

GRAND CHALLENGES *for social work*

**Incorporating the Grand Challenges for Social
Work into Social Work Education:
Implications and Strategies**

About us



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Examining the Views of Master of Social Work (MSW) Graduates on the Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society

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Abstract

Despite the social work profession's unified commitment to identify and address widespread societal problems, there have been few scholarly articles that have focused on the Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society ("Grand Challenges"). While half of social work academic programs have reported incorporating content about the Grand Challenges initiative into curricula, there have not been any known empirical studies about whether graduates have interests in these areas or feel prepared to address

Recently Published Article

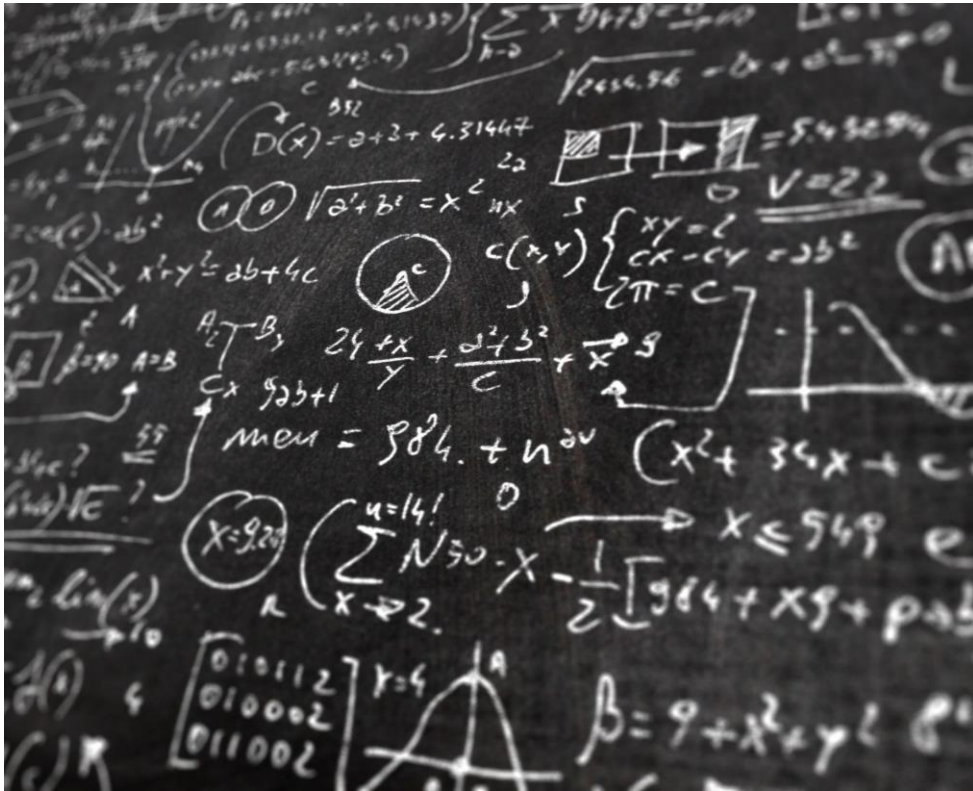
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Advances in Social Work

Learning Objectives

1. Upon completion, attendees will be able identify the correlates of social work student attitudes and views about the Grand Challenges.
2. Upon completion, attendees will be able to articulate the educational motivators and barriers to enhancing student interests in working on the Grand Challenges.
3. Upon completion, attendees will be able to design educational strategies (including integrating into a social work capstone course) for strengthening the connection between pedagogy/curriculum and progress toward addressing the Grand Challenges.

Grand Challenges: History

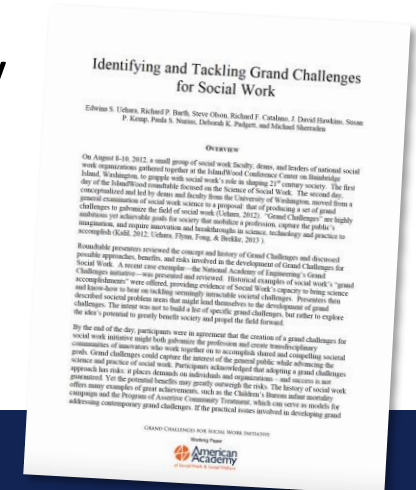


In 1900, German mathematician David Hilbert first conceptualized grand challenges when he unveiled 23 unsolved math problems, which would absorb mathematicians' attention across the next century and inspire advancement in mathematics.

Since this time, grand challenges initiatives have been used to call out critical issues and priorities within professions that need solutions and require concentrated effort and strategies.

The Grand Challenges

- Bringing new light and talent around social issues with potential for high impact change
- Coalescing social work science around issues of keen public interest--beyond traditional SW areas
- Adding a critical dimension to social work organizational efforts to strengthen social work with an explicit focus on strengthening society
- Creating cross-university, interdisciplinary networks working to address pressing social issues





“It could be a way of communicating about the profession to a new generation.”

Darla Spence Coffey, Former President and CEO Council on Social Work Education

“By connecting social work research directly to practice and by attracting key partners to our common cause we can and will drive transformative social change.”

Angelo McClain, Former CEO of National Association of Social Workers

“We have to make sure that people get the same opportunities, and when I see the challenges, that is what I see. Finally, I have a recipe that I can look up to and I say this is what we are going to strive for, that is what I see.”

Ana Bonilla-Galdamez, NASW 2014 National Social Worker of the Year

What are the 14 Grand Challenges?

- Close the health gap
- Ensure healthy development for all youth
- Stop family violence
- End homelessness
- Eradicate social isolation
- Advance long and productive lives
- Prevent gun violence
- Create positive social responses to a changing environment
- Harness technology for social good
- Smart decarceration
- Economic inequity
- Financial capacity
- Equal opportunity and justice
- Eliminate racism

Grand Challenges for Social Work Timeline



GO GRANDER
Grand Challenges
for Social Work

Oxford University Press publishes *Grand Challenges for Social Work & Society* (Fong et al., 2018)

GCSW partners with Prof2Prof to encourage collaboration across universities, disciplines and nationwide

CSWE highlights GCSW in its *Why Social Science?* blog

GCSW launches sponsorship program—individuals, organizations and universities across the country contribute financial support

GCSW conducts its first education survey

GCSW establishes the Grand Challenge to Eliminate Racism

GCSW creates & compiles resources to help the field address the COVID-19 pandemic

UP! newsletter expands to monthly distribution

GCSW publishes 25th working paper

NASW structures Blueprint of Federal Social Policy using Grand Challenges as a framework

Oxford University Press publishes second edition with updates and new content on the GC to Eliminate Racism and Gender Mainstreaming sections for each GC

Encyclopedia of Social Work highlights GCSW

AASWSW issues a call for ideas for Grand Challenges for Social Work

AASWSW receives more than 80 concept papers and publishes first working papers

GCSW launches at SSWR Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

GCSW holds Policy Conference in St. Louis to strategize 10-year research, policy, and practice goals; develops policy briefs for each GC

GC networks meet for the first time

GCSW produces introductory video



AASWSW establishes Grand Challenges Executive Committee (GCEC)

AASWSW publishes 13 additional working papers

GCSW begins quarterly publication of the newsletter UP!

GCSW publishes 24th working paper

GCEC establishes six subcommittees to help implement the GCSW

GCSW develops "Vision, Mission, Domain, Guiding Principles, & Guideposts to Action"

NASW publishes *Grand Challenges for Society* (Bent-Goodley et al., 2019)

GCSW restructures Leadership & Governance

Social Work Today features update on the Grand Challenges

GCSW publishes 5-year impact report

GCSW conducts Education Integration Survey

GO GRANDER
GCSW launches Go Grander campaign to expand the initiative

Each year momentum builds, with individuals, schools and organizations addressing the Grand Challenges from all angles—policy, practice, education and research. Read about many of these efforts in Progress and Plans for the Grand Challenges: An Impact Report at Year Five of the 10-Year Initiative.

Despite the social work profession's unified commitment to identify and address widespread societal problems, there have been **few scholarly articles** that have focused on the Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society (“Grand Challenges”).

Method – Survey Research

SAMPLE

102 MSW graduates who attended one of six different licensure preparation programs in June 2021 sponsored by the National Association of Social Workers

A total of 145 attendees completed the survey, but the 33 students who attended were excluded as the focus of the study was on those who had already obtained their graduate degrees. Another ten social workers were excluded as they were not MSW graduates.

These programs were virtual and hosted by six different states across the United States.

Representation included a program in each of the regions: pacific, north central, midwest, southeast, mid-Atlantic, and northeast.

Demographics

Thirty-eight percent of MSWs in the final sample (N=102) had BSWs in addition to their MSW degrees. In their graduate programs, the majority (66%) focused on working with individuals or families as a specialization, and a quarter (24%) reported an advanced generalist course of study, with the remainder (10%) educated on working on the mezzo or macro levels exclusively.

A total of 70% were employed as social workers at the time of the survey.

Limitations

There are limitations to the study as findings are limited to the experiences of a convenient sample of social workers who attended six licensure preparation programs virtually sponsored by six different state chapters of a professional organization. Research with larger samples is needed in the future.

This research also did not include the most recent Grand Challenge on gun violence.

Table 1. Distribution of Employment and Practicum Placement Foci of Employed Social Workers in Rank Order of Employment Focus (n=65)

Grand Challenge	[n (%)]	
	Current Employment	Practicum Placement ²
Advancing long and productive lives	22 (34%)	19 (30%)
Ensuring healthy development for all children	18 (28%)	23 (36%)
Closing the health gap	7 (11%)	6 (9%)
Creating social responses to a changing environment	4 (6%)	5 (8%)
Stopping family violence	4 (6%)	0 (0%)
Achieving equal opportunity and justice	3 (5%)	4 (6%)
Ending homelessness	3 (5%)	2 (3%)
Eradicating social isolation	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
Promoting smart decarceration	1 (1%)	2 (3%)
Reducing extreme inequality	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Building financial capability for all	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Harnessing technology for social good	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Eradicating racism	0 (0%)	2 (3%)

¹ 4 social workers who were employed as social workers were excluded from the analysis as they had missing data or indicated more than one focus.

² 1 social worker was missing a response (n=64).

There is a strong relationship between work focus and practicum placement.

Many students are not working in settings which were identified as focusing on the Grand Challenges.

Primary professional interest of the majority of social workers (68%) was addressing one of three Grand Challenges – ensuring healthy development for all children, achieving equal opportunity and justice, and advancing long and productive lives.

Grand Challenges	Primary Professional Interest <i>n</i> (%)	General Interest in Working to Address ² Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Ensuring healthy development for all children	26 (28%)	3.43 (0.865)
Achieving equal opportunity and justice	19 (21%)	3.69 (0.608)
Advancing long and productive lives	17 (19%)	3.48 (0.716)
Closing the health gap	6 (7%)	3.3 (0.791)
Ending homelessness	6 (7%)	3.25 (0.803)
Eradicating racism	5 (5%)	3.66 (0.634)
Creating social responses to a changing environment	5 (5%)	3.3 (0.763)
Stopping family violence	3 (3%)	3.58 (0.631)
Reducing extreme inequality	2 (2%)	3.38 (0.751)
Promoting smart decarceration	2 (2%)	2.95 (0.993)
Harnessing technology for social good	1 (1%)	2.76 (0.902)
Building financial capability for all	0 (0%)	3.37 (0.763)
Eradicating social isolation	0 (0%)	3.29 (0.815)

¹ Nine social workers were missing data for these questions.

² Interest was assessed on a four-point Likert scale with values of 1 (*not interested at all*), 2 (*slightly interested*), 3 (*somewhat interested*), and 4 (*very interested*).



Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on the Professional Interests of Social Workers in Rank Order by Primary Professional Interest (n=93)

Grand Challenges	Mean (SD)	
	Professional Competency ¹	Profession's Ability to Make Progress ²
Ensuring healthy development for all children	3 (0.91)	2.29 (0.525)
Advancing long and productive lives	2.85 (0.865)	2.1 (0.619)
Achieving equal opportunity and justice	2.81 (0.856)	2.22 (0.556)
Stopping family violence	2.77 (0.893)	2.1 (0.498)
Creating social responses to a changing environment	2.67 (0.813)	2.27 (0.557)
Eradicating racism	2.63 (0.901)	2.1 (0.637)
Eradicating social isolation	2.6 (0.865)	2 (0.561)
Closing the health gap	2.53 (0.883)	2.11 (0.57)
Ending homelessness	2.4 (0.965)	1.98 (0.56)
Reducing extreme inequality	2.39 (0.976)	2.04 (0.669)
Harnessing technology for social good	2.26 (0.941)	2.11 (0.678)
Building financial capability for all	2.25 (0.95)	1.86 (0.628)
Promoting smart decarceration	2.15 (0.953)	1.97 (0.55)

¹ Fourteen social workers were missing data for these questions (n=88). Perceived competency was assessed on a four-point Likert scale with values of 1 (*not competent at all*), 2 (*a little competent*), 3 (*somewhat competent*), and 4 (*very competent*).

² Twelve social workers were missing data for these questions (n=90). Opinions were assessed on a three-point Likert scale with values of 1 (*no progress*), 2 (*some progress*), and 3 (*significant progress*) could be made.

Table 3. Perceived Professional Competencies (in Rank Order) and Beliefs that the Profession Can Make Progress to Address the Issue in the Next Five Years

Social workers indicated little to some competence in addressing all 13 Grand Challenges. They had the least reported competence in promoting smart decarceration and the most perceived ability in ensuring healthy development for all children. With regard to social workers' opinions about the likelihood that the profession would make progress on achieving the Grand Challenges, there was some, but little, overall variability.

Index Construction

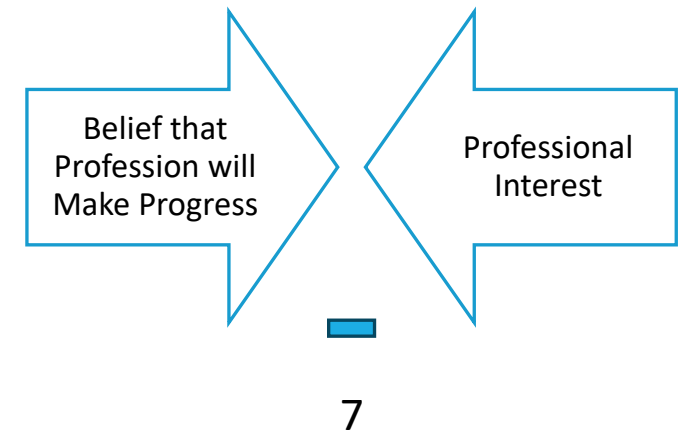
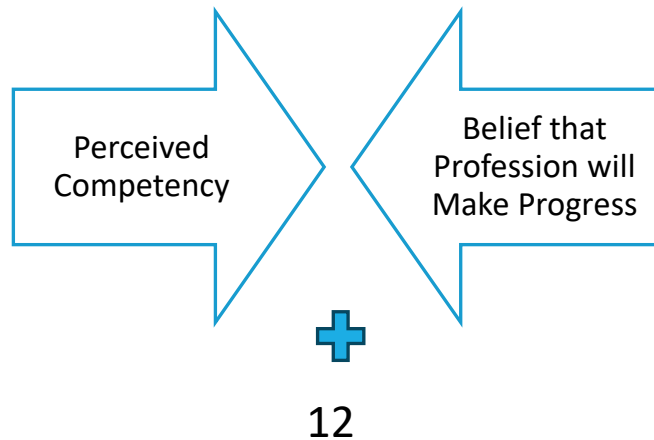
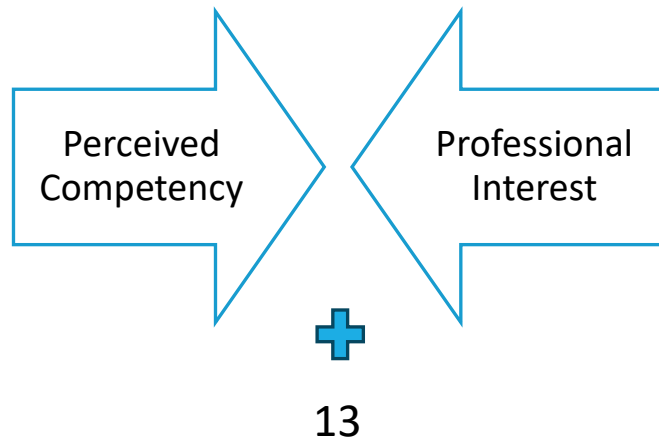
Reliability testing was used to create an index of **professional interest** with a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha=.882$.

Reliability testing was used to create an index assessing **optimism about the ability of the profession to address the Grand Challenges** with a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha=.897$.

Reliability testing was used to create an index of **competency to address the Grand Challenges** with a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha=.904$.

The strongest relationship was between **perceived competency** and the **likelihood that the profession would make progress**, $r(86) = .48, p = .001$, and **professional interest** and **perceived competency** to address an issue, $r(86) = .45, p = .001$. A weaker positive relationship, though still statistically significant, was found between **professional interest** and **optimism about the profession to make progress**, $r(88) = .29, p = .02$.

Individual Findings



No - creating social responses to a changing environment

Yes - Achieving equal opportunity and justice, eradicating racism, creating social responses to a changing environment, stopping family violence, reducing extreme inequality, harnessing technology for social good, and building financial capability for all

Conclusions

Study findings indicate a lack of knowledge about the Grand Challenges initiative by the vast majority of social workers, even among those who also possessed undergraduate social work degrees.

Data collected on the employment foci of those working after graduation indicates about half are focused on ensuring healthy development for all children or advancing long and productive lives. Closing the health gap was also a focus for about ten percent of those working in the profession. **Many Grand Challenge areas had no or few graduates addressing them.**

Social workers had moderate to strong professional interest in all but two of the Grand Challenges – promoting smart decarceration and harnessing technology for social good.

Conclusions

Perceived competency of all problems (except creating social responses to a changing environment) **was related to optimism about the profession to make progress in the chosen areas.**

Social workers' interests were not related to their views about whether progress by the profession would occur in seven of the 13 areas.



Social workers have been trained to work on systemic, longstanding societal problems so their professional interests in these areas appeared not to be deterred by their lack of optimism.

Implications

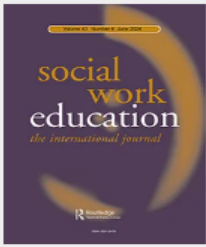
Since employment foci were significantly related to practicum experiences, schools of social work should ensure sufficient numbers of students have training in the identified underrepresented areas. Expanding practicum experience opportunities in these chosen areas may increase social workers' interests in working on these issues professionally.

Social work curricula, including practice placement availability, must be examined to raise student interest in smart decarceration and harnessing technology for social good.

CSWE allows programs to choose their own foci, resulting in a broad range of specializations (i.e., geographic areas, populations, methods, and so on). Linking these specializations to the Grand Challenges through accreditation policy would likely increase knowledge about this initiative, as well as further strengthen the relationship between social work education and practice priorities.

Implications

There are many Grand Challenges that have little or no interest as primary professional foci despite social workers being somewhat interested in addressing them. A concerted effort should be made to attract social workers into these practice areas as they have been identified as critical problems facing society.



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Research Article

Integrating the Grand Challenges for social work into an undergraduate capstone course

Dawn Apgar & Lori Zerrusen

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Related Research

...

Senior Capstone Experience



As part of their capstone experience, students graduating with a BA in Social Work study the Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society.

- Present policy analysis at statewide and university research conferences
- Speak with practitioners who were working in Grand Challenge areas
- Educate others about Grand Challenges

A semester-long course on the Grand Challenges led to **increased professional interest and optimism** among students about addressing smart decarceration.

This case study highlights the need for **greater exposure to Grand Challenges in undergraduate curricula.**

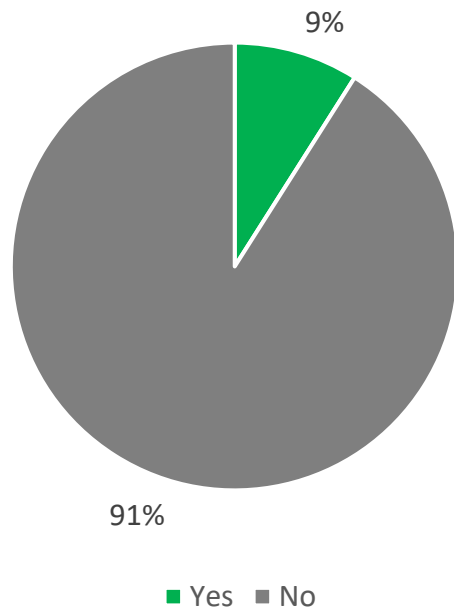
- Integrating these topics into accreditation processes
- Calls for innovative pedagogies to better prepare students for addressing pressing social problems

Senior Capstone Experience

.... Results

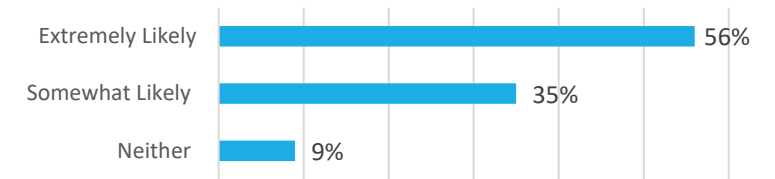
BEFORE

- 1** *Have you ever heard of the Grand Challenges for Social Work?*

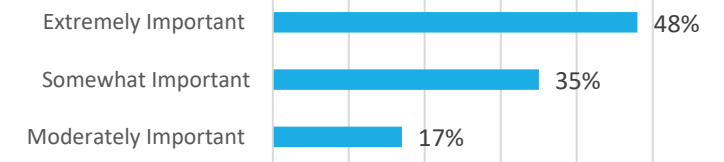


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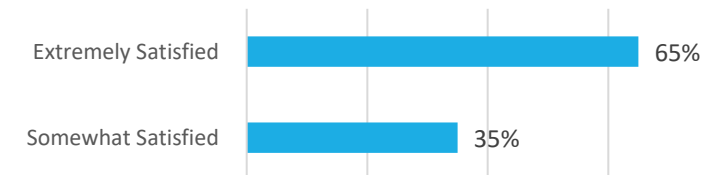
- 2** *How likely are you to recommend a course on the Grand Challenges to a fellow social work student?*



- 3** *How important do you think taking a course devoted to this content was for your professional development?*



- 4** *How satisfied were you with the format of the class sessions?*



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https://connect.springerpub.com/sites/default/files/Connect-Journals/CFP_%20JBSW-Incorporating-Grand-Challenges.pdf



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Question and Answers