

# Perspectives Social Work Competencies and Multidimensional Assessment

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The authors review the Council on Social Work Education's 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) related to the assessment of social work competencies. The 2015 EPAS focuses on the multidimensional assessment of holistic competencies (Drisko, 2015). This is a significant change from the assessment of practice behaviors approach of the 2008 EPAS. This article aims to clarify the intention and language related to assessment in the 2015 EPAS and to provide programs with an overview of possible ways of developing assessment plans that are in compliance with Accreditation Standard 4.0–Assessment.

**KEYWORDS** accreditation, assessment, best practices, social work competencies

What is the goal of higher education? This is a complex question that requires an equally complex answer. Boahin and Hofman (2012) suggest that "the main goal of education is to prepare an individual for life which involves a multiple of roles in order to function effectively in one's community" (p. 285). Related to preparedness, it is necessary for learners to gain knowledge and skills; this obtainment of knowledge and skills is considered competence. Undoubtedly, achieving competence is a cornerstone in the pursuit of higher education and the preparation for professional practice.

This article reviews competency-based social work education and the multidimensional assessment of social work competencies by baccalaureate social work educational programs.

## Competency-Based Education

*Competence* is both a professional and pedestrian term. According to Drisko (2014), competence refers to "the ability of an individual to perform a task," further adding that "the task must be performed fully and properly" (p. 416). McKnight (2013) proposes that competence is an "ongoing ability" to "integrate knowledge, skills, judgment, and professional attributes in order to practice safely and ethically" within one's professional scope (p. 460). Simply, *competence* refers to the ability of the individual to complete tasks related to real-life situations within his or her profession (Blomeke, Gustafsson, & Shavelson, 2015).

Competence assessments are a growing norm in higher education (Rissi & Gelmon, 2014). Competency-based assessments focus on the result of the educational process (Kiguli-Malwadde et al., 2014). A goal of competence-based assessments is to provide learners with relevant skills and knowledge in order to best prepare them for their professional futures (Maxwell, 2012). Theeb, Muhaidat, and Al-Zboon (2014, p. 133) consider competency-based educational programs to be an "institutional process" that has produced a shift in focus from "what teachers think is important (teacher based) to focus on what students need to know and be able to perform (based on the student/workplace)," as well as considering "skills associated with vocational needs identified by employers and specialists."

Schuwirth and Ash (2013, p. 555) submit that this form of outcome-based education is "conquering the world" and is the most prevalent framework within curricula of the health professions. Despite the burgeoning focus on competence in higher education, there remains some challenges related to this approach. Rissi and Gelmon (2014, p. 336) see these as "identifying appropriate competencies . . . and assessing the development of student competence" along with more specific concerns such as "the relationships among competence, program curricula, and course content . . . ; course-level teaching, learning, and assessment methods . . . ; and the validity, relevance, and balance among competencies."

## Accreditation

Accreditation is "a process of external quality review created and used by higher education" (Eaton, 2011, p. 1). Moskal, Ellis, and Keon (2008) set forth that accreditation serves to "encourage continuous quality improvement through assessment" (p. 269). For social work education programs in the United States, the accrediting body is the Commission on Accreditation (COA) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). CSWE's Commission on Educational Policy (COEP) creates educational policy for social work education, and COA creates accreditation standards. The educational policy and accreditation standards together form the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the guide to the accreditation of baccalaureate- and master's-level social work educational programs. The 2015 EPAS focus on holistic competence (Drisko, 2015).

Social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being. EPAS recognizes a *holistic view of competence*; that is, the

demonstration of competence is informed by knowledge, values, skills, and *cognitive and affective processes* that include the social worker's critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment in regard to unique practice situations. (CSWE, 2015, p. 6, emphasis added)

## Social Work Competencies

The 2015 EPAS identify nine social work competencies: (1) demonstrate ethical and professional behavior; (2) engage diversity and difference in practice; (3) advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice; (4) engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice; (5) engage in policy practice; (6) engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; (7) assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; (8) intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; and (9) evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The 2015 EPAS provide a description of each competency that defines the competency.

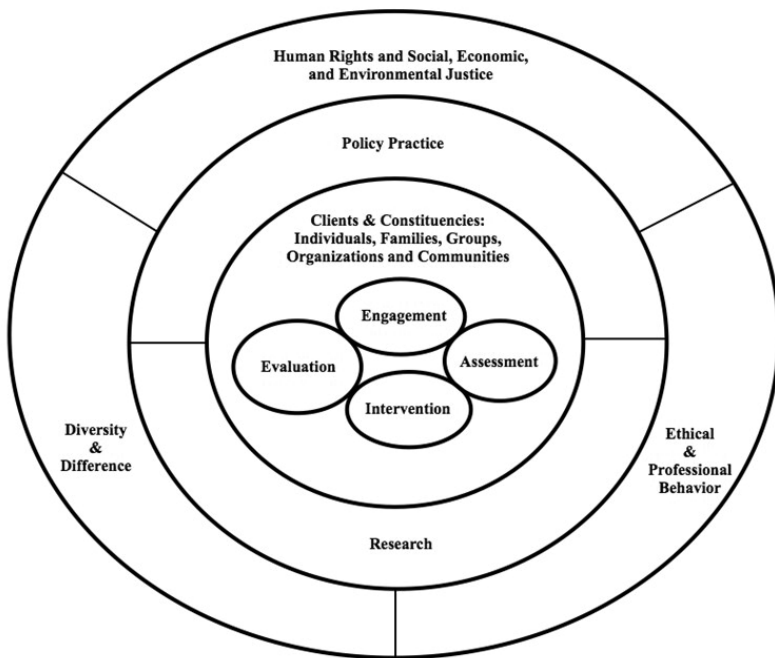
## Holistic Competencies

The nine social work competencies mandated by CSWE are connected and interrelated components of professional social work practice. The relationships among the competencies are bidirectional and circular. The relationships are not hierarchical or linear. Figure 1 shows a conceptualization of the interrelationships among the nine professional social work competencies. The competencies in the outer ring are those that apply broadly to all practice situations. Ethical behavior, diversity, and social justice competency are fundamental components of effective social work practice.

The competencies in the middle ring of the figure are the two areas of social work practice that are not client-based. Policy practice and research competence are informed by the competencies of diversity, social justice, and ethical behavior and in turn inform social work practice with clients and constituencies. The competencies in the inner circle are those related to social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Diversity, social justice, ethical behavior, policy practice, and research competency all inform the practice competencies of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with different clients and constituencies.

The 2015 EPAS identifies six dimensions that are associated with each social work competency—performance, knowledge, values, affective reactions, critical thinking, and professional judgment. *Performance* is the

Figure 1 Social Work Competencies

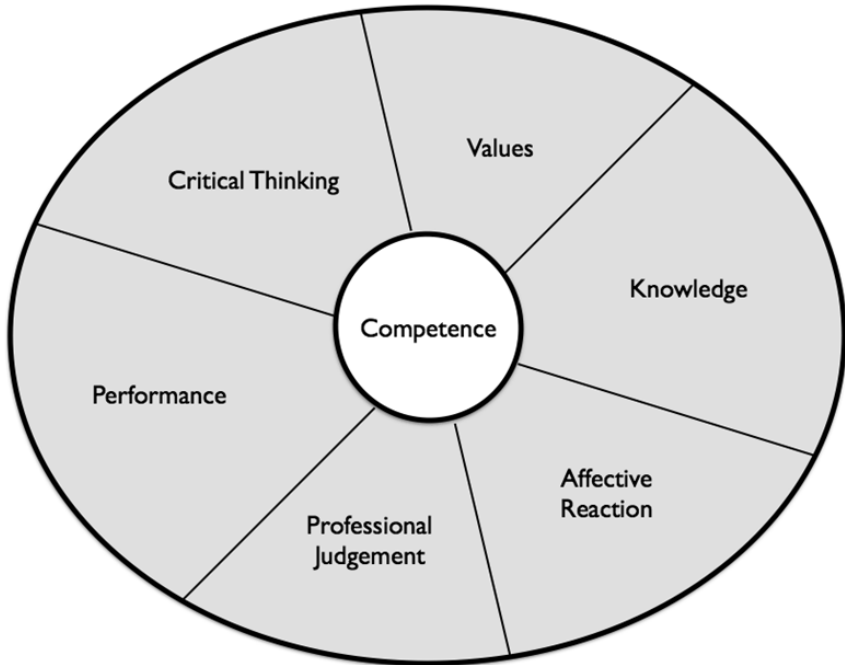


behavioral dimension of the competency, and *knowledge* is the cognitive dimension. The performance dimension is best measured by observation and the knowledge dimension by examinations or course assignments.

The *values* dimension is less clear. It can have knowledge and/or performance components. Students' knowledge of social work values related to each competency could be assessed as well as their ability to make ethical decisions in practice. The values dimension is a component of each competency that can be measured in terms of performance (ethical behavior and decision making) or knowledge (social work values).

*Affective reactions* generally refer to the affective component of practice with clients (Rubaltelli & Slovic, 2008). It is the worker's emotional response to the client and his/her situation, which is tied to empathy and other affective processes. Affective reactions have relevance for social work competency in that effective social work practice requires cognitive and affective understanding of the client as well as one's own feelings, emotions, and reactions. It is an internal process that cannot be directly observed. The measurement of the affective reaction dimension with any of the social work

Figure 2 Dimensions of Social Work Competencies



competencies will need to be done through some form of self-reflection or self-report and then assessed by social work faculty members or field personnel.

Critical thinking is the “open-minded search for understanding, rather than for discovery of a necessary conclusion” (Kurfiss [1989], qtd. in Mumm & Kersting, 1997, p. 75). Critical thinking is a process with the center of the cycle focused on explaining the why. The process includes “recognising contradictions...providing evidence . . . examining implications of evidence. . . [and] questioning or challenging an interpretation of the evidence and offering an alternative” (Heron, 2006, p. 221). As with affective reactions, critical thinking is an internal process and is not directly observable. Measurement of the critical thinking dimension requires some form of self-report and subsequent assessment by faculty members or field personnel.

The final competency dimension listed in the 2015 EPAS is *professional judgment*. Professional judgment is about decision making in social work practice. A key issue debated in relation to decision-making in social work is the extent to which social workers use analytical versus intuitive reasoning

styles (Collins & Daly, 2011). O'Sullivan (2011) "caution[s] against the dangers of polarizing between intuitive and analytical decision-making and suggest[s] that both approaches have a role to play in social work practice" (Collins & Daly, 2011, p. 4). Thus, professional judgment is reasoned decision making based upon evidence, knowledge, analytical reasoning, and practice wisdom. It is a process of examining all facets of a case and making a reasoned decision supported by both objective and subjective evidence. Measuring professional judgment goes beyond an assessment of the practice decisions. It entails an examination of the process used to reach the decision. This requires an examination of internal processes as well as the observable decision. As with affective reactions and critical thinking, the professional judgment dimension requires some form of self-report and subsequent assessment by faculty members or field personnel.

### Levels of Competence

Competency is a complex concept that focuses on what practitioners or students are able to do and not just what they know (Bogo, Rawlings, Katz, & Logie, 2014). It involves "both performance *and* the knowledge, values, critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment that inform performance" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18, emphasis added). The 2015 EPAS do not distinguish between different levels of competency. We believe that social workers and social work students can vary in their levels of competence for each social work competency. We, therefore, are proposing three levels of competence that we hope will help BSW programs conceptualize their outcomes assessment plans. The three levels of competence are *cognitive*, *behavioral*, and *holistic*. The three levels are hierarchical. Achieving competence at a lower level is a prerequisite for achieving a higher level of competence.

We are calling the lowest level *cognitive competence*. Mastery of a body of knowledge related to each social work competency is a prerequisite to being able to demonstrate competency in the world of practice. We have included the knowledge level in our model because we believe that assessing students' knowledge about each social work competency provides important information for quality assurance and program renewal. Programs need to know if their curricula are providing students with the knowledge needed to achieve practice competence. Although social work competence is defined as the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills (CSWE, 2015), we believe that assessment of students' mastery of curricular content is an important component of any outcomes assessment plan.

The second level of practice competence in our model is *behavioral competence*. This is the ability to apply knowledge and skills to practice

situations. Assessment of this level of competence requires the identification of observable practice behaviors for each professional competence. This is the level of competence assessment associated with the 2008 EPAS. Students are assessed upon their ability to perform an identified behavior and apply knowledge and values to practice situations. This approach involves assessing students' ability to demonstrate the competencies identified in the educational policy. We believe that this is a basic level of practice competence. Students demonstrate the ability to perform identified practice behaviors in practice tasks or activities that approximate social work practice as closely as possible. Students achieving this level of competence are judged to be competent social workers.

The third and highest level of practice competence is *holistic competence* (Bogo et al., 2014). This level of competence entails a demonstration of competence that is "informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that include the social worker's critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment in regard to unique practice situations" (CSWE, 2015, p. 6). Students who achieve this level of competence are able to integrate knowledge and skills associated with different competencies, apply critical thinking and reflection, and apply their skills in unique practice situations. The key components of holistic competence are internal processing components of critical thinking, reflection, and affective processes. Therefore, assessment of holistic competence must capture the demonstration of the competencies and the quality of internal processing informing the performance of the competencies. Thus, holistic competence extends behavioral competence by including the dimensions of critical thinking, affective reactions, and professional judgment.

## Assessment

Baccalaureate social work programs are mandated to implement programs of assessment to evaluate their students' mastery of the professional competencies. Education Policy 4.0: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes states that "assessment is an integral component of competency-based education. Assessment involves the systematic gathering of data about student performance of Social Work Competencies at both the generalist and specialized levels of practice" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18).

In 2008, with the release of the new EPAS, there was a shift from assessment of program objectives to a competency approach with measurement of practice behaviors. The new 2015 EPAS contains another shift in assessment. The 2015 EPAS no longer focus on measuring practice behaviors, but rather on multidimensional assessment of the competencies.

Educational Policy 4.0 (CSWE, 2015) provides a general framework to help guidance program's competency assessment:

Competence is perceived as holistic, involving both performance *and* the knowledge, values, critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment that inform performance. Assessment therefore must be multi-dimensional and integrated to capture the demonstration of the competencies and the quality of internal processing informing the performance of the competencies. (p. 18, emphasis added)

Although it is up to individual BSW programs to design and implement their assessment plans, Accreditation Standard (AS) 4.0—Assessment requires the following:

4.0.1 The program presents its plan for ongoing assessment of student outcomes for all identified competencies in the generalist level of practice (baccalaureate social work programs) and the generalist and specialized levels of practice (master's social work programs). Assessment of competence is done by program designated faculty or field personnel. The plan includes:

- A description of the assessment procedures that detail when, where, and how each competency is assessed for each program option.
- At least two measures assess each competency. One of the assessment measures is based on demonstration of the competency in real or simulated practice situations.
- An explanation of how the assessment plan measures multiple dimensions of each competency, as described in EP 4.0.
- Benchmarks for each competency, a rationale for each benchmark, and a description of how it is determined that students' performance meets the benchmark.
- An explanation of how the program determines the percentage of students achieving the benchmark.
- Copies of all assessment measures used to assess all identified competencies.

4.0.2 The program provides its most recent year of summary data and outcomes for the assessment of each of the identified competencies, specifying the percentage of students achieving program benchmarks for each program option.

4.0.3 The program uses Form AS 4(B) and/or Form AS 4(M) to report its most recent assessment outcomes for each program option to



constituents and the public on its website and routinely updates (minimally every 2 years) its findings.

4.0.4 The program describes the process used to evaluate outcomes and their implications for program renewal across program options. It discusses specific changes it has made in the program based on these assessment outcomes with clear links to the data.

4.0.5 For each program option, the program provides its plan and summary data for the assessment of the implicit curriculum as defined in EP 4.0 from program defined stakeholders. The program discusses implications for program renewal and specific changes it has made based on these assessment outcomes. (CSWE, 2015, p. 18)

### **AS 4.0 Clarified**

The 4.0 accreditation standard described above details the components of assessment that are the minimum standards for compliance. This section attempts to provide further clarification based upon our interpretation of these standards. The assessment standard in the 2008 EPAS was the one most frequently cited by the Commission on Accreditation. Between 2009 and 2011, AS 4.0 was cited 51.2% of the time in reaffirmation decisions, and between 2013 and 2015 AS 4.0 was cited in 46.3% of the reaffirmation decisions by the Commission on Accreditation (J. A. Regan, personal communication, May 2015). Clearly, a great many social work programs struggled with the assessment standard under the 2008 EPAS. The following interpretation of the 2015 AS 4.0, although not official COA policy, is meant to help BSW programs develop and implement assessment plans that are found compliant by the Commission on Accreditation.

One significant change from 2008 is that "assessment of competence is done by program designated faculty or field personnel" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). Those responsible for assessing student competence must be program faculty members or field professionals. COA will no longer accept self-efficacy measures of competency. Student self-report cannot be one of the two required measures. The assessing of competence must be done by faculty members or field personnel. This is a significant change that will affect the current assessment plans of many programs.

As noted earlier, a major change is the level of assessment. Under the 2008 EPAS, programs were required to measure practice behaviors that were assumed to be behavioral indicators of the social work competencies. Under the 2015 EPAS, programs are required to assess students at the competency

level. The 2015 EPAS states that programs must assess "student outcomes for all identified competencies in the generalist level of practice (baccalaureate social work programs)" (p. 18). The shift to competency-level assessment is another significant change from the 2008 EPAS that will significantly impact many BSW program's current assessment plans.

AS 4.0.1 focuses on the program's assessment plan and has a number of components. The first is a description of the assessment plan used by the program. The program must provide "a description of the assessment procedures that detail when, where, and how each competency is assessed for each program option" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). The assessment plan at a minimum should describe the measures that are used to assess each competency at the generalist level of practice, when and how the data are collected, competency-level benchmarks, the rationale for each benchmark and how the benchmarks are calculated, and how the data are analyzed and used for program renewal for each program option. *Program option* refers to the method of delivery (seated, online, satellite campus, and so forth); it does not refer to regular versus advanced standing or part-time versus full-time options. The assessment plan should be detailed and communicate to the COA the details of how, when, and where assessment of competencies is accomplished. Many programs have included other components of their assessment process in their self-studies such as exit surveys, student focus groups, employee surveys, and licensing pass rates. We recommend that programs, in their self-study narrative, separate these components of their assessment plan from the required outcomes assessment component. The compliance with AS 4.0 is based upon the outcomes assessment, and it should stand alone. The other aspects of the program's assessment plan provide additional information but are not reviewed for compliance. For clarity, the components of the assessment plan that measure achievement of student competencies should be identified explicitly.

The narrative describing the program's assessment plan should also include "an explanation of how the assessment plan measures multiple dimensions of each competency" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). The dimensions referred to include skills, values, knowledge, self-reflection, critical thinking, and professional judgment. The outcomes assessment must be multidimensional. For each competency, programs may choose to measure behaviors or knowledge related to the competency. Measuring both would make the program's assessment of each competency multidimensional. Furthermore, adding a values, self-reflection, critical thinking, or professional judgment dimension to each measure would make the assessment truly multidimensional.

The 2015 EPAS state that “practice often requires the performance of multiple competencies simultaneously; therefore, assessment of those competencies may optimally be carried out at the same time” (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). The assumption is that the measures used will be able to assess more than one competency.

Programs must submit copies of all measures used for assessment of student competencies. This includes the class assignments and the rubrics used to evaluate each assignment—rubrics used to evaluate real and simulated practice behaviors as well as all questionnaires, scales, and indices. We recommend that the measures be clearly linked to the specific competencies they measure. The connection between the measure and the competence cannot be assumed to be obvious. It must be made explicit.

Another point of clarification related to assessment involves the measurement of the competencies. Each competency has many component parts that are used to define the substance of the social work competency. Programs are not required to attempt to measure every component that appears in each competency of the 2015 EPAS. Such a situation would result in an excessive number of measures. Programs are free to select the components of the competency that they choose to measure. It is the programs’ responsibility to provide a justification for their choices and an articulation of how their assessment plan and measures capture the social work competencies.

AS 4.0.2 requires programs to submit “its most recent year of summary data and outcomes for the assessment of each of the identified competencies” (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). There are three important points of clarification. The first is that programs must submit a year’s worth of data. Partial data based upon one semester would be out of compliance. Second, the summary data must report the percentage of students achieving the identified benchmarks for each competency. The percentages and benchmarks must be reported at the competency level. Finally, summary data must be provided for each program option. Again, *program option* refers to the mode of delivery. The intent is to have programs submit separate data for each program option. For example, one school of social work in the Mid-Atlantic region reported summary data on online or hybrid courses in the campus-based MSW program as less than 50%, summary data on online courses for the online MSW option as 100%, and summary data for its satellite campus. As noted earlier, *program option* does not refer to different curriculum ladders such as full-time, part-time, or advanced standing.

AS 4.0.4 is about program renewal. The standard requires programs to describe the specifics of how the outcome data are reviewed and the specific

changes that have been made for program renewal based upon the outcome data. The changes reported made must be tied to the outcome findings and review process. Listing changes unconnected to the data will probably result in the COA citing AS 4.0.4. The self-study narrative for AS 4.0.4 describes program renewal and the changes made for each program option.

AS 4.0.5 represents a significant change from 2008. COA now requires programs to develop assessment plans and collect data on the implicit curriculum as defined by EP 4.0. The program may assess all or some combination of the various components of the implicit curriculum. It is the responsibility of the program to provide a rationale for its assessment plans and choice of measures. AS 4.0.5 also requires programs to provide a discussion of how the implicit curriculum assessment data were used for program renewal. As with the assessment of student competencies, the program changes should be data driven and clearly linked to the assessment data. Assessment of the implicit curriculum must be done for each program option. Program renewal and the changes made should be reported by program option.

## **Measurement**

Finding and/or developing measures that can be used to assess the nine social work competencies is challenging. This section will provide examples of possible measures for the three levels of competency—cognitive, behavioral, and holistic. This discussion is organized by levels of competence rather than the competency dimensions because we feel this approach provides programs with the greatest flexibility in designing their assessment and measurement plans. We also believe that multidimensional assessment should involve the layering of the dimensions of values, critical thinking, affective reactions, and professional judgment upon the foundational dimensions of knowledge and performance. Although simply measuring cognitive and behavioral-level competence satisfies the minimum requirement for COA compliance, such an approach will not provide information on the higher level of holistic competence.

### **Cognitive Competence**

Cognitive competence refers to the student mastery of a body of knowledge associated with each competency. It is essentially the knowledge dimension identified in the 2015 EPAS. The narrative in the 2015 EPAS of the nine social work competencies contains numerous substantive components for each competency. As noted earlier, programs do not have to assess every

component of the competency mentioned in the narrative description. Programs may choose the aspects or components of the competency that they will assess. Possible cognitive components of Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior include social work values, ethics, ethical decision making, and the NASW Code of Ethics. Programs, for example, may also choose to include the distinction between personal and professional values, and ethical issues in the use of technology, as part of their Competency 1 knowledge assessment.

The key to assessment at all three levels is that the assessment instrument measures what it is intended to measure. For example, course grades in a course that covered social work values and ethics would not be a sufficient measure of Competency 1. They would be too general and cover content not directly related to Competency 1. Measures that directly target the knowledge components identified by the program are needed. In this example, course assignments with specific faculty assessment rubrics targeting the specified content would be one possible way to measure the knowledge component of Competency 1. For this approach to be effective, the assignments or parts of the assignments must be directly related to the identified Competency 1 knowledge components. In addition, the grading rubric must also be directly linked to the identified knowledge components. As a general practice, we strongly recommend rubrics that operationally define the different levels of achievement for all aspects of the competency being evaluated. Non-anchored rating scales are problematic in terms of inter-rater reliability among those scoring the rubrics (Moskal & Leydens, 2000; Peat, 2006).

Another possible way of measuring student knowledge mastery of Competency 1 is a course test graded by faculty members. Again, the key is to link specific test items to the identified knowledge areas. Whether they are multiple-choice test items, short-answer questions, or essay questions, the questions have to be linked directly to the competency. As with course assignments, anchored grading rubrics are recommended for course tests that include short-answer and/or essay questions.

A third possible way to measure students' knowledge mastery of Competency 1 is through the use of standardized measures. The advantage of standardized measures is that they are already developed and have known psychometric properties. They also tend to be easy to administer and score. The disadvantage is the difficulty in locating measures that directly assess knowledge related to each social work competency. One standardized measure that could be used to assess students' knowledge related to Competency 1 is the Foundation Curriculum Assessment Instrument (FCAI) developed by the Social Work Education Assessment Project (SWEAP, 2015). The FCAI is a 64-item, multiple-choice instrument that covers all the major

social work curricular areas, including ethics and values. Another standardized measure that could be used to assess knowledge related to Competency I is the Social Work Values Inventory (Pike, 1996).

### Behavioral Competence

Many social work programs have been doing this level of competency assessment for outcome assessment under the 2008 EPAS. The 2015 EPAS provide a set of behaviors that "represent observable components of the competencies" (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). Programs may adopt the suggested behavioral indicators or create their own based upon their program context. The behaviors associated with Competency I areas follows:

- make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW Code of Ethics, relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision-making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context;
- use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations;
- demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication;
- use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes; and
- use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior. (CSWE, 2015, p. 7)

The Accreditation Standard 4.0 states that "one of the assessment measures is based on demonstration of the competency in real or simulated practice situations. . . [a]ssessment of competence is done by program designated faculty or field personnel" (CSWE, 2015, p. 18). The wording of this accreditation standard assumes that one of the assessments is based upon a behavioral demonstration of the competency, and it requires that the rating or assessment of the behavioral demonstration be made by social work professionals, faculty members, or field personnel. This means that student self-assessments cannot be one of the two required measures.

A logical source of students' practice assessment is their work in their field placements. Many programs have used behavioral rating forms to assess students' achievement of the identified practice behaviors that are completed by field instructors. If this type of measure is used, we recommend that the rating form have descriptive anchors for each level of the scale used. Doing so will increase inter-rater reliability among field instructors. We also

recommend that programs create ongoing systems to document students' practice behavior development and that field instructors systematically monitor their students' professional development related to the identified behavioral components of the nine professional social competencies. Tasks associated with the behavioral indicators can be incorporated into field placement learning contracts that are incorporated into the students' ongoing field supervision. Some possible ways of documenting student progress are process recordings, video clips from role-plays or client interactions, audio recordings, and case notes. These data can provide the field instructor with a basis upon which to evaluate students' behavioral competency. Simply having field instructors fill out a rating form at the end of the year without some form of documentation upon which to base their judgments will most likely result in inflated and meaningless assessment data.

Another possible way to collect behavioral assessment data is through the use of the objective structured clinical examination (OSCE; Bogo et al., 2012, 2014; Fang et al., 2013). This form of skills assessment is widely used to evaluate students' skills in a range of health-care disciplines, including medicine, nursing, trauma studies, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and radiation therapy (Clarke, McDonald, & Rainey, 2012). Nursing education is using OSCEs more frequently to assess students' clinical skills (Nulty, Mitchell, Jeffrey, Henderson & Groves, 2011): "The OSCE is an assessment method based on objective testing and direct observation of student performance during planned clinical situations" (Clarke et al., 2012, p. 35). OSCEs have attracted considerable attention in a number of disciplines because of a "high level of reliability, creditability and objectivity, content validity of the achieved skills, fairness, creating motivation for learning, and instructors' and students' satisfaction" (Eldarir & Abd el Hamid, 2013, p. 63). OSCEs require the creation of simulated case scenarios, the development of rubrics to rate the behaviors being assessed, and the observation and assessment of the behavior by social work faculty members or designated field personnel. OSCEs and their use of case scenarios satisfy the accreditation standard requiring that one of the assessment measures be based on demonstration of the competency in real or simulated practice situations.

### **Holistic Competence**

Holistic competence entails the addition of one or more of the social work dimensions of critical thinking, affective reaction, professional judgment, and values to either the knowledge or behavioral measures of competence. In our opinion, the addition of the holistic competence dimensions is better suited

to assessment of behavioral competence than knowledge competence. However, it would be possible to develop holistic assessments by incorporating the critical thinking dimension into assessments of knowledge competence. However, such a scenario would result in a weaker holistic assessment. The objective of competency assessment is to assess students' ability to do social work effectively and not just assess their knowledge about social work principles and concepts.

As noted earlier, the competency dimensions of critical thinking, affective reaction, professional judgment, and values (to a lesser extent) are all internal processes. They cannot be observed. Therefore, incorporation of these dimensions into behavioral assessment requires some sort of self-report or reflection by those being assessed. This is easily accomplished by adding a self-report component to behavioral measures and course assignment-type measures. The self-report could be on any or all of the internal process dimensions. As with all assessment measures, rubrics will need to be created to measure the various dimensions, and the self-reports will need to be assessed by social work faculty members or designated field personnel to be compliant with the 2015 EPAS accreditation standards.

## **Discussion**

Due to the increase of competence-based educational programs it is important to reflect upon assessment measures used in higher education. Within the profession of social work, CSWE's Commission on Accreditation outlines several accreditation standards related to assessment that must be addressed in order for programs to be in compliance. Utilizing these standards as guides, we propose that the use of multidimensional assessments can be regarded as best practice. Integrating the dimensions of social work competencies (values, knowledge, affective reactions, professional judgment, performance, and critical thinking) into authentic or simulated behavioral assessments provides a holistic assessment of student achievement of professional competence. Furthermore, utilizing a multidimensional approach can assist in identifying the level of competence achieved by the student. There are a variety of ways to conduct multidimensional assessments, and it is necessary for each educational program to determine which assessment best meets the needs of its students. Nevertheless, we recommend that programs develop assessment plans that use at least one knowledge or behavioral-level measure and one holistic-level measure of each competency.

It would be possible to be compliant with the 2015 EPAS accreditation standards related to assessment without any holistic-level measures, but this



approach is not advisable. The fundamental purpose of educational assessment is to provide information that will guide program renewal and improvements so that more competent social work graduates will be prepared. Assessment plans that just meet minimal accreditation standards will, most likely, yield data that provides little to no useful information. The NASW Code of Ethics (2005) requires us to provide the best possible level of service to our clients. This requires social work programs to prepare competent social workers who have the knowledge, skills, and professional judgment to provide clients with competent social work services.

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