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## Competencies and Their Assessment

James W. Drisko

This article explores competencies and methods for their assessment in higher education and in social work's accreditation standards. Many contemporary policy and educational accreditation efforts employ the model of competency assessment. The current emphasis on accountability in higher education, including the Council on Social Work Education's 2008 and draft 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, is contextualized through a short history of this movement and its purposes. A multipart definition of competencies is offered based on McClelland's pivotal conceptualization of competency assessment. Within this competency model, several methods of assessing competencies in social work education are described and critically examined. The importance of identifying an appropriate and complete list of competencies is also addressed. Several issues regarding how to assess professional competencies are identified for future professional discussion.

Since the 1990s learner access to postsecondary education has increased and diversified (Kasworm, 2012). Options for learning no longer include just traditional postsecondary institutions but also a growing number of independent, often for-profit, providers. The effect of rapid technological change has also increased the variety of routes available for pursuing continued learning (edX, 2012). Innovative technologies and sources have resulted in new educational initiatives, novel degree programs, and many new ways to extend teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, some of these options are "degree mills" that simply sell diplomas or that fail to prepare graduates adequately. Ezell and Bear (2005) stated that a billion dollars are paid annually to degree mills, including taxpayer-supported funds. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) stated that degree mills mislead individuals about the value of the degrees they will earn. CHEA (2011, third section) also stated that bogus credentials pose a danger to the public "in fields where they could present a threat to health, safety or well-being" such as social work. Ensuring that learners actually obtain the knowledge and skills they pay for is a growing concern to governmental and public funders and to the public.

Ensuring quality educational outcomes is not a simple task. The Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993, p. 14) stated that "putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses." A key aspect of this overhaul is to ensure positive learning outcomes through performance-based or outcome-based education. A fundamental concern is ensuring that graduates are truly competent.

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In 2005 the United States Department of Education (DOE) created a Commission on the Future of Higher Education. DOE established the Commission because of concerns about the inadequate preparation of many students and the rising numbers of graduates who could not perform reasonably expectable work tasks. In its 2008 final report the Commission concluded there

is a lack of clear, reliable information about the costs and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students . . . students, parents and policy makers are left scratching their heads over the answers to basic questions [including] which institutions do a better job than others not only in graduating students but in teaching them what they need to learn. (p. x)

The DOE's Commission also advocated that

Student achievement must be measured on a "valued added" basis that takes into account students' academic baseline when assessing their results. This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (p. 4)

Accreditation processes were also found to have "significant shortcomings" (DOE, 2008, p. 15). The public-private system of federal, state, and private regulation was seen as too private, too process-oriented, and with too little focus on bottom-line learning outcomes. A "transformation of accreditation" was proposed (p. 15). In large part because of this report and its resonance with the public and with educators, renewed emphasis on outcome-based or competency-based education has grown rapidly.

The DOE Commission recommended a more transparent, outcomes-based, and accountable accreditation system based on student performance (DOE, 2008). Such a recommendation also fits well with the current attention to evidence-based practice or science-based practice in which policy makers emphasize outcomes. "Performance outcomes," rather than "inputs" or "processes" should be the focus of assessment and accreditation (2008, p. 25). Innovation and continuous improvement are emphasized, parallel to business models of quality control and improvement such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards used in international industry. The ISO "'conformity assessment' means checking that products, materials, services, systems, processes or people measure up to the specifications of a relevant standard or specification" (ISO, n.d., para. 1). Consistent with such efforts, an outcomes focus was adopted in the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE's) 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS).

In 2010 CHEA mandated that all of its recognized accrediting organizations provide "accreditation standards or polices that require institutions or programs routinely to provide reliable information to the public on their performance, including student achievement as determined by the institution or program" (CHEA, 2010, p. 5, Standard 12). Such standards were established to "provide consistent information about academic quality and student achievement . . . to foster public awareness, confidence and investment" (p. 5). That is, higher education programs must provide the public with information about student achievement and their overall program performance to be accredited. This requirement led CSWE's Commission on Accreditation (COA) to a major revision of the EPAS Assessment Standard 4 for social work BSW and MSW programs

voted in June 2012 (COA, personal communication, June 12, 2012). To meet CHEA requirements, CSWE requires that all programs provide the public regularly with outcome data on student performance after January 1, 2013.

In February 2012 President Obama urged widespread adoption of the DOE's "college scorecard" comparing institutions of higher education on affordability and value by disclosing costs and graduation rates (The White House, 2012). This information would be made easily available to the public via online and print resources. Federal regulations already require for-profit schools to report similar information to the government. The new DOE rules would cover both nonprofit and for-profit institutions and make the results available to consumers: potential students and their families.

In higher education, accreditation or performance standards target specific, relevant outcomes. How to define and assess these competency outcomes is central to a sound assessment and accountability process. Student performance is one area of concern, and overall program performance is another.

### WHAT IS A COMPETENCY?

Competence, in everyday language, is the ability of an individual to perform a task (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). Some definitions add that the task must be performed fully and properly. Still other definitions add that the task should be performed efficiently. At the heart of the competence is the ability to do a task effectively. In assessing professional competencies, the ability to perform specific tasks is pivotal (Mondofacto, 1998).

Competence may be broken down into component parts. In social work and in many related professions, competence is widely viewed as including knowledge, values, and skills. This trio has been formalized in the accreditation requirements set by CSWE (2008) and in the core ethical values established by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2008). Specific knowledge is a vital part of professional competence. Having requisite knowledge is as a central part of many competencies.

Values also frame how and why professionals apply knowledge. Values guide and focus a profession's mission. The NASW *Code of Ethics* (2008) identified six core values in social work. The six values are (1) service, (2) social justice, (3) dignity and worth of the person, (4) importance of human relationships, (5) integrity, and (6) competence. The *Code* further stated that "this constellation of core values reflects what is unique to the social work profession" (2008, Preamble). In most instances, however, professions are further distinguished by a unique mission or purpose, a knowledge base, and public, legal sanction to practice such as licensure.

It is important to note that social workers also identify competence as a core professional value. The authors of the *Code* stated, "social workers practice within their areas of competence, and develop and enhance their professional expertise. Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice" (NASW, 2008, Ethical principles). Here the *Code* language explicitly identifies the linkage between knowledge and skill. The *Code* language also identified cultural competence as important to social work practice, integrating professional knowledge, values, and skills (NASW, 2008, §1.0.5).

Skills are abilities to act, acquired or developed through training or experience. Skills may be defined in ways that overlap with definitions of competence. For example, skills may be defined

as the ability to do something well, based on one's knowledge, practice, or aptitude. Knowledge is often a key part of skill, as are training and experience. In social work, skills are evident in the application of knowledge, integrated with core values, to a specific client in a specific situation. Identifying what is important to the client in a particular situation requires both knowledge and judgment. Judgments about priorities, and how best to intervene, are recursively shaped by knowledge and values. Client dignity, needs, and goals; agency context and purposes; and larger issues of social and economic justice all form the context in which skills are applied. The importance of relationship always frames how professional social workers act skillfully.

These intersecting and overlapping definitions suggest that breaking competencies down into component parts reflecting knowledge, values, and skills is appropriate and is based on a widely shared understanding across disciplines and professions. Still, some more technical definitions of competence are much narrower. In human resource terms, a competency is a set of defined behaviors that enable the identification, development, and evaluation of these behaviors in individual employees (Fogg, 1999; Simmering, 2012). Behavior is the sole focus in this definition, though behavior may well be understood as based on knowledge and values—or their lack.

### CONCEPTUALIZING COMPETENCIES: FRAMING VALID ASSESSMENT

Although the current competency-based education movement is no more than 25 years old, much of the core work in conceptualizing how to assess competencies was developed in the 1970s. In social work, both Armitage and Clark (1975) and Baer and Federico (1978) argued for performance-based social work education. Yet there were serious challenges to how competencies were conceptualized and assessed.

In 1973 psychologist David McClelland argued that neither tests nor school grades “seem to have much power to predict real competence in many real life outcomes, aside from the advantages that credentials convey on the individuals concerned” (1973, p. 6). He argued this was because testers “have believed so much that they were testing true competence that they have not bothered to prove that they were” (p. 6). He set out a conceptualization of a more thorough and valid way to test competence.

To test competence, McClelland (1973) argued, five points must be considered. First, “tests should assess clusters of competencies involved in life outcomes rather than single aspects of competencies” (p. 9). Multiple measures of several relevant dimensions of a competency will be better indicators than is any single measure of just one dimension. The entire construct of a competency must be measured, not just a single aspect of it. Such measurement should be done, at least in part, in real-world, applied settings. Second, he argued that testers must go into the field and test for the actual result or criterion sought. Valid measures of competence should reflect actual, real-world outcomes. Real-life grades are more important than school grades. Ecological validity as well as face and construct validity is crucial to competency assessment.

Third, McClelland (1973) argued that tests of competency must include what he called “operant” or spontaneous behaviors of individuals in the absence of a clearly delimited stimulus. Unlike the structured responses sought by questions on classroom tests, real-world competencies involve both making framing judgments in open and often ambiguous systems as well as making responses that are situation- or context-specific. Therefore, tests of competence must allow the individual to respond spontaneously in complex real-world situations or their close equivalents.

Social workers might say competence must be demonstrated in open systems reflecting actual professional endeavors. Fourth, McClelland argued that how to improve on a competency should be made public and explicit. That is, positive outcomes should be clearly understood and transparent rather than hidden and secret. Both learners and teachers should be clear on what is being sought. Good outcomes need to be explicitly defined and generally understood. Finally, “tests of competency should be designed to reflect changes in what the individual has learned” (1973, p. 8). Such tests are valid when “scores on them change as the individual grows in experience, wisdom and the ability to perform effectively” on the target tasks (p. 8). Note carefully that a range of possible outcomes is required, reflecting gains in competence by the learner over time.

These five criteria have become key parts of competency assessment in today’s higher education. McClelland (1973) directly challenged the adequacy of a few items on a classroom test to serve as a valid indicator of competence. This does not mean that knowledge is not an important part of competency, or that classroom tests have no place in competency assessment. However, tests may not be a complete and thorough measure of performance in real-world practice. Multiple measures and multiple methods of assessment are encouraged to build validity through triangulation of results across tasks and settings. The nature of the target competencies should always be explicit, clear, and public. Educators and learners should know the focus of educational efforts and the criteria for demonstrating competency. Today we would add that potential program applicants and the public should also know the criteria used for assessing competence.

There is a range of competence, from beginner through expert. Measures of assessment should be able to reflect a developmental progression in competence, not simply to show its presence or absence. A range of levels of competence allows for different baselines or starting points among learners. A range also allows students to advance based on increasing mastery and to identify additional areas for learning and growth as they learn. Competencies should be tested in open and complex situations to show the learner’s ability to understand and interpret the situation and to act in response to a specific situation. In social work, work with cases in agency settings provides such open, complex systems. Similarly, students who research a topic of their own selection work within an open system in which they must specify and clearly delimit appropriate work with rigor from that which is irrelevant or lacking in rigor.

## SOCIAL WORK ACCREDITATION AND COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT

Social work’s accreditation process generally addresses each of McClelland’s (1973) five points to strengthen valid competency assessment. Programs must identify competencies and their component parts, each linked to assessment tools. Current social work accreditation standards require multiple measures of each overall competency (CSWE, 2008). In practice, multiple measures are required for each of the component parts of a competency, called practice behaviors in the social work accreditation standards. Almost all (98%) social work programs use field evaluations to assess performance in real-world situations that include complex open systems (CSWE, 2010). The vast majority of programs (94%) also use classroom assignments or tests of knowledge as another part of competency assessment. Ideally, these classroom assignments and tests include complex decision-making by students and draw on real-world case examples. Assignments and tests that address open systems and complex settings closely related to professional practice provide the best classroom indicators of competence.

It is important to note that the validity and real-world relevance of many outcome measures is an area under active discussion within the social work profession. A CSWE Subcommittee headed by Montgomery, and more widely reported by Gambrill (2001), argued that client outcomes should be used as a measure of student competency. Gambrill presented a summative, quantitative, plan for measuring such outcomes, though issues of the reliability of measures, the ethics of client informed consent, and the practicalities of program–agency agreements remain challenges to be resolved. Bogo et al. (2011) argued for the use of standardized, multifaceted, clinical examinations in measuring student competencies to allow for real-world relevance and to allow for cross-student comparisons. Defining specific approaches and assignments to measure real-world competence is a difficult and ongoing task. As McClelland argued, use of assignments set in open systems and complex settings, closely related to professional practice, provides more relevant competency measures than do more narrow approaches.

The current social work accreditation standards, as well as the draft 2015 EPAS, require that the assessment criteria for each competency be clearly identified on course syllabi or in program manuals or student handbooks (CSWE, 2008, 2013, 2014). The EPAS further require that all assessment measures be included in program self-study documents (CSWE, 2008, standard 4.0.5). Students, educators, and the public should be able to determine what competencies each program assesses and how the assessment is done. Specific learning goals and competency standards should be fully explicit. Ideally, the full assignments used to evaluate competence should be included in all syllabi (except for copyrighted standardized instruments or restricted-use exam content). In this way, the face validity of competency assessment is established and efforts to establish the construct validity and ecological validity of these assessments may be undertaken.

Optimal measures of competence are based in real-world performance and address open, dynamic, and complex practice situations. They require that learners make considered judgments in specific contexts and incorporate professional values. Multiple measures of a competence are required. How ratings of competence are determined should be clearly understood by learners, educators, and the public. Ratings of individual competence must establish a range of competence from beginner to expert. The content of professional competencies must be carefully and thoughtfully determined. Identifying core professional competencies can be a challenging effort.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES A VALID ASSESSMENT MEASURE AND METHOD?

Valid assessment measures must have a clear connection to a specific competency or to its component parts. What is being measured must be explicit and conspicuously related to the competency being assessed. In research terms, measures of competence should be at least face valid. For example, a measure of competence in delivering social work services to diverse populations should be based on observation or oversight of such work. Evaluative feedback from other sources, including client(s), coworkers, and other service providers, may be incorporated as relevant and available. Such feedback may be formal or informal, qualitative or quantitative, but it must be directly related to the competence being assessed.

Multiple measures, ideally using different assessment methods and assessing performance in differing contexts—including open and ambiguous systems—are optimal. Measures of knowledge from classroom testing can provide valuable, though partial, information regarding the learner's development. Measures of simulated performance in open and ambiguous settings such

as role-plays and simulated or standardized client situations can assess areas of knowledge, values, and skills. Within a given context, multiple items or observations are preferable to any single item or observation.

It is clear that some industries and professions develop standardized tests to determine competence or quality. In elementary and secondary education the use of standardized tests has become one widely used way to assess learning and to allow comparison of student achievement and program effectiveness. However, such tests are based on limited, closed systems; lack variation in content and in settings; and lack the complexity of context for which McClelland (1973) argued. Multiple, varied assessments and multiple, varied items for assessment are preferable.

### The Value-Added Approach

The United States DOE (2006) and the college scorecard (The White House, 2012) both argued for a value-added approach to competency assessment. That is, student performance should be measured at point of entry as well as at the end of studies. Comparison of starting- to end-point assessments would define the value added—the learner’s gains—from the course of study. Some educators advocate for pretests followed by mid- and end-point assessments to document each learner’s progress over the course of study (DOE, 2008). Yet others have argued that assessing competency only at mid- or at endpoints effectively documents a learner’s current functioning. Where programs do not use pretests, establishing the value added by the course of study is not possible. Still, aggregating endpoint-only assessments provides one suitable basis for documenting overall program outcomes. Such an endpoint-only model is apparent in CSWE’s EPAS (2008). Value-added assessment is not currently required by CHEA policies and standards.

By completing both starting- and endpoint assessments, over the entire course of study or in specific courses or practicums, a value-added model could be included in social work’s approach to competency assessment. The challenges to such a model include the lack of specific consensus measures for starting-point or pretest assessments. Specific measures are now determined by each program linked to its specific mission, goals, and objectives. A wide range of measures would be needed to address the variation across social work programs and at both foundation and advanced levels. Implementing both beginning- and endpoint assessments would be very demanding for small social work programs without additional resources. Still, a value-added assessment approach might be useful in documenting the effectiveness of social work education.

### Who Can Assess Competency?

Persons of established competency, or measures they create, must assess learner competencies. The learner alone cannot assess competence. Assessment of competence presupposes the evaluator is qualified: possesses the knowledge, values, and skills being examined and has considerable experience in their application. This assumption is common in the academy and in business and industry. For example, social work accreditation standards require field instruction or supervision from qualified individuals who hold the degrees learners seek and who have additional practice experience. People already established as competent are best placed to assess learner competence. Alternatively, tools created by certified competent individuals may be used to assess learner competence.



McClelland's (1973) model argued for multiple raters of competencies. Multiple raters, assessing different aspects of the learner's performance in different but related situations, afford a more rounded appraisal of competence. Comparison of different data types assessed by different raters may also reveal a learner's individual strengths and weaknesses. For example, a learner may display stronger ability to write course papers than to write agency progress notes. Triangulation of ratings includes different measures, data types, and different raters. This can strengthen the holistic and particular understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Denzin, 2009). Comparing the ratings of field instructors and classroom faculty on student self-awareness may help identify the nature of a specific learner's strengths and challenges. Taken together, comparing such ratings may point out the importance of different aspects of competence among learners.

### Measures That May Not Fully Capture Competence

Self-efficacy, or belief in one's own ability to learn, is a valuable part of learning. Yet students' self-assessment of their own learning efficacy is not a typical outcome measure of professional competence. Holden (1991) documented that improvements in self-efficacy are correlated with improved overall professional functioning. Improved self-efficacy can clearly facilitate the learning process. Yet facilitating the process of learning is not the same as measuring competence. It is instead a useful component in enhancing the learning process in the service of achieving other professional competencies. For example, a program may have students assess their own learning self-efficacy as part of a larger goal of promoting lifelong learning. This is a potentially useful endeavor. Yet assessment of the competence, demonstrating lifelong learning, would require a series of measures, completed over time, to document. In another example, students may assess their self-efficacy in learning research. Efforts to enhance research self-efficacy have been demonstrated to improve overall research learning. This is very useful. Still, the assessment of research competence should be based on demonstrated ability to conceptualize and complete a research project, or to understand a research report, not solely on a student's own assessment of their self-efficacy. Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, and Metrey (2002) argued that self-efficacy is related to self-awareness, which is often a goal in social work education. Use of self-efficacy measures as components of assessment of self-awareness as a competence is certainly appropriate. However, self-efficacy measures alone are often not optimal measures of other learner competencies.

Self-report surveys, such as alumni surveys, have similar limitations. First, the linkage of items on such surveys to specific competencies is rarely clear and direct. General statements, not linked to specific competencies, are not appropriate measures of professional competence. Second, although graduates have attained a level of professional competence, their self-appraisal may be subject to attribution biases. Attribution bias refers to cognitive distortions in the way in which individuals assign cause or responsibility for events. In one example, Gigliotii and Buchtel (1990) showed that student course evaluations identified the source of successes as based on the student's own attributes and actions, whereas the source of failures was instead attributed to situational factors. Self-report surveys have great merit for reviewing programs, policies, and curricula, but they are not optimal measures of competence.

Course evaluations are also useful tools, but learner evaluations of instructors, course or program content, and instructional materials rarely address learner competence. Such self-report

assessments of competency raise questions of validity and attribution bias. Course evaluations provide valuable formulative data, but they are not optimal measures of a learner's competence.

## Standardized Tests

One solution to documenting learning has been the growing use of state-wide or even national standardized educational tests. Based on a common curriculum, the purpose of these tests is to measure each student's performance on the same content to allow comparison across learners and across institutions. They may include multichoice, short-response (i.e., a math answer), short-answer (paragraph length), and open-response essay answers (with or without specific guiding prompts). The properties of test questions and scoring may be subject to extensive psychometric analysis to ensure reliability across different languages and test versions. Some have argued that standardized tests are effective indicators of learning; others have questioned their scope and content (Popham, 1999; Reeves, 2001). In contemporary discussion of assessing elementary and secondary educational effectiveness, standardized tests are widely emphasized.

Professions have common educational purposes, but they allow individual institutions to vary in mission, educational content, and specific curriculum form and content. The lack of a shared set of specific curriculum objectives makes creation of a national or international standardized test difficult. On the other hand, states developed their own state-wide licensing examinations for professionals, and some professions have national certification. For example, in social work, the NASW's Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW) credential at one time required a formal pencil-and-paper examination. Yet, at present, neither the ACSW nor the American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work requires standardized examinations for their credentials. At a minimum, the lack of explicit linkage between test item content and required competencies is one important concern.

Two standardized examinations are available for assessing undergraduate social work outcomes. These are the Area Concentration Achievement Test (ACAT; PACAT, n.d.) and the Baccalaureate Education Assessment Project (BEAP; Baccalaureate Program Directors, n.d.). The BEAP has recently reorganized as the SWEAP (2013). SWEAP instruments were not available for inclusion in this article. The ACAT has three versions specific for use in social work. The "Curriculum A" version covers eight core content areas, and the "Curriculum B" and "Curriculum C" versions address four content areas. The "A" and "C" versions are 120-minute paper or online exams, and the "B" version is 60 minutes in duration. The publisher provides no further information, such as the number of test items. Although the core content areas covered by the ACAT exams may address key aspects of CSWE's required competencies, they do not appear to address all 10 of them. Neither do the ACAT content areas explicitly link to the 41 BSW/foundation practice behaviors that are the component parts of the EPAS required competencies (CSWE, 2008).

The BEAP's Foundation Curriculum Assessment Instrument (FCAI) is its overall pre- and postexamination for BSW students or foundation year MSW students. The FCAI consists of 64 multiple-choice questions organized into seven core curricular areas. Although the core content areas covered by the FCAI exam do address many key aspects of CSWE's required competencies, not all 10 of them are clearly assessed (Hamilton, Gerritsen-McKane, & Rodenheiser, 2012). Neither do the FCAI content areas explicitly link to the 41 practice

behaviors that are the component parts of the 10 EPAS required competencies (CSWE, 2008). BEAP's Field Placement/Practicum Assessment Instrument (FPPAI), a 55-item instrument using 1–9 Likert-type ratings, does appear to address the 10 core competencies and the 41 practice behaviors. Overall, these standardized tests have a focus more on content than on assessing broader competence in open settings with complex clients.

It might be possible to develop a valid standardized measure for both BSW and MSW social work education competencies. However, neither the ACAT nor the BEAP currently cover all the CSWE required core competencies and their component practice behaviors. Neither addresses the MSW advanced curriculum. Applying McClelland's critique of tests as measures of competency, both tests appear to be primarily measures of learner knowledge. Multiple-choice items provide a narrow stimulus to the learner. They do not require the learner to impose a frame on an open system. The limited number of items may allow for an insufficient range of content for a construct valid measure of competence. Test results alone do not assess a range of competence on specific issues. Inclusion of open-response essay items might strengthen both standardized tests. Open-ended essays are currently parts of some widely used college entrance examinations.

### What Are Effective Measures of Competence?

CSWE statistics have shown that most social work programs use a variety of classroom-based measures in conjunction with field evaluations (CSWE, 2010). Carefully selected measures can assess knowledge, values, and skills in both close-ended and open-ended contexts. For example, a final examination requiring learner analysis of a specific social policy might require a policy analysis as well as identification of the strengths and the limitations of the policy and its application in practice. Clear linkage of the examination content to the competency being assessed is a crucial starting point. Appraisal of the policy in context is required. Students might identify differing strengths and shortcomings of the policy. Students might also identify different implications of the policy for individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Such an examination requires the student to establish some framing judgments and to demonstrate knowledge and skill in policy assessment. Value and ethical issues could emerge in how the student appraises the strengths and challenges of the policy. A range of outcomes is quite possible across different learners.

Combined with classroom-based competency measures, almost all social work programs use field evaluations. Field evaluations are commonly scaled appraisals of the student's performance on a specific issue. Very often, these issues are established using the 41 practice behaviors included in EPAS for BSW and foundation-year MSW students. Advanced practice behaviors differ in number and content, based on the program's selected concentration area(s). Advanced practice behaviors must involve greater depth, breadth, or specificity related to each of the CSWE competencies. An item on a field evaluation might be "How well does the student advocate for client access to appropriate social work services?," addressing EPAS (2008) standard 2.1.1. The response options are a 1–7 Likert-type scale, where the field instructor rates the student on a continuum from *not at all* to *very effectively*. At midyear the student might be rated as a 3 on the scale. By year's end, showing progress, the student might be rated as a 5.

The assumption is that the field instructor is privy to information that allows assessment of the student's performance on each issue. Such information may be obtained from direct

observation, from the comments of clients and colleagues, from documents, from cases notes, and from written and oral supervisory discussions. Here real-world, applied competence is measured. Different client situations, needs, and service contexts require the learner to frame options from within open, dynamic systems. Knowledge, values, and skills are each applied and are open to appraisal. Potentially, all of McClelland's five points about competency evaluation can be effectively addressed in field education.

Yet field evaluations do have some limitations. First, field instructors may not have good access to all the content they are charged to appraise. One challenging area might be the use of practice experience to inform scientific inquiry (standard 2.1.6). Practicum settings vary in such opportunities. Second, the rating scales may not be applied consistently across many different field instructors. Third, rating options on a scale may fail to capture small changes in learning or performing effectively. That is, field evaluation ratings may lack the sensitivity to assess small but meaningful changes. Finally, grade inflation—the “Lake Wobegon effect,” where all students are above average—is a constant risk. These issues noted, field evaluations can provide an important part of competency assessment.

Capstone projects provide another approach to assessing complex learner performance. Capstones might include practice projects, theses, or other multifaceted opportunities for learners. An ideal capstone project includes demonstration of several clearly identified competencies or their components. Measures for assessing capstones should identify each competency and provide clear standards for appraisal. For example, a thesis research project might include an assessment item on how practice experience is applied to inform scientific inquiry (standard 2.1.6). A set of standards for appraising this item should be clearly provided, perhaps on an evaluation form. The form might include categories such as *omitted*, *minimally addressed*, and *fully explained* or a similar set of progressive but descriptive points or a Likert scale.

A combination of multiple, different rating methods, completed by different competent raters, with access to different aspects of the learner's performance, is vital to assessing competencies. Such an approach fits well with McClelland's vision of appropriate competency assessment.

## DEFINING A PROFESSION: IDENTIFYING CORE COMPETENCIES

This article has sought to define competencies and explore how to assess them. Yet if competencies are to serve as markers of professional achievement, which specific competencies are examined becomes a crucial part of defining a profession. Although competencies may be understood as comprising knowledge, values, and skill components, what they address must also be carefully defined. Distinctions between foundation and advanced or specialized outcomes should be clearly stated. Having an appropriate, comprehensive, and flexible list of competencies and their component practice behaviors is pivotal to a profession. Defining such lists takes great care and attention.

Many professional organizations have developed specific lists of competencies and content to guide their higher education programs. These lists are important aspects of the accreditation process for educational institutions, along with more general information on institutional mission and goals, program resources, and policies regarding faculty and students. For example, accreditation by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing requires assessment of individual specific learning outcomes, specifying nine “essential areas” and 66 specific competencies (2011,

pp. 9–29). Similarly, the British Psychological Society (2006) listed 40 specific competencies grouped into nine broad areas. Institutions, too, publicly promote professional competencies.

Social work accreditation standards currently identify 10 competencies through CSWE's (2008) EPAS. As is typical across professions, these competency statements are quite broad in nature. Many of the competencies are double-barreled items, such as to "advance human rights and social and economic justice" (standard 2.1.5). There are also instances when the narrative of the standard is not fully reflected in its component practice behaviors. For example, standard 2.1.1 states social workers "know the profession's history." Knowledge of the profession's history, however, is not specified in this standard's list of practice behaviors. Similarly, the general practice behaviors for research (standard 2.1.6) do not specifically include all the content found in the standard's narrative.

Developing a list of competencies should include a wide range of social work professional organizations and allow for feedback from all social workers. Carefully and thoroughly defining the list of core competencies, at foundation and at advanced or specialized levels, is vital to making the assessment of competencies optimally meaningful and useful. It is a very worthy and important endeavor.

McClelland's pioneering work has guided the effort to define competencies of many kinds. Recent educational and political demands require the careful assessment of professional competence. Analyzing what competencies are and how they are optimally assessed can improve social work's efforts to ensure graduates are fully qualified beginning professionals. Defining competencies clearly and creating valid methods to assess them is vital to strong professional education. This is an important undertaking for the profession, as well as to serve and to protect the public.

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