
Grand Challenges for Social Work: Vision, Mission, Domain, Guiding Principles, & Guideposts to Action

This statement is a guide for the Grand Challenges for Social Work as a national initiative to address each of the 12 Grand Challenges. The commitment to ending racism and other injustices is fundamental throughout the Grand Challenges for Social Work.

Our Vision

The Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) will shape a more positive future for our society by promoting culturally relevant, attainable, generative, multidisciplinary, scientifically sound, and sustainable efforts to address the 12 Grand Challenges. The GCSW is open and welcoming to all who wish to participate. The GCSW focuses on innovations to solve social problems, especially those that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable in our society. Foremost in this vision is complete elimination of injustices and inequities due to race, ethnicity, religion, sexual and gender identity and expression, abilities, custom, class, and all other human differences.

Our Mission

The mission of the Grand Challenges for Social Work is expressed in five priorities:

- To identify major social challenges for the nation
- To gather evidence based on rigorous science
- To design imaginative, effective, and culturally relevant solutions
- To promote policies and professional practices that lead to positive change
- To advance sustainable initiatives that achieve the positive impacts for *all* families and communities, tribal nations, and society as a whole

Our Domain

The domain of social work, and the domain for efforts to address the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work, can be summarized by the words *social*, *scientific*, and *application*.

Social is fundamental. Humans are highly social, and social interactions are the most influential force on our planet. Social relationships in families, communities, organizations, education, and governance are basic to human growth, problem solving, and achievements of all kinds. Social relationships ultimately account for the most important advances in health, daily functioning, political stability, and world peace. The Grand Challenges for Social Work is committed to strengthening our capacity to engage in productive relationships that enhance well-being, reduce conflict, and bridge across the many factors that divide us. We support the design and implementation of positive social interventions that increase human efficacy and freedom, not coercive measures for problem solving and social control. We support delivery of programs and services that arise from and strengthen positive, healthful social relationships and institutions.

Scientific in this context means that knowledge and understanding are achieved through the development of theory and the collection and analysis of evidence. To be sure, social work operates with commitment, but that commitment is guided by science. We engage in and draw upon rigorous, high-quality research. The selection and use of research methods must always be consonant with the values and principles embodied in the initiative. The Grand Challenges for Social Work aims for research that informs and provides direction for design, implementation, and improvement of practices, programs, and policies to address the 12 Grand Challenges.

Application refers to the use of knowledge for positive impact. Social work is an applied profession. We are not content just to know; we aim to know and do. The simple word *do* has profound ramifications. In knowledge building, social work must be as scientific as any academic discipline, but *the knowledge must also inform meaningful and consequential action*. This is a very high bar. It requires careful selection of issues and research questions; testing solutions that are efficient, scalable, and sustainable; and then making those solutions real and relevant in the world.

Our Guiding Principles

The Grand Challenges for Social Work is grounded in a set of core principles that reflect the deepest commitments of the profession. These universal guiding principles are what social workers hold to be most worthwhile. They provide the aspirational conditions that shape our science and our professional practice. They guide us in our unwavering commitment to reduce human suffering, promote human development, and enhance human potential. Moreover, these principles shepherd inquiry and create pathways toward collaborative solutions; they direct choices in interdisciplinary and professional collaborations, and inform tests of outcomes.

The national endeavor to address the Grand Challenges for Social Work embraces social justice, inclusiveness, diversity, and equity. These principles are far more than guidelines and even more than intended outcomes. For social work, these principles are the pillars of outlook and action. These four pillars provide the foundation, form, and substance of all GCSW decisions and actions.

Social Justice

We strive to create a more socially just and equitable society through the science and solutions of the Grand Challenges for Social Work. We support diversity, community, intergenerational collaboration, and empowerment through the networks and coalitions formed to address the 12 Grand Challenges. The initiative promotes research on social, racial, tribal, gender, sexuality, abilities, and economic justice (among others), and social justice principles imbue the GCSW's choices and efforts.

Inclusiveness

In the GCSW, everyone is in. We build a society of full inclusion. We embrace diverse ways of knowing and methodologies to procure culturally and scientifically rich approaches that can produce meaningful, culturally relevant, and impactful solutions. The research and potential solutions for the Grand Challenges are strengthened when communities most affected have genuine voice and collaborative power—in other words, when they authentically join and contribute to this work.

Diversity

In the GCSW, we value the unique historical and cultural legacies and experiences of diverse populations, the contributions of those populations to society and community, and their partnership in the science and solutions for all undertakings. We value, respect, and support the cultural dignity and worth of all individuals, communities, and populations, including all genders, races, ethnicities, LGBT and two-spirit populations, abilities, religions, and nationalities.

Equity

Economic systems and strata of power can confer extravagant privileges to some while prohibiting equal access for all, thereby begetting injustice and inequity. Achieving equity requires continually challenging exclusive and unfair systems, including challenging them through action in economic and political arenas, where problems are produced and sustained, and also through the applied science that examines societal challenges. The concept of equity embodies values, worldviews, practices, and policies to ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented because of their race, ethnicity, tribal status, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, and religion—are represented in the design and implementation of actions to address the Grand Challenges, and particularly population-specific challenges. The pursuit of equity embraces diverse areas of knowledge, diverse ways of knowing, collaborative scientific and community-based partnerships, and evidence-based solutions.

Challenging inequities and working in robust partnerships are the vehicles by which the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative takes hold of large issues and promotes social change. All communities and populations deserve access to a full and healthful life, as well as voice and efficacy in how this is achieved. This access and voice are essential to a democratic, engaged, and renewing society.

Social justice, inclusion, diversity, and equity are the four pillars of outlook and action in the Grand Challenges for Social Work. Together these pillars point to an active, ongoing process requiring critical, deep, and continual engagement by everyone to promote effective social solutions in our own time and for future generations.

How Efforts to Address the Grand Challenges Embrace the Four Principles

Imagination, Discovery, and Innovation

The GCSW initiative embraces imagination, inquiry, and discovery, bringing to light improvements in research practices, new knowledge, and innovations to achieve meaningful and culturally relevant social solutions regarding each of the Grand Challenges.

Excellence

Excellence is advanced through design and practice of the highest-quality, culturally relevant research, and through the use of knowledge to shape social practices, social services, and social policies to achieve the objectives of the Grand Challenges for Social Work.

Integrity

All activities to address the Grand Challenges for Social Work are carried out with high standards of quality and protections against harm, and with accountability to professional bodies as well as to the communities and constituents we collaborate with and serve.

Service

Through beneficial research and effective innovations in practice and policy, efforts to address the 12 Grand Challenges respond to issues and priorities of the communities we collaborate with and serve. At the end of the day, the GCSW and all of social work are evaluated foremost on service to people and society.

Impact

Through all of the above principles, strategies, and efforts, the GCSW seeks meaningful impacts. As described above, social work is applied science, with strong emphasis on applied. In the GCSW, *impact* refers to *applications leading to major and lasting social change affecting large numbers of people*.

Our Guideposts for Action

The guiding principles of the Grand Challenges for Social Work are embodied in and realized by the following eight guideposts:

Recognizing contexts. We recognize contexts by acknowledging the reality and impacts of historical and contemporary occupations, thefts, repressions, exploitations, and genocides. These include settler colonialism, slavery, sexual and gender exploitations, and other political, economic, and social injustices. We seek to be honest about harms that have happened and harms that are still happening. This perspective supports research and innovations toward remedies that bring about positive development—for example, empowering tribal nations’ restoration of sovereignty, eradication of deleterious intergenerational impacts of chattel slavery, and ending a long history of racialized mass incarceration. Recognizing the underlying roots of the Grand Challenges includes examining the historical and bio-socio-political contexts in which social problems take root, grow, and reproduce. Such examinations are necessary if efforts to address the Grand Challenges are to mitigate or eradicate the deleterious impacts of oppressive policies and practices.

Embracing resistance, resilience, and resurgence. Our efforts to address the Grand Challenges recognize and respect the power of communities and their strengths, including resistance, resilience, and resurgence of healthful practices that generate community and familial well-being and survival. In other words, the

work of the GCSW is not all about problems—it is about the potential for positive development of all people and society as a whole.

Welcoming process. The GCSW initiative nurtures a culture of open-mindedness, compassion, and inclusiveness among all stakeholders and groups.

Broadening inclusion. Efforts of the Grand Challenges for Social Work are actively designed to bring in everyone and, in the process, to incorporate a broad and diverse range of scientific, professional, disciplinary, and communal voices representing people of diverse cultures, life experiences, and backgrounds.

Opening up to all perspectives. The Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative embraces diverse worldviews, methodologies, and scientific approaches to ensure that our efforts are culturally relevant and the proposed solutions are culturally respectful, safe, meaningful, effective, and sustainable.

Creating opportunities. The GCSW creates opportunities for critical engagement, discourse, and education relevant to each of the 12 Grand Challenges, with steady attention to social justice, inclusion, diversity, and equity across and within the networks organized to address the Challenges.

Engaging purposefully. The GCSW is dynamically engaging in community, tribal, agency, and transdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships within each Grand Challenge and across the initiative as a whole.

Evaluating accountability. The Grand Challenges for Social Work is committed to and building the process for analysis of whether and how research, education, and professional practice results in measurable population- and systems-level changes.

Authors

The authors are members of the Committee on Values and Principles of the Grand Challenges for Social Work and are listed in alphabetical order:

Richard P. Barth, *University of Maryland* (rbarth@ssw.umaryland.edu)

Sarah Gehlert, *University of South Carolina* (sgehlert@mailbox.sc.edu)

Sean Joe, *Washington University in St. Louis* (sjoe@wustl.edu)

Charles E. Lewis Jr., *Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy* (celewisjr@crispinc.org)

Angelo McClain, *National Association of Social Workers* (naswceo@naswdc.org)

Trina R. Shanks, *University of Michigan* (trwilli@umich.edu)

Michael Sherraden, *Washington University in St. Louis* (sherrad@wustl.edu)

Edwina Uehara, *University of Washington* (sswdean@uw.edu)

Karina L. Walters (Chair of committee), *University of Washington* (kw5@uw.edu)

Recommended Citation

Grand Challenges for Social Work. (2019, February). *Grand Challenges for Social Work: Vision, mission, domain, guiding principles, & guideposts to action*. Retrieved from <http://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org>

About the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work are the targets of a groundbreaking effort to champion social progress powered by science. Initiated by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, this effort seeks to address society's toughest social problems through the concerted work of many. Additional information on the Grand Challenges may be found at GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org or by emailing gcsocialwork@ssw.umaryland.edu.