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Dana J. Sullivan[a], Kathryn Krase [b], Tobi DeLong Hamilton[c], Tameca Harris-Jackson[d], Brian Christenson[e], Kristin Danhoff[f] and Ruth Gerritson McKane[g]

[a]Department of Social Work, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, USA; [b]Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York, New York, USA; [c]School of Arts & Sciences, Brandman University, Irvine, California, USA; [d]School of Health Sciences, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA; [e]Masters of Social Work Department School of Public Service Leadership, Capella University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA; [f]Department of Social Work, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA; [g]School of Health Sciences, Regis College, Weston, Massachusetts, USA

ABSTRACT

Mastering competence is a 'cornerstone' in the preparation of social work students for professional practice in the field. But who determines how competency is defined? And, ultimately, who gets to determine when a student achieves competence? These are important questions. This article relates the development and adoption of competency-based social work education to the reality programs face in documenting student achievement in an effort to satisfy competency-based accreditation standards set by the Council of Social Work Education for undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the United States but has relevance to similar processes in other countries, as well. A pragmatic road map for the development of competency benchmarks for the purpose of program assessment is offered here, using real-life examples from programs successful with accreditation and reaffirmation using standardized assessment instruments. Problems inherent in the development of these benchmarks, and with the current state of program assessment, are explored.

Development of competency-based social work education in the United States

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) governs how accredited undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the United States should prepare students for practice in the profession of social work through Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (Council on Social Work Education, 2015a). CSWE was formed in 1952 in an effort to consolidate professional groups previously responsible for the accreditation of social work programs. At the time of inception, CSWE was the singular authority for accreditation of graduate programs in Social Work for the United States (and for a time, those in Canada, as well). In 1974, CSWE was authorized to accredit baccalaureate programs and continues to do so. In 1961, CSWE adopted standards in the form of a document entitled 'Social Welfare Content in Undergraduate Education,' to

guide the development of social work programs. CSWE first adopted 'accreditation standards' in 1973. In 1974, CSWE was authorized by the National Commission on Accrediting to formally accredit undergraduate programs (Council on Social Work Education, 2020).

Initial CSWE accreditation requirements, and those that followed for decades, focused on defining 'what' social work programs should provide to students through their curricula. This 'what' included 'what should graduates know and be able to do; and what were the requisite skills, capabilities and competencies needed for effective professional practice' (Holloway, 2008, p. 1). As long as programs could relate how their program structure and resulting curriculum supported the expectations for what social work graduates should know and do at the end of their program, then CSWE would authorize their accreditation/reaffirmation.

Starting with the 2001 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS 2001), accreditation expectations shifted beyond outlining what programs should include, to add a requirement of programs to show 'how' they were meeting the expectations for preparing students for practice (Holloway, 2008). EPAS 2001 required programs to evaluate how well they prepared students for each self-defined program objective through a process defined as 'assessment.' A major difficulty that resulted from EPAS 2001 expectations was that program-defined objectives were sometimes unclear or difficult to articulate in behavioral terms. As a result, assessment of those outcomes was 'ineffective or problematic' (Holloway, 2008).

CSWE's EPAS 2008 removed focus from program-defined objectives, replacing them with CSWE defined competencies that focused on expected professional behaviors (CSWE, 2008; Holloway, 2008). The 10 Core Competencies, and 41 required Practice Behaviors, clearly outlined what skills students were expected to be prepared to perform at the conclusion of their social work program. Self-studies for reaffirmation of accreditation required that programs used multiple measures, and program-defined benchmarks, to assess student performance of each Core Competency at the Practice Behavior level.

EPAS 2015 requirements for assessment

Current requirements for accreditation and reaffirmation of social work programs outline a multi-dimensional assessment of each of the nine EPAS competencies for all baccalaureate programs as well as generalist practice of all master's programs. In addition, master's programs are also expected to develop and assess competencies at the specialized practice level using multiple measures (Council on Social Work Education, 2015a). This is a model that could potentially be expanded and utilized in social work programs, globally. Program assessment has become essential to program success, as educators prepare students for the standards of practice for the profession.

Programs must report on the assessment of each competency, at the generalist practice and specialized practice levels (for master's programs), using two measures. At least one of those measures must result from real, or simulated, practice situations. Very often, programs use evaluations from field placement to meet the 'real or simulated practice situations' requirement.

EPAS 2015 also requires that programs provide an assessment plan that shows that multiple dimensions of each competency are measured. The dimensions of each

competency that must be measured include knowledge, value, skills, and cognitive/affective processes. Therefore, programs must elaborate on their assessment plan on how they capture at least two of these dimensions for each competency.

In order to report assessment outcomes, programs must identify, define, and explain benchmarks for students' attainment of each competency (Council on Social Work Education, 2015a). Defining benchmarks is the responsibility of each individual social work program. Benchmarks identify the percentage of students a program expects to achieve an adequate level of mastery, suggestive of professional competence. Aggregation of student achievement of professional competency, explained through performance related to benchmarks, is then reported to CSWE through Chapter 4 of a program's self-study for initial accreditation and again at reaffirmation, as well as provided and updated regularly through required online posting of assessment results (i.e. AS4 reporting).

Social work education assessment project

The Social Work Education Assessment Project (SWEAP) team is currently made up of a group of six social work educators from a diverse sampling of undergraduate and graduate programs across the country. This group, formerly known as the Baccalaureate Education Assessment Project (BEAP), was formed in the late 1980s to create instruments for use in internally and externally driven outcomes assessment. The initial team came together organically through identification of a shared interest in the science and practice of program assessment. BEAP transitioned to SWEAP in 2013, reflecting the applicability of our instruments to graduate, as well as undergraduate, social work programs. Over the past 20+ years, 17 different social work educators have been part of the team. The SWEAP team continues to grow and change, organically. New members are often identified through networking at professional conferences, where mutual interest in improving program assessment and supporting program improvement is often found and cultivated.

All SWEAP team members have extensive experience in social work education, with particular expertise in outcomes assessment. Most SWEAP team members have served as the 'assessment coordinator' at their institutions. Multiple SWEAP team members have served as BSW and/or MSW Program Directors, for a combined 17 years of experience in these roles. Almost all team members have been responsible for the development of successful self-studies in support of initial CSWE accreditation and program reaffirmation at the undergraduate and/or graduate levels.

The current SWEAP package includes six different standardized instruments: the Foundation Curriculum Assessment Instrument (FCAI), the Field Practicum Placement Assessment Instrument (FPPAI), the Entrance Instrument, the Exit Instrument, the Employer Survey, and the Graduate/Alumni/ae Instrument. All SWEAP instruments include assessments that relate to CSWE EPAS. A combination of the SWEAP FCAI, FPPAI, and Exit Instrument has been successfully used by undergraduate and graduate programs to meet the requisite multi-dimensional assessment of student competency of the EPAS 2015 general practice competencies, as well as an assessment of program implicit curriculum.

Over 500 undergraduate and graduate social work programs have used BEAP and/or SWEAP instruments since their inception. Multiple undergraduate and graduate social

work programs have successfully used SWEAP instruments towards CSWE accreditation and reaffirmation under EPAS 2015, including those with which the SWEAP team are academically affiliated.

Setting appropriate benchmarks: using SWEAP instruments

Educational accreditors provide programs with considerable room for interpretation of assessment requirements. For instance, CSWE does not define what student 'competency' means, nor does CSWE delineate benchmarks for what percentage of students in a given program should achieve competency. Instead, CSWE leaves such authority to individual programs. However, EPAS 2015 requires programs to provide a rationale for each benchmark, along with 'a description of how students' performance meets that benchmark' (Council on Social Work Education, 2015a). These tasks can often be challenging for a program.

According to Merriam-Webster (2019), a benchmark is 'something that serves as a standard by which others may be measured or judged, a point of reference from which measurements may be made, a standardized problem or test that serves as a basis for evaluation or comparison.' Benchmarks in educational settings 'provide a point of reference by which something can be measured … that includes a set of performance criteria which a [student] is expected to meet' (Kirschner & Davis, 2003).

Setting benchmarks is an important process for any social work program. Making these decisions should involve all faculty and be based on a determination of past performance, as well as strategic planning for improvement.

In the context of social work program evaluation, benchmarks refer to two different thresholds related to the percentage of students who achieve competency using a particular measure:

(1) Competency threshold: the level of individual student performance that programs determine needs to be met for a student to be considered 'competent' in a particular area; and,
(2) Benchmark for Competency: the percentage of students who achieve the competency threshold on a particular measure that a program aims to meet.

Competency threshold: FCAI

The SWEAP FCAI is a knowledge test that asks at least five questions related to each of the nine EPAS 2015 social work competencies at the generalized practice level. SWEAP FCAI questions are designed to be difficult. Item difficulty analysis shows that students, on average, answer 50–70% of questions correct. Therefore, the SWEAP team, after careful consideration, decided to set the threshold for competent performance by a student as answering at least 50% of questions correct in a given competency area.

Programs using the FCAI have the option of increasing, or decreasing, the competency threshold. However, it is important to note that CSWE requires programs to describe and explain their assessment measures, and therefore, deviations from SWEAP defined competency thresholds need to be adequately explained by programs.

Competency threshold: FPPAI

Many programs use field evaluations as one of their measures for assessing student competency. The SWEAP FPPAI is one such measure. Field evaluations, like the FPPAI, require field instructors to evaluate student performance on various elements related to social work competencies on a defined scale. The FPPAI uses a five-point scale, where a one represents 'lacking performance,' a two represents 'inadequate performance,' a three represents 'competent performance,' a four represents 'superior performance,' and a five represents 'mastered performance.' By definition, a three on the FPPAI scale meets the threshold for competent performance of a particular behavior. Therefore, the SWEAP team has determined that an average of three, or better, on FPPAI items in a given area is the threshold for competent performance by a student.

Programs using the FPPAI have the option of increasing, or decreasing, the competency threshold. However, it is important to note, as with the FCAI, that CSWE requires programs to describe and explain their assessment measures, and therefore, deviations from SWEAP defined competency thresholds need to be adequately explained by programs.

Benchmark for students performance: FCAI and FPPAI

CSWE EPAS 2015 requires programs to set benchmarks for group achievement of each competency. Programs can define their benchmark at any percentage they choose, but EPAS 2015 requires programs to provide a rationale for each benchmark. For instance, many programs self-define the expectation that 80% of students will achieve competency on a given measure, for a given competency area. But is 80% an appropriate benchmark? What about 75%? Or 95%?

It could be argued that an appropriate benchmark for the performance of any competency area should be 100%; don't programs aim to prepare all their students to be competent practitioners? However, social workers know that 100% is an unrealistic expectation. We also intrinsically understand that students have areas of strength and areas of weakness. We also know, based upon our experience and practice with gatekeeping, that a certain proportion of students will not be able to complete our programs. Ultimately, we also recognize that students are just starting in the field, and thus they will continue to improve their performance, even after graduation, indicating continuous room for growth.

The SWEAP team as a group, and individually as faculty at various accredited programs, supports the use of benchmarks in the range of 75–85%. We support program independence to set their own benchmarks and encourage programs to consider their previous program assessment outcomes when setting current benchmarks for student performance.

Reporting benchmark achievement

CSWE has particular reporting requirements for benchmarks in documentation to support accreditation and reaffirmation under EPAS (CSWE, 2015b). Programs do not simply report the percentage of students who achieve competency in a particular area, on a particular measure. Programs must:

- Compute the percentage of students who achieve competency on EACH of two measures for an individual competency,
- Average the two percentages, and then,
- Report whether the average of the two percentages meets the program-defined benchmark for student achievement of competency in a particular area.

To illustrate this process, an example from a hypothetical program, that utilizes SWEAP instruments, 'Persistence College,' is presented. Persistence College uses the SWEAP, FCAI and FPPAI as the two measures required for assessment of competency performance for both their BSW program and the generalist practice experience of their MSW program. Persistence College follows the SWEAP suggested competency thresholds of 50% on the FCAI and an average of 3 on the FPPAI. Persistence College sets their benchmark for competency attainment at 80%.

In their assessment plan, Persistence College outlines that 80% of their BSW and generalist practice MSW students will be rated by their field instructors at 3 or above at the competency level on the SWEAP FPPAI at the end of their field placement, and 80% of these students will answer at least 50% of questions correct at the competency level on the SWEAP, FCAI. An example of their Assessment Plan can be found in Table 1.

Persistence College collects data through online SWEAP instruments. When all instruments are appropriately completed, the assessment coordinator runs a report that aggregates the program's data and provides all information necessary for reporting assessment outcomes in their self-study for reaffirmation by CSWE. These reports outline the percentage of students that attained the benchmark for each outcome measure (i.e. the FCAI and the FPPAI). Persistence College then averages the percentages of the two measures together to obtain the percentage of students demonstrating competence at the competency level. To complete their reporting of assessment outcomes to CSWE, Persistence College determines whether this aggregated percentage is larger than the competency benchmark, of 80% previously defined by the program. They report their assessment outcomes in table form in Chapter 4 of their self-study. An example of their reporting for Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior can be found in Table 2.

Identifying and responding to challenges and limitations of benchmarks in the current landscape of social work program assessment

There are three major challenges and/or limitations to working with benchmarks in the current landscape of social work program assessment: setting benchmarks, calculating benchmark achievement, and responding to outcomes.

The major challenge in setting benchmarks is deciding what is appropriate for your program. Due to the nature of outcomes assessment in social work education in the United States, and the increasing pressure to show evidence of success through these processes, programs may be inclined to set benchmarks, ex post facto, or after completing their outcomes assessment. Just as with ex post facto hypotheses in research, there are dangers inherent in such a plan. Benchmarks should ideally be set before gathering data for the outcomes assessment. However, for many programs, the first time they are calculating these figures is for reporting to CSWE or regional accreditors. Also, programs

should not use previous data to simply set benchmarks to a level that is easy or that they expect to meet. Programs should consider past student achievements on outcomes assessment, along with their program's mission and goals when determining their benchmarks.

The main challenge in calculating benchmark achievement is a concern for the integrity of basing program plans for improvement on 'an average of an average.' In order to report benchmark achievement, programs are instructed by CSWE to '[d] etermine the percentage of students that attained the benchmark for each outcome measure. Average the percentages together to obtain the percentage of students demonstrating competence' (CSWE, 2015a). The number used to determine whether the program has met their own-defined benchmark is not actually the percentage of students that achieved competence on both the required measures but is the average of two averages. Additionally, this problematic calculation has the potential of misleading assessment findings. For instance, if students perform under the benchmark on one measure, but significantly over the benchmark on the other measure, the 'average of the average' calculation will ultimately find that the program has met the competency level benchmark. Even though programs need to report meeting this benchmark, since they have met CSWE's reporting requirements, they should, in order to preserve integrity of their outcomes assessment processes, identify those competencies as areas in which to improve their curriculum and offerings, even if just for internal purposes.

With the challenges identified in setting and calculating benchmarks, programs should be careful in how they respond to benchmark achievement. It is important for programs to seek ways to triangulate findings from their outcomes assessment. Such information can come from students, faculty, administrators, alumni, field instructors, and employers of program graduates. While CSWE outcomes assessment requires two measures for each competency, and only 1 year's worth of data, multiple years' worth of data, and from various perspectives, provides a sound plan for program improvement in the long run.

Using benchmarks to inform program improvement

Assessment of program outcomes is only as valuable as what is done with the information gleaned from the analysis. The most important part of outcomes assessment is using the information gained to inform further program development.

If a program's outcomes assessment shows that students met a particular competency benchmark, the program can be satisfied that their students are exhibiting professional competency in a particular area. However, it is incumbent on the program to continue to identify ways to improve their curriculum and offerings, especially as the field of social work changes and curriculum is updated.

If a program's outcomes assessment shows that students did not meet a particular benchmark, CSWE requires the program to give an explanation and identify steps taken, and to be taken, to improve student outcomes in that particular area. When reporting whether or not the benchmark was met, it is essential to include a narrative of steps to be taken to increase scores on competencies that were not met. This could be a discussion at faculty meetings, creating new courses or strengthening existing ones, or an examination

of measures to determine if they are valid and reliable. This is a time for faculty, staff, and students to strategize on how to make program improvements.

Conclusion

While mastering competence is a 'cornerstone' in the preparation of social work students for professional practice in the field (Poulin & Matis, 2015, p. 118), there are many 'soft edges' in how it defined and exemplified in practice. Providing programs with wide latitude to determine how competency is defined and determined is a noble, and appropriate, goal, but not without challenges. The present article sought to provide an outline for thoughtful analysis of important issues related to this process, using SWEAP instruments and the thinking-process of the SWEAP team, as an example.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Dana J. Sullivan, Ph.D., CSW, is a Professor of Social Work at Western Kentucky University and a member of the Social Work Education Assessment Project (SWEAP) team.

Kathryn S. Krase, Ph.D., J.D., M.S.W. is currently Associate Professor of Social Work at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, and Chief Financial Officer of SWEAP.

Tobi Delong Hamilton, LCSW, Ph.D., is the MSW Program Director at Brandman University, and the Chief Executive Officer of SWEAP.

Ruth Gerritsen-McKane, Ph.D., LCSW, LICSW, CCTPis an Associate Professor of Social Work, Director of MSW Field Education at Regis College in Massachusetts, and a Team Member of SWEAP.

Dr. Brian Christenson, LMSW, LGSW, CAP, is the Program Director for the Masters of Social Work Program at Capella University, and a Team Member of SWEAP.

Kristin Danhoff, Ph.D., MSW is currently Assistant Professor of Social Work at Metropolitan State University of Denver and the Department's Assessment Coordinator, and a Team Member of SWEAP.

Tameca Harris-Jackson, Ph.D., LCSW, CSWE is current Assistant Professor of Social Work at Regis College, and a former member of the SWEAP Team.

ORCID

Kathryn Krase 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6140-4223

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