**Abstract:**

*Study Pond* is a website designed to help Western students find and connect with study groups devoted to a specific class or topic. The goal of the site is to bridge the “communication gap” that often exists in lecture classes, where students usually don’t know their peers and don’t feel comfortable initiating group meet-ups. *Study Pond* is hosted on Western’s WordPress service, which allows users to make posts about group meetings, respond to others’ posts, and browse pre-existing groups by subject or department. The site is intended to be straightforward, efficient, and user-friendly.

**Intro and Overview:**

*Study Pond* was created to serve Western students looking for study groups to enhance their learning. While brainstorming ways to help our fellow students, we identified the universal experience of being in a large lecture class, where it is difficult to make friends and study partners you can go to for help or test preparation. *Study Pond* was therefore designed to get around that “communication gap”, and help students connect with each other by forming or finding groups that would meet their learning needs. Because the site is organized by classes and departments specific to Western, we envisioned *Study Pond* to be a purely Western-based resource.

**User Research:**

For the user research process, our goal was to find out how to create a website as suitable for the users based on the findings. To do that, Asaki conducted interviews and surveys in person and online. To grasp the right audience, she interviewed a wide range of potential users. She interviewed students in STEM, business, arts, design, education, etc. And she has made sure to include all students in different school years. She has come to realize that not all majors need study group sites. For example, in a small major like plastics and composites engineering, often times, it feels unnecessary to have a study group. They feel this way due to the structure of their courses. Similar to plastics and composites engineers, other smaller the major were the same way. People tend to just reach out within their own major. Especially when you are far along in a small major, you know everyone and it makes it easy for them to reach out to work together. But looking at popular larger majors like business, political science, and others, they tend to need more help finding study partners. A good find we had was that in lecture classes, the seating arrangements make it hard for students to communicate with one another. So students with lecture heavy classes can find good use of these websites.

**Design Decisions/Process:**

            While contemplating Content Management Systems, we originally considered using Grav, an online CMS service that provides design skeletons and site hosting. However, we quickly ran into complications that other groups also mentioned in their presentations; for example, the skeletons were very expansive, complex, and difficult to edit. Because *Study Pond* has a fairly simple premise, we then decided to go ‘back to basics’ and find a CMS that would fit our utilitarian and user-friendly needs.

         We ultimately decided on Western’s provided WordPress service for our CMS. WordPress is originally intended to host blogging platforms, and its design is catered to that end, but we believed its functions were straightforward enough to suit our purposes. WordPress did meet our general needs, which included posting and commenting functions, a post categorization system, and a form function that prospective members could use to sign up for the site.

         We did encounter some difficulties because of WordPress’s inherent limitations. For example, we weren’t able to create a membership authorization page that would verify that only Western students were granted membership/user access (i.e. by requiring a user to input their W#). WordPress also had a built-in post limit function that would inhibit the freedom to use the site for non-members. Lastly, Western’s WordPress system did not send out administrator invites to all of our group members, so Alyssa was not granted access to edit the site despite being part of the design team.

**User Feedback:**

After the project was finished, we had some students play around with on our site to test it out. Students saw a good use of the website, but had mentioned that Wordpress may not have been a good place to plant it on. It seemed obvious to the users that we had difficulties working with Wordpress. Our website didn’t look advanced to our users. They were looking for more of a modern overall look for the page. With these criticisms, there were also positive feedback as well. They had an easy time navigating through the page, and wished to see this take place at Western. Overall, our page was straightforward to the users and even though it wasn’t as aesthetically pleasing to them, it was functionally pleasing.

**Self-Reflective Statement:**

Overall, we learned about the triumphs and challenges of creating a website with an entire group of students. Many intro-level computer science classes only ask for individual projects and portfolios, so this was a new experience that required a learning curve. The most difficult part of the project was identifying a CMS that would suit our needs, since many of us were not familiar with the concept of a CMS or how to use one. It was also a challenge to produce written work documenting our entire design process while actively trying to build the site. Lastly, just as in any group project, it is always tricky to coordinate conflicting schedules and ideas, but our group was luckily very communicative and cooperative. All in all, our biggest takeaways from this project were how to do design/process documentation and how to use content management systems.