
STUDY SHOWS SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS INCREASING GRAND CHALLENGES CONTENT

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Grand Challenges
for Social Work

ABSTRACT

One major purpose of the Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) is to transform social work education at all levels. That is why the leadership of GCSW commissioned two surveys of social work training programs nationwide to determine how study of the 13 most potent societal challenges of our time – which GCSW refers to as the Grand Challenges – is being incorporated into curricula. This paper reports the results from the second survey, in 2020, which not only assessed the integration of the Grand Challenges into curricula but also identified interdisciplinary collaborations taking place in higher education to address the Grand Challenges.

The results strengthen the call to action for GCSW to be a leader in promoting the importance and relevance of educating future social workers on society's biggest challenges.

Of the 527 accredited BSW, MSW, MSS, PhD, and DSW programs surveyed 123 (23.1%) responded. Three in five (59.3 percent) reported that knowledge about the Grand Challenges was being integrated into their coursework. That is a significant increase of 18 percent from two years earlier, when only half the schools surveyed said they were incorporating the Grand Challenges into their curricula. The challenges most often included were Eliminate Racism and Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice. Those least frequently included were Eradicate Social Isolation and Build Financial Capacity for All. The Grand Challenges were most likely to be integrated in the foundation, practice, and policy aspects of social work programs.

Of particular interest, three in eight programs (37%) reported working with other disciplines to incorporate the Grand Challenges into coursework. The most frequent such linkages were with health, social science, and humanities departments. But almost all the programs (97.3%) said they had no dedicated funding for this work. Majorities are seeking help with curricula design (88.5%), webinars and meetings (69.4%), and technical assistance, consultation, and support (50.9%).

Compared with the 2018 survey, the 2020 survey clearly shows momentum increasing for the study of the Grand Challenges to be a part of social work curricula at all levels – and that the GCSW is having a positive impact on social work education. But the field will need to mobilize further to bring this initiative to its full potential.

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INTRODUCTION

Led by some of the nation's leading scientists, educators, and policy experts from throughout the field of social work, the Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) is a groundbreaking initiative that champions social progress powered by science. Its goal is that social work researchers and practitioners work together – and with other disciplines – to tackle 13 of the nation's most important and difficult social problems. A commitment to tackling these Grand Challenges represents a dynamic and comprehensive social agenda – because doing so successfully would lead to more individual, family, and community well-being, a stronger and more equitable social fabric and a more just society. ([See Grand Challenges for Social Work | Social progress powered by science](#)).

The Grand Challenges also serve as a call to action for social workers everywhere to improve and eventually eradicate the most complex problems facing society. They provide a tangible agenda for encouraging social workers to engage in innovative thinking, utilize evidence-based interventions, and work collaboratively to solve these problems.

The intent of GCSW is to transform education, research, policy, and practice in the field of social work. The initiative also stresses the importance of developing interdisciplinary and intersectoral relationships and opportunities as a best practice for addressing societal ills.

This paper addresses the interdisciplinary and intersectoral linkages that schools of social work are engaging in – including collaborations between social work educators and programs in health, humanities, law, engineering, and technology. This work has been progressing in the past decade, as the survey results show.

ARTICE OVERVIEW

This paper provides a brief historical perspective and overview about the 13 Grand Challenges and reports on the second of two surveys that sought to gauge the incorporation of the Grand Challenges into social work education. The 2020 survey of social work schools and departments is explained, followed by a description of the findings. The survey was conducted two years year after the first survey.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The GCSW began as an initiative of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW). It was created to¹:

- promote scientific innovation in social work;
- engage the social work profession in strengthening the ties among social work organizations;
- foster transdisciplinary research;
- expand the student pipeline into the social work profession; and
- create greater acknowledgement of social work science within the discipline and by other, related disciplines.

Dean Eddie Uehara at the University of the Washington School of Social Work is credited with the idea for what became the Grand Challenges for Social Work. She built on the work of John Brekke (2012), who identified a science of social work,² AASWSW embraced these ideas and examined the grand challenges initiatives already created by the National Academy of Engineering, the William and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and Grand Challenges Canada. The AASWSW Grand Challenge Executive Committee announced the initiative in 2013 and the GCSW took form after three years of planning and research. The GCSW was formally launched in 2016 and all schools of social work were encouraged to get involved. In a bold move, the Suzanne Dworak Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California in 2016 created an executive doctor of social work degree informed specifically by the original dozen Grand Challenges.

1. Fong, R., Lubben, E., and Barth, R.P. (Eds.). (2018). *Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press
2. *ibid*

The GCSW was separated from the AASWSW and became its own entity, with fiscal and in-kind support from the University of Maryland in 2018. That year, a Learning and Education Subcommittee was formed by the GCSW Executive Committee – with members from the committee and senior leaders in the social work field – to promote the Grand Challenges as a foundational activity in social work training programs for undergraduates, master’s degree students and doctoral candidates.

The subcommittee conducted a survey of deans and directors of Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited social work programs at the baccalaureate through doctorate levels. Its purpose was to assess the integration of the Grand Challenges into curricula at all levels, which could inform subsequent decisions by GCSW to create supporting materials such as webinars, technical assistance programs, and publications. A second such survey was taken in late 2020 to investigate developments in the intervening two years.

OVERVIEW OF THE GRAND CHALLENGES

There were originally a dozen Grand Challenges; another – Eliminate Racism – was added in 2020 to focus intentionally on an intractable problem pervading almost all other societal ills. GCSW has organized the challenges into these three groupings, although there is obvious interaction and overlap among them:

<p>INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY WELL-BEING</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure healthy development for youth• Close the health gap• Build healthy relationships to end violence• Advance long and productive lives
<p>STRONGER SOCIAL FABRIC</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eradicate social isolation• End homelessness• Create social responses to a changing environment• Harness technology for social good
<p>JUST SOCIETY</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eliminate racism• Promote smart decarceration• Build financial capability and assets for all• Reduce extreme economic inequality• Achieve equal opportunity and justice

For descriptions of each of the Grand Challenges please visit the GCSW website:
<https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/>.

METHODOLOGY

The 2018 survey included 11 questions and was designed to be completed in less than 5 minutes. The 2020 survey had 12 questions. Most were the same as before, although questions 7 and 8 were added and questions 11 and 12 were modified. The questions asked in 2020 were:

1. What degrees do you offer?
2. What is the total enrollment of your program(s)?
3. Do you integrate knowledge about the Grand Challenges into your curricula/coursework/program(s)?
4. If yes, in which program.
5. If yes, please check which Grand Challenges are integrated.
6. If yes, please indicate where in the curriculum the Grand Challenges are addressed.
7. Beyond curricula how else have you integrated the Grand Challenges for Social Work into your education program?
8. Have you engaged any other disciplines, professions or other education programs in your effort to integrate the Grand Challenges for Social Work?
9. Are you currently funded to incorporate any Grand Challenge(s) into your curriculum?
10. What would be helpful for you to include in your planning to integrate the Grand Challenges into your curricula coursework/programs?
11. Are there materials you would like to share with us that illustrate how you have incorporated the Grand Challenges?
12. Address

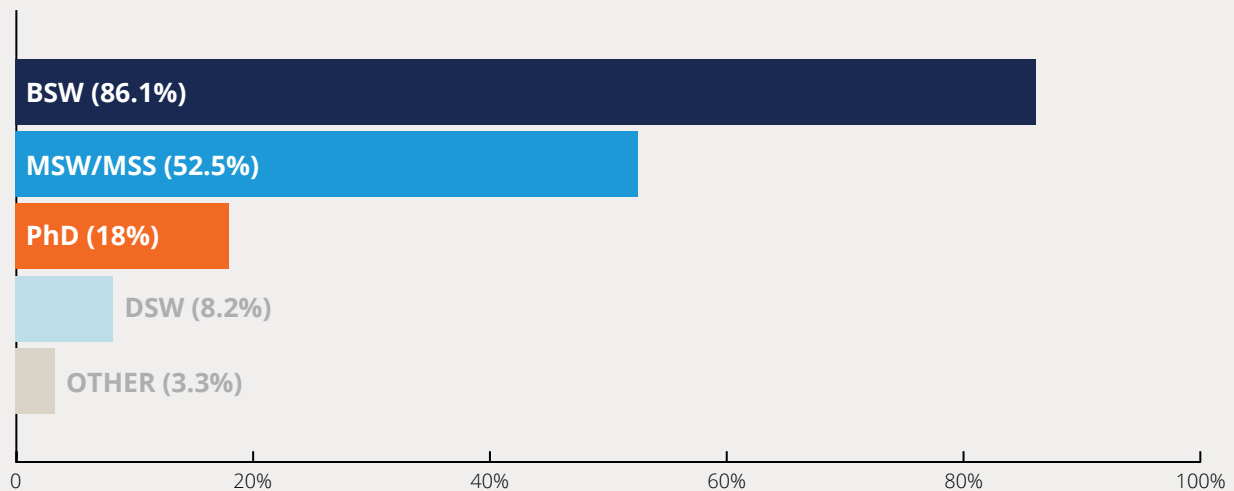
Survey Monkey was used to solicit responses from all 527 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited bachelor of social work (BSW), master of social work (MSW), master of social service (MSS), doctor of philosophy (PhD), and doctor of social work (DSW) programs. There were 123 responses, a 23.1% response rate.

THE FINDINGS

Q1. What degrees do you offer? (Check all that apply.)

They were: BSW (n=105, 86.1%), MSW/MSS (n=64, 52.5%), PhD (n=22, 18.0%), DSW (n=10, 8.2%) and other degrees (n=4, 3.3%).

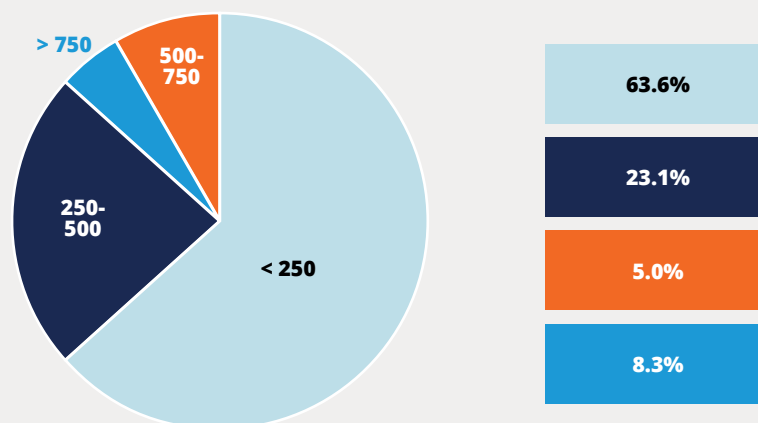
DEGREES OFFERED



Q2. What is the total student enrollment of your program(s)?

They were: less than 250, (n=77, 63.6%); 250-500, (n=28, 23.1%); 500-750, (n=6, 5.0%); and more than 750, (n=10, 8.3%).

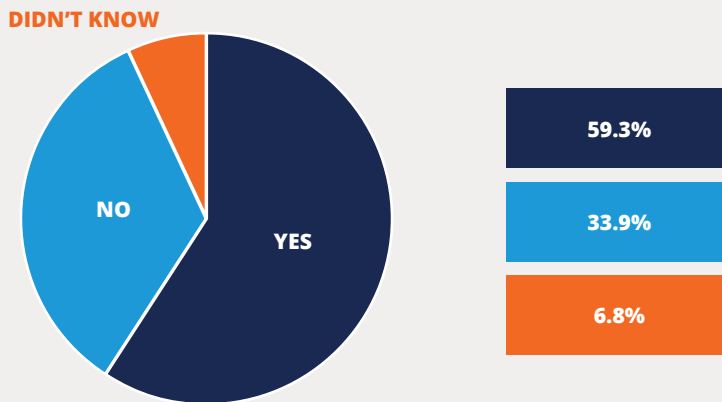
ENROLLMENT



Q3. Do you integrate knowledge about the Grand Challenges for Social Work into your curricula/coursework/program(s)? If no, skip to Q#7

Almost three fifths of responding institutions (n=70, 59.3%) indicated knowledge about the Grand Challenges as being integrated into coursework; an additional (n=40, n=33.9%) did not integrate the Grand Challenges and eight (N= 8, 6.8%) of the programs didn't know.

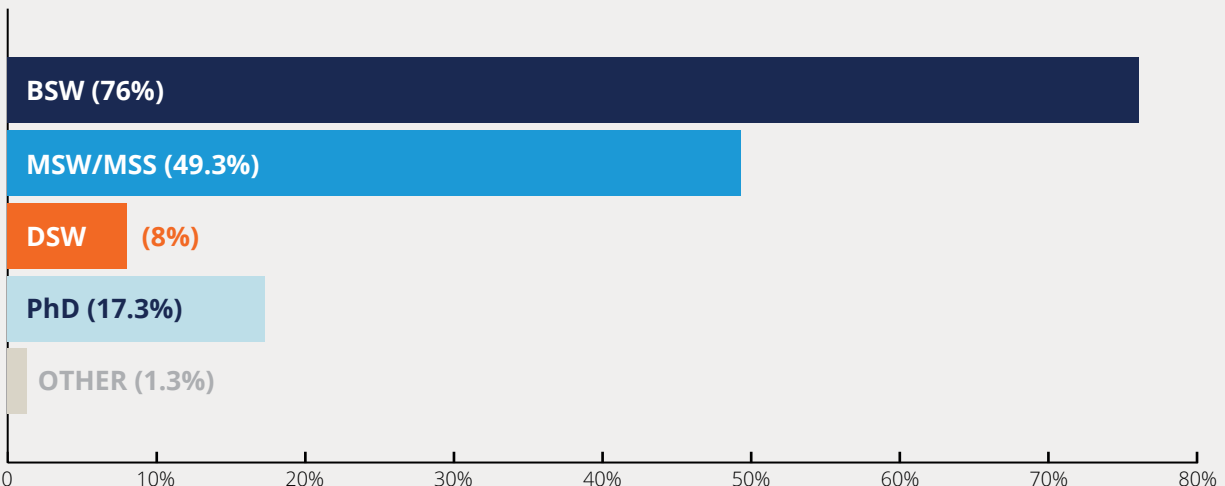
CURRICULA INTEGRATING GRAND CHALLENGES



Q4. If yes, in which program? (Check all that apply)

Of the respondents who said GCSW knowledge was integrated into their programs, the programs were: BSW (76.0% n=57), MSW/MSS (49.3% n=37), DSW (8.0% n= 6), PhD, (17.3% n=13), and one "other."

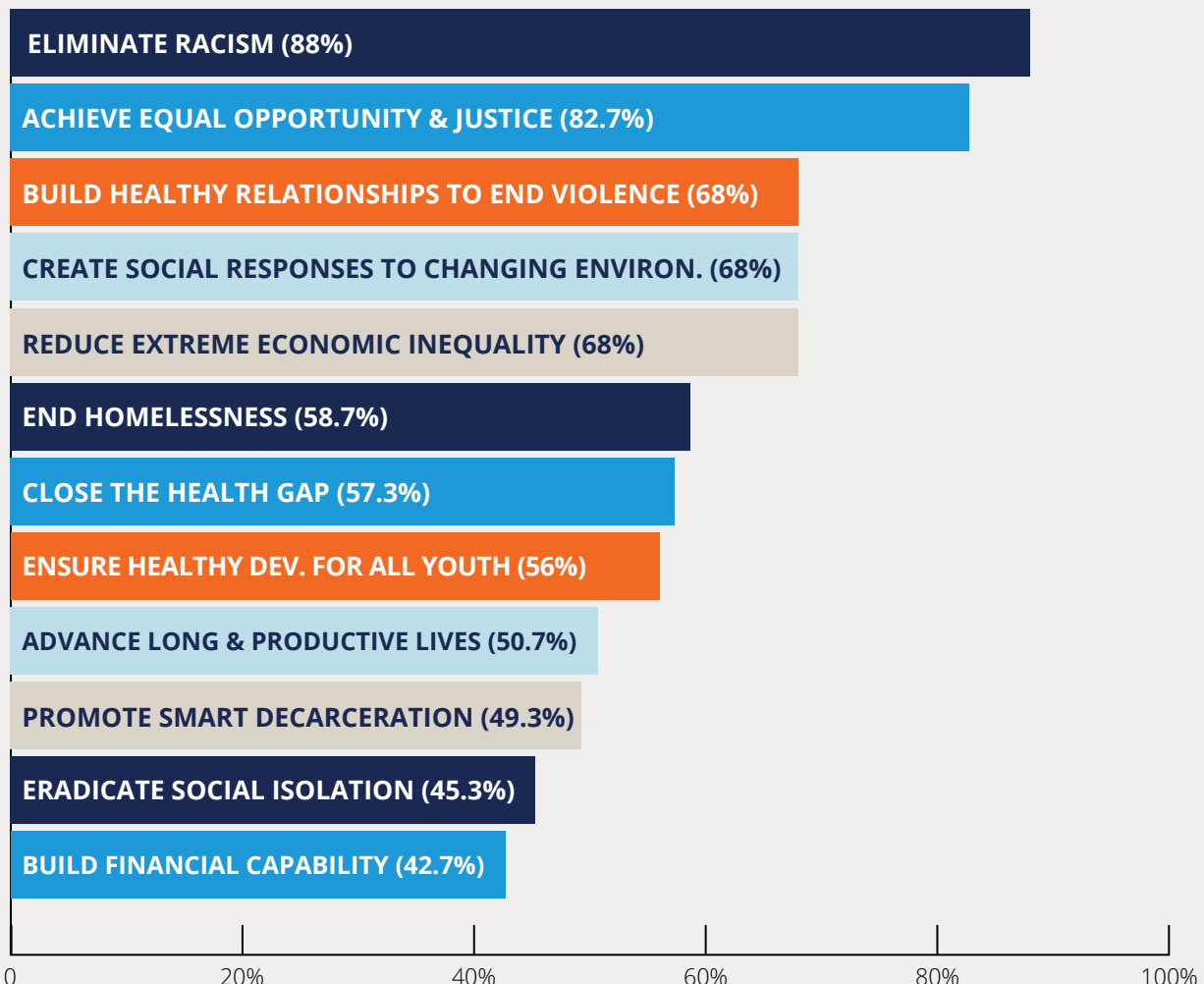
PROGRAMS INTEGRATING GRAND CHALLENGES



Q5. If yes, please check which Grand Challenge is integrated. (Check all that apply.)

The Grand Challenge to Eliminate Racism is part of the curriculum in seven out of eight programs that use the GCSW rubric (88.0% n= 66). More than two-thirds of those programs incorporate Achieve Equal Opportunity and Justice (82.7% n=62), Build Healthy Relationships to End Violence (68.0% n=51), Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment (68.0% n=51) and Reduce Extreme Economic Inequality (68.0% n=51). A majority of programs integrate End Homelessness (58.7% n=44), Close the Health Gap (57.3% n=43), Ensure Healthy Development for All Youth (56.0% n=42) and Advance Long and Productive Lives (50.7% n=38). Smaller shares include Harness Technology for Social Good (49.3% n=37), Promote Smart Decarceration (49.3% n=37), Eradicate Social Isolation (45.3% n=34) and Build Financial Capability for All (42.7% n=32).

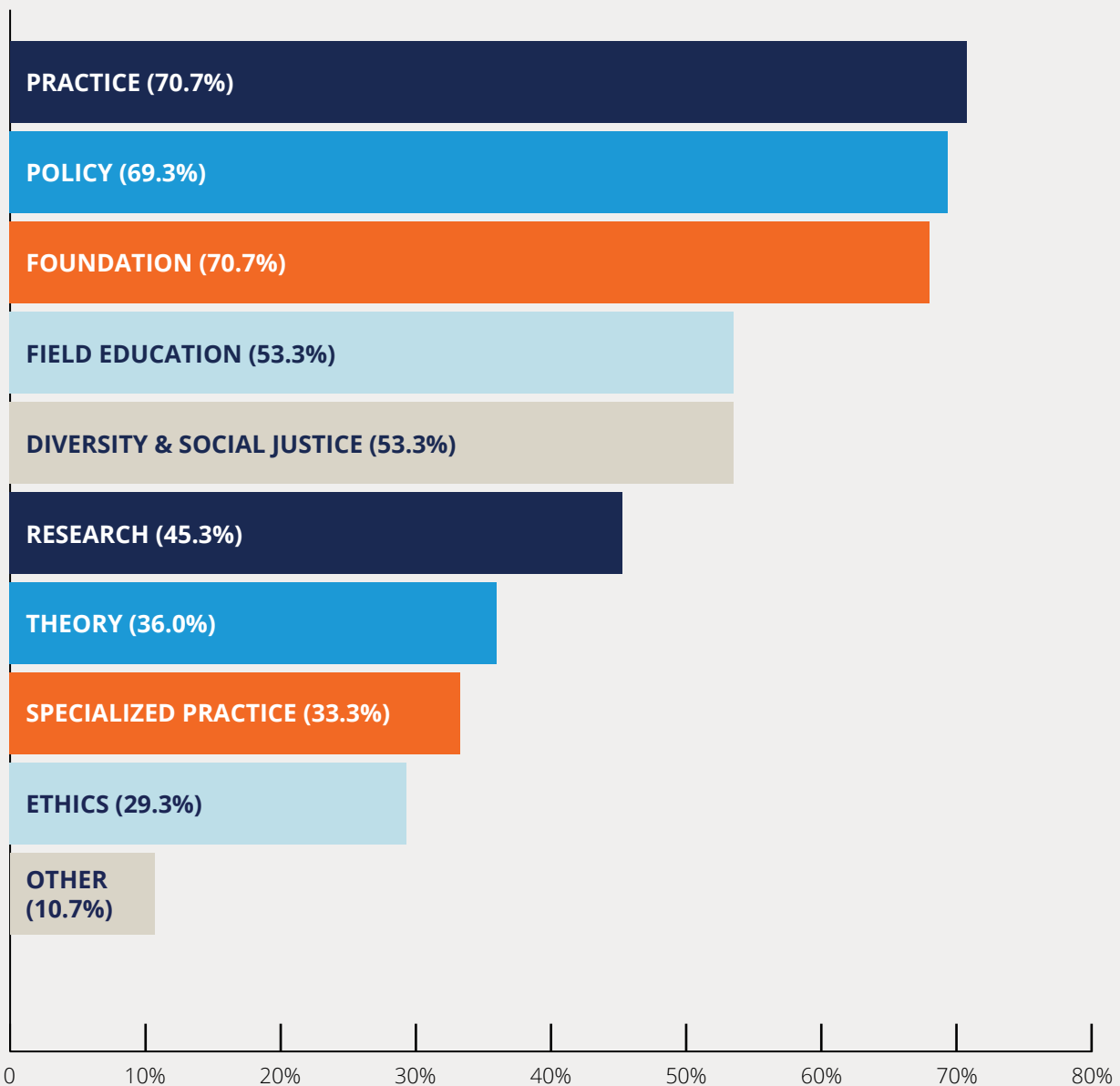
WHICH GRAND CHALLENGES ARE INTEGRATED



Q6. If yes, please indicate where in the curriculum the Grand Challenges are addressed. (Check all that apply.)

The Grand Challenges were most likely to be integrated in the practice (n=53 70.7%), policy (n=52 69.3%) and foundation (n=51 68%) aspects of social work programs. Most schools also said field education (n=40 53.3%) and diversity and social justice (n=40 53.3%). Smaller numbers of institutions pointed to research (n=34 45.3%), theory (n=27 36%), specialized practice (n=25 33.3%), ethics (n=22 29.3%), and other (n=8 10.7%).

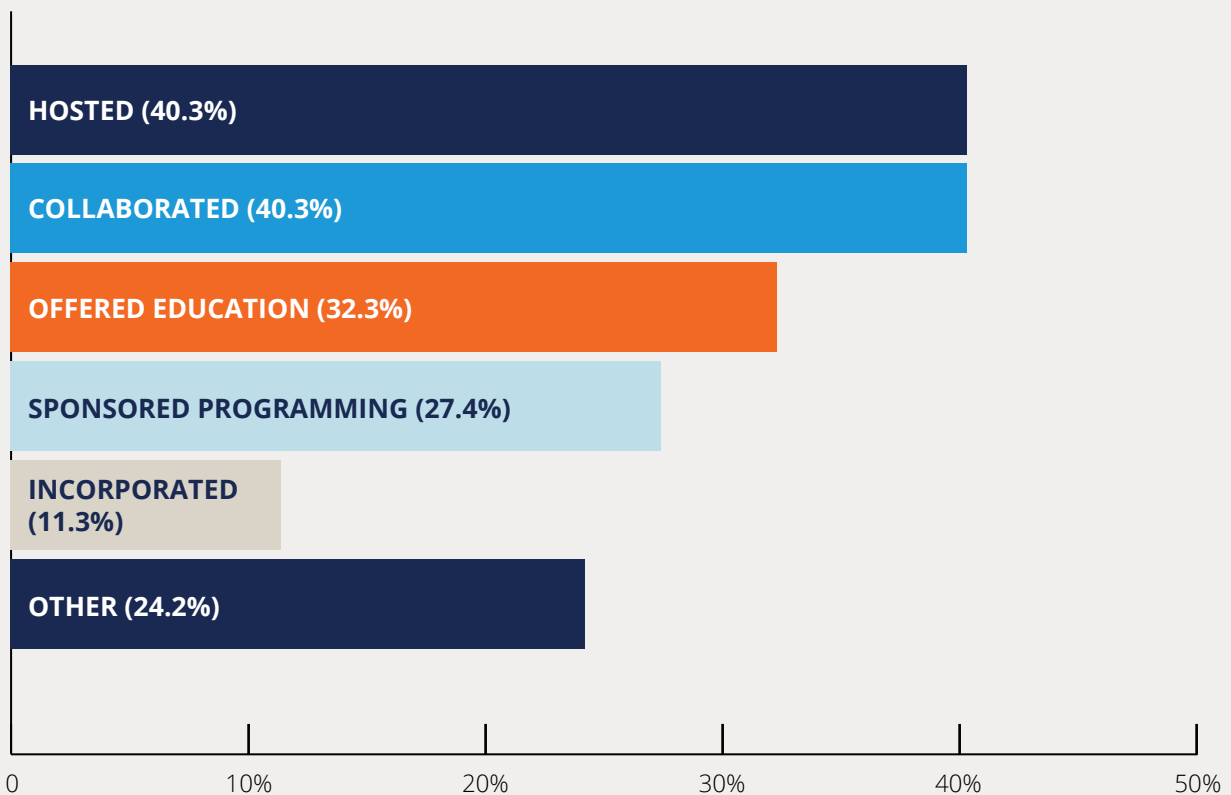
WHERE GRAND CHALLENGES FIT IN THE CURRICULA



Q7. Beyond curricula how else have you integrated the Grand Challenges for Social Work into your education program?

The 62 programs that responded to this question identified the following: Hosted or participated in an academic conference (40.3% n=25), Collaborated with other academic units within their college or university (40.3% n=25), Offered education or training opportunities (32.3% n=20), Sponsored programming for students (27.4% n=17), Incorporated the Grand Challenges into the admission process (11.3% n=7), and Other (24.2% n=15).

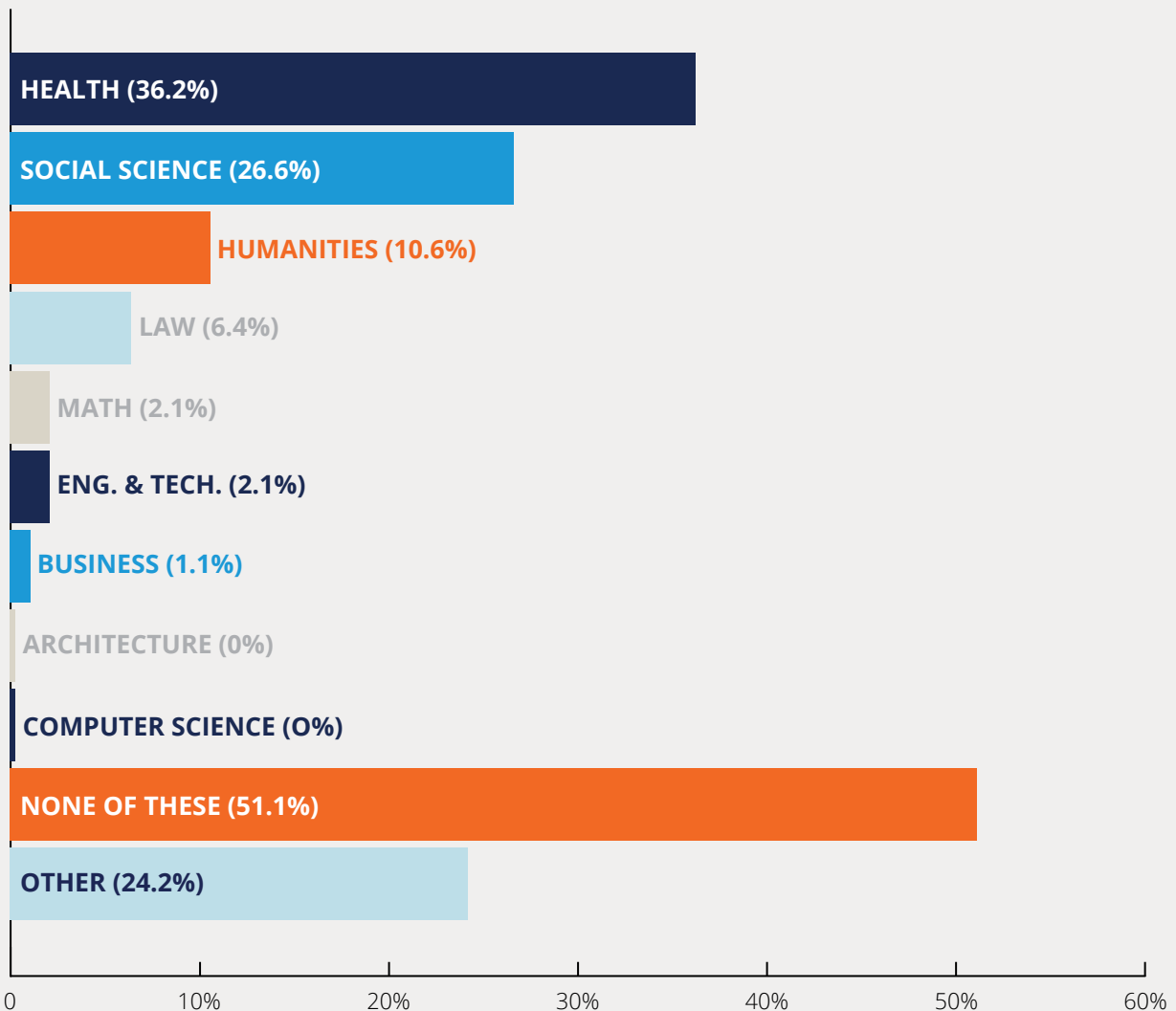
OTHER WAYS THE GRAND CHALLENGES ARE INTEGRATED



Q8. Have you engaged any other disciplines, professions, or other educational programs in your effort to integrate the Grand Challenges for Social Work? (Check all that apply.)

The 94 programs that responded to this question said: Health (36.2% n=34), Social Science (26.6% n=25), Humanities (10.6% n=10), Law (6.4% n=6), Mathematics (2.1% n=2), Engineering and Technology (2.1% n=2), Business (1.1% n=1), Architecture (0% n=0), Computer Science (0% n=0), None of these (51.1% n=48), and Other (9.6% n=9).

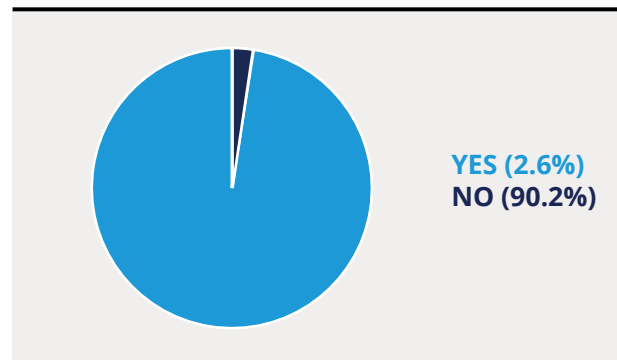
OTHER DISCIPLINES, PROFESSIONS, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ENGAGED



Q9. Are you currently funded to incorporate any Grand Challenges into your curriculum? (Check all that apply.)

Only three programs (2.6%) reported having specialized funding now; 111 programs (90.2%) do not. (Four programs (3.2%) reported that they were seeking such funding.)

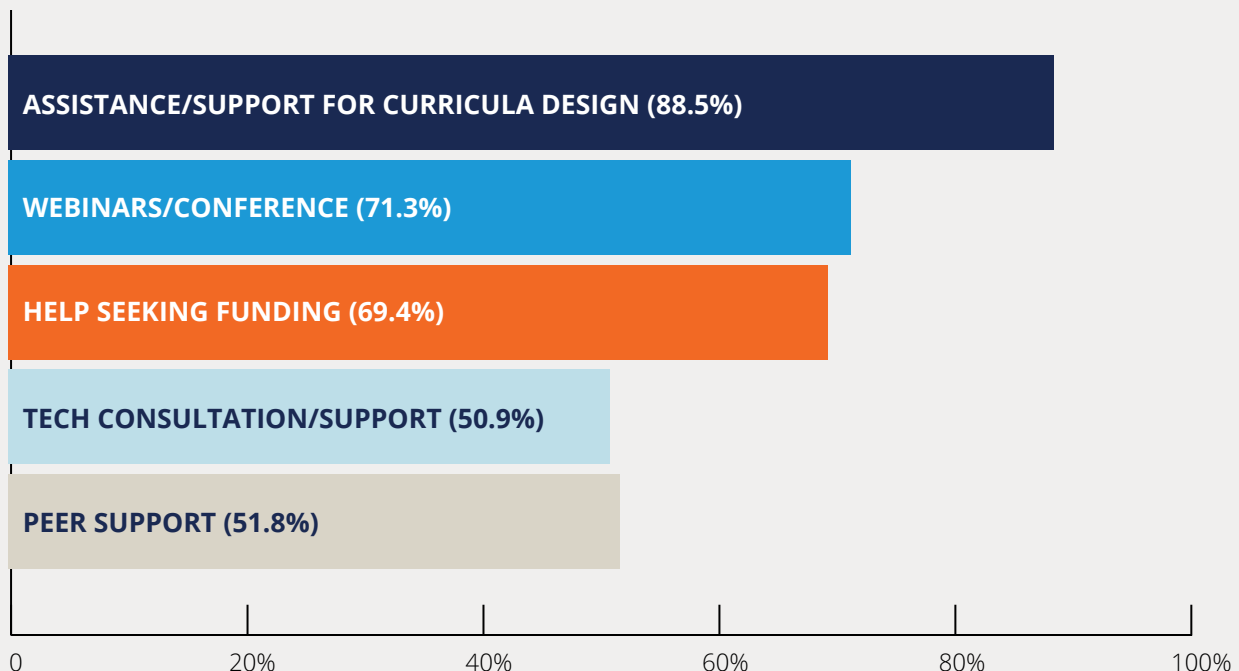
FUNDED TO INCORPORATE GRAND CHALLENGES



Q10. What would be helpful for you to include in your planning to integrate the Grand Challenges into your curricula/course work/programs? (Check all that apply.)

Help with integrating Grand Challenges content into curricula was mentioned by seven of eight respondents (n=108, 88.5%). Also, 71.3% (n=77) are seeking help with webinars and conferences; 69.4% (n=75) are seeking fundraising help; 50.9% (n=55) would like technical assistance, consultation, or support from GCSW; and 51.8% (n=56) are seeking peer support from other schools of social work.

HOW TO HELP SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS



CONCLUSION

The most recent survey found three in five responding social work programs (59.3%) incorporating the Grand Challenges for Social Work into their curricula, course work and programs. This is an increase of 18% (and more than 9 percentage points) in the two years since the first GCSW survey. Twenty-one programs (17.1%) submitted materials such as articles, syllabi, conference materials and videos that illustrate these efforts. This swift and significant change provides reason for optimism about the potentially transformative impact of the GCSW on social work education.

Of great importance to GCSW, a significant number of the responding social work programs (88.5%) want more education, training, and assistance on the integration of the Grand Challenges into their curricula. They said this assistance should be in various forms: webinars, conferences, technical assistance, assistance in curricular design, and technical consultation and support. Further, virtually all respondents (98%) provided contact information, suggesting strong interest in the GCSW's work.

GCSW also takes heart in the survey results showing that schools of social work are collaborating with other departments at their schools and taking interdisciplinary approaches to teaching about American society's most significant problems. The leadership organizations in the field of social work must make a collective, concerted effort to offer assistance and further this collaborative spirit. And there is a compelling need for additional funding to support more research and innovative practices addressing each of the 13 Grand Challenges.