GRAND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE
Impact Model: Scope, Products, Impacts, and Timeframes

Grand challenge: “a deeply significant problem widely recognized by the public whose solution is within our grasp in the next decade, given concentrated scientific and practical attention.”

Internal Impacts and Products

Within 12 months
Inform and engage the field about the GC (publications, presentations) and articulate Grand Context.

18 months
Announce and disseminate the final GCs with exemplars of prior societal impact and highlight the profession’s Grand Accomplishments.

18 months to 5 years
• Impact the identity of social workers and social work scientists in terms of societal mission and scientific mission.
• Influence social work education, nationwide.
• Influence the substantive career directions of social work scientists, particularly those who are emerging.
• Change the professional and scientific identities of our MSW and PhD students.
• Engage our professional organizations.
• Influence social work educators and leaders

SCOPE and FORESIGHT
Anticipate society’s greatest emerging problems.
Identify opportunities for social change.
Locate resources for change.
Develop “success scenarios” for social work.
Raise vital scientific questions.

IMPACT

SOCIAL WORK

External Impacts and Products

Within 12 months
Build an Advisory Board reflecting external stakeholders and others we want to influence and/or engage.

18 months
Announce and disseminate the final GCs with exemplars of prior societal impact.

18 months to 5 years
• Improve prospective students’ appreciation of social work as a powerful and meaningful profession of choice (MSW and PhD).
• Increase general public’s appreciation of social work’s contribution to making the world a better place.
• Influence collaborative and inter-disciplinary research agendas.
• Influence funders.
• Increase the benefactor pool.
• Influence the perception of social work from other disciplines and professions.
• Develop a scientific program.

Brings a voice to the definition of society’s greatest problems
Frames a vision and achievable goals on key problems
Integrates with national agendas
Generates and tests innovative scientific solutions
Builds strategies for widespread and sustainable impact
Affects key societal problems
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within our grasp in the next decade, given concentrated scientific and practical attention.”

The Impact Model (see diagram) for the Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative provides a
comprehensive scheme to stimulate our thinking on how to map social work’s grand challenges.
It acknowledges the complexity involved in determining the profession’s grand challenges—from
how we conceptualize key problems, to how we integrate ourselves into larger efforts
toward change, to how we assess our impact. The model graphically outlines scope, products and
activities, timeframes, and impacts. The purpose of the model is to provide a structure to help us
discuss, generate, and articulate compelling grand challenges for social work.

A globe is used as the backdrop for the impact model to emphasize that, even when focusing on
one country, grand challenges almost always imply world-changing impacts. The focal point of
the model is scope, which involves determining the range of our perceptions, ideas, or actions
concerning social work’s grand challenges.Foresight is central when it comes to scope.
Foresight is about providing for, or gaining insight into, future problems and needs. Beyond
identifying and understanding current problems, foresight is about looking at the current context
and trends and making intelligent projections on emerging problems as well as their possible
consequences. While the world confronts us with urgent problems, the second dimension of
grand challenges involves aspirations for change: identifying opportunities for change and
locating/generating resources.

To formulate solid grand challenges for social work, we can think in terms of success scenarios.
Borrowing from Keenan et. al., the visionary success scenario would outline what would be
happening in the profession of social work within the next decade if it were operating in an
effective and successful way. (According to Keenan et. al., given the uncertainties involved, a
scenario approach can “capture multiple futures.”) Finally, grand challenges suggest
continuously raising vital scientific questions, but also fundamental questions about our purpose
as a profession, our underlying assumptions, and the implications of our disciplinary lens.

The impact model includes a timeframe for impacts at both the internal level (impacts within the
social work profession) and the external level (impacts beyond our profession): within 12 months,
18 months, and 18 months to 5 years. Specific products and activities are outlined. On a broader
level, although addressing specific problems is the goal, problem-solving from a grand
challenges perspective almost always means transforming systems/structures that may be at the
core of many social problems

Ultimately the objective is for social work’s internal and external impacts to converge to achieve
far-reaching impact on deeply significant problems. Using the terminology of the National
Academy of Engineering, we can think in terms of the grand challenges that await social work
solutions. The last set of boxes in the diagram suggest a process to help frame social work
solutions. It involves six elements.
First, is to bring social work’s voice into the multi-disciplinary conversation on the definition of deeply significant problems. This involves characterizing the problems and issues facing society (e.g., in terms of social- vs. individual-level determinants), interpreting the context, and analyzing causes and consequences. Problem definition sets the stage for all the other elements: how the most pressing issues are defined dictates the types of solutions that are entertained, the kind of world we are able to visualize. Essential to this step is determining the “grand context,” that is, demographic trends and other global conditions facing contemporary society.

Second, is to frame a vision and achievable goals concerning the problems: what we would want the world to look like. This involves framing opportunities for human development, for a healthy society, and for reaching human potential. This step also entails taking stock of, and building on, the profession’s “grand accomplishments.”

Third, is to integrate ourselves within a larger discourse and efforts concerning deeply significant problems. Integration implies linkages on two levels, (a) vertically, for example, under that of the Office of the Surgeon General’s “National Prevention Strategy” or the United Nations “Millennium Development Goals,” and (b) horizontally, for instance, in collaboration with existing agendas and work taking place at the community level.

Fourth, is to generate innovative scientific solutions, but also engage in policy development and other socio-political approaches to change.

Fifth, is to advance innovative and sustainable initiatives that will have widespread impact as we take them to scale in society.

Sixth, we strive to affect societal problems and to create significant societal impact. Assessment and evaluation of social work’s efforts would be required.

The Impact Model can help in the development and articulation of social work’s Grand Challenges, which will help guide the profession’s agenda for the next decade.

1 Michael Keenan et. al. provide an in-depth discussion on the concept of foresight in relation to engineering in “Orienting international science cooperation to meet global ‘grand challenges,’” Science and Public Policy 39 (2012): 166-177.
2 Ibid.
4 Grand Challenges for Engineering (http://www.engineeringchallenges.org/)