Challenging the Grand Challenges for Social Work

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Abstract

When Abraham Flexner refused to grant the status of "profession" to the field of social work, it sparked a century old drive to meet his standards and obtain that recognition. The grand challenges for social work are the most recent effort to that end, but this article will show his arguments were flawed, undeserving of the weight given to them, and not universally accepted. Thus, the group that introduced and currently oversees social work's grand challenges initiative may not adequately represent all members of the field of social work. The early proponents of the grand challenges for social work recognized the many achievements throughout social work's history, but not the multiple approaches to those achievements as evidenced in the careers of its founding mothers Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. The grand challenges for social work have the potential to unite the field of social work or to splinter it further. This article challenges the need for a grand challenges approach using a historical social work lens and a critical look at the wording of the grand challenges for social work.

Keywords: social work, grand challenges, academy, practitioners, professionalism, Flexner effect

For over 100 years, the profession of social work has experienced an identity crisis regarding its place as a profession and within the realm of science (Austin, 1983; Flexner, 1915/2001; Gibelman, 1999; Gitterman, 2014). This identity crisis and resulting lack of professional self-esteem are rooted in the reaction to Abraham Flexner's speech at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1915 regarding the status of social work as a profession (Flexner, 1915/2001). The boldest and most recent attempt to garner social work's rightful place at the proverbial table of science is the grand challenges for social work (GCSW). The idea of using a grand challenges approach for social work was presented to a small group of social work deans and academics to bring organization, focus, and increased recognition for its ongoing work in all aspects of social justice (Barth, Gilmore, Flynn, Fraser, & Brekke, 2014). The intent of this article is to critically evaluate the need for the GCSW using a historical view of the profession of social work while challenging its language.

What Are the Grand Challenges for Social Work?

The GCSW are similar in nature to other grand challenge initiatives such as that endorsed by the Canadian Government, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and the original initiative by David Hilbert at an international society of mathematicians in 1900 (Uehara et al., 2013). The GCSW encompass three umbrella goals: welfare of individuals and families, strengthened social interconnection, and societal justice (grandchallengesforsocialwork.org). Each of these goals has four specific challenges (i.e., stop family violence, end homelessness, promote smart decarceration; grandchallengesforsocialwork.org). Each challenge is led by a network of scholars whose research falls within the sphere of that challenge (grandchallengesforsocialwork.org).

More information regarding history and goals of the GCSW is discussed below.

Historical Context

History of the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The GCSW initiative was first introduced in 2012 by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW). The GCSW were presented as set of societal goals, which although intimidating, indicated scientific promise of resolution through collaborative efforts that utilize emerging technology and innovation (Barth et al., 2014). The grand challenges approach has been utilized by numerous other groups, typically groups within the field of science (Barth et al., 2014). The first person to use this approach was a mathematician who presented a list of unsolved mathematic challenges he felt should be addressed and solved (Uehara et al., 2013). Over a century later, the engineering field used the grand challenges approach to meet current engineering challenges throughout society, bridge the scientist/practitioner gap, and increase recruitment of new engineering students (Uehara et al., 2013). Since the early 21st century and the inception of the engineering field's use of the grand challenges approach, several other groups have begun to use it as well, including the Canadian government, the United Nations, and scientific communities such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Academy of Sciences (Uehara et al., 2013).

The most recent attempt to bring social work into a full recognition scientifically and academically is the introduction of the GCSW (Uehara et al., 2013). The introduction and oversight of the GCSW have been streamlined by the AASWSW, and one must understand the history of the AASWSW to fully understand the history of the GCSW. In 1999, a group of deans that would later come to be known as the St. Louis group met for the first time (Barth et al., 2014). Historically, this was a time of increased attention to the science of social work, and leaders in the field were being newly recognized at professional conferences (Barth et al., 2014). It was through this St. Louis group and conversations during conferences of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) and the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE) that the formation of an academy in social work emerged (Barth et al., 2014). According to Barth et al. (2014), the purpose of forming an academy was to promote social work as an equivalent to other disciplines that already had academies, such as engineering and medicine. Further, having a social work academy would serve to complete the academic standing of social work and bring to focus the rigor of social work research (Barth et al., 2014). The formation of a social work academy received two reactions. Those focused on social work as science reacted positively, while deans from more practice-oriented schools and those supporting the unification of the field under a single social work organization were opposed to the idea (Barth et al., 2014). Ultimately, despite these tensions, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) was formed in 2009 (Barth et al., 2014).

The GCSW initiative can be linked to the outgrowth of the movement of social work science that began in 2011 with John Brekke's *Aaron Rosen Lecture* at the SSWR annual conference (Brekke, 2012; Padilla & Fong, 2016; Palinkas, He, Choy-Brown, & Hertel, 2017). This promoted multiple articles encouraging Ph.D. programs to have a strong social work science focus (Fong, 2012; 2014). In 2012, a committee was established to begin spearheading the grand challenges initiative (Padilla & Fong, 2016). In 2013, the grand challenges committee began the process of collecting ideas for the grand challenges, reading through submissions, and determining the initial grand challenges list. A public request for papers on the selected areas occurred in 2014 (AASWSW, 2016; Padilla & Fong, 2016). In 2015, at the annual SSWR conference in a special roundtable session, the proposed grand challenges were revealed and opened to the group for discussion (SSWR, n.d.; Williams, 2015). Following the roundtable

discussion, changes were made to the proposed list, leading to a finalized list of grand challenges, which were then presented at the following year's SSWR annual conference (SSWR.org; Uehara et al., 2013).

History of the profession

Social work as a profession began in the late 1800s and early 1900s to meet the emerging needs of people brought about by increased industrialization and urbanization of the era (AASWSW, 2013). From the beginning, there were two different foci of this new profession of social intervention: Charity Organization Societies (COS) and Settlement Houses (AASWSW, 2013). The COS were known for their "friendly visitors" and served as a precursor to the modern caseworker (AASWSW, 2013). Alternatively, the Settlement Houses challenged issues faced by society in the workplace including child labor, environmental issues, and more (Addams, 1910). In addition to the societal issues tackled, the Settlement Houses served as places where the less fortunate could experience art, literature, and other privileges typically reserved for the more affluent (Addams, 1910). Both the COS and the Settlement Houses practiced early versions of social work research in their own unique ways (AASWSW, 2013).

The profession of social work continues to seek equity for all persons with a concerted focus on the experiences of marginalized peoples. The founding mothers, Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, came from very different backgrounds and experienced life differently. Jane Addams was born in 1860 and had a privileged childhood; but from an early age, she was intrigued by the differences between the haves and have nots (Addams, 1910). Before the age of seven, when she witnessed poverty for the first time, she also recognized the physical divide between the two groups (Addams, 1910). She vowed then to have a big house built amongst the smaller houses of the poor, rather than amongst the larger houses of the wealthy (Addams, 1910). By age eight, she began inquiring into the predetermination of people into one group or another (Addams, 1910). She was told that there would always be differing levels of wealth, but that even those in poverty could experience equality in education and other areas (Addams, 1910). Even at age twelve, she recognized that all people, regardless of their financial standing, experienced similar goals, dreams, and desires (Addams, 1910). As a young woman in her final year of college, she expressed the importance of studying a branch of physical science as a means of training students to search for truth and thereby make them aware of their own biases (Addams, 1910). Later, however, she began to feel as though education focused too much on learning and too little on practice (Addams, 1910). Thus, when Hull House opened, it brought together her desire as a young child to live amongst the poor, bridged the gaps between the groups by offering some of the benefits of wealth (e.g., art and information) to those who were not wealthy, and served as an opportunity for practical education for social work students (Addams, 1910).

In contrast, Mary Richmond's life diverged from her contemporary, resulting in a much different view of and contribution to the world. Following the loss of her mother when Richmond was three, she was raised by her maternal grandmother and two of her aunts (Franklin, 1986; Lederman, 1994). Financially, her childhood was neither affluent nor poor, but more middle class (Lederman, 1994). For example, her grandmother was able to afford the services of a gardener, had a plethora of books, and supported a formal education for Richmond beginning at age eleven (Lederman, 1994). Her grandmother fought for women's rights and spiritualism, which taught Richmond the personal benefits of fighting for a cause (Lederman, 1994). Richmond joined a Universalist church in the late 1880s; and through interactions with and encouragement of the minister, she applied for a position at the Baltimore Charity Organization Society, which was the beginning of her journey in charity work (Lederman, 1994). Once there, Richmond's outstanding abilities enabled her to move up to the highest position possible (Lederman, 1994). While she was moving up through the ranks of the Baltimore Charity Organization Society, she

heard a lecture by Josephine Shaw Lowell, who held the belief that the cause of poverty lay within the character of the person and could be eradicated through education and rehabilitation (Franklin, 1986). Previous influences in Richmond's life and her own experiences likely served as the catalyst for the intense influence of Lowell's lecture on Richmond's later work and writing (Franklin, 1986). Richmond believed government handouts were harmful to individuals and led to greater poverty, and she expressed throughout her career the belief that individual casework was the only way to reduce poverty. Her belief in casework was likely an outgrowth of the idea that flaws in a person's character were the primary causes of poverty and that casework should therefore focus on education and assistance addressing those flaws (Franklin, 1986). Richmond was an advocate for social work education, but she was strongly opposed to liberal arts education, preferring instead to use cases as educational materials (Austin, 1983). Richmond's influence and leadership within casework, social work education, and the professionalization of social work are still evident almost a century after her death in 1928 (Franklin, 1986).

Thus, Jane Addams and Mary Richmond helped lay the foundation of the profession and discipline of social work during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Addams, 1910; Agnew, 2004). They are both often referred to as social work's founding mothers. The emerging profession of social work was dominated by women (Austin, 1983). Early social workers had often earned college degrees, but most other fields were male dominated and resistant to the entrance of women, while social work welcomed them wholeheartedly (Austin, 1983). Social work science methodologies, casework, and social work education were established during these foundational years of the field (Franklin, 1986). By the early 1900s, due in large part to the influence of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, social work was gaining momentum (Franklin, 1986). What started as primarily a volunteer role was now becoming a paid position. Social workers were investigating foster homes, working at numerous settlement houses, conducting casework, and working in newly founded agencies as the recognition of, and need for, their services grew (Austin, 1983; Franklin, 1986). The first social work schools were well into their first decade, and by 1912, a full two-year training program for social workers was in place (Austin, 1983). However, when social workers, even those who were educated in social work schools, interacted with other professions, they were viewed as volunteers, making the recognition of social work as a profession increasingly necessary (Austin, 1983). Additionally, being recognized as a profession would have offered the extended benefit of recognizing social work degrees as professional degrees and, by further extension, the faculty teaching the courses as legitimate (Austin, 1983). Thus, by 1915, this burgeoning field began to seek recognition of its place as a profession (Austin, 1983).

Those working in the social work field anticipated the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Correction as the time and place for this deeply needed official recognition (Austin, 1983). Abraham Flexner, highly regarded as one of the most influential men of his day in education generally, and medical education specifically, was asked to address the question of whether social work was a profession (Austin, 1983). His status and influence were likely the primary reason for this invitation, but he did not give social work the endorsement they had hoped for (Austin, 1983). Instead, his influential status backfired and sent the field into an identity crisis now a century old (Austin, 1983). A recent manifestation of these ongoing efforts to establish social work's identity as a profession is today's GCSW initiative.

Goals of the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The overall goals of the GCSW include focus and unification of efforts to tackle difficult emerging social problems through several internal and external goals (Padilla & Fong, 2016). Internally, the GCSW is intended to increase the scientific focus of the discipline, thereby increasing

funding for social work research, reinvigorating macro level social work, increasing and improving collaboration between practitioner and researcher, and finally, recruiting and preparing future generations of social workers (Barth et al., 2014; Gehlert, Hall, & Palinkas et al., 2017; Nurius, Coffey, Fong, Korr, & McRoy, 2017; Padilla & Fong, 2016; Williams, 2016). Externally, the goals of the GCSW include increasing the recognition of social work's contributions to scientific knowledge and social justice efforts while simultaneously strengthening those efforts through collaborations with other disciplines and community partners (Padilla & Fong, 2016; Uehara et al., 2013; Williams, 2016).

There has been a renewed effort to increase the scientific focus of social work, including efforts to define what social work science is (Anistas, 2014; Brekke, 2012, 2014; Marsh, 2012; Palinkas et al., 2017). This renewed effort is invigorated by the adoption of the GCSW, such that written into the grand challenges is a recognition of technological advances, which allow for and enable rich scientific efforts to bring lasting societal change (Padilla & Fong, 2016). Inherently connected to the increase in scientific focus is the much-needed increase in funding for social work research. Further, to meet the GCSW, which address broad level societal issues, a focus on policy change is necessary despite a current shift within the field toward a more micro-level focus (Rodriguez, Ostrow, & Kemp, 2017). Therefore, the GCSW necessitate renewed efforts toward policy changes that strengthen micro and mezzo level social work efforts and facilitate the big changes needed for real and lasting social change. Similarly, the GCSW demand purposeful efforts to bridge the gap between practitioner and researcher as work in each of these areas necessarily informs the other (Gehlert et al., 2017; Nurius et al., 2017; Palinkas et al., 2017). Finally, if social work is to meet these challenges, it requires recruiting and preparing the next generation of social workers to take on the challenges, incorporate social work science into their daily work, collaborate on projects, and increase the field's sense of identity

(Fong, 2012, 2014; Gehlert et al., 2017; Nurius et al., 2017). This, then, involves shifts in the way social work education at all levels is designed (Fong, 2012, 2014; Gehlert et al., 2017; Nurius et al., 2017).

Simultaneous to the renewed efforts toward a scientific focus are the efforts toward an increase in recognition of social work's scientific and social justice contributions (Brekke, 2012). Social work is charged with piggybacking on scientific work of other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology and blending the efforts of social work into those other disciplines (Brekke, 2012). Thus, the GCSW are intended to be a bold move by the field to portray its efforts toward resolution of large societal issues and thereby increase the recognition of social work. Similarly, to meet the challenges, a transdisciplinary approach that allows the challenges to be viewed through multiple lenses for a more thorough approach is necessary (Nurius et al., 2017). Additionally, to bring about effective change in real time, collaboration with community partners is also an essential component (Padilla & Fong, 2016). Thus, the increased recognition of social work as encouraged by the GCSW can help fuel collaboration with other disciplines as well as community partners.

Critiques of the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The GCSW have lofty aims to facilitate measurable change in large societal issues, each with its own deep implicit societal norm and policy level issues that must be addressed if the GCSW can make even a small change. To begin with, the idea that the GCSW are a necessary means toward the end of societal change flies in the face of the historical accomplishments noted by the very same people who claim their necessity (AASWSW, 2013). Social work has a long history of facilitating change at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, and it managed to achieve such accomplishments without a grand challenges initiative (AASWSW, 2013; Addams, 1910; Franklin, 1986; Lederman, 1994). Given that the ability to create large and meaningful

societal change seemingly does not require a grand challenge initiative, there must be other, deeper reasons for the push to adopt the GCSW. Potential contributing factors are discussed next.

Abraham Flexner

From a historical viewpoint, the Flexner speech at the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections comes to mind, and the identity crisis it created for some may be one contributing factor for the introduction of the GCSW (Austin, 1983). This identity crisis did not affect the entire field of social work. In fact, even at the conference where his speech took place, others gave speeches in direct opposition to Flexner (Austin, 1983). According to Austin (1983), it was primarily social work educators who took Flexner's speech as their proverbial marching orders, except Mary Richmond, who gave her retort to Flexner a couple years later (Austin, 1983). At the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1917, Richmond argued that social work was more than just a mediating agent as purported by Flexner and had its own identifiable techniques that were passed on through social work education (Austin, 1983). She further sought to build social work's status with the publication of her book, *Social Diagnosis*, in which she used the medical model as a metaphor for the education, analysis, and treatment of casework (Agnew, 2004; Gitterman, 2014; McLaughlin, 2002).

There remains a faction within the discipline that still thinks there is a need to determine the identity or define the profession of social work (Gibelman, 1999; Gitterman, 2014; Williams, 2015). In 1999, Gibelman claimed the adoption or recognition of a social work identity is hindered by the broad scope of social work, its susceptibility to current sociopolitical and economic atmosphere, and divisions within the field. In 2014, Gitterman also attributed the identity crisis of social work to the years following Flexner's speech during which social work simultaneously utilized the medical and psychiatric models in theory, methodology, and as exemplars of its professional status, concurrently relinquishing the distinct role and contribution of social work. In 2015, Williams discussed the efforts that began around 2007 to improve the field by forming a definition of the profession of social work. In the same year, Howard and Garland (2015) claimed that the identity crisis faced by social work research endangers its future practicability. It is this need that the GCSW initiative is purported to address. Importantly, not everyone within the field sees this as something in need of change; some observe that social work has been dealing with questions related to its professional identity since its inception.

The articles cited above were published 85 to 99 years after one man gave a speech and refused to give the prized title of *profession* to the field of social work. Looking back at Flexner's speech, one can find multiple reasons to question the basis for his conclusions that have led to what has been coined "the most significant event in the development of the intellectual rationalization for social work as an organized profession" (Austin, 1983, p. 357). This *Flexner effect* still grips the field of social work and is evident in the current literature. The terms identity, profession, science (in relation to social work), the name Flexner, and other mentions of improving the status or recognition of social work appear in various combinations in numerous articles such as Barth et al. (2014), Brekke (2012), and Fong (2014). According to Gibelman (1999), this search for status and identity did not begin in 1915 but, instead, has consumed social work since its inception. Despite the fact that during the same 1915 conference other speakers recognized social work as a profession, Flexner's speech had the strongest effect (Austin, 1983). Gibelman (1999) also states that rather than the scope of social work being defined from within, it has been subject to the socio-political atmosphere of a given time, which may also speak to why the *Flexner effect* is still an issue over 100 years later. As a profession and a discipline, social work may be overly reliant on the opinions of other professions. Herein is another goal of the GCSW that may not be viewed as an issue in need of change by all social work scholars and practitioners.

Given the ongoing effect Flexner's speech had on an entire field/discipline/profession,

one might ask about Flexner as a person, what credentials he had that gave him the authority to determine the professional status of social work, and how he came to his conclusions. Flexner is most noted for his contributions to medical education (Austin, 1983; Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012). His personal educational achievements include a bachelor's degree in the classics and a master's degree in psychology (IAS, n.d.; Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012). When Flexner gave his historical speech, he was the assistant secretary of the General Education Board, founded and funded by John D. Rockefeller (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012). By 1959, Flexner was considered one of the most powerful men in the field of education, but whether his influential reverence was warranted is a completely different matter (Austin, 1983). First, the catalyst for a major paradigm shift in the delivery of medical education was a report written by a man who never went to medical school ("Abraham Flexner: Life," n.d.). Today, it is doubtful that professions would engage in paradigm shifts because of commentary by someone with his credentials and without formal education or affiliation in the specified fields (Flexner, 1915/2001). In fact, Flexner himself questioned his ability to make the assessment and placed no specific weight on it (Flexner, 2001). He states at the outset of his speech: "Hence, if the conclusions that I have reached seem to you unsound or academic, I beg you to understand that I should not be disposed to press them" (Flexner, 1915/2001, p. 152).

Flexner's authority comes into even greater question with a closer look. It is possible some of his unofficial credentials lay in his association with Rockefeller and the Carnegie Foundation (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012). Flexner was said to have spent approximately a half billion dollars of money from Rockefeller (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2012). Both foundations and the amount of money he had access to likely fueled his influential status. Furthermore, tax-exempt foundations, such as the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations, were found to have used their wealth to control education in this country through activities deemed un-American (Dodd, 1954; Gallagher, 2008).

Following the money then, Flexner's work as an operative of both the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations may be considered one of the methods by which these foundations pursued their goals, thereby further reducing his qualifications to determine the professional status of the field of social work.

The arguments made and conclusions drawn by Flexner are just as questionable as his credentials. First, inherent in the speech is the assumption that the professions he mentions and to which he compares social work are listed in some official register of professions or that there is some group of people somewhere that determines which occupations are granted the status of a profession (Austin, 1983). Neither of these assumptions is accurate. In fact, there has been no solid agreement regarding a list of professions (Austin, 1983). Further, there is no body of officials whose job is to assign the status of profession (Austin, 1983). Another argument against Flexner's arguments is the assumption that all professions are alike. There are vast differences between the professions of medicine and social work, the focus of his speech. While professions experience periods of change, differences between professions are not valid reasons to denigrate one simply because it is considered by the speaker to be a step behind the other. To put this in perspective, social work was experiencing a paradigm shift in 1915 away from relying on moral judgements of clients' character toward depending on practice wisdom to determine helping efforts. At the same time, the medical field was also engaged in its own paradigm shift, moving away from depending on practice wisdom toward relying more on scientific research to guide practice. Therefore, it is possible that some of Flexner's underlying reasoning was based in the opinion that practice wisdom was no longer useful or valid (Austin, 1983). Finally, there is another potential reason for his judgment of social work: gender. In 1915, social work was one of the few occupations that primarily consisted of women, including those in the top positions (Austin, 1983). Unable to break into the male-dominated

professions but seeking to build a career following the completion of their education, women generally found a home in social work (Austin, 1983).

Elitism

Formation of the academy

The group of deans mentioned earlier and known as the St. Louis group initially sought to push their respective schools further in the direction of social work science and then collectively decided to create an academy that would elect fellows who would serve as the elite of social work academics (Barth et al., 2014). The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) began to impose the agenda of social work science on the rest of the field by becoming the gatekeepers of the direction the field should take, what should be studied and how, and who should be recognized as the chosen few (Barth et al., 2014). Initially, discussions about forming the AASWSW was met with mixed opinions. Some schools thought it was unnecessary for various reasons, not the least of which was its elitist nature viewed by some as exacerbating the divide between research and practice (Barth et al., 2014). These concerns, typically from some of the smaller schools of social work, were noted, and an attempt was made to address them with the decision "to include scholars and practitioners as potential members of the Academy" (Barth et al., 2014, p. 497). There is a sense that in forming the AASWSW, its founders gave a minimal nod to the ideas of elitism and the research/practitioner gap and, effectively, gave a greater voice to those in favor of an academy than to those in opposition. Further, this small group took it upon themselves to determine the issues faced by social work and the best way to solve those issues by initiating challenges that can only be successful with the cooperation of the entire field (Williams, 2016).

Elite science

The connection between most of the groups that have employed a grand challenges approach is science, but not just any science. There is an implicit understanding that science as it is used by these groups is hard science that primarily recognizes randomized control trials and the scientific method (Palinkas et al., 2017; Sarangapani, 2011). This operationalization of the term science connotes a dichotomous good/bad, us/them mindset, whereby anything other than this level of science is not *real* science. It lends itself to an elitist view of science and, therefore, demeans those who do not subscribe to this view of science. This view marginalizes anyone who dares consider research methodologies that scientific purists do not believe are adequate. Historically, social work science has been considered a social science, often viewed as soft science not on par with the hard sciences (Palinkas et al., 2017; Sarangapani, 2011). Thus, when the argument over social work as a science occurs, it is likely a debate over the type of science and whether it should be recognized as equal in importance and influence as hard science rather than a debate about whether social work uses science in any way.

In fact, Williams (2016) framed the GCSW and its scientific focus this way: "There is a strong emphasis on *continuing* (emphasis by author) to conduct high-quality research" (p. 68). Additionally, Fong (2014) states, "Social work is progressively...driving research standards to new levels of sophistication" (p. 607). It is important to note here that despite recognition of social work science, Fong (2014) still distinguishes between hard or basic science and soft or applied science. Additionally, many authors writing about the GCSW have highlighted the accomplishments in the areas addressed by the initiative. For example, Bent-Goodley (2016) says "the grand challenges are in areas that the social work profession engages in scholarship and practice and in which there is a *demonstrated ability to be impactful*" (emphasis by author, p. 197). Thus, social work conducted social work science and effected meaningful change *before* the introduction of the GCSW.

GCSW momentum and funding

Currently, the GCSW are in phase three as described by Uehara et al. (2013), where the authors describe the planned efforts of the AASWSW as they relate to the initiative. Phase three includes:

announcing and broadcasting information about the challenges; collaborating with other social work organizations; and improving public opinion, awareness, and funding for social work research (Uehara et al., 2013). There is no mention of direction or advisement in organizing and tackling the grand challenges themselves. In other words, once the GCSW was initiated and set into motion by the AASWSW, their role became advertising and public relations for the profession of social work and the GCSW. This is in spite of its assertion that the GCSW vision "extends beyond the development of the grand challenges to *assure implementation support*…" (emphasis by author), but such support has not been forthcoming (Barth et al., 2014, p. 499). A cursory glance through the challenges reveals variations in organization or progress between each of the challenges, some of which show very little progress while others are much more developed (AASWSW.org). A potential factor in the different levels of progress is a lack of funding for grand challenges projects. Funding, of course, is one of the goals of the GCSW, and increasing funds from community partners is part of phase three. Without the necessary funding, meeting these grand challenges will likely be quite difficult.

A Direct Critique of the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The language of the challenges themselves is questionable. According to several articles, one of the primary examples considered during the formation of the GCSW is the National Academy of Engineering's Grand Challenges for Engineering; however, the tone of the engineering challenges and that of social work's challenges are different (http://www.engineeringchallenges.org/). For instance, where the engineering challenges contain words like *advance, enhance,* and *improve*, the GCSW contain more concrete terms like *close, stop, eradicate,* and *end* (http://aaswsw.org/grand-challenges-initiative/12-challenges/; http://www.engineeringchallenges.org/challenges.aspx). The challenge to achieve equal opportunity and justice seem to go beyond grand and achievable and into

the realm of grandiose as discussed by Howard and Garland (2015). Even if one considers applying macro level social work to effect policy change, it is unlikely that equal opportunity and justice will result unless implicit biases that could influence the judgments of those implementing the change are also eradicated.

A closer look at other challenges present similar levels of difficulty, especially in terms of solutions to the challenges as they are presented (http://aaswsw.org/grand-challenges-initiative/12-challenges/). Finally, considering the continued effect of Flexner's speech over a century ago, a potential harm of the GCSW emerges. What if, much like the Flexner speech, this attempt to finally establish the identity of social work or be recognized as a science also backfires? The GCSW is not the first effort to find the identity of social work or unify the field; it is merely the most recent one at the end of a growing list of failed attempts (Williams, 2015). What may make it more dangerous is the level of notoriety that has been brought to this effort. In other words, rather than simply an internal attempt, this time it has been broadcast loudly. The greater the noise, the more is at stake. Of course this can be a good thing if all goes well. On the other hand, if it is not successful, the failure brings even greater repercussions to a profession still suffering from an identity crisis.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given the absence of a convincing argument for the necessity of a GCSW, the inherent elitism associated with the challenges, and the reality of the historical accomplishments of social work, what should be done with the GCSW now? Should they be discarded in part or in their entirety? Do they offer any utility despite their questionable beginnings? The primary utility of the GCSW may lay in the organization of the discipline. First, there are multiple divisions within the field of social work that are reminiscent of the origins of the field, and perhaps the heterogeneity of societal needs in general makes these divisions inevitable. There are twelve challenges organized into categories, which can be useful in terms of helping those interested in a social

work career narrow which direction or specialty with which they are most aligned. Psychology is another field with a similarly wide range of service specialties; and it is organized by those specialties under the umbrella of the American Psychological Association (https://www.apa.org). In a similar fashion, the grand challenges may serve to identify the first set of social work divisions, which may very well be reevaluated and edited over time but can be useful immediately. In much the same way, the effort to organize social work education around the GCSW furthers the above organizing effort by creating educational opportunities that enable emerging social work practitioners or scholars to specialize in the area they are most interested in. Not every graduate level social work program would have to cover all the challenges. Instead, each could focus on as many challenges as possible based on size and funding opportunities and put a concerted effort into those. This focus could then help in forming natural alliances and collaborations between schools that specialize in the same challenge or challenges, hence opening research opportunities even for smaller schools.

Social work is still suffering an identity crisis fueled by the *Flexner effect* over 100 years later. This identity crisis is expressed in a lack of professional level self-esteem, whereby contributions made by social workers are often embedded in the literature of other professions (e.g., psychology) rather than proudly displayed as social work science. The science of social work is a blend of methods, some of which are considered soft or non-traditional perhaps, but nevertheless are often necessary to increase understanding of certain populations and human experiences as viewed through the unique lens of social work. Additionally, the profession and discipline of social work seeks to improve a broad range of human experiences as a function of the interaction between person and environment. It is not possible to cover such a range without social workers who specialize or focus their attention on a narrow set of experiences. This, then, is the basis for the multifaceted work of social work practitioners and scientists. Furthermore, this is the

legacy handed down from the founding mothers of social work.

What is needed going forward is a return to social work roots and a recognition of its inherent uniqueness not an assimilation into other professions or disciplines. If social work researchers purposefully published *only* in social work journals, it would build a consortium of evidence of social work contribution, even when the science of other disciplines serves as the theoretical foundation for the research. Transdisciplinary approaches encouraged by the GCSW are already being utilized by social work in this manner, but its unique pairing of theory to social justice issues or its unique interpretation remains social work's contribution to the base of scientific knowledge. If those contributions were published in a social work journal, it would allow for recognition of the unique social work lens while simultaneously building the recognition of the journals themselves. This will require systemic change within academia as journals in other disciplines often have much higher impact factors than social work journals, and those impact factors are used to judge the merit of potential faculty members or those seeking tenure. Perhaps going forward, those emerging scholars who seek to build the field of social work through exclusive publication in social work journals should be granted the same level of merit as those publishing in more distinguished journals. It is time to own the unique lens, contributions, and place within the realm of social science held by social work and proudly present research findings and successes as social work science and practice. Finally, though the GCSW may be viewed as an elitist move by a small number of social work scientists, it is nonetheless useful. In a field still trying to find its identity and increase its self-esteem, it would be wrong to further fragment the field by outright dismissal of the efforts and potential value of the GCSW. This is important both in terms of how the field will function internally and how the field will be viewed by those external to it. Perhaps the true grand challenge of social work is to find a way to unify under the umbrella of the grand challenges,

with some recognizing the value and necessity of multiple research methodologies and others of the GCSW themselves.

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