

Community-Building in a Virtual Teaching Environment

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Abstract: *In 2010, the University of Southern California School of Social Work launched its Virtual Academic Center (VAC) to deliver online MSW programming to students located around the country. USC's platform is a significant innovation in offering online education and has transformed the traditional educational model for both students and faculty. This research explores the experiences of faculty teaching via the VAC. Twenty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with USC faculty of different ranks. Inductive data collection using a grounded theory approach with thematic analysis examined experiences teaching in an online program, revealing the strengths and challenges associated with geographic diversity and community-building. Findings warrant the development of innovative practices to build community and to facilitate collaboration among geographically diverse faculty and students in a virtual education program.*

Keywords: *Virtual education; virtual community; geographic diversity*

The virtual delivery of education is a widely discussed topic in the field of social work. While many schools of social work have offered online curriculum to rural and underserved communities for years, the profession is rapidly expanding its use of technology to educate and train a diverse workforce. Advances in technology have created exciting opportunities for both education and practice, broadening boundaries, reducing access barriers, and helping social work become more sustainable in the 21st century. This is an important moment in social work and Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley and Wood (2013) identify it as an emerging paradigm shift in the field. Virtual education creates opportunities for knowledge-sharing and collaborative efforts that can build strong, socially sustainable communities locally and around the world (James, Murray, & Pacheco, 2013; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014).

A rapidly evolving literature evaluates the impact of online education and details the many successes of virtual social work programs. Much of this research has focused on the student experience, finding that students are largely satisfied with online education and that learning outcomes have little variance across delivery structures (Ayala, 2009; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Chan, Tsui, Chan, & Hong, 2009; Thyer, Artlet, & Markward, 1998; Woehle & Quinn, 2009; York, 2008). While debate exists about teaching relational and clinical skills to students via an online platform, research indicates that teaching clinical skills virtually is an effective modality with no demonstrated differences among students receiving traditional versus online training (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Cummings, Fouls, & Chaffin, 2013).

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A separate line of inquiry focuses on faculty experiences of delivering virtual education and the critical role that instructors perform in the successful achievement of student learning outcomes (Beauchamp & Kennewell, 2010; Horvath & Mills, 2011). A growing body of literature identifies specific resources needed for effective online instruction, discusses challenges faced, and evaluates instructor satisfaction (Ayala, 2009; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Douville, 2013; Hill Jones, 2015; Horvath & Mills, 2011; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Larsen, Sanders, Astray, & Hole, 2009; Liechty, 2012; Pruitt & Silverman, 2015; Siegel, Jennings, & Conklin, 1998). Identified challenges include comfort with technology or adjusting to technology glitches (Horvath & Mills, 2011; Levin, Whitsett, & Wood, 2013), guidelines to facilitate synchronous communication (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Martin & Parker, 2014), time commitment (Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012), and community-building with other faculty (Dolan, 2011). Suggested resources to support online faculty include technology training, round-the-clock technological support (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011), and mentoring (Smith, 2015).

Online social work programs adhere to different instruction delivery modalities. Web-based technology offers a broad range of options for social work programs to combine asynchronous content, synchronous classroom time, traditional face-to-face time, and on-site field placement training (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). According to CSWE (2016), as of 2015, 39 Schools of Social Work had adopted a range of curriculum delivery options. For example, some programs require monthly face-to-face meetings combined with weekly asynchronous content. Others provide few live synchronous meetings, relying on other forms of classroom communication via forums, blogs, and email. Some programs combine regularly scheduled synchronous sessions with asynchronous work. While research demonstrates that instructors are largely satisfied with a host of delivery options, there has been limited inquiry into how faculty experience different modalities of online teaching and build virtual relationships with each other as well as their students.

The USC Virtual Academic Center

The University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work launched its Virtual Academic Center (VAC) in 2010, providing 80 students the opportunity to earn an MSW degree via a fully online, interactive platform that combines weekly asynchronous assignments, weekly synchronous classroom time, and on-the-ground field experiences in each student's local community (Flynn et al., 2013). The virtual campus enables students and faculty living in communities outside of Southern California to participate in USC's highly ranked MSW program (U.S. News, 2012). As of April 2015, 2,230 students have enrolled in the program and have been taught by over 375 full-time and part-time instructors (Adams, Maiden, & Wind, 2015). The USC program was one of the first elite research universities to offer its highly ranked MSW program via an entirely online platform (USC Online, 2016). The program delivers excellence in education internationally, reduces access barriers and frequent military moves, overcomes situational factors preventing relocation, and removes disability-related barriers (Anstadt, Burnette, & Bradley, 2011; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Tandy & Meacham, 2009).

While geographic diversity is an important strength of the program, it raises unique challenges related to training and supervising faculty, as well as relationship and community-building (Smith, 2015). Given the profession's emphasis on understanding the person-in-environment, it is important to uncover the experiences of USC's virtual faculty in order to inform best practices. This paper presents findings from qualitative research exploring USC faculty experiences teaching via the virtual campus. This research examined the instructor experience in a geographically diverse fully online program. While literature considers online educator experiences, less attention has been given to the social work educator in the fully virtual environment and no attention has been given to faculty living and working from distant locations. An inductive Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using NVivo10 software guided the initial data collection of 25 semi-structured faculty interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used to analyze the data. The specific aims of this research were to: a) characterize instructor motivations for online teaching, b) learn about instructor experiences and teacher-student relationships in virtual classrooms, c) understand community-building and relationships among faculty in virtual social work education, and d) uncover opportunities and challenges for virtual classroom instructors. Knowledge gained from this research was expected to strengthen the VAC and facilitate understanding of faculty delivering education in online communities.

Methods

An exploratory cross-sectional design utilizing qualitative methods was developed to meet the specific aims of the study. Given that USC employs over 300 faculty members to teach in the virtual social work program, an initial step in this project was formulating an appropriate sampling strategy. The inclusion criterion for selection in the sample was having taught a minimum of at least one year in the VAC to capture perspectives of faculty familiar with the platform. In addition, it was important to represent the different types of online instructors: 1) Tenure Line, 2) Non-Tenure Track Faculty (NTTF), Clinical Teaching, 3) NTTF Adjunct, and 4) Field. Forty-eight faculty members were recruited for participation using a combination of purposive and quota non-probability sampling strategies to ensure representation from the four lines presented above. This sampling strategy captured the points of view of all faculty lines, each of which play an essential role in curriculum development and delivery.

Following approval from the USC's Institutional Review Board in May 2014, the Director of the VAC sent an introductory email to all 48 individuals selected for participation. This email included information about the research, protection of human subjects, consent procedures, and contact information for questions and comments. In June 2014, a second email was distributed to schedule interviews. Thirty-three individuals (69%) responded to email recruitment, with five refusals and twenty-five faculty successfully scheduling interviews (three did not follow-up after expressing interest). The first author electronically responded to interested participants to schedule an interview day and time. During these initial contacts, participants were informed that their identity would remain anonymous and that no identifying information would be collected. Candidates

learned that their telephone interviews would be recorded, transcribed, and stored in a password-protected Dropbox file accessed only by the researchers.

Interviews occurred between August 6, 2014 and October 21, 2014. The researcher contacted each participant via telephone. Once permission to turn on the audio recording was received, the interviewing began. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, that their identities would remain anonymous, and that no harm was anticipated as a result of their involvement. Informed consent was collected and recorded for each individual. The interviews adhered to a semi-structured interview schedule that was comprised of fifteen questions, with eight of the questions collecting demographic information on variables such as gender, race, and years of teaching experience. The other seven questions were open-ended with prompts designed to elicit information about online teaching experiences. For example, question #5 asked participants to “Describe the relationships that you have with your students on the VAC.” An associated prompt is “Have you noticed a difference in your VAC student relationships as compared to your other teaching experiences?” See Appendix A for the complete Interview Schedule.

Data Analysis

Data collection and interview selection adhered to traditional grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis followed principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) using NVivo 10 software for data management and organization. The iterative analysis was completed in four steps. The first step of open coding was concurrent with early data collection to ensure that the data encompassed content related to the specific aims of the study. The analysis of interviews 1-12 resulted in an initial codebook of 48 nodes that was developed by the first author and approved by the two co-authors. Selective coding of interviews 13-16 comprised step 2, resulting in theoretical saturation and a reduced codebook of 21 nodes and three overarching themes. In step 3, the two co-authors independently selectively coded interviews 17-22, validating the nodes and themes. The final step of the analysis was an analytic seminar attended by all three authors, reviewing the codebook for completion and selectively coding interviews 23-25 collectively. The seminar concluded with agreement on the thematic schema presented in this paper.

Results

Sample

The initial sample was comprised of 20 adjunct, 18 clinical teaching, 8 tenure line and 2 field faculty members. Twenty-five individuals (52% of the invited sample) completed telephone interviews with the first author. The final sample represents 12 (48%) adjuncts, 7 (28%) clinical teaching, 5 (20%) tenure-track and 1 (4%) field faculty member. Twenty-one individuals (84%) identify as female, 17 (68%) identify as White, and four (16%) identify as African-American. Sixteen individuals (64%) were over the age of 50 years, with nine (36%) in their 60s, 7 (28%) in their 50s, 7 (28%) in their 40s, and 2 (8%) in their 30s. The sample had an average of 14 years teaching experience, with a spread of 1 to over 30 years.

Overarching Themes

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three over-arching themes that emerged from the data: Geographic Diversity, Community-Building among Faculty, and Community-Building among Faculty and Students.

Theme 1: Building a Geographically Diverse Academic Community

Almost all faculty verbalized appreciation for the geographic diversity that the virtual platform brings to the classroom. Unlike many online social work programs, the VAC does not limit program acceptance by region. Thus, students are located in 49 of the 50 United States and some live abroad, generally on military bases located in Guam, Germany, and France. Many related that the inclusion of this form of diversity deepened the learning experiences for both students and faculty alike. As one female instructor in her mid-40s relates:

I think it has provided an opportunity to bring diversity – more of a diversity spectrum or framework to the classroom. You know, we often think of diversity in religion, sexual orientation, gender or what not but we really, I mean, to get a sense of how it's actually different to live in the South than it is in the West and in the East...there's just a difference in some respects. I think that diversity is valuable in the classroom.

Another male instructor who has taught in the VAC for almost four years echoes this sentiment:

...It makes for really fascinating discussions where the students can get really engaged. Policies, legislation and all that plays out very differently across the country, whereas if all the students are in San Diego County there is not as much variety with that. I think that having the riches of all the different experiences and communities as well as orientations, backgrounds of the students. There's a lot more variety so you can do a lot with diversity discussions, policy and all that. That's some really rich material for a professor teaching on the VAC.

A relatively new part-time female instructor in the VAC relates her thoughts that summarize the general feeling of the VAC faculty: “*I think that it is phenomenal to be able to reach people around the world.*”

The majority of the participants clearly appreciated the geographic diversity of the student body and how it impacts classroom discussions and dynamics. However, only two considered the opportunities that a geographically diverse faculty bring to the program, as reflected in the following perspective provided by a long-time female USC School of Social Work instructor with experience teaching both on the ground and in the VAC:

From an organizational standpoint, I think it's given us an opportunity to attract some really stellar folks to teach for us, that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to do. But they are really amazing practitioners and leaders in the profession and they've been attracted to what we are doing here. So, organizationally, it's been an amazing thing that we've been able to achieve by doing this.

Theme 2: Community-Building Among Faculty

Community-building was a frequent topic discussed during the interviews, with participants representing different points of view. One perspective held by several individuals is that the USC School of Social Work has become so large that there are inherent challenges to maintaining a sense of community on one campus let alone across several. One person notes that it is “not realistic” to expect a campus so large to have a shared sense of community. Others offer that the large number of part-time instructors in the VAC create separate challenges for building community. For example, many adjunct faculty members elect to teach part-time so they can also have a clinical practice or alternative career. These individuals may not have the time or inclination to be involved with the school community outside of their teaching responsibilities.

Despite these perspectives, most participants reported concern about relationship building among faculty across the campuses. Many expressed feelings of isolation in their work and from other instructors. Some identified difficulties developing connections with faculty who live outside of Los Angeles. Those living afar noted feeling alienated from the School of Social Work. The geographic diversity that makes the VAC so unique can also pose barriers to informal networking and can cultivate feelings of isolation for some faculty. As one female professor with over 20 years of teaching experience expressed:

Teaching on the VAC, for me, having been based in both Los Angeles and San Diego prior to being in the virtual program, has felt pretty isolating. I have felt like I don't have enough communication and interaction with colleagues.

Several individuals identify missed opportunities for informal relationship-building at faculty meetings or simply having a chance to engage in “water cooler talk” between classes. These informal get-togethers help people recognize each other and, over time, may encourage community-building. While VAC instructors are invited to attend faculty meetings virtually, they sometimes conflict with other schedules or time zones. Additionally, although meeting attendance creates opportunities for faculty to interact on the platform, several weeks or months can pass between meetings. This lapse in time creates barriers to nurturing new relationships and keeping the dialogue moving forward. As one female Los Angeles-based faculty member reflects:

It's like, you and I can have a really great rapport, but if we don't ever....you know, we many never interact again. So, it was just a really nice conversation but it does not build community.

Others note that this lack of consistent communication and ability for informal interaction limits opportunities for faculty to collaborate on research or communicate about shared students. A suggestion made by many is for USC to find opportunities to bring faculty in person together once or twice a year. As one female instructor with over three years' experience teaching in the VAC suggests:

I think it's key to at least provide opportunities for faculty members to come together as a full body of faculty as we do on the ground. I've found that that's been the way that connections have been established, research opportunities have opened up, writing, all those types of things. There are opportunities that just

happened just in conversations walking in the same physical space in the hallway. 'I've done that – if you're interested in this, I'm on this research project would you like to participate?' You know there are things like that that happen by the nature of being in the same physical space but I don't know how that happens to the VAC – so I think creating some opportunity for that.

Another idea introduced is to host bi-annual faculty meetings by region so that people living in the same part of the country can get to know each other. Others recommend developing alternative methods for community-building that do not require meeting in person. This perspective considers establishing virtual opportunities for connection using the Adobe Connect platform built for the VAC. Considering alternative strategies is exemplified by a male tenure line instructor:

There should be 'here is one strategy for engaging students and faculty' but it doesn't...because to me it always ends this message that meeting in person or on the ground, coming to campus, is always best. And that maybe is the case but it feels premature to me, at this point. To me, it seems like we should explore more and be open to the fact that, yeah, it's just different. You get to engage in that way when it's live, but how do you build a sense of community that is as rich, as rewarding, with your students and your colleagues when you do it online and feel that it is just as good, if not better, than meeting on the ground.

Theme 3: Community-building Among Faculty and Students

While there is general consensus about challenges faced building community among faculty, participants held varying opinions on community-building between faculty and students. Using Adobe Connect technology, faculty facilitate weekly 75-minute synchronous class discussions. For some, community-building with students in the classroom and over email has been a productive experience. Several reflect that there is little difference in their ability to build community with students online as compared to their experiences teaching in a traditional setting. One male instructor in his mid-40s with over ten years teaching experience shares:

I develop relationships with the students totally online at the same quality I would say as on the ground. Again, the modality of interaction on the phone, or office hours, not in the same air space that's a little bit different but in terms of the person-to-person connection or the professor-to-student connection its absolutely just as good.

Another male teaching both on the ground and in the VAC indicates:

I wouldn't say that there's any difference based on geographical location, no. I think that the relationship is the same regardless of whether they are on the East Coast, or whether they are international, or in the South, or Midwest or North. I don't necessarily see any difference.

Others identify challenges building community with students that are commonly associated with geography. As with community-building among faculty, some participants feel that not having informal interactions around campus limits their ability to get to know

their students outside of the classroom. Along a similar vein, some suggest that it can be challenging to mentor students that are taking virtual classes in a traditional sense. For example, if living across the country from each other, an instructor would not be able to connect students with local resources or professional contacts. One tenure-line female professor with over 30 years teaching experience reflects:

There is no way that I could have the same connections in their different cities to help them. There's no way you can develop the same kind of rapport and that they can benefit from some of the relationship with me in the same way as if they're on the ground and walking around and dropping in.

Another instructor, a tenured female teaching both on the ground and in the VAC shares:

On campus you can see people on the quad...you can see people formally in the classroom and you see people informally. And I didn't have that opportunity with the online students. Kind of more came to class and then if they needed something, I was in touch with them but it was never...like we were all attending the same lecture, we went to this lunch, or they were, you know, tabling in the quad and I was able to go talk to them about their cause.

While a handful of participants identified barriers to community-building with students, the majority reported that geography does not limit their ability to know or mentor students. Some reflect that, regardless of modality, there are always going to be some students who seek mentorship and deeper relationships with their professors more than others. Several participants acknowledged that it is easier for students to be anonymous in a virtual classroom, thus faculty need to develop strategies to engage students throughout the term. One instructor requires all of her students, regardless of campus, schedule a private meeting at some point in the term. She explains:

One of the things that I like to do with the students that were a bit of a surprise with the VAC students was try to have a quick individual meeting with everybody – private – just to get to know them a little bit. Make them more comfortable talking to me so I have students that have to come see me in my office or make a VAC appointment before the midterm.

Others relate that they use synchronous class time to stimulate group discussions and build community. As one female professor in her mid-sixties shares:

What I try to do in the synchronous portion is to really sort of ask the kinds of questions that stimulate discussion among students. I always start my course talking about who I am and why I'm teaching this course and then I ask them about who they are. I really try to get to understand where they are coming from.

Several respondents noted that features of the virtual classrooms successfully facilitate relationship-building among the students and with faculty. Most participants appreciate the smaller classroom size on the VAC, and many value the ability to use the breakout rooms for small group exercises and the chat pod to build community. As one female instructor with over a decade of teaching experience reflects:

I do like the smaller classes and I see a great deal of collegiality that is built and respect for each other and interest....like you have the little chat box that's going on at the side and I always look to see, for example, how someone shared something and others will jump in and comment. That doesn't happen in the ground classes, where people give feedback immediately to their peers. I think in many ways the peer support is greater on the VAC even though they are not in the same physical space.

Discussion

This qualitative research study aimed to explore the specific experiences of instructors in USC's VAC. An especially significant motivation of the faculty was the opportunity to teach a geographically diverse body of students that stretches across the entire U.S. and into other countries. In teaching in traditional on-the-ground classrooms, instructors may experience a diversity of sociodemographic characteristics, but the students are all constrained to one geographic location. In contrast to traditional programs, VAC instructors virtually interact with students embedded in different locations with various perspectives that would be difficult to experience otherwise. Existing literature touches on the unique characteristics of students attracted to virtual education, including students being older, representing rural communities, and having financial and family responsibilities that prohibit traditional graduate education programs (Flynn et al, 2013; Hill Jones, 2015; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Reamer, 2013; Stotzer, 2012). However, participants in this study consider an alternative type of classroom diversity that is largely unrepresented in the literature. As an example, one participant identified the unique ability to examine the implementation of social policies in different communities around the country. Future examination of VAC student diversity and its impact on educational and career outcomes of graduates may create greater understanding of how to build and sustain national and international social work educational communities.

While study participants largely appreciated the diversity of their virtual students, the limited attention given to the geographic diversity of the faculty was surprising. In fact, in many ways, the distance among faculty was considered a limitation to relationship building and collaboration as was illustrated by the statements related in Theme 2, Community-building among Faculty. USC is one of the first schools of social work to employ faculty who are not based in the same location as the ground campus, representing a unique education delivery system (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). Research suggests that, even with the most advanced technology, the lack of shared physical spaces for interaction is a challenge for both students and faculty (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Smith, 2015). Voices represented in this study echo existing literature suggesting that virtual educators can experience a sense of isolation and alienation from colleagues, students, and the larger organization (Smith, 2015). While a growing body of research considers a developing pedagogy for virtual education and for using technology to facilitate community-building with students (Hill Jones, 2015; Horvath & Mills, 2011), there is less emphasis on faculty perspectives and experiences. Examining how to transcend these challenges and reframe geographic diversity of faculty is something that warrants investigation in the future.

The instructor experiences of community-building with faculty and students in virtual classrooms were seen to have many similarities but also significant differences in physicality. Establishing and working with this difference in student-faculty and faculty-faculty community-building in the VAC provides both opportunities and challenges for the future growth of the program. Apart from the physicality, the scale of the VAC can be daunting, and there may be emergent challenges to programming and community-building presented by the mere size and rapid growth of the program (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015; Pruitt & Silverman, 2015; Reamer, 2013). Future research should explore what might be the optimal size of the VAC platform in terms of numbers of students and faculty to build effective community. Getting all students and faculty, particularly the pool of part-time adjunct instructors, together in one physical or virtual meeting is probably not realistic; however, smaller regionalized meetings should be considered as should virtual opportunities for community-building.

Study Limitations

The study was primarily limited by the extent of its analysis, which was restricted to a qualitative methodological approach that identified themes that were largely descriptive. This qualitative methodology precludes quantitative inferences about the relationships among the themes and perspectives described in this paper. It would have been useful to conduct more analysis mapping of the identified themes to abstract concepts grounded in the data, and to systematically relate them to specific concepts found in the literature. The use of non-probability purposive and quota sampling limits our ability to generalize the findings beyond the USC faculty members interviewed for the study. Comparison of cases representing the different strata of the purposive sampling design would have provided one way to increase the extent of the analysis and move from description to explanation. The fact that only one interviewer was used to complete all of the interviews and that this individual is an instructor in the VAC creates the potential for interviewer bias. Lastly, quite a few programmatic changes have been made since the original interviews took place. Many of these changes were designed to create more opportunities to connect faculty across campuses and build a more cohesive community. The data presented in this paper do not represent programmatic changes made after the data collection.

Conclusion

The VAC challenges the basic assumptions that have guided social work education from its beginning as a profession. Our research has shown that certain basic assumptions of social work education concerning geographical uniformity, physicality, and scale of community-building among faculty members with each other and their students have been challenged by the VAC. The program has undoubtedly increased access to and opportunities for quality MSW education as well as introduced a model for the wider social transformation of education. But with this innovative model specific unintended consequences and lessons learned have emerged that need to be investigated and applied in future research on the VAC and similar internet-based models of social work education. At bare minimum, the formative research presented in this paper documents that social work has entered into a new design of the classroom in which everyone is seated in the

front row. In this new design, the opportunities and challenges for community-building are impressive, but need to be specifically addressed in order to determine future directions of social work education in the virtual environment.

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Appendix A

VAC Faculty Interview Schedule

Thank you for participating in this study! We are eager to learn about your experiences as an instructor in the Virtual Academic Center. The information that you and your colleagues share will be completely anonymous and will help develop a knowledge base around the instructor experience in an online social work community.

Your identity will remain completely confidential. While your interview will be tape recorded and transcribed, your personal identity will not be attached to the interview. Your identity for the purposes of this study will be your interview number (e.g., Interview #1, Interview #2, etc.). The only individual who will be able to link your name with your interview transcript will be the person conducting the interview. This information will be held in the strictest confidence. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and no harm is anticipated to occur as a result of this interview.

Do you consent to participate?

- *Yes Date:* _____
- *No Date:* _____

1. What motivated you to get involved with teaching in the VAC?
 - i. Prompt: Have you had prior experience teaching online?
 - ii. Prompt: Have you taken online classes?
2. How did you prepare for teaching in a virtual community?
 - i. Prompt: Did you receive any special training?
 - ii. Prompt: Did you feel prepared to teach online?
3. What has your experience been teaching in the VAC?
 - i. Prompt: What have your classroom experiences been like?
 - ii. Prompt: If you have taught on the ground before, how is this different?
 - iii. Prompt: What lessons have you learned about teaching online?
4. Given our large number of student veteran population, how prepared do you feel with managing student veteran issues that may come up in the classroom?
 - i. Prompt: Do you have a personal or professional history with the military community? Please explain.
 - ii. Prompt: Have you received special training or mentorship?
5. Describe the relationships that you have with your students on the VAC.
 - i. Prompt: Have you noticed a difference in your VAC student relationships compared to your other teaching experiences?
 - ii. Prompt: The VAC has small classrooms. How has this been for you?
 - iii. Prompt: Do you feel as if you to get to know your students?
 - iv. Prompt: Do you mentor students on the VAC?

6. In your experience, what are the opportunities and challenges of being an instructor in the VAC?
 - i. Prompt: What works for you regarding teaching in the VAC?
 - ii. Prompt: Is there anything that you think could enhance your experience as a VAC instructor?

7. How do you experience community in the VAC?
 - i. Prompt: Do you interact with other instructors?
 - ii. Prompt: Do you attend faculty meetings? If yes, do you attend in person or log on to the VAC?
 - iii. Prompt: Do you feel as if you are part of a larger virtual community? If so, what does that feel like to you?
 - iv. Prompt: Do you feel satisfied with your connection to the larger USC School of Social Work system?

8. What is your age range?
 - o 25-29
 - o 30-39
 - o 40-49
 - o 50-59
 - o 60 +

9. What is your gender?

10. Your ethnic/racial background:
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Black/African-American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native American
 - White
 - Other (please specify): _____

11. What is your terminal degree?

12. What is your position at USC?
 - o Tenure/Tenure Track
 - o Clinical Teaching Faculty
 - o Clinical Field Faculty
 - o Research Faculty
 - o Adjunct Faculty

13. How many years of teaching experience have you had?

14. How many years have you been teaching in the USC School of Social Work?

15. How many years have you been teaching in the VAC?