

GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIETY

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CHAPTER 1

Grand Challenges for Social Work and Society

JAMES E. LUBBEN, RICHARD P. BARTH, ROWENA FONG,
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AND EDWINA UEHARA

Ambitious yet achievable goals for society that mobilize the profession, capture the public's imagination, and require innovation and breakthroughs in science and practice to achieve.

Kalil (2012)

The Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) provides an agenda of grand challenges for all of society. GCSW is a campaign inaugurated by the social work profession, prompting social workers and allies in other fields to ponder society's most challenging problems and how best to accelerate progress toward resolving them. GCSW is designed to 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 acknowledgment of social work science within the discipline and by other, related, disciplines. A related goal is to position social work to become a more valued science by creating a social agenda for America.

The GCSW is sponsored by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW or "the Academy"). Established in 2009, the Academy is to provide social work—and social issues—with the significance that the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine provide to those fields. Founders of the Academy envisioned a future in which social work and

social welfare science are recognized as fundamental to society. Accordingly, the charter of the Academy elaborates the mission of encouraging and recognizing outstanding research, scholarship, and practice that contribute to a sustainable, equitable, and just future. AASWSW is an honorific society, inducting new members annually through a rigorous nominations and elections process modeled after the traditions of the National Academy of Medicine. There are currently more than 110 member fellows, recognizing the highest honor of researcher and practitioner accomplishment in the profession.

The Academy also informs social policy by serving as a frontline source of information for the social work profession, for Congress, and for other public and private entities charged with advancing the public good. Its focus is to promote the examination of social policy and the application of research to test alternative policies, programs, and practices for their impact on society. The Grand Challenges for Social Work is the first major initiative of the Academy.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK

Success has many parents, and so it is with GCSW. Edwina Uehara, Dean at the University of Washington School of Social Work, is one of the proud parents, having become an active student of grand challenges campaigns being adopted by a number of other organizations and professions. Dean Uehara first advanced the idea of grand challenges for social work. This work built upon a strong foundation laid by John Brekke, who championed the notion that there was a *science of social work* (Brekke, 2012). Brekke showcased his thinking regarding a science of social work at the Society for Social Work and Research's (SSWR) 2011 Aaron Rosen Lecture on the Science of Social Work (Brekke, 2011, 2012; Brekke & Anastas, forthcoming). These two notions—the possibility of a grand challenge campaign for social work and the codification of a science of social work—were synergistic movements. In particular, the strong emphasis on scientific rigor for the grand challenges is due in part to the growing consensus that social work had a science. Similarly, the science of social work movement benefited from the increased attention to social work becoming a critical partner with other branches of science in solving challenging societal problems.

Capitalizing on the energy of these two related developments, a meeting was arranged with Marilyn Flynn, Edwina Uehara, and Richard Barth. Flynn and Uehara were deans of their respective schools of social work, and Barth was then President of the AASWSW and Dean of the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Among the topics discussed was the idea of launching a Grand Challenges campaign for social work under the auspices of the

Academy. To further develop this idea, a larger meeting was planned for the summer of 2012. A select group of 40 participants was invited to the 2-day conference designed to grapple with social work's role in shaping 21st-century society. The 2-day conference took place at Islandwood, a conference center located on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound, Washington. One day of the conference was devoted to refine the development of a science of social work, and the other day focused on nurturing the idea of a grand challenges campaign for social work.

On the day devoted to grand challenges, Uehara introduced the history and concept of grand challenges and proposed that social work create a grand challenges initiative (Uehara et al., 2014). In addition to her articulation of the fit between grand challenges and the point of intersection with the progress of social work, she also illustrated the potential benefits of grand challenges by introducing University of Washington's Dean of Engineering, Matt O'Donnell, who described the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) Grand Challenges initiative. The NAE had selected 14 grand challenges to galvanize the engineering profession to recruit more female and domestically born engineers by encouraging collaborations and innovations to solve major problems. The NAE's intention was to shift the understanding of engineering from a profession that built tunnels, sewers, skyscrapers, and computer programs to one that solved such major problems as providing access to clean water, providing secure cyberspace, and advancing personalized learning.

The Islandwood meeting then reviewed strategies of other grand challenges then in progress, such as the grand challenges from the William and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH), and Grand Challenges Canada. Barth's presentation considered the dominant approaches previously taken—especially comparing the generation of grand challenges from one or a few experts—by a larger group of people (NIMH used a very large panel of respondents from throughout the world in their Delphi process) and suggested that we needed to find our own, third way. More background on the grand challenges and their emergence—since David Hilbert first announced his grand challenges—is provided by Uehara and colleagues (2013).

Like engineering, social work is concerned about the student pipeline and a desire to galvanize its profession to become more focused on visibility and benefit for all of society. The GCSW also provided an opportunity to work collaboratively with a problem-solving (rather than organizational) focus across social work organizations and other related scientific disciplines. The GCSW would be ambitious, bold, and uncharted. Although benefits for the social work profession were expected from a successful GCSW initiative, discussions originated and remained focused on ways to explore how social work could address social problems innovatively and transformatively, making a significant impact within a decade. The goals were to improve society while building

new science, skills, and relationships that would also strengthen the profession of social work.

The Academy board enthusiastically approved the role of shepherding the grand challenges and undertook the GCSW initiative in 2013 with the appointment of a Grand Challenge Executive Committee convened by Barth and staffed by Sarah Butts, the AASWSW's first administrator. Beginning in December 2012, Barth invited John Brekke, Claudia Coulton, Diana DiNitto, Marilyn Flynn, Rowena Fong, J. David Hawkins, King Davis, James Lubben, Ron Manderscheid, Yolanda Padilla, Michael Sherraden, Edwina Uehara, Karina Walters, and James Herbert Williams to be the Grand Challenge Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee convened for the first time in early 2013 at a retreat in Chicago and elected John Brekke and Rowena Fong as co-chairs. The meeting was organized by four sessions: (1) Grand Context—Impact Model, (2) Potential Frameworks and Criteria for Developing Grand Challenges for Social Work, (3) Strategies to Foster Collaborations Among Stakeholders, and (4) Approaches to Gather and Process Input from Stakeholders.

Executive Committee members more intently studied exemplars and models of grand challenges originating outside of social work. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the examples, began its initiative in 2003, focused on health-related challenges throughout the world. The 2010 NIMH's grand challenges targeted global mental health. The National Science Foundation identified six research ideas and three process ideas for its grand challenges. Having reviewed the exemplars, retreat participants decided to model GCSW most closely with the discipline of engineering because of similar interest in affecting the population entering the profession and being academically and profession driven yet collaborating with the community and with other disciplines.

Executive Committee members left the inaugural committee meeting with a sense of inspiration and charge. There was agreement that the process of identifying social work's grand challenges would not be hardwired and would be representative of the values of the profession—strengths-based and inclusive. Also, the meeting engendered the recognition that the committee would continue to wrestle with framework, structure, criteria, and process in the months and possibly years ahead but would eventually develop a refined construct and process.

DETERMINING AND SELECTING THE GRAND CHALLENGES

The GCSW initiative went through three phases. The first phase focused on the identification and selection of the 12 Grand Challenges. This phase