates), Licensed Independent Social Worker (LISW) (advanced generalist) and Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LICSW) (advanced clinical). According to the Minnesota Board of Social Work. in 2009 there were 10,700 licensed social workers in Minnesota. Of the 5500 licenses at the Master's level, the vast majority (3500) are LICSWs, although only 700 are licensed as advanced generalists (http://www.socialwork.state.mn.us/fees). Most macro practitioners are licensed at the LISW level. However, some macro practitioners are not

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licensed all, because the Board of Social Work in Minnesota has not recognized their work as meeting criteria for social work practice.

Licensing has become a major focus in Minnesota and is a primary avenue for socializing new social workers to the profession, through the immediate identification with the profession it provides, as well as due to its required supervision hours and continuing education units (CEUs). Minnesota's social work licensure requirements mandate that social workers participate in supervised practice until they reach the level of Independent Social Worker (LISW or LICSW). For newly licensed MSW graduates (at the LGSW level), the requirements call for 75 hr of direct supervision by an advanced licensed social worker for 4000 hr of practice.

For social workers employed in micro-practice social work settings, supervision generally takes place in the workplace. However, for social workers in macro settings, supervision is not as easily available in the workplace because, for example, their supervisors may not be social workers, or they may be the only social worker in their office. This poses a problem for socialization to the profession, because supervision is not being provided as part of their work. When the social worker does not become licensed and does not need to meet a supervision requirement, or becomes licensed but must seek supervision from a nonmacro practice social worker, the macro practitioner's social work identity is threatened. To respond to these issues and to meet the direct supervision requirement, groups of five to seven new macro practitioners were formed for supervision by advanced macro practitioners. These groups were the starting point for Association of Macro Practice Social Work (AMPSW).

Macro practitioners in these licensure groups reported feeling isolated from other social workers and from the profession as a whole. They often were the only social worker in their place of employment, and missed the camaraderie and resource sharing that had occurred during their MSW programs. Also, they did not see themselves represented by the existing professional organizations in the Twin Cities, such as the National Association of Social Workers Minnesota Chapter, the School Social Work Organization, or the Minnesota Society for Clinical Social Work. These feelings of disconnect from the profession were closely connected to the opportunities for trainings and CEUs offered by these professional organizations. Although the trainings were of high quality, they rarely met the needs of macro practitioners who were eager to expand and improve their skill sets. The training consistently focused on micro practitioners' needs, and the training that did focus on macro knowledge and skills was far too introductory for those social workers that specialize in macro practice. The absence of appropriate trainings was another missed opportunity for socialization, networking, and professional development. Finally, many macro practitioners felt that the work they were doing was not honored, or identified as social work by the public or by the rest of the profession. AMPSW arose as a grassroots, locally focused response to these concerns.

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METHODS

Meeting agendas, minutes, notes, and community organizing invitations were used to trace the activities of AMPSW beginning at its inception in 2006. We were part of the first group to form AMPSW. Two of the authors were part of the founding board, and one is a current member of the board. After reviewing notes for key events, and chronologically placing them in the context of AMPSW's developments, we agreed upon the following case synopsis.

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AMPSW as a Case Study: A Response to Strengthen and Sustain our Macro Identity

An open meeting was held in May of 2006 to discuss the possibility of a professional macro- identified social work organization. Invitations were sent via e-mail using a snowball method, encouraging invitee's to extend invitations to their colleagues. Attendees at this first meeting included academics from three of the local social work programs, researchers, policy advocates, community organizers, managers, supervisors, and social work administrators, as well as a few clinical practitioners. The participants discussed their understanding of macro practice social work, what was available and what was missing for professional development in the community, and identified next steps for the creation of an organization.

Because licensing has such a strong influence in Minnesota, a discussion emerged about social work licensure and Minnesota's licensure requirements for macro practice social workers. Licensure was viewed as a particularly pressing concern because, at this time, the Minnesota Board of Social Work was considering eliminating the LISW, the only advanced licensure available for generalist practitioners leaving only advanced licensure at the clinical level (LICSW). Although the group did not achieve consensus around this—some of the group felt that licensure was an unnecessary barrier for macro practice, yet others felt that it was an important part of ethical social work practice and identity—it did provide a catalyzing issue for the group, and provoked many thoughtful discussions about the meaning of macro social work practice and the necessity of licensure.

First Steps: Forming

After the initial meeting, the organizers conducted a needs assessment of macro practitioners in the greater Twin Cities area and an environmental scan to identify existing resources for macro practice, both locally and nationally. Locally, there were statewide chapters of the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education, as well as

the Minnesota Society for Clinical Social Work, the Minnesota School Social Workers Association, Minnesota Nursing Home Social Workers Association, and the Minnesota Social Service Association, which largely serves publically employed social workers. Nationally, there were multiple macro practice organizations, including the Association for Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA), Influencing State Policy, the Society for Social Work Research, the National Network of Social Work Managers, and the Social Welfare Action Alliance. However, although these groups were doing important work on a national level, none had the regional presence needed to respond to the pressing needs of socialization at the local level.

As the group continued to meet, themes emerged for the group to address. Two pressing concerns appeared: (a) a need for macro practitioners to connect with one another and (b) opportunities for continuing education. In an effort to establish itself in the community, begin to bring macro practitioners together, and to further the awareness of the knowledge, values, and skills of macro social work, the group organized its first event very early in its development. The event focused on policy issues impacting social work in Minnesota after the close of the most recent state legislative session. It drew a significant crowd and generated enough interest that the group was encouraged to continue its efforts.

A needs assessment was then conducted, using an electronic survey tool (see Appendix A for Assessment Questions). The questionnaire was developed by a subcommittee of the original organizers and distributed via e-mail to all of the attendees of the first meeting. Everyone who received the survey was encouraged to forward it along to other macro practice social workers. From this survey, as well as from the first meeting, the following needs were identified:

- Advocacy on behalf of the macro social workers, including but not limited to licensing issues;
- Increasing awareness and visibility of macro practice for the general public, as well as within social work;
- Social justice advocacy;
- Education and support for macro practice social workers and students, including networking, mentoring, field placements, and licensure supervision;
- Collaboration with other social work groups, including NASW, CSWE, and national macro practice organizations; and
- Professional development, training and continuing education.

Performing: AMPSW Activities 2006–Present

The organization that grew out of the many meetings and the initial needs assessment is member based and focused on creating a strong and visible

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community of macro practice social workers in Minnesota. The mission of AMPSW is "to promote macro practice social work by strengthening our identity, our professional standards, our knowledge base, and through the advancement of social justice" (Association of Macro Pratice Social Work, 2010). The intent of AMPSW is to:

- Strengthen the professional identity of macro practitioners,
- Provide opportunities for macro practitioners to network,
- Support new macro graduates,
- Encourage the study of macro practice knowledge and skills, and
- Represent macro practice social workers in the community.

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To meet these goals, AMPSW has undertaken a number of activities. Perhaps the most visible are the trainings focused on macro practice concerns. Since 2006, trainings have been held on administration, organizational culture, ethics in macro practice supervision, community organizing, community building, state legislation and policy, technology, and licensing and macro practice. Additionally, a representative from ACOSA has come to meet with AMPSW and presented on ACOSA's mission, goals, and work. Along with the more formal events, AMPSW has hosted a number of informal networking events, such as happy hours at statewide conferences, or before or after one of the organization's trainings. These face-to-face networking events are supported by AMPSW's presence on social networking sites, such as Facebook, as well as through its own Web site and listserv.

AMPSW purposefully has kept its membership fees low (they started at $15 for a year, and are now $20) and welcomes students and BSW and MSW social workers as members. Members receive a small discount on registration fees for trainings, which are open to all members of the social work community. It is important to the group to keep membership dues low as licensing fees are very expensive, often deterring traditionally low paid social workers from belonging to professional organizations. Keeping membership fees low has also kept the fledgling organization's budget low enough to avoid incorporating as a 501c3.

In 2007, AMPSW initiated a strategic planning process. The intent of the process was to clarify the goals of the organization and solidify its purpose and mission. An all-day retreat was organized, an outside facilitator was brought in, and more than 20 members participated. The discussion was rich and useful, and provided the group with critical information as to its goals for the next year and the next 5 years. With new short-term and long-term goals, the organization was able to create a board structure with subcommittees that reflected the primary goals. Three subcommittees, reflecting the three goals, were created: (a) training, (b) membership and marketing, and (c) policy. More work was done after the strategic planning retreat to

clarify subcommittee goals and to identify workable tasks to achieve those goals.

Finally, AMPSW has increased macro practitioner's connections with and presence in other social work organizations. For example, one of the most important victories for AMPSW has been securing representation on the Advisory Committee to the State Board of Social Work. NASW—Minnesota and the Minnesota Council on Social Work Education (MCSWE) have had representation to the Board of Social Work, as have other professional groups, such as the Clinical Society, the School Social Workers, and the Nursing Home Social Workers. However, until the creation of AMPSW, there had been an absence of a specifically macro voice to our state Board's Advisory Committee. The formal representation of macro practice on this body means that, as future licensing decisions are made, macro social workers will be represented as fully as social workers in other specialty practice areas.

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DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Fewer and fewer students are graduating with a specialization in macro practice (Ezell et al., 2004) and those students that do often lose their identification with the social work profession soon after leaving their educational programs (Koeske et al., 2005; Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008; Specht & Courtney, 2004). AMPSW was created to respond to that loss of identity for macro practice social workers. Although much of the literature highlights how educational institutions can improve macro practice identity (Austin & Kruzich, 2004; Martin et al., 1999; Moore & Johnson, 2002; Nesoff, 2007; Patti, 2003), this article highlights how an improvement in identity to the profession can occur postgraduation through a community-based professional organization. Using AMPSW evolution as a case study, steps are identified to bolster the professional identity of macro social workers. These activities build on each other to strengthen the identification of macro practitioners with the social work profession.

The first step to enhance macro social work identity is to begin to offer trainings that focus on the knowledge, values, and skills required by macro practitioners. AMPSW's continuing education programming has been a key component in raising the competency level and visibility of macro practice social workers in Minnesota. Schools of social work and practitioners have come together to provide macro social work focused trainings (Schneider & Netting, 1999; Starr et al., 199; Szakos, 2005). This collaborative approach provides participants with evidence-based interventions, skills, and research that have been vetted in the field by direct practitioners. Additionally, because AMPSW is a social work professional organization, the content of the trainings (i.e.: community organizing, grant-writing, policy

advocacy) is tied directly to social work practice. Thus, professional connection back to social work is fostered, enhancing the professional identity of macro practitioners and reminding them that their work is, in fact, social work and they are social workers.

Second, like all professionals, macro social workers need to network, be mentored, and socialize to improve and develop as professionals. The case study highlights this need, and suggests several interventions. Informal networking sessions build and strengthen connections among macro practitioners in the local community; they provide an important opportunity for the development of a social worker's professional identity (Haynes & White, 1999; Netting, 2005). The various networking activities provided by AMPSW allowed both new and seasoned macro practice social workers opportunities to connect with one another to discuss shared histories, experiences, and professional philosophies (Wenger, 2000). Such activities are critical for the creation and maintenance of a social work identity. If the profession wants to keep macro practitioners in the fold, it must provide opportunities for these social workers to engage with one another, share stories, and build on this specialized area of practice (Starr et al., 1999; Szakos, 2005, Wenger, 2000).

The third step in strengthening social work identity for macro practitioners is to raise the visibility of macro practice social work within the social work profession as a whole. Through their initial trainings and networking activities, AMPSW was able to raise the visibility of macro practice enough to gain entrance to various social work decision-making boards and broader professional organizations. Prior to its formation, few macro practice social workers sat on decision-making boards; now, a macro social work voice is at the table when decisions are made about the rules and regulations surrounding the practice of social work in Minnesota. These positions provide more visible macro practice role models within the profession and reminds the profession that "macro practice *is* social work" (Netting, 2005, p. 51). Given the focus and energy placed on clinical social work licensure in many states (Ezell et al., 2004; Koeske et al., 2005), macro practice concerns can get marginalized. When this happens, macro role models are lost and new macro practitioners do not see veteran social workers from whom they can receive guidance, mentoring, and role-modeling (Schneider & Netting, 1999; Szakos, 2005). They may see social workers who share social work values and ethics but they do not see social workers who share a similar type of practice method. Without this type of connection, macro social workers may leave the profession and seek support and guidance elsewhere. AMPSW's work creates public leadership roles for macro social workers, both creating present day role models, and fostering future leaders.

If macro social work practitioners are to retain their identity as social workers, they must become involved in organizations that support, expand,

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and renew the social work knowledge, skills, and values. This fourth step addresses the ultimate goal of AMPSW; that macro social work practitioners identify with the profession of social work. When macro practice social workers identify with the profession, they subsequently identify as social workers at their jobs, may become more active in all social work professional organizations, and will continue to practice from a social work perspective, basing their practice on the knowledge, skills, and values of the profession (Gibelman, 1999; Haynes & White, 1999; Netting, 2005). National organizations such as ACOSA have been important in this effort, but without local chapters representing macro social work interests, it is difficult to meet the supervision, training, and networking needs that encourage identity. Local professional organizations offer the opportunity for involvement in the organization itself. To truly strengthen professional identity, social workers must move from mere participation in professional organization's planned events, to organizing and planning them for themselves and take ownership of the organization and its work. These new active members then become new macro practice social work role models. This is the critical next step, and given the challenges faced by a fledging volunteer organization it requires great effort by all involved.

It is evident from the recent discussion at the 2010 Social Work Congress in Washington, DC that the profession of social work is facing challenges. After 2 days of discussion by social workers from across the country, 10 imperatives for the profession emerged. Of those 10 imperatives, almost half relate directly to macro practitioners and the knowledge and skills they posses. One imperative calls for "models of sustainable business and management practice" to be taught and practiced, and a second demanded that the profession create "a data-driven business case" to promote the value of the profession to the greater public (NASW, 2010). Both imperatives require the skills of a macro practice social worker who is fluent in both social work values and ethics and business and management knowledge and skills. A third imperative, focused on leadership development, called for the profession to "integrate leadership training in social work curricula at all levels" which is an imperative strongly supported by the social work administration literature (Ezell et al., 2004; Martin et al., 1999; Patti, 2003). Finally, if the profession is going to meet the fourth imperative of "strengthen[ing] the ability of national social work organizations to identify and clearly articulate, with a unified voice, issues of importance to the profession" (NASW, 2010), macro practice social workers must be meaningfully included. Without an organized voice and a strong professional presence, macro practice social workers are often not included at the decision-making table, despite possessing a skill set that is an asset in the development of the social work profession.

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CONCLUSIONS

As AMPSW looks to the future, it hopes to continue to build its presence in the state of Minnesota. As AMPSW became active on Facebook and developed a Web site, membership dues from people who did not live in the State of Minnesota arrived in our mailbox. This certainly was an unintended outcome of the organization's creation, but also points to the desire for macro practitioners to be affiliated and represented by a professional group at the local, state, and national level. Many of these membership dues included request for information on how to start local macro social work professional organizations in their own communities. AMPSW is a replicable model for development of a regionally focused macro practice association. States or local communities wanting to begin their own macro practice organization are welcome to use our needs assessment (Appendix A), and utilize features on the Web site (www.ampsw.org) for further information.

This is also a call to the larger macro practice organizations, such as ACOSA, Influencing State Policy, and others, to continue to advocate, spotlight, and enhance macro practice and macro social work identity. The dissemination of macro ideology, identity, and even pride, which begins in academic institutions, are necessary to maintain the status of macro social workers and to assist in the effort to improve the status of macro social workers. The call is clear for the social work profession to support efforts to encourage macro practitioners identity to the social work profession. Macro practice social workers need the support of the profession and the profession needs the knowledge, skills, and values of macro practitioners to survive.

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APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What mission, purpose, and goals should the association serve?
2. When you think of a macro social work association, what would you like it to look lik? (what activities and/or benefits should the association provide)
3. Who would you like included in a macro social work association (mark all you think should be included)
   —BSW level social workers
   —MSW level social workers
   —BSW students
   —MSW students
   —PhD level social workers
   —other_____
4. How should we recruit potential members?
5. In order to better define macro practice social work, we would like to know what area of macro social work you work in. (check all that apply)
   —Advocacy for individuals
   —Advocacy for groups/communities
   —Information and referral
   —Community organization
   —Research
   —Development of social welfare policy
   —Coordination/evaluation of service delivery
   —Provision of training regarding community needs and problems
   —Supervision of macro practice social workers
   —Consultation regarding agency practice and policy development
   —Other:_____
6. What are other interest areas that you want to develop? (check all that apply)
   —Advocacy for individuals
   —Advocacy for groups/communities
   —Information and referral
   —Community organization
   —Research
   —Development of social welfare policy
   —Coordination/evaluation of service delivery
   —Provision of training regarding community needs and problems
   —Supervision of macro social workers
   —Consultation regarding agency practice and policy development
   —Other:_____

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7. What is your level of licensure?
   —LSW
   —LGSW
   —LICSW
   —LISW
   —Not licensed
8. What motivated you to become licensed or not licensed?
9. What is your level of interest in a macro practice association?
   —Very interested
   —Somewhat interested
   —Somewhat not interested
   —Not interested
   —Undecided
10. If you are interested, what can you contribute?
    —Time
    —Networks
    —Space
    —Resources
    —Technical Advice
    —Money
    —Other:_____

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