

## Starting the Conversation: Approaches to Integrating the Grand Challenges Into Social Work Academic Programs

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According to the website of the [American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare](#),

The Grand Challenges for Social Work is a groundbreaking initiative to champion social progress powered by science. It's a call to action for social work researchers and practitioners to:

- Harness social work's science and knowledge base;
- Collaborate with individuals, community-based organizations, and professionals from all fields and disciplines; and
- Work together to tackle some of our toughest social problems.<sup>1</sup>

In order for this effort to take hold, it is essential that we create a generation of social work innovators who are prepared to take on these Challenges and work collectively to address the social issues captured by these topic areas. This process must begin as new social workers are socialized into the profession at both the BSW and MSW levels through academic programs that promote and support these efforts. Doctoral programs also play a critical role, as they prepare the future leaders of social work, leaders who will carry forward the initiative's efforts and be the educators of subsequent generations of social workers yet to come. Faculty who teach and conduct research in social work have new and unique opportunities to collaborate across disciplines to address the diverse social problems represented in the Grand Challenges.

This brief is an invitation to other social work education programs to share how they are incorporating the Grand Challenges into their programs, so that others may learn from such efforts. Here, we offer four approaches from our respective programs as examples of ways in which some schools and departments have begun this process. We want to emphasize that these efforts

are works in progress and are not intended to suggest best practices or a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, we hope to begin a dialogue in the academy, a dialogue where ideas are shared regarding how social work educators can contribute to the Grand Challenges effort.

### Catholic University of America, National Catholic School of Social Service

Joe Shields, the chair of the PhD program at the National Catholic School of Social Service, decided in the summer of 2017 that he wanted to “bring students into the social work conversation about what the critical issues of the day are in our profession.”<sup>2</sup> He decided to create a PhD seminar course, SSW 990: Social Work Grand Challenges. Focused exclusively on the Grand Challenges, the course ran for the first time in the fall of 2017. After two class sessions were spent introducing the Grand Challenges and the history of the effort in social work, each subsequent session focused on a different Grand Challenge. For each class, students read policy briefs from the respective Challenge and related articles about the issue. In addition, he brought in experts who were involved in the specific Challenge. The students were then required to write a concept paper about one of the issues and explore some of the complexities and solutions for social work.

Shields reported that the students “loved” the course. He believes that this was primarily because they were exposed to different faculty who do not normally teach in the doctoral program, as well as to faculty and experts from other social work programs and organizations working within the Grand Challenges. He felt that this course engaged students in the “social work conversation” while simultaneously pushing them to think critically about topics that are outside of their own primary areas of interest but that intersect with those

interests in numerous ways. Shields also stated that, for doctoral students, such a course is essential, as “we want to prepare our graduates to have this knowledge as they prepare to be future social work educators.”<sup>3</sup>

### University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration

As a network co-lead for the Promote Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge, Associate Professor Matt Epperson had been discussing the issues surrounding smart decarceration in his Criminal Justice and Social Work Interface course for several years. Students became more interested and engaged in understanding social work’s role within the opportunities and obstacles of decarceration, and Epperson decided to create a class specifically devoted to this topic. For the past 2 years, the course Smart Decarceration: A Grand Challenge for Social Work has been taken by University of Chicago social work master’s students as well as by students in law, public policy, and social sciences. The broad goals for the course are to (1) explore the political, social, and empirical context for decarceration; (2) examine emerging decarceration policies and practices; and (3) develop interventions at multiple levels to achieve smart decarceration outcomes. Core readings for the course include Grand Challenges working papers as well as chapters in a book product from a national conference on smart decarceration. In the primary assignment for the course, students choose a topic that relates to mass incarceration and disproportionate impact, and they develop a policy, practice, or research-based intervention to address the problem and promote outcomes identified in the Promote Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge.

Students have expressed that this course not only challenges them to be creative and social justice minded as they struggle with developing social work interventions for decarceration, but that it also contextualizes their work in a broader national effort to achieve smart decarceration. In related work, members of the Education Working Group for the Promote Smart Decarceration Grand Challenge are creating model syllabi that focus on developing various types of smart decarceration practice behaviors.

Additionally, as the Grand Challenges for Social Work was launched in the 2015–2016 school year, doctoral students at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration aimed to

create an opportunity for their peers to learn more about the initiative and its potential relevance to their research interests. The coordinators of the Doctoral Theory and Teaching Workshops, a speaker series that runs throughout the academic year, decided to focus that year’s workshops on the Grand Challenges. Local and national speakers were invited to present on how each Grand Challenge was emerging, and students engaged in a discussion of each topic. These discussions explored the general concepts of the Grand Challenges and provided critique of their foci and methodologies. This speaker series was also attended by faculty members and master’s students, and it provided attendees with an important grounding in the Grand Challenges as the initiative was being launched.

### Colorado State University, School of Social Work

At the Colorado State University (CSU) School of Social Work, engagement efforts with the Grand Challenges continue to develop. The school has integrated several new practices and will continue to advance innovative ideas over time. In 2016, the school’s director, Audrey Shillington, in collaboration with faculty, revised the school’s research-related goals in order to lay out a specific one aimed at conducting impactful research responsive to the Grand Challenges for Social Work. This effort helps drive research-related decision making to support professional development, hiring, and funding opportunities. In faculty recruitment efforts, the candidates are given opportunities to discuss their contributions and leadership in the context of the Grand Challenges. In this way, CSU prioritizes hiring faculty whose work is well positioned to make significant contributions in one or more of these Challenge areas. All current faculty, instructors as well as researchers, are asked to indicate their association with a Grand Challenge priority. This enables students and outside constituents to quickly identify a specific champion.

Furthermore, the CSU communications and public relations team has begun using social media and news outlets to highlight faculty accomplishments and contributions toward the Grand Challenges. CSU also has begun weaving in the initiatives through student engagement in courses, internships, mentoring, and other social-work socialization efforts; course design, including joint and interdisciplinary programs; community-engaged research; and presentations. Shillington

has presented on the Grand Challenges to the external advisory board and to the dean of the College of Health and Human Sciences. This has contributed to broader conversations on the role of social work interprofessional collaborations to target identified social problems. CSU is working toward a joint MSW/MBA with the College of Business and a joint addictions-counseling program with the Psychology Department. Both efforts are examples of these interdisciplinary collaborations.

Finally, CSU has a Diversity and Human Rights Committee that organizes talks from experts around campus and the community. Focused on various social issues important for social work, these “Dialogues Around Difference” are critical for information sharing and mobilizing students, faculty, and the larger campus community toward addressing these problems. Dialogues have been organized around a specific Grand Challenge and speakers who share knowledge, identify pathways for social action, and specify ways to become involved. A forthcoming competition within the BSW, MSW, and PhD programs will use donor funding for a cash award to students whose papers showcase innovation proposals to address a priority within the Grand Challenges. Overall, social work is well poised for community engaged and cross-disciplinary work, and CSU strives to contribute to the Grand Challenges in these ways.

### University of Southern California, Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work

The Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California has instituted a new DSW program that is focused exclusively on the 12 Grand Challenges identified by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare.

When students enter the program, they select one of the 12 Grand Challenges as their primary focus. Then, over their six semesters in the program, they develop an innovation project to address their chosen Challenge. At the end of Semester 3, students are expected to pass a preliminary assessment, and at the end of Semester 6, they are expected to present and defend their proposed project. By the time of graduation, they are expected to have a “shovel-ready” proposal for a pilot project that is fundable.

Projects can address a clinical practice, a business innovation, a policy change, or a piece of

legislation related to the selected Challenge. Over the program, students learn leadership strategies, design concepts, communication strategies, financing methods, and project-implementation skills such as the use of logic models, outcome assessment, and evaluation. The goal is to produce graduates who will lead major social change in significant public and private roles throughout society.

### Continuing the Conversation

As shown above, these four institutions have taken different approaches to integrating the Grand Challenges. One uses a course to provide students exposure to all of the Grand Challenges and then affords opportunity to address one in particular for an assignment. Another focuses on one specific Grand Challenge but has also provided a forum within the school to expose the entire community to the initiatives of the various Grand Challenges. A third approach is to infuse the program’s culture with the Grand Challenges by including them in the mission statement, and to tie research projects directly to them. Finally, a distinctive DSW program structures training and development to focus on a specific Grand Challenge.

We recognize that other programs also are using innovative strategies to integrate the Grand Challenges, and we offer these examples in the hope of starting a dialogue among institutions and members of the academy. Additionally, in the fall of 2018, the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare’s Education and Training Committee conducted a brief survey of all bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programs in social work. The purpose of this survey was to examine how academic programs are introducing the Grand Challenges into their curricula, and results from this survey are forthcoming.

In order to continue this conversation, we have created a short survey for schools and departments of social work to include their particular approaches to incorporating the Grand Challenges. The survey can be accessed here: <http://bit.ly/HigherEdBrief>. We will compile responses from this survey and share the findings with the broader social work academic community. By sharing different approaches in this brief, we hope to begin a dialogue where others can discuss ways we as a profession can continue to advance the causes outlined by the Grand Challenges.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> About (n.d., para. 1). Retrieved January 4, 2019, from <http://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/grand-challenges-initiative/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> J. Shields (personal communication, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> J. Shields (personal communication, 2018).

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## 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](http://GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org).

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