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# Building a Bridge: Challenging the Negative Perceptions of School Resource Officers

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Building a Bridge: Challenging the Negative Perceptions of School Resource Officers

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### **Abstract**

This capstone addresses the negative perceptions of School Resource Officers (SROs) on local high school campuses. One common concern is that at risk students will have a higher rate of going to jail if they go to a school with a SRO. This capstone provides insight that counteracts such common stereotypes of the relationship between resource officers and the School to Prison Pipeline. An argument is made that schools can benefit from SROs because of the critical role they can play on campus. SROs function at a higher level than police officers or security guards. More specifically, SROs can serve as mentors, counselors, and provide safety when necessary. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what he learned to formulate an action that responded to the focus issue in a way that inspired, informed, or involved a particular audience.

*Keywords: School Resource Officer, SRO, School to Prison Pipeline, Law enforcement*

## Building a Bridge: Challenging the Negative Perceptions of School Resource Officers

Growing up in Baytown<sup>1</sup>, California, I have witnessed the community change drastically. Throughout my K-12 education I have attended schools only in Baytown and have lived in the area of the city that is known for its higher crime rate. Baytown, was once known for being the “Salad Bowl” of the world due to its’ agricultural resources, but over the years the “Salad Bowl” name has been slowly been drifting away. Instead it is recognized as a high gang violence area and is even considered the youth murder capital of California. Baytown now is known for its violence instead of its wonderful resources and history. I have personally witnessed people talk about Baytown being a dangerous area and I have even had people ask me if I am scared to live there. Over the past decade gang violence has been a significant problem in Baytown, at times taking the lives of innocent people. Some victims of gang violence were never involved with gangs and instead were either with the wrong people or wearing a color that represented a certain gang.

As I mentioned previously, I have attended multiple schools in Baytown, but it was not until I reached middle school and high school that I began to see problems among students. Entering middle school, I began to see drug use, fights, gang activity, bullying, truancy, vandalism all taking place on campus. As these problems arose, the schools I attended began to try to solve them by bringing in drug sniffing dogs randomly throughout the school year. Also, more supervising staff was added to our lunch period.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

These problems only got worse going into high school. There was greater amount of gang activity, higher drug and alcohol use, more fights, even weapons were found on campus. Again, trying to solve these problems, the school brought in drug sniffing dogs, supervisors were being placed in high risk areas, and certain areas were blocked off during lunch and break periods. It was not until a School Resource Officer (SRO) was present, that I saw a difference in student delinquent activity. The presence of the SRO had an impact because he was observant of the students and placed themselves in areas where they saw problems were going to occur. The SRO would also be near the group of students that were known to be involved in gang activity, this would make those students be aware of their decisions. The SRO was also a resource, I would see students go up and speak to him during lunch, I personally had friends that would ask them for advice, but most importantly their presence promoted safety.

The career I want to pursue is law enforcement. My personal experiences have made me pursue that career. I want to help people, but also make a change in my community. I decided to choose SROs as my capstone project because, I believe it is a great idea to have an officer on campus to ensure safety and be used as a resource. Another reason I chose to do this project is because, being a Liberal Studies student, I have learned not only about schools and how they work, but also how diverse they are. Wanting to pursue the law enforcement path, it made me want to incorporate law enforcement into schools, and find the benefits of having an SRO.

Just recently the Baytown Police Department received a grant to fund the SRO program, however no school district wanted to adopt the program. The grant was funded by the state, meaning no money from the department was being used to fund SROs, which was an issue some people had when denying the program. It is important to educate parents, community, and staff

on what the SRO program is about. The lack of education on the program may be a big portion of the reason why it is being denied. However, a school district in Baytown just recently adopted the SRO program, and will be having two officers available for all its campuses. With this district adopting the program, it will allow other districts to learn about the benefits it provides. This gives me hope in my community, in that we are moving towards a plan to allow our schools to be safer places.

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

A School Resource Officer (SRO) is a sworn law enforcement official that is placed on a school campus to provide security and crime prevention services (Wikipedia, 2017). The SRO takes on more roles than just enforcing the law on a school campus. COPS (n.d.) provides a visual example of the additional roles an SRO takes, including mentoring, counseling and managing. The School to Prison Pipeline has had an impact in not allowing SROs on school campus', due to the negative misconceptions, such as connecting students to the Juvenile Court Systems.

#### **What is the issue?**

As a SRO, many roles such as security and crime prevention services are linked to the duty. According to Sneed (2015), the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) is to create relationships with their communities and provide safety in schools. In his work, Sneed (2015) talks about a community that is took different perspectives on SROs. The community stated that SROs were not building relationships nor providing safety, but instead were building a connection to the School to Prison Pipeline.

Likewise, an additional example of negative perceptions of SROs is the Salinas Police Department. In 2014, the Salinas Police Department received a \$3.4 million grant from the U.S. Justice Department to support the placement of officers on school campuses (Adami, 2017). According to Melendez (2017), in the summer of 2017, the Salinas Police Department attempted to implement the grant in the Salinas Union High School District, but was denied. Throughout the process of having the Salinas Police Department attempt to implement SROs, many community members spoke out against having SROs, and a common terminology that arose was the School to Prison Pipeline (Melendez, 2017).

So what is the School to Prison Pipeline? According to Mallet (2015) “the pipeline is best understood as a set of policies and practices that make it more likely for students face criminal involvement with juvenile courts than to attain a quality education”(p.1). Therefore, the School to Prison Pipeline is a term that refers to students being at higher risk of entering the Criminal Justice System. According to Amurao (2013), statistics have shown that the School to Prison Pipeline has more of a target on students of color or students that have a history of abuse, neglect, poverty or learning disabilities. The School to Prison Pipeline tends to focus on disciplining students with more severe consequences rather than a warning or talk with the principal.

The School to Prison Pipeline is also considered to be a term that is used in connection to SRO’s. According to Elias (2013), the School to Prison Pipeline includes physical restraint tactics, and automatic suspensions for actions that can be resolved in a different manner. Elias (2013), also states that many classroom policies such as Zero tolerance, and teacher decisions all contribute to the School to Prison Pipeline. As well as Amurao(2013), Elias(2013) makes the

connection that the School to Prison Pipeline only targets students of color and students with learning disabilities.

### **Why is it an Issue?**

**Answer 1:** A School Resource officer as shown in figure 1, is a law enforcer at schools that is present to provide safety, eliminating the amount of crimes that happen on campus. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), data shows many different forms of crimes are happening in schools. The crimes can vary from harassment, threat with or without a weapon, violence and drugs. NCES states that between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2014 there were a total of 48 deaths among schools in the United States. The 48 deaths included staff, students, and non-student school associated deaths. NCES also reports that in 2013- 2014 school year, there was 65 percent of crime reported among public schools, leading to 757,000 incidents (2017).

Moreover, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (NCASA), a survey was conducted and showed that 46% of teenage students reported gang activity in public schools (2010). The statistic shows that gang activity is a common issue that is ongoing in schools. The gang activity increases or decreases depending on the area of the school. With gang activity in schools much more crime is vulnerable to occur. According to Zhang, et al., (2016), it is stated that students from urban areas reported more gang activity (18%) than students from suburban (11%) and rural areas (7%) in 2013. In response to the high crime activity in schools, COPS (2003) states, “Law Enforcement in schools has been viewed nationwide as a reaction to school violence.”



**Answer 2:** As mentioned previously, SRO is a sworn in law enforcement officer who is placed on a school campus to promote safety. Although, the SRO acts more than just a community officer, because s/he may take the role of informal counselor, educator and emergency manager. As shown in Figure 1, the informal counselor will build relationships with students, while still enforcing positive behavior. As an educator the SRO will be a resource for any information regarding law enforcement. As an emergency manager the SRO will provide safety for schools as well as implementing strategies for additional crimes. The roles provided counteract any connections to the School to Prison Pipeline.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>LAW ENFORCER</u></b></p> <p>Promotes <b>safety</b> in or around the school by addressing crime and fear of crime</p> <p>Serves as a <b>liaison</b> between the school and outside agencies</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>INFORMAL COUNSELOR</u></b></p> <p>Builds relationships</p> <p>Reinforces <b>positive behaviors</b></p> <p>Connects <b>youth</b> with needed services</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>EDUCATOR</u></b></p> <p>Teaches topics related to law enforcement geared toward positive student behavior</p> <p>Collaborates with stakeholder groups</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>EMERGENCY MANAGER</u></b></p> <p>Develops and implements <b>comprehensive safety plans</b> or strategies, in coordination with school administrators and local first responders</p>

*Figure 1 SRO Roles: SROs play multiple roles in schools. Retrieved from <https://cops.usdoj.gov/supportingsafeschools>*

**What should be done?**

**Answer 1:** Educating the public about the SRO roles, will help eliminate the negative perceptions. As stated previously, an SRO takes more than just being a police officer on campus.

Many common thoughts that arose throughout research is connecting students to the School to Prison Pipeline, but the benefits a SRO provides were being left out. According to Schlottman (2015), an SRO states, that other than he or she being only an enforcer, he has also taken part in handling truancy, providing protection at school events, providing traffic control and also given law enforcement presentations in classrooms. The SRO also states “My presence in these roles has made me part of the fabric of the school rather than an outsider, which strengthens the relationships with the students, staff, visitors and stakeholders.”

**Answer 2:** Having a required training, will allow SROs to be more suitable for the job and will also make them more credible. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the law enforcement officer who is seeking to become an SRO will go through a forty (40) hour training course (n.d.). The course will teach the officer how to build a partnership like relationship with the school. The format that NASRO provides for SRO is likely to tackle the School to Prison Pipeline term. Many ethics are taught, how to deal with violence, special needs kids, understanding teenagers, and being a counselor/mentor (n.d.).

Overall, educating the public and having trained SROs may provide a different perspective. The SROs are on campus to be more than just a law enforcer, as research shows they provide different resources that will benefit students, staff and parents. Educating their audience on the roles an SRO takes will establish relationships, therefore leading to a more welcoming atmosphere.

### **Method**

For this Capstone Project the researcher investigated how various stakeholders view School Resource Officers (SROs) and what they thought could be done to improve the negative

perceptions of SROs. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what he learned to formulate an action that responds to the focus issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

### **Context**

Baytown<sup>2</sup>, is a mid-size town located 8 miles from the Pacific Ocean, with a population of 170,000 people. Baytown is surrounded by agricultural fields. According to DataUsa (n.d.), Baytown's employment opportunities are highest in agriculture. Baytown has a crime rate problem with gang violence increasing since 2007. Baytown is also one of the capitals for youth crime rates, with its low population compared to metropolitan areas, its crime rate is high (Magdaleno, 2016). According to Greatschools (2017), Baytown has a total of five different school districts, one of those being a Union High School district.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

The three participants who were interviewed were all males. The reason they were chosen is because they all had a connection to the perceptions of SROs. All three males were Latino and work on a school campus.

**Alex Green<sup>3</sup>:** Former student at a school where a SRO was present. Green is also familiar with the School to Prison Pipeline from conducting research.

**John Brown<sup>4</sup>:** A Latino male who has been a community liaison for 5 months. Brown is also familiar with the perceptions of SROs, as he has worked closely with a community group that

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

focuses on transforming institutions and organizations.

**Joe Smith<sup>5</sup>:** A Latino Police Officer who is currently an SRO. Smith has been a police officer for 14 years and has worked as a part-time SRO in the past.

### **Researcher**

- How and why is the concern personally meaningful to you?

I have experienced the turnaround of students and also the benefits of having a school resource officer on campus. My career goal is law enforcement, this will be an assignment that is in my interest to benefiting the youth.

- What experiences, background knowledge, and personal qualities, skills, and/or talents qualify you to carry out this project?

I went to a school where we had a SRO for a certain amount of time and witnessed the impacts a SRO has when being on campus.

- We all have biases; the most insidious are those of which we are unaware or unacknowledged. What makes you different from the “targets” and “influentials?” Is it race, ethnicity, social class, education, work experience, physical or mental ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc? How might these differences impact both your perspectives and work on the concern?

The community I grew up had rise in gang violence while I attended middle school and high school. I witnessed many problems while attending schools, starting from gangs, drugs, fights etc. Me being an athlete, excluded myself from those problems, but was able to witness the impacts a School Resource Officer had when he or she was on campus.

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

1. Tell me about SROs?
  - a. What do you see as the problems with how SROs are perceived? Why is this an issue?
2. What is currently being done to improve public opinion about SROs? - by whom - and what do you feed about these efforts? Why?
3. What do you think should be done to improve public opinions about SROs?
4. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to changing to improving public opinions about SROs?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about public perceptions of SROs and/or the improvement of how they are perceived?

### **Procedure**

Participants were selected for the interviews based on their knowledgeable connections regarding the School to Prison Pipeline or SROs. The participants were emailed and asked if they were willing to participate in being part of the research. Next, an interview date was set up at a neutral location. The interviews were done face to face and were audio recorded upon their consent. The short interview conducted of five questions, with regards of any further information questions. Each interview lasted between 15-30 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, three community members were interviewed to see what they

think could be done to eliminate the School to Prison Pipeline. This is important because the School to Prison Pipeline is a major terminology used when implementing SROs on a campus. Throughout research, it has been found that many believe SROs make a stronger connection between juvenile students and the Juvenile Justice System (Melendez, 2017; Elias, 2013; Sneed, 2015). Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; cost and impact. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1: Evaluation of Action Options

	Time	Cost	Outreach
Social Media Publicity	Low	Low	High
SRO workshop	Medium	Low	Medium
SRO mandatory Training	Medium	High	Low

### **Social Media Publicity**

Publicizing the actions that a SRO is taking in schools is crucial to eliminating the School to Prison Pipeline. As mentioned previously, Sneed (2015) states that the role of an SRO is to build relationship with the community and provide safety in schools. Instead the community has taken a different perspective leading them to believe that SROs are connecting the students to the School to Prison Pipeline. According to Smith, (personal communication, November 16, 2017) he states that only the negative media is being publicized, therefore the benefits that SROs actually bring to the schools are being hidden. The outcome of those publishes, create a negative

mindset in people, leading to SROs not being allowed on campus. Smith, also states that he has taken initiative in publicizing his work using his personal social media page, and has received positive results from parents and community members.

Using a social media page for publicity will take a low on time because it can be a quick post with picture and message that can be done. The social media page is low on cost because most social media pages are free. There may be a required cost if the user wants to make the social media page professional. There will be high outreach on parents, students, teachers etc. because social media is a popular demand. Certain social media pages have also been used to publish certain events, news, etc.

### **SRO workshop**

Two of the three interviewees mentioned a workshop being done to educate the people (parents, teachers, students, etc.). As mentioned previously, Schlottman (2015) conducted an interview with a SRO, where the SRO then states that his roles were more than being an enforcer. It was mentioned that the roles he took were providing safety, traffic control and also giving presentations of his duties as a police officer. Green (personal communication, November 5, 2017) stated that he was not aware of what an SRO does, but he does know about the School to Prison Pipeline. Green gave the recommendation of SROs providing a workshop at schools where people may attend to receive information regarding their roles. Smith, agreed to the workshops as he has received questions by parents of what he does at the schools. Smith also states that it is important for the parents, teachers and students to know what SRO provides because it can eliminate the perceptions of School to Prison Pipeline, but will also allow them to understand that the SRO is there to benefit the students and staff.

Creating a workshop at schools will have a medium impact on time, because there may be limitations on how much time is available, but also setting a certain date will create complications. There will be a low impact on cost. The workshop will likely have to take place at an after school meeting, creating no additional costs for the school. This is because school staff is at times required to attend meetings. There will be a medium impact on the outreach, because parents may not always be available to attend, therefore only certain parents will receive the information that SROs provide.

### **Mandatory Training**

When conducting the interviews, a common issue that arose was that a SRO is not trained like a certified teacher or counselor. Therefore, it was mentioned by all interviewees that having an SRO trained like a certified school staff member would help reduce the School to Prison Pipeline connection. According to National Association of School Resource Officer (NASRO), the desired officer will be put through 40 hours of training if they want to be certified as an SRO. Two of interviewees stated, that the trainings will allow them to understand how to work with students, which will allow the SRO to act more of a certified school staff than a police officer on campus. Brown (personal communication, November 15, 2017) stated that SROs do not have the appropriate training that counselors or teachers do to understand juvenile students. Therefore, there is no benefit of having an SRO as they will be more of an enforcer than mentor. Smith agreed to the statement regarding appropriate training, he added that training should be mandatory. The reason for Smith to state mandatory training is because, he states that the brain of a young adult is not as developed as one from a grown adult, therefore it requires different techniques when working with juveniles.



Having mandatory training has a medium impact on time because according to the NASRO, it is only a 40-hour training. The training will have a benefit because the SRO will be exposed to specific trainings needed when working with young adults. The cost of will be high, because there will be costs for the trainings, but also may require travel, which will be paid to the desired SRO. The outreach of the training will have a medium impact because the students may be the only ones impacted. The SRO will possibly need additional training to have a stronger impact on everyone in the school.

### **Recommendation**

From the three themes that arose from the interviews, as shown in Table 1, it is recommended that the positive work from SRO is published. Publishing the positives will help eliminate negative perceptions that certain audiences have. I am confident this will create an impact because, the SRO that was interviewed has already started this process and has received positive outcomes from the community he works for.

### **Concessions**

The two other options shown in Table 1, SRO workshops and SRO mandatory training are also great options. Both these options will decrease any misconceptions on SRO as they will provide information for the community. Also, the training will increase the acceptance for SRO as they are receiving proper training to be successful when working with students and eliminate the School to Prison Pipeline.

### **Limitations**

Using social media as a publisher may have limitations, as this action option arose throughout the interviews. Social media is only accessible when using internet. This may cause

an issue as not everyone has access to the internet. Also, having to create a profile might limit the size of an audience, because some people may not have the knowledge to create a profile or might not want to take the time to create it. Therefore, not everyone will have access to viewing the positives an SRO provides.

### **Potential Negative Outcomes**

Publicizing the benefits on social media may cause bias perceptions. The social media profile will be only publicizing the positive outcomes, which might make people question why the negatives are not being published. Therefore, the information presented may not be seen reliable as only the pros are being shown and the cons are being hidden.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the action options provided all have great outcomes. Although, I still have a stronger opinion about using the social media as an outreach. Using the social media, allows the audience to have access at all times with only having to take little time out of their day. Furthermore, social media is free to access, creating a more accessible resource for the audience.

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

For this capstone project, my focus was to eliminate the negative perceptions on SROs. Three interviews were conducted. Two of the interviewees saw no purpose in having a SRO, while the other interview was a SRO. After analyzing all three interviews, three action options emerged to help eliminate the negative perceptions of SROs. These three action options are:

1. Using social media to publish the positive work an SRO does on campus
2. Creating workshops for an SRO to educate and clear any misconceptions
3. Having mandatory training for a SRO

For this project, the action option I chose was to use social media as a publisher. The reason for me choosing social media is because, it is a very popular interaction that most people use, creating a much greater audience. Using it allows for the positives to be shown to the public, helps educate the public, and it can also be used as a resource. With social media being used as a publisher, the negative perceptions can be eliminated because people will be able to see what the SRO does on the school campus. Also, with social media, many people can contribute, examples are the schools, news media, and even the police departments.

In order for me to start this action, I had to choose from three popular social media sites: Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The social media that seemed best fitting was Instagram. Instagram was easier to navigate, used pictures as its icons, would save the story until the user deleted it, and it was public. Once the profile was created (Appendix A), I posted pictures to show some benefits of SROs. The profile was made public for anyone to see and share.

During the process of creating the profile, I had to modify what pictures to post. While searching for pictures, I had to analyze, because there were some pictures that conveyed no meaning and perhaps would not capture the audience attention. Also, as mentioned previously the positives are being concealed therefore it made it difficult to find positive stories of SRO. The pictures that were posted showed the interaction between SRO and students, but also some roles that SROs take. Some changes I would like to make are expand the audience by following popular profiles, therefore they can contribute and share. Having other sources share the positives of SRO will help eliminate the negative perceptions of SRO.

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

After working on this capstone project, I came across information that was beneficial

towards my topic but also information that made me question about SROs not being allowed in schools. This project was also very interesting because I have been in schools where having an SRO made a positive impact.

With law enforcement being my career goal, this project has allowed me to know that law enforcement and schools do not always have a great relationship. There are many benefits of having a SRO but educating the public is the core to allowing officers in schools. If I am successful in achieving my career goal, being a SRO would be a field that would be in my interest because I have educated myself regarding SRO, but also because I will be a great fit for wanting to help students.

After working on this capstone project, I was excited to make connections in my desired career of law enforcement and my area of study. Although when conducting research, not much research was available for the certain information I was searching for. Many negative perceptions arose which brought more curiosity to my issue. It was interesting to make connections between my personal points of view and experiences to the research I found. Being able to conduct interviews and receive personal points of view allowed me to expand my research and dig deeper to understand their reasons.

This project allowed me to create an action option that I believe will have an impact in making a change towards the negative perceptions of SRO. Although, working towards the change is not necessarily easy, the message I want to portray relies on having a large audience as the negative perceptions seem to rise all over the country. The action option was a great start to help eliminate the negative perceptions. If I am successful in achieving my career goal of law enforcement, being an SRO would be a field that would be in my interest because I have

educated myself regarding SRO, but also because being a Liberal Studies student I have learned about diversity, social justice and working with students.

When regarding Major Learning Outcome (MLO) 2: Diversity and Multicultural Scholar, my personal and professional development grew in the area of diversity. Many of the courses I took at CSUMB covered that area of study such as LS 362 Immigrants and Equity Issues in Education and LS 384 Issues in Comparative and International Education. These courses taught me about the different cultures and education systems around the world. In my K-12 education I rarely learned about other cultures so this was completely new knowledge to me. In these courses I learned about both different ethnicities and sexualities.

Another MLO that has impacted my professional development at CSUMB, is MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator. One course that helped me grow in this part of my career was LS 391: Diversity in Educational Settings. This courses taught me about all the different groups of people that have migrated into the United States and some history of why they did so. I thought it was interesting to learn the historical reason as of to why these groups of people migrated and left their home countries behind in search for a better life. It is so common to believe that some people just come to this country in order to look for the American Dream, however, I learned there are many other reasons why people come here such as persecution in their own countries. Another interesting fact I learned in this course was that not all the people from Latin American countries share the same culture and language. Every country and state has their different unique culture and language.

In my opinion learning about diversity and different cultures is important because, not only does this topic relate to education but to everyday social human interaction. MLO 2:

Diversity and Multicultural Scholar and MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator have impacted my future career because I have learned to not categorize or stereotype people based on their appearance.

As my semester comes to an end and I graduate CSUMB, I will continue to seek my career as Law Enforcement. As a professional, I will use the information I learned as a Liberal Studies student and apply it to my career. The skills and information I learned will make me a better person because I will have a more broad perspective on ideas, solutions, and cultures. As mentioned previously becoming an SRO will be a desire of mine as I have gained knowledge and first hand experiences on how to create a positive outcome.

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### Appendix A

Instagram profile “sro\_publicity”

