

# The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare: History and Grand Challenges

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## Abstract

Conceptualized by social work deans and actualized with the support of major social work organizations, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare was established in 2009. This article describes the historical context and creation of the Academy, whose objectives include recognizing outstanding social work scholars and practitioners; informing social policy by serving as a signal scientific source of information for the social work profession and agencies seeking information; promoting the examination of social policy and the application of research to the design and development of more effective public policies, social welfare programs, and social work practice; and celebrating excellence in research, education, and practice. The Academy's 72 members have been selected using the methods of the National Academy of Science. The Academy's first substantive effort is the Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative, designed to help transform social work science, education, and practice around visionary and achievable challenges.

## Keywords

policy analysis, outcome study, social welfare policy, social Work

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW: The Academy) arose from a culmination of forces that began in the post-World War II period, emanating from Cold War competitiveness and a reinterpretation of research universities as potentiating economic growth contributing to the fiscal health of states. Beginning in the 1960s, research expenditures by the federal government to support work at the nation's universities began an exponential march, transforming the traditional academic environment. With new resources for research and needed workforce expansion, schools and departments in major universities were thrown into an unprecedented competitive environment. For some, the change was less disruptive than for others. Social work, which had for the first half of the 20th century been an agency-oriented profession often nested physically on the edge of campus, was offered new opportunities for centrality in connection to emerging research priorities.

Social worker researchers, who had long ago been organized under the banner of the National Conference for Social Welfare began to organize together, again. In 1991, following a report based on a 3-year National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)-supported effort chaired by David Austin, NIMH's advisory council highlighted the need to strengthen social work research (see Austin, 1992). This report helped to spur the creation of the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research in 1993, the Society for Social Work and Research

(SSWR) in 1994, and the ANSWER Coalition in 1995. In 1992, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) in social work published guidelines emphasizing research scholarship in doctoral education. Accelerating research activities was invigorated with the introduction of research infrastructure development grants by NIMH from 1993 to 2000 and by NIDA from 2000 to 2003. In the same period, SSWR began awarding annual research prizes.

The James E. Flynn Prize for Research was established in 1999 and administered through the University of Southern California. The prize sought to recognize leading social work scholars and to raise the status of social work research to that recognized by significant prizes in other professions and disciplines. In 2002, Washington University established the Aaron Rosen lecture and prize to recognize scholars who had advanced the integration of research and practice. Once a group

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of exceptionally high-performing scholars had begun to be celebrated, a precedent had been set for honoring scholarly accomplishment that went beyond the usual distinguished service or lifetime career

As research universities became more oriented to funding from the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Science Foundation, and other agencies, some deans sought to realign their work and their schools to fit the new research priorities on their campuses. They, along with their faculties, began to adjust promotion and tenure criteria, establish incentives for interdisciplinary collaboration, introduce more rigorous training in methods, and create other infrastructure changes to increase research productivity. In this context, a small group of graduate deans met to discuss how research quality and capacity could best be strengthened in the face of other challenges threatening the profession. Initially organized by Ronald Feldman at Columbia University, these deans convened a larger cohort of deans at Washington University in St. Louis in 1999, formally establishing what subsequently came to be known as "The St. Louis Group." Marilyn Flynn, dean at the University of Southern California, became the first president and remained in this role until 2005. As deans and directors began attending St. Louis Group meetings, a more generally shared understanding of leadership in a research-driven environment took shape. Along with efforts at SSWR and GADE, this laid the groundwork for new thinking about the place of social work in the research community, broadly defined, and eventually to the suggestion of a national academy.

The idea of creating an academy, as a tool for advancing the profession's maturity as an equal partner with the arts and sciences and older professions like engineering and medicine, came early to the discussions of the St. Louis Group. Other trends affected early development and perceptions of the newly formed entities to advance social work research. State coffers swelled from economic growth in the last decade of the 20th century, driving greater spending on higher education. Federal expenditures under Title IV-E for child welfare training grants rose rapidly. Employment opportunities for social workers grew.

As a consequence, the number of social work programs at the bachelor of social work and master of social work (MSW) level mushroomed, dramatically changing the composition of the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) and the voting membership of the CSWE. A gap opened between members from teaching and service-oriented institutions, many with young programs and no doctoral tradition, and deans from long-established programs in research-extensive universities. Countervailing voices were heard at academic leadership meetings, where research-extensive universities seemed to be speaking from a distant and elitist world about unfamiliar metrics, networks, and expertise. That almost all of the research funding in social work education and that the majority of social work graduates were concentrated in these research-intensive programs may have made them seem all the more suspicious.

In the meantime, major social work organizations were meeting at the Wingspread Conference (June 18–19, 2007) and

having other smaller meetings to see whether the profession could be "unified" under a single organization in order to achieve the aspiration of having one major voice for social work and one major annual conference. Moreover, some of those strongly attracted to unification found proposals related to an academy distracting. Although not opposed particularly to a group calling itself "The Academy," they favored reducing most groups to committee, track, or affiliate status, rotating around a hub of a conjoined National Association of Social Workers (NASW)/CSWE. This offered, in essence, another vision of how social work might best achieve a grander place in the professional pantheon.

Many contrasting ideas for promoting research excellence emerged in discussions and panel presentations by deans at the St. Louis Group meetings. At the 2005 meeting of the St. Louis Group, Dean Grover Gilmore of Case Western Reserve University presented a "Proposal to Establish a National Academy." The presence of a national academy would continue the alignment process of bringing social work to full academic stature and highlight the quality of social work research to university administrators and others. It would, in addition, offer a neutral resource for studies of urgent social issues as a basis for advice to Congress and provide members with continuing updates on social problems of high public concern. The academy might provide both incentives and inspiration to those in the profession seeking scientific recognition. The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm. The group was intrigued and invited panelists from some of the established academies, such as the National Academy of Public Administration, to offer alternative views of the functions of an honorific society.

In the same year, Gilmore and Karen Sowers, Dean at the University of Tennessee, led a discussion on establishing a national academy at the annual meeting of the NADD. There was a mixed reaction from this audience. Some deans favored the idea. However, other deans were concerned about creating an "elitist" organization. Still others, out of concern for what were seen as more pressing issues, had little interest in the concept.

The value of an academy was viewed differentially, with larger universities prizing the "Fellow" status of faculty members. For example, during the search for a Vice Provost for Research at one major university, membership in an academy was considered as a prerequisite for moving forward in the search. The argument made was that if a scholar was not recognized as excelling in his or her own field, how could that scholar be expected to have credibility among scholars from other disciplines. Without an Academy, social work scholars—though widely recognized as making significant contributions to society—might bring less capital to the disciplinary competition emerging at universities.

Another perceived advantage of having an Academy is that universities use membership in national academies as a metric of faculty excellence. Indeed, invitations to some campus-wide leadership events are restricted to fellows. By creating a social work academy—and the corresponding opportunity to become a Fellow—leaders in the profession sought to generate an

opportunity to honor our field's leading scholars and practitioners and create a mechanism, used in most other professions and disciplines, to strengthen the status of the social work profession in academia.

Additional motivation to create an academy came from seeing the benefits of more established academies. Conceived by Abraham Lincoln, the National Academy of Science has received large governmental investments to produce Congressional reports (e.g., the Institute on Medicine reports on child abuse) that might have been equally well organized by a social work academy. More generally, having an academy was expected to generate new opportunities for social work scholars to provide expertise to foundations and governmental organizations. This is the case for the Institute for Medicine which is used by Congress and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for this purpose. It is true also for the National Academy for Education, which is used by the Spencer Foundation to provide overall analysis of the education field.

The Academy also appeared to some as promising the profession the chance to create an agenda for social work that would build on our scientific and substantive expertise. A final motivation was to promote national and local social policy development that incorporates the social work perspective, supporting social work progress as well as social and economic justice. Taken together, these lines of thinking coalesced into a movement that created a social work academy.

Leading the way was Ira Colby, Dean at the University of Houston, who was part of the St. Louis Group conversations and who brought his interest in creating an Academy to his role as President of the CSWE in 2007. As widespread discussions on social work unification faltered, common ground was found for seeking ways in which the profession might discover collective purpose and action. Colby began discussions about creating an academy with members of CSWE and with organizational representatives from other social work organizations. Colby volunteered CSWE staff—the then Executive Director Julia Watkins and executive assistant Nicole DeMarco—to accomplish this work. CSWE began down the unusual path of creating an organization that was not a subsidiary and might, given the field's fixed resources, be a rival. One of CSWE's undertakings was to create a list of major award recipients from national social work organizations to determine what might eventually be the shape of the eventual academy membership.

At about the same time, in 2008, the St. Louis Group held its annual meeting at the annual conference of the SSWR. This involved a panel that included Greg White, MSW, EdD (Executive Director of the National Academy of Education [NAE]), who presented on the approach that the NAE had taken during its relatively brief history. In addition, Richard Barth (Dean at the University of Maryland) presented on some of the common features of academies in terms of selection of fellows, objectives, size, and funding, and Colby updated the audience on the CSWE efforts. The result of this was the creation of a working group, which convened in early 2009 and endeavored to determine how to move from the idea of an academy into implementation. The Group included leadership of major social work

organizations and leading social work deans who had been engaged in early discussions about the formation of an academy (James "Ike" Adams, Larry E. Davis, Richard L. Edwards, Marilyn Flynn, Sarah Gehlert, Grover C. Gilmore, James J. Kelly, Wynne Korr, and Nancy Smyth).

Despite their enthusiasm about creating an academy, members of the working group faced many challenges. Further fragmentation of the profession was a significant concern because of the sense that social work was disadvantaged by not having a national conference and a single professional organization. Not everyone was convinced that the aspiration for social work organizational unification was unachievable, at that time, and how those who nurtured hopes for unification would experience the creation of another social work entity was unclear. Leaders of some social work organizations feared that an academy would be placed under another organization, perhaps shifting the balance of leadership in the profession. It was clear that an academy would have to address social work's historic concern about elitism and its reluctance to be aligned with organizations that are not open to all who want to be members. A corollary concern was whether members could be selected in a way that was just. Moreover, the working group had to struggle with the historic split between practitioners and researchers. These concerns shaped the way that the Academy took form.

A common view emerged: An academy, if formed, needed a comprehensive and inclusive mission. A significant quandary was whether and how to describe the place of practitioners and of scholars in the Academy. The working group decided to include scholars and practitioners as potential members of the Academy. The emerging Academy also needed a name—the National Academy of Science in Social Work was the first proposal and would have been ideal for its parallel structure to the National Academy of Engineering (another creation of President Lincoln) and the National Academy of Science. Yet, that name was viewed as confusingly close to the NASW. Also, the working group wanted to be sure that the Academy was seen as open to those who were not social workers but were involved with the broader enterprise of the social welfare state. Thus, the name began with "American" and ended with "Social Welfare."

The working group also needed to determine whether to place the academy under some currently existing organization or create an independent social work organization. Members concluded that the Academy needed the support of all the major social work organizations but that there was no existing organization that could capture the promise of the Academy if the Academy was subsumed under it. It was deemed important that the Academy be seen as a distinctive organization that could set its own agenda. The working group also sought to create the sense that the Academy had a lynchpin role for the profession. Finally, the working group needed an inaugural board. The working group examined lists of major award recipients from social work organizations. They selected a group of six members who had, already, been recognized by their peers for their leadership in the field and would be embraced as people who

substantiate the mission of the Academy through their professional accomplishments. These were individuals who also had demonstrated leadership skills that were critical for the new organization.

The inaugural members of the Academy, constituting the first board, were Paula Allen-Meares, Richard Barth, Claudia Coulton, Peter J. Pecora, Enola K. Proctor, and Barbara White. In all this inaugural board was distinguished and very well connected to the organizations that might, otherwise, be unenthusiastic about the addition of yet another social work organization. This inaugural board was charged with developing a process to solicit nominations and make the selection of the next class of fellows. At the same time, the board developed a business plan for the Academy. Because the fledgling Academy had no preexisting home, the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences of Case Western Reserve University agreed to provide pro bono administrative support for the Academy for 3 years and to provide legal services to establish the Academy as a free standing 501(c)3 organization. The AASWSW had arrived.

## The Academy Evolves

The first charge of the academy board was to select officers. In 2009, Barth was selected as President by his peers and agreed to an initial 3-year term. Coulton agreed to be Treasurer. No other positions were filled but a mix of 2- and 3-year terms was assigned to other members.

The next charge was to review the mission of the Academy as proposed by the working group. The new board made no significant changes and unanimously approved the following mission statement: “The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare” (The Academy) is an honorific society of distinguished scholars and practitioners dedicated to achieving excellence in the field of social work and social welfare through high impact work that advances social good. The Academy was established to:

1. Encourage and recognize outstanding research, scholarship, and practice that contribute to a sustainable, equitable, and just future;
2. Inform social policy by serving as a frontline source of information for the social work profession as well as Congress and other government agencies and nongovernment entities charged with advancing the public good;
3. Promote the examination of social policy and the application of research to test alternative policies, programs, and practices for their impact on society; and
4. Celebrate excellence in social work and social welfare research, education, and practice.

The Academy’s goals are shared with other national social work organizations, certainly, a point not missed by some who wondered why a separate Academy was created for the profession when extant social work organizations had means to recognize outstanding members and work toward achieving

similar goals. At the same time, an explicit commitment to shared goals and values was viewed as crucial in creating the potential for partnerships between the Academy and other social work organizations. What the Academy brought was the greater possibility of harnessing the expertise of AASWSW fellows behind the substantive work of the profession in a way that had become unlikely given the way that social work organizations were arrayed.

## Selection, Then Election, of Fellows

The inaugural board agreed to use the time-honored procedures of the National Academy of Sciences of having current fellows nominate and elect the next classes of fellows. The board agreed to wait 1 year to institute this procedure and, in the interim and for the sake of expedience, to select the first class from the compilation of honorees from the major social work organizations (CSWE, NASW, and SSWR) that confer “lifetime achievement,” “researcher of the year,” and other awards. From the list of scholars and practitioners who had been so recognized, the second class of academy fellows was selected (requiring 60% vote of the board). This was the only class selected in this way. Three subsequent elections of fellows have followed NAS rules—nominees must be solicited from fellows, be reviewed and approved by a majority of the members of a Nominating Committee, and then be elected by at least 60% of all fellows. Nominees remain in the pool for 3 years—after which they must be renominated. The Academy now has 72 fellows (see <http://aaswsw.org/board-and-fellows/>) who have been installed in four induction ceremonies. Induction ceremonies have been held in Washington, DC, and, more recently, at the annual conferences of CSWE and SSWR.

## Scholarship

From the outset, the academy board viewed the fellows as having great capacity to add professional scholarship to our field and to generate information that could be used to guide policy and practice beyond social work’s boundaries. Board members discussed a variety of opportunities for panels and presentations and settled on having brief working papers developed by fellows for presentation at the annual induction ceremony. Fellow King Davis, Robert Lee Sutherland Chair in Mental Health and Social Policy at the University of Texas, Austin, presented the first of these at the third induction ceremony held in Washington, DC, at the Council on Social Work Education meeting. (A link to Davis’s address can be found at [http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Socialized\\_Health\\_Capitalistic\\_Medicine-Revised-December-3-2012-2.pdf](http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Socialized_Health_Capitalistic_Medicine-Revised-December-3-2012-2.pdf).) In 2013–2014, the Academy completed two additional scholarly working papers, described further subsequently, in the discussion of the Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative.

The launch of the AASWSW is potentially a watershed moment for social work. First, it represents the realization of a common purpose and commitment transcending any one social work organization. Second, it acknowledges and

addresses the need for social work to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of individuals who have made significant contributions to the field and to the broad mission of social work in society. Third, the Academy represented a strategy for social work to announce to a variety of national audiences that it has warrant among other Academies to lay claim to scholarly capital. Finally, it established a body of practitioners and scholars who are charged to become leaders in significant national initiatives. The first initiative of the Academy is the Grand Challenges for Social Work.

## The Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative

The Grand Challenges of Social Work Initiative (GCSWI) is modeled after several others (e.g., the NIMH's Grand Challenges in Global Mental Health: Collins et al., 2011)—and, especially the National Academy of Engineering's highly successful effort (<http://www.engineeringchallenges.org/>).

The near term goals of the GCSWI are to develop a dozen, or so, transformative goals around which the profession can rally (a) to accelerate advances in social work science, practice, and education; (b) to increase public awareness and appreciation of social work; (c) and to influence public funding for social work science and education (Uehara et al., 2013). The criteria for the Grand Challenges were developed by a Grand Challenges Executive Committee (Co-Chaired by John Brekke, University of Southern California, and Rowena Fong, University of Texas at Austin). A “grand” challenge must be grand in scope. It must be inspiring, important, and compelling. Moreover, scientific evidence should suggest that a grand challenge can be solved. Meaningful and measurable progress to address a challenge should be feasible within a decade. Daunting but not impossible, grand challenges should generate interdisciplinary or cross-sector collaboration. Finally, solutions to challenges should require creativity and innovation.

The GCSWI vision extends far beyond the development of the grand challenges to assure implementation support and an extended impact. These efforts will include partnering with national social work organizations and groups to influence social work science, education, student recruitment, and professional identity and to increase public awareness and appreciation of social work and influence public funding for social work science (Uehara et al., 2013).

The Grand Challenges Executive Committee anticipates that the GCSWI will generate panels, interuniversity work groups, meetings, miniconferences, papers, grant submissions, and scientific and curricular progress on each challenge ultimately selected. In engineering, some graduate programs are now organizing themselves along the lines of the grand challenges. Interdisciplinary work may also be facilitated by recognition by our profession of the centrality of these efforts to the transformation of society. Indeed, if our path further follows that of the National Academy of Engineering, grand challenges meetings may be convened by groups who believe

that their subfields were not adequately captured in the original grand challenges (Reichert et al., 2011).

The Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative has also now spawned two working papers (see [http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Intro\\_Context\\_GCSW.pdf](http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Intro_Context_GCSW.pdf) and <http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/FINAL-Grand-Accomplishments-sb-12-9-13-Final.pdf>) and clarified its overall objectives with an *Impact Model* (see <http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/FINAL-Grand-Accomplishments-sb-12-9-13-Final.pdf>). The grand challenges working papers were led by Michael Sherraden, Washington University, and involved input from Academy fellows, members of the Grand Challenges Executive Committee, and colleagues who volunteered their expertise. The *Introduction and Context for Grand Challenges for Social Work* (Sherraden, Barth, et al., 2014) discusses the foundational contribution of social factors to the development of civilization and underscores the necessity of effectively functioning social units to the future success of humankind. The paper also lays out the roles that social work plays in helping to enhance the capability of individuals and social groups and to align the functioning of social units to achieve social and economic justice. Contextual elements discussed in this paper, largely limited to the American context, provide background for work on the Grand Challenges: These include developments in information technology; globalization; environmental change; and increasing interactions across nations, races, religions, and cultures. Also addressed are the aging of our population, the underinvestment in the well-being of children, racial segregation in residence and schooling, unemployment and disconnection, mass incarceration, access and effectiveness in health care, financialization, and the needs of vulnerable populations.

The second working paper of the GCSWI series is the *Grand Accomplishments of Social Work* (Sherraden, Stuart, et al., 2014). This paper was built through the contributions of 18 scholars and describes the emergence of social work and some of its most influential accomplishments. Accomplishments discussed include social work actions to advance social research; to improve the protection of children from death, child labor, and child abuse; to implement comprehensive social insurance; to institute employment protections and policies; to advance human rights and civil rights; to fight poverty and racial injustice; to create a system of civic service; to help deinstitutionalize the mentally ill and create evidence-based community services; to create science-informed prevention programs; and to accelerate the development of services to support healthy and productive aging and long-term supports for the elderly and disabled. The idea for this paper arose from discussions of the Grand Challenges Executive Committee desire to encourage the development of Grand Challenges that arose from social work's demonstrated success. A third paper on the history and background of the Grand Challenges is underway. A background paper on the GCSWI is now in print in the *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* (Uehara et al., 2013).

The GCSWI is intended to draw on the talents of the profession and has an open call for submissions of ideas that meet the grand challenges criteria mentioned previously: Ideas can be

submitted at <http://aaswsw.org/grand-challenges-initiative/suggestion-form/>. The mechanisms for helping to develop these ideas further and to select the grand challenges from nominated grand challenges remain under development by the Grand Challenges Executive Committee.

## The Academy of the Future

The academy board foresees a future for the Academy that will continue to focus on its original mission of recognizing excellent scholars and practitioners and endeavoring to influence social policy relevant to social work and social welfare. We anticipate that AASWSW will build on the momentum of the GCSWI to strengthen the capacity to accomplish our greater goals for scholarship and public impact. This includes mobilizing AASWSW fellows for timely input into policy and program decision making. We believe that a successful GCSWI will give us more prominence in providing expertise to foundations and governmental entities seeking to improve program, implementation, and evaluation practices. The board is also working on solidifying the organizational infrastructure and business model of the Academy to ensure that it maximizes its capacity for achieving the goals set by the leadership of the social work profession. We hope that the Academy's success will eventually establish that the founders of the Academy had Lincolnesque vision.

The creation of the AASWSW is an outgrowth of values and a vision set in motion by broader societal trends and encapsulated by the oldest and most established schools of social work. The idea of the Academy was fostered by a small number of individuals from a relatively small group of social work schools. The success of the Academy will depend on its ability to gain the interest of a broader array of stakeholders inside and outside of social work.

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