

Some Considerations of the Import of the 2008 EPAS for Curriculum Design

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Introduction: A New Approach to Curriculum Design in Social Work Education

Rationale for Change

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) adopted by the Board of Directors of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in April 2008 represent a distinctly new approach to the design of social work curricula. From its origins in the early decades of the 20th century, educational policy in social work approached curriculum design from a content perspective. That is, the policy and standards outlined the academic content which it considered essential for the education of professional social workers. As knowledge grew and the profession matured the volume of content and areas to be covered required by successive iterations of policy and standards grew as well. Those working on successive versions of policy and standards always found it more difficult to trim and delete older content than it was to add new. As such, by the end of the century the amount of content required to meet accreditation standards -- as well as the format in which that content was expected to be delivered -- left little or no room for individual programs to innovate with respect to program focus. In addition, a comprehensive analysis was never undertaken to assess the extent to which required curriculum content, added to and modified over the years, related to the functioning of the contemporary entry level social worker. It was almost as if the presumption was that the content required was the content necessary to prepare students for the arduous work of professional social work practice, whether or not that was truly the case. These concerns as well as fresh anxiety about the existential challenges facing the profession and their implications for social work education led to the construction of the 2008 EPAS.

In response, the 2008 EPAS no longer mandates academic content and significantly loosens expectations regarding curriculum form or structure. Instead, it introduces the notion of requisite student competencies comprised of interrelated practice behaviors as the organizing principle for curriculum design. This is a distinctly new approach for social work and represents a significant departure from our past. It is not new in professional education however. The approach often referred to as “competency-based education” has informed teacher education since the 1970s and more recently has become the norm in medicine, nursing, law and business. The basic notion of competency-based education is a shifting of the focus from a preoccupation with what students should be taught to an emphasis upon what practitioners can actually do. Thus it represents a shift from an “input” curricular orientation to an “outcomes” student competency orientation. As such, it is particularly well suited for professional education since, in contrast to the academic disciplines where breadth of knowledge defines preparation, for the professions *competence* is the hallmark of effective preparation.

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Demonstrated competence as defined in EPAS no more represents the end of professional preparation than did prior CSWE approaches to curriculum design. Rather it marks a threshold across which the student passes commencing a journey of career-long learning. The notion of competence here is that the student has mastered the learning and skills – i.e. practice behaviors -- which are necessary to commence entry level practice. This represents his or her beginning of a professional right of passage toward the eventual achievement of that sought after status of “expert. “ This journey evolves through a practice career as the competent graduate takes on more difficult tasks, refines and applies his or her learnings to more complex challenges, moves into more responsible positions such as supervisor or teacher and when the practitioner regularly contributes to the development of new knowledge and practice behaviors.

As it is utilized here, “competence” is a threshold concept. That is, in demonstrating competence one crosses the threshold separating the novice from the competent practitioner. Competence, however, does not in any way connote “expert”. A competent cook understands the rudiments of measurement, the principles of mixing and blending and the more elemental means of applying heat to ingredients such that a desired outcome is achieved. He or she can follow a recipe and in so doing produce a respectable meal. One might consider these rudiments to be comprised of practice behaviors which inform basic culinary competencies. This more or less describes a “competent cook.” Being considered “a competent cook” however is a far cry from being viewed as a brilliant one!

The Competency Based Approach: Implications and Cautions

EPAS defines competencies as “measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values and skills” (**EP 2.1**). *American Heritage* adds the notion of “ability” to the definition. This suggests that the components of a competency share a commonality at least insofar as they all contribute to the ability in question. EPAS describes each of its competencies in a couple of sentences and then goes on to suggest the practice behaviors which constitute its elemental parts. Together these practice behaviors serve to operationalize the competency as well as to inform content utilized in curriculum design. Again, the competency is operationalized by the practice behaviors and evidence of student acquisition of the competency is demonstrated by the performance of the practice behaviors. Thus it is the demonstrated ability to execute ***an interrelated and comprehensive set of practice behaviors*** which EPAS takes as evidence of having acquired competency.

The orientation to the competency notion and to some extent its definition will be shaped by the characteristics of the profession in question. “Values,” for example, is a concept so intrinsic to the core identity of social work that we include it as a component of our competency definition. Other professions such as medicine and law approach the notion somewhat differently. Medicine, for example, employs the concept “be altruistic” which includes being both compassionate and empathic in its competency framework. Law, on the other hand, alludes consistently in its behavioral prescriptions to “fairness and impartiality.” Upon reflection one can intuit how these characteristics might be viewed as intrinsic to the discipline in question.

The EPAS posits that there is a minimum of ten competencies which constitute the domain of social work practice. These competencies include such activities as identify as a professional social worker, application of ethical principles to guide professional practice, application of critical thinking, engage diversity and difference in practice, advance human rights and social and economic justice, engage in research informed practice and practice informed research, apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, engage in policy practice, attend to contexts, and engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. Each competency is briefly defined in the document and is operationalized with an interrelated set of

generalist practice behaviors. The document introduces some flexibility in just how the competencies are operationalized, noting that the bulleted practice behaviors may be modified. Should programs make modifications in the practice behaviors suggested for each competency they are required to rationalize that change in the context of their particular program and their understanding of the competency in question. Most importantly, EPAS requires that the determination of success for programs is an assessment demonstrating student mastery of the practice behaviors utilized to operationalize each and every competency. Also, in suggesting that programs “may add competencies consistent with their missions and goals” (EP 2.1) the document hedges a bit upon the full significance of the ten competencies for the purpose of defining the basic domain of social work practice. The intent, however, is not that competencies be added gratuitously. Rather they are only added when they serve to complete or elucidate the uniqueness or particular characteristics of ones program. So, for example, a program based in South Florida with a mission focused on practice within the Latin American and Caribbean region might add a bilingual competency which would be responsive to its particular mission. While this degree of flexibility regarding the ten competencies does not completely resolve the issue of the illusive parameters of the social work domain, we believe it breaks significant ground in this regard.

Each of the EPAS competencies -- numbered **EP 2.1.1 – EP 2.1.10(a)-(d)** – has a bolded descriptor which is elaborated in one or two sentences appearing directly below each descriptor. EPAS indicates that each competency must be specified by an interrelated set of practice behaviors which serve as its component parts and are used to operationalize the competency for purposes of curriculum design and measurement (**EP 2.1; AS B2.0.3; M 2.0.4**). Together these practice behaviors are understood to comprise the essence of the competency. We are given the option here to utilize the practice behaviors – the “bullets” found below each competency – suggested in EPAS, or modify them consistent with our program’s focus while not violating the essence of the competency in question. Clearly those developing the new EPAS were reluctant to assert that they had identified *the* definitive set of contributing practice behaviors for each competency and therefore introduced the options of adaptation and elaboration. But such modifications must be rationalized in the program’s understanding of the competency in question as well as their programmatic emphasizes as indicated in **AS B2.0.3** and **M 2.0.4**. As noted above, programs are invited to develop additional competencies consistent with their mission and goals presumably with the assumption that additional competencies should also be presented and rationalized as described above.

The implications of this approach for curriculum design are quite profound. First it introduces flexibility in how programs shape their curricula. This stands in sharp contrast to our historic approach which was so driven by specified content that by the time programs had addressed all that was required there was little or no curricular space for them to differentiate their program from others. This approach also shifts responsibility for curriculum design from the dictates of the accreditation standards to the program seeking accreditation of its offerings. That is, under the old system programs were directed by educational policy and standards what to teach and how to structure its delivery. Now, in contrast, the only requirement in curriculum design is that it should result in student mastery of a set of competencies, each comprised of an interrelated set of practice behaviors. It delegates to individual social work programs the critical task of determining how this will be accomplished. We believe that this change significantly enhances the opportunity for our curricula to be informed by creativity and insight as opposed to prescription and replication.

With the explosion of knowledge in the social and behavioral sciences it is incumbent upon us to seek new and creative ways to engage and organize that knowledge. We believe the competency-based approach significantly challenges us in that fashion. Knowledge explosion in genetics, for example, has profound implications for specializations such as social work in health care, aging and developmental

disabilities. Similarly the advent of the information age requires that those of us focusing on such areas as research, policy practice and human services management find new ways to expose our students to these arenas of learning. By loosening the constraints associated with content driven accreditation standards, we may well have facilitated opportunities for our colleagues to better address this challenge.

That competency-based education has increasingly become the preferred mode of curriculum design for other professions does not necessarily constitute a particularly compelling reason for social work to climb on the competency bandwagon. What does, beyond the arguments offered above is the fact that it significantly enhances the transparency of the profession's domain and elevates its accountability for expected outcomes. With the advent of the 2008 EPAS, the public is clearly informed about what social workers can be expected to know how to do. Accreditation now assures the public that a social worker possesses the competencies detailed within the EPAS. These elements of transparency and accountability we consider to be an enormous step forward for social work.

In contrast to other professions, the precise focus and scope of the social work profession is viewed as somewhat vague and ambiguous. We experience difficulty in defining the parameters of just what constitutes the core or essence of our profession's domain. This results in continuing conflicts with sister professions and semi-professions about just where our turf ends and their's begins. Even in the context of collaborative efforts with other professions, it raises question about what precisely are "the social work activities" as opposed to those of nursing, law or whomever. This emphasis on competencies we believe places us in a potentially much more illuminated environment to begin addressing these concerns -- concerns which can only be expected to increase within the public domain.

As we embrace this new approach, some cautions are also in order. A frequent criticism of the competency-based orientation is that in its attempt to specify and describe the behavioral elements which constitute the competency – an unavoidable component of this orientation – one can run the risk of losing the essence of the competency in question. EPAS defines competencies as an interrelated set of "measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values and skills." It is these practice behaviors which, when clustered together, comprise the competency. As such they are selected very judiciously such that in combination they capture the essence of the competency. So, for example, the competency "identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly" holds significant meaning for us in describing some of what we expect of professional social workers. We appreciate its composite character. But when we shift our focus from the competency to aspects of its component practice behaviors we run the risk of losing some of that meaning. Yet our only means of measuring the achievement of the competency **is to break it into its component parts**. Should we become overly preoccupied with one or some of these composite parts, we will in the process lose the essence of the competency. It is precisely because of the necessity to focus on component parts of the competency for purposes of curriculum design and measurement on the one hand and the potential that focus holds for distortion on the other that the competency concept holds implicit pitfalls. As we begin to appreciate the potential this approach holds for diluting the essence of the competencies we hope to foster, in the process of shaping and assessing their development, we are cautioned to maintain perspective and struggle against such distortion.

This issue of specification operates in both directions. Competencies must be sufficiently defined and specified so as to make them understandable and discrete. While the term "a competent social worker" holds meaning for most of us as a concept, it is completely unhelpful as a tool for curriculum development until it is defined, specified and elaborated. We make an effort below to struggle with the architecture of competencies, offering some suggestions to ensure that they are neither *overbuilt nor under built*.

Emphasizing Context

Along with the shift in focus from a content driven curriculum to one focused on competence, the 2008 EPAS introduces a second concept which informs the conception and structure of the new standards. It is the notion of “context” as it informs a unit of attention. That is, what are the characteristics of the larger context which is informing the subject of our immediate attention? This is, of course, the “person and environment” construct so basic to our profession’s understanding of social phenomenon. Just as we can only understand an individual’s experience and circumstance as we appreciate it in that person’s larger social and political environment, the 2008 EPAS suggests that programs must define and orient themselves with attention to *their* “environment” or context. It also suggests that the social and institutional “environment” in which the educational offerings are embedded must be understood to inform those offerings. This attention to “context” plays out in three primary ways. The first is **EP 1.1 – Program Context**. Here EPAS observes that a program is influenced by “the mission of the institution in which it is located” as well as “the needs and opportunities associated with the setting”. It goes on to elaborate elements of “context” suggesting that program mission should be influenced “by the ways they elect to engage these factors.” In other words, programs are asked to consider the potential influence their larger context may hold and select among these factors as they highlight program emphases.

The second way context informs the 2008 EPAS is through the distinctions it makes between Explicit Curriculum in **EP and AS 2** and Implicit Curriculum in **EP and AS 3**. Explicit curriculum is defined as “the program’s formal educational structure and includes the courses and the curriculum”. Implicit curriculum is defined as “the educational environment in which the explicit curriculum is presented.” “It is composed of the following elements: the program’s commitment to diversity; admissions policies and procedures; administrative structure; and resources.” In their assessment of student learning, programs are asked to reference changes in both the explicit and implicit curricula as they attempt to improve student achievement of desired competencies. As such, the role of the learning context receives significant attention in this iteration of EPAS.

Finally, we have the “context” competency (**EP2.1.9**). This competency references the practitioner’s capacity to focus upon and appreciate the import of context in any and all practice encounters. It suggests that all practice encounters are influenced by the larger context in which they occur. It references the structuring of interventions as dictated by the characteristics of that context as well as the practice challenges implicit in practice task itself. It also suggests that practice may commence with operations upon the context, the presenting practice task or both.

Structural Components of the Competency Orientation

Foundation and Concentration Redefined

EPAS has retained the terms “foundation” and “concentration” but it is important to understand that when associated with the competency notion the meaning of these terms changes somewhat. In the 2001 EPAS “foundation” referred to the body of curriculum content required of BSW programs and introductory components – in most cases the first year – of MSW programs. Educational policy specified that that content be designed around a generalist practice orientation and prescribed in detail the curricular elements of that content including values and ethics, diversity, populations-at-risk and social and economic justice, human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social work practice, research, and field education. Concentration in the last EPAS referred to the advanced curriculum in MSW programs which was required to meet specified structural criteria.

“Foundation” changes meaning with the introduction of the competency orientation. Here it refers to the place in the curriculum where the level of the competencies associated with generalist practice behaviors are addressed. That is, at the baccalaureate level it is the place where the competencies are operationalized consistent with the definition of generalist practice found in **EP2.0** and **B 2.2**. In master’s programs it refers to the entry level of education (presumably at least the first year) where the competencies and associated generalist practice behaviors are initially addressed. The distinction here is subtle and perhaps not particularly important for curriculum design. Baccalaureate programs are expected to construct a curriculum to achieve the competencies focused upon “generalist practice” (**EP2.0; B 2.2; AS B2.0.1**). Masters programs are simply directed to design a curriculum with a foundation focused upon the competencies and associated generalist practice behaviors and concentration(s) informed by all the competencies (**AS M 2.0**) and elaborated with additional practice behaviors characteristic of advanced practice. Just how the practice behaviors associated with each competency and those elaborating them for advanced practice are engaged is left to the program to determine.

What we find here is a bit more flexibility for masters programs in how they organize their curriculum given the characteristics of the competency notion and the fact that typically they have more time for program implementation. They address the competencies in the foundation but may also elaborate some of the competencies in preparation for advanced practice in the foundation as well. Lest BSW educators worry that this distinction somehow poses a threat to advanced standing and the ambiguous notion of “continuum” with which we have struggled for so long, we suggest that the concern can be set aside. EPAS also directs Master’s programs to institute admissions requirements which ensure “BSW graduates entering MSW programs are not to repeat what has been mastered in their BSW programs” (**AS M3.2.3**). This presumes that competencies associated with generalist practice have been developed in BSW education. As well, the enhanced rigor associated with assessment in these standards adds fidelity to the notion that BSW and MSW “*foundations*” will all result in mastery of similar generalist practice behaviors for each of the competencies. Thus, while the content association with the term “foundation” has shifted somewhat with the advent of the current EPAS, the student competencies associated with the term have been strengthened.

Advanced Curriculum

EPAS does not posit the notion of “advanced” competencies. Rather, the document envisions competencies as areas of practice activity which can be extended and enhanced through specialization for advanced practice. In other words the competencies are seen to inform advanced practice as they are elaborated with advanced practice behaviors. Since the competencies are envisioned to comprise the domain of social work practice it follows that they are extended and elaborated in advanced practice but their essence does not shift as one moves from generalist to advanced practice. Critical thinking remains critical thinking in advanced practice but in a clinical concentration it might be elaborated with advanced practice behaviors associated with the concentration(s) in question. To stretch the cooking analogy a bit, one doesn’t master haute cuisine without first mastering the basic competencies of **cooking** and in haute cuisine one applies all the competencies of basic cooking but elaborates them with advanced practice behaviors! Indeed, many elements become nuanced and informed with specified knowledge like how specific ingredients mix, how levels and sources of heat affect differential ingredients such as eggs versus chocolate. But these are all refinements of the competencies which might be understood to comprise elemental cooking.

Masters programs are directed to approach advanced practice in a fashion which “incorporates all of the competencies augmented by knowledge and practice behaviors specific to a concentration or area of advanced practice. Advanced practice is typically informed by refinement of practice method

and also frequently informed by its application to one or more fields of practice. And as one begins to specialize some of the competencies are likely to become significantly elaborated while others may not. In a two concentration program focusing on clinical social work and social service administration, for example, one can imagine how the “intervention” competency [EP 2.1.10(a)-(d)] would become quite elaborated in the concentration -- and differ sharply between the two concentrations -- where the “engage diversity and difference” competency (EP 2.1.4) might not receive much additional elaboration beyond how issues of authority in organizational life can influence perceptions of diversity and difference. In the cooking example cited in the introduction, the principles of following a recipe and applications of heat are not particularly elaborated but those associated with order and technique of mixing ingredients, the characteristics and affects of particular spices and ingredients are profoundly specified as one attempts to master the precepts of differing cuisines.

Designing a Competency-Based Curriculum

Identifying Curriculum Content

While we’ve repeatedly made the point above that this new EPAS is not content driven, any curriculum is comprised of content and therefore an initial task in its design is the identification and ordering of that content. The point of departure with curriculum design, of course, is program mission and goals. Whether a baccalaureate or a master’s program, one starts with what program emphases emerge from the mission and goals. This EPAS directs us to address the profession’s purpose, values and the program “context” in our mission and goals (EP 1.0). As noted above, context is a new dimension of mission and goals in this EPAS and holds significant potential for the differentiation of programs from one another. “Context encompasses the mission of the institution in which the program is located and the needs and opportunities associated with the setting. Programs are further influenced by their historical, political, economic, social, cultural, demographic, and global contexts and by the ways they elect to engage these factors. Additional factors include new knowledge, technology, and ideas that may have a bearing on contemporary and future social work education and practice” (EP1.2 **Program Context**). The notion of choice – “by the ways they elect to engage these factors” – represents an invitation to programs to differentiate along dimensions they deem important. These choices should significantly inform the program’s mission and goals.

So an initial task in curriculum design is to begin to review the competencies to ensure that they hold the potential for implementing the mission and goals which define one’s program direction. Emphases of particular programs may lead them to modify some of the practice behaviors which operationalize one or another of the competencies so as to better reflect their program’s particular focus or orientation. We caution, however, that the EPAS requires such modifications to be rationalized as to how they maintain the essence of competency in question.

Once all practice behaviors associated with the competencies have been thoroughly reviewed for congruence with program mission and goals, masters programs, having determined the focus of their concentration(s) must also then elaborate the competencies such that they also inform the advanced practice associated with concentrations. Competencies will be elaborated differentially depending upon which concentration emphasis they inform. So, for example, the elaboration of the intervention competency (EP 2.1.10(a)-(d)) will look quite different for a concentration in clinical social work than it will for a concentration in management of social service programs.

Having reviewed the composition of the competencies for the foundation and -- in the case of masters programs - their elaboration for the concentration(s), programs now commence the challenging task of beginning to deconstruct the competencies for the curricular content which they imply. There

must be many different ways of going about this task but essentially the goal is to develop a listing of knowledge, values and skills associated with all the practice behaviors in each competency. In the end, however, one will compile an inventory of instructional content which is viewed as best leading to the development of the practice behaviors selected to comprise the competencies associated with one's program.

As we engage this task, redundancies and overlaps will inevitably occur. But the organizing principle for the task remains the competency. That is, as we begin to discover content similarities between critical thinking, say, and ethical decision making, we ask ourselves how best can this content be packaged, integrated or reframed *so as to build the desired competencies?*

How Competency Characteristics Affect Curriculum Design

Reflecting upon the competencies *as a package* it becomes immediately clear that they represent different orders of things one from the other. They differ with respect to the level of abstraction at which they are presented. They also differ with respect to the quantity and mix of knowledge, values and skills of which they are comprised. And finally they differ with respect to their relationship to one another. Before we commence the task of utilizing these clusters in designing our curricula we must struggle with the import of these differing characteristics for curriculum design.

Level of abstraction seems important as we ask ourselves whether we approach this competency directly as in the primary subject of a course or whether we approach it in the context of its application to other content. Contrast the ethics (EP 2.1.2) or critical thinking (EP 2.1.3) competencies on the one hand for example with the policy practice (EP 2.1.8) or intervention [EP 2.1.10(a)-(b)] competencies on the other. The latter two are pretty straight forward (although clearly complex) with respect to the material one begins to organize and present in attempting to develop student abilities. The first two are more subtle. Of course one could design a course in philosophy and logic to get at critical thinking and one could (and many do) create a course in ethical principles. But the point here is that these competencies really take on their meaning as they interact with other competencies -- for the most part those associated with [EP 2.1.10(a)-(b)].

With respect to competency composition - the mix among knowledge, values and skills – there are likely some instructional insights, which can be drawn as well. We assume the knowledge components of the mix will usually take precedence in the ordering of instructional content. Typically one would begin by considering the application of knowledge; that is, “knowing for doing.” Thoroughly exploring the ideas whether expressed through the most recent evidence-based approaches to the problems and issues social workers confront or through basic, time-tested understandings of human conduct typically represents the first step in puzzling through the practice behaviors that comprise a competency. So, for example, a clinical program may choose to focus on evidence-based approaches that have shown promise in working with neglected and abused children and their families or it may focus upon theoretical approaches associated with abuse and neglect or both. In any case, it seems that knowledge associated with respective competencies must inform the development of skills. Skills then are viewed to *apply knowledge* in specified circumstances. The composition of the skills is engaged but is also informed by the knowledge about the specific practice circumstance in question.

The relationship of the competencies to each other requires study and also has implications for curriculum design. The intervention competency [EP 2.1.10(a)-(b)] while not completely embodying practice – see research (EP 2.1.6), policy practice (EP 2.1.8) and practice elements of the other competencies – represents a different order of activity than most of the other competencies. Also by definition it must apply and incorporate all of the other competencies. As such, the relationship of the

intervention competency to each of the other competencies is quite different than the relationship of other competencies to one another. As we attempt to identify relevant content the relationship of the competencies may be suggestive of content emphases and order. Are there, for example, some content elements of the diversity competency which presupposes content from the critical thinking or human behavior competencies? While clearly complex, teasing out content from the competencies must address their levels of abstraction, composition and relationship one to the next.

Curriculum Architecture: Designing a Framework to Organize and Integrate Content

The critical tasks in curriculum design are content selection, ordering and integration. Selection is largely informed by the composition of the competencies which comprise one's program - that is the practice behaviors selected to operationalize the competencies. Order is more complex. It is surely informed by developmental considerations but also by such factors as program emphasis and the particular characteristics of the setting in which the program is delivered. Seasonal access to particular client populations in field, for example, might inform the ordering of much of the curriculum content.

Curricular integration takes on a more complex meaning with the 2008 EPAS. Under previous accreditation standards we referenced "horizontal" and "vertical" integration. This meant the pulling of curricular themes as well as the subject areas horizontally across the foundation and concentration courses and vertically between the foundation and concentration offerings. Here integration has a more significant meaning. It really refers to the architecture of the entire curriculum as informed by the characteristics and interrelationship of the competencies comprising the program. That composition and the interrelationships will suggest and/or dictate implications for the approach to instructional content. The profound challenge here is to develop a curricular framework which most efficaciously exploits the essence and composition of the competencies which inform ones educational program and at the same time meets the principles of sound pedagogy.

By "framework" we refer to a set of principles or concepts which assist us in ordering content and integrating it in ways which are most helpful in addressing our competencies. The elements of the framework constitute the studs, beams and scaffolding – considered together the architecture – of the curriculum. We offer a possible framework here only to exemplify how such a tool might become useful in the challenging task of ordering content in service of building specific competencies. In doing so we in no way wish to imply that this particular framework should be utilized by programs to shape their curricula. Rather we simply hope to demonstrate the utility of frameworks in organizing curriculum content.

The framework we suggest draws upon three dimensions to develop its architecture. The first is the themes which we select to inform the unique focus of our program. The second is the interrelationship of knowledge, values and skills and the third is some basic tenets of pedagogical practice.

Our themes are informed by the program's mission and our context. Our mission might emphasize enhancing social wellbeing and family functioning within our region. Our context leads us to emphasize generalist practice within rural settings and practice competence informed by issues of diversity and difference. Our orientation to knowledge, values and skills might be that the moral dimension must set the direction for action and that action must be informed by knowledge. As such our content begins to be ordered by "why take action?", "what do we need to know to assist us in taking action?" and "what are the operations which comprise effective action?" The pedagogical principles we select include organizing content in developmental order, attempting to tease out the general principles

of content as they will inform the more specific and providing opportunities for application and analysis (assignments, role plays) of bits of knowledge as they are presented and engaged in practice.

With this framework in place we would now consider the content we have agreed is implicit in the generalist practice behaviors associated with the competencies and in the case of MSW programs, the practice behaviors selected to elaborate the competencies in the concentration(s). As we reflect on the competencies we might decide, for example, that the primacy of the moral dimension, knowledge for action and dimensions of difference might lead us to construct a first semester course on “The Etiology and Demographics of American Poverty,” an “Introduction to Social Policy” which focuses on historic social work services and their impact and an “Introduction to Social Work” which focuses on basic elements of the helping relationship and how it might hold significance for the lives of individuals and families. These courses might suggest that we complete the first semester with a practice course which introduces the initial steps in the building of a helping relationship.

We might well develop a curriculum matrix tracking the practice behaviors addressed in our initial courses so as to know when to expect that the acquisition of particular competencies had been achieved. At that point we would also develop assignments designed to measure the competencies in question -- or perhaps a combination of competencies such as “critical thinking” (EP2.1.3) and “assessment” [EP 2.1.10(b)]. What we learn in response to these assignments would inform the direction of the course or courses in question.

Frameworks will vary of course and be informed by unique characteristics of the institution, program and setting. But the competency approach significantly alters the task of curriculum design. Effectiveness at curricular integration, we believe, will require faculty to reconsider their roles and responsibilities to one another. A consequence of the content driven curriculum was that it lent itself to compartmentalizing and divvying up. That is, individual faculty could easily find a fit between their area of expertise and components of the curriculum. As long as they delivered their component they could consider themselves an effective member of the team. But the competency approach to curriculum design doesn't lend itself to compartmentalization. There is a new instructional accountability implicit within these standards; “just how does my piece (course?) build which practice behaviors contributing to which competencies?” We suspect that as programs begin to engage the process described above they will experience an enhanced sense of collegiality and interdependence. Effectiveness in the design and implementation of a competency-based curriculum will necessarily require enhanced collaboration and teamwork.

Options for Curriculum Delivery

The challenge and opportunity here is to consider the alternative instructional approaches suggested to us by the differing characteristics of the competencies, the framework which we have selected and the unique elements of mission which we wish to emphasize. In essence we must struggle with what might come before what; what can build upon what? The possibilities, of course, are many. One obvious option is to teach everything through the lens of practice. This would result in a set of courses labeled something like “Practice I” through “Practice XX.” It could be taught via the case method, a temporal orientation, i.e. “beginnings, middles and ends,” from a life course orientation or many, many others. The practice challenges and dilemmas would draw in content associated with related competencies such as values and ethics, critical thinking, and identification with the social work profession.

Another option might be to utilize the curricular structure with which we are familiar from the 2001 EPAS. That would have us organize the content around curriculum areas such as policy, research,

practice, human behavior and field education. With this option we would draw the content identified via our inventory of the competencies and structure it according to these categories employing some rationale for its ordering. This is a very reasonable way to structure content and may well be informed by the principle of parsimony; that is, approach a problem with modest solutions and only employ the more elaborate or radical ones when the modest ones prove inadequate.

A third option may be to create a program organized around the essence of the competencies. This would require some synthesis of how those essences cluster. A case might be made to cluster in the following fashion: **1.** human behavior (EP 2.1.7), diversity (EP2.1.4) and human rights (EP 2.1.5); **2.** research informed practice and practice informed research (EP 2.1.6) and policy practice (2.1.8); **3.** critical thinking (EP 2.1.3 and ethical decision making (EP 2.1.2); and **4.** respond to context (EP 2.1.9) and engage, assess, intervene [EP 2.1.10 (a) – (d)]. There are likely any number of other such clustering possibilities. While the core competencies represent clear and distinct differences, there is no doubt that competencies can be taught as combinations in particular courses or sequences of courses.

There must be several other structural rubrics by which we might organize a competency-based curriculum.

Pathways to Curriculum Restructuring

While the import of the new EPAS will likely require curricular restructuring for most programs that task will be mediated by several factors. The central task, of course, is to identify the critical variables which should inform our selection. At the least these include timing, satisfaction with the current curriculum, parsimony and challenge. Timing is a primary determining factor affecting how curriculum review will occur. We refer here to how much time programs have before their scheduled review under the new standards. For those programs to be reviewed soon after the standards take affect the kind of basic curriculum reconfiguration described briefly above is simply not an option. As the new standards require that the assessment be organized around the competencies and practice behaviors these programs will necessarily have to start with such an assessment. This will require adopting and/or adapting the competencies to their existing program mission and goals and designing an assessment plan to determine the extent to which the current curriculum is successful in achieving those competencies. In all likelihood the assessment will reveal that many of the competencies are being achieved. Where there are gaps or some competencies fail to meet benchmark the program reports these findings and presents a plan to modify the curriculum in the ways they believe will achieve the desired competencies. This is the essence of what is required to meet the expectations of the new standards.

Similarly, programs which have more time but are challenged by resources or feel that their current curriculum is strong and wish not to make fundamental change can follow this procedure as well. On the other hand, programs which have more time or are particularly challenged by the opportunity presented by the new standards may undertake more basic curriculum change and can develop a plan to implement it over time. Basic curriculum change in our institutions is a time consuming process often requiring review at differing levels within the institution. The vision, however, associated with the opportunity and challenge of these standards can be implemented in degrees over sequential periods of time.

Challenge of Classroom Assignment Design

The competency emphasis has particular implications for the design of classroom assignments. After all, the whole point of a course assignment is to demonstrate the degree to which the student has mastered the desired learnings associated with components of a particular course. With the emphasis upon practice behaviors as they build competencies, faculty members are challenged to rethink their approach to the design of assignments as opportunities for students to demonstrate their mastery of practice behaviors and competencies. We highlight this opportunity for several reasons. First, we believe that assignment design may be an area of weakness in our current pedagogy. We wonder if it might be the case that a higher percentage of social work faculty are adept at the delivery of instructional content than are competent in the design of assignments which apply and assess the mastery of that content. Didactic papers contrasting alternate theoretical approaches to a particular practice situation may be intellectually challenging but also may not sufficiently focus the student's attention upon the application of knowledge to a practice task or challenge. Exams and essays are often effective at assessing the degree of knowledge acquired but may not assess student capacity in its application. The competency focus should be viewed as an opportunity to structure classroom assignments which approximate the practice behaviors of which the competencies are comprised. The perennial question which we believe faculty should ask themselves as they design assignments is "how can I construct a task which requires students to tie new knowledge to its application in practice?" Viewing the design of assignments in this fashion we begin to appreciate that the assignment not only poses the opportunity to assess learning but also serves as an instructional tool in itself. As such, we believe that faculty should expect assignments not only to measure student learning but to add to it as well.

Another very important component of assignment design is the potential assignments hold as tools for program wide assessment of student competencies. The standards require programs to demonstrate that graduating students have achieved the competencies which comprise the program's course of instruction. Competencies are operationalized through a set of discrete practice behaviors. Classroom assignments which demonstrate student accomplishment of practice behaviors not only represent success in a particular course but they can contribute to the assessment of program wide outcomes. This opportunity should challenge faculty to collaborate on assignment design such that student outcomes on particular assignments can be aggregated and utilized in the program's response to Accreditation Standard 4; Assessment.

Viewed as a component of curriculum each assignment must be used to move a student forward toward acquiring a competency. Thus, there is a strong case to be made that signature or master assignments be created which are designed toward the end of reaching a competency. Every student in a program must experience those assignments, by definition, if the program is serious about its students acquiring the requisite competencies at the end of their program tenure. If courses are driven only by general learning objectives that may or may not translate into a competency, then the curriculum, itself, has not done its job. Assignments are the vehicles by which students learn to apply knowledge and demonstrate skills that immediately or down the road culminate in their acquisition of the program's competencies. We understand that this "master assignment" notion is resisted by many. Faculty members often prefer to design their own assignments and to alternate them over the years. But when one considers the competency demand on the one hand and the utility of master assignments for the demonstration of successful outcomes in the program's assessment, this resistance to master assignments might require reconsideration.

Implications for Field Assignment Design

Some in our field have suggested that the centrality and significance of field education has diminished as the size and structure of our programs have evolved. They view the distancing of program faculty from the field experience in many programs as an unfortunate trend requiring redress. In an effort to denote the centrality of field education in our educational enterprise and hopefully to elevate its role the authors of this EPAS have termed it to be the “signature pedagogy” of social work education. This characterization suggests that field instruction is intrinsic to social work education and critical to the process of becoming a professional social worker. What this means is that all social work education programs require field education as a non-elective course or set of courses for which no prior experience, regardless of the nature or extent of the work experience, can be substituted. This puts enormous importance on field education, not only because of its long history in social work education, but also because its place in social work education is believed to be uniquely important. It should be noted that in social work, field education was never meant to be an apprentice program. Apprentice programs are designed around the student learning exclusively from or replicating the work of a supervisor or master practitioner. Student learning in social work is far more complex because it involves an integration of learnings between program courses of instruction and those occurring in the social agency in which the student is placed. That is, students are expected to transfer what they learn in classroom-based courses to application in the field. They are expected to question practice and they are expected to receive from their agencies and field instructors planned, graduated experiences in practice that ultimately prepare them for professional practice. The concept of field education therefore might best be captured as a curricular process rather than a curricular component; that is, the process of *classroom to field and field to classroom*.

Thus, in preparing field agencies and field instructors to re-orient their work around competencies strengthens the historic role of field education. It gives impetus to both agencies and schools to be accountable to the public, the clients, and the agency and to the social context in which all elements of the educational enterprise exist. Acquiring competencies demands that social work students have the opportunity to actually “try out” their skills and knowledge, under supervision and in graduated and well-planned activities with and/or on behalf of their clients and others whom they will serve. In addition, acquiring competencies demands that field instructors and the educational program together, fashion assignments that lead a student gradually but pointedly toward a level of knowledge and skill attainment that meets the threshold definitions laid out in EPAS and operationalized through thoughtfully constructed practice behaviors. In order to ascertain success this will likely involve somewhat frequent measures, perhaps at mid-term and semester end and will likely require a completion measure that will actually demonstrate a set of competencies. These can take many forms. They may include an actual observance by the field instructor(s) of student competencies, a video tape demonstrating competency attainment, a case analysis illustrating particular competencies or even a behavior checklist or assessment measuring particular competencies completed by clients, colleagues or other social workers.

It was the hope of the authors of the 2008 EPAS that in referencing field education as social work’s signature pedagogy, they would predispose an emphasis on the enterprise. That is, in featuring field education a center piece of the profession’s educational operations they hoped to elevate its significance in programs across the country. Doing so would represent an opportunity to improve the profession, to assist social work in redefining itself in communities and to improve the place of social work in society.

Implications of 2008 EPAS for the Profession's Future

It has been our intent in this document to elucidate the thinking which led to the design of the 2008 EPAS and to consider some of its implications for curriculum design. In so doing, we have offered ideas and suggestions regarding how programs might adapt to and implement their own formulations for curriculum development and modification.

The 2008 EPAS offers an opportunity to improve social work education and practice by focusing on what social workers do in practice rather than what they are taught. It moves us forward into professional education standards that reach for the frontiers of knowledge that resonate with the public and with our sister professions. It provides our profession the opportunity to improve from the ground up by means of a thoughtful, relevant and focused educational policy and associated accreditation standards. It must be acknowledged that social work education had become unquestioning relative to a model of education that had been in place for generations while knowledge was exploding. But that knowledge, whether from our own profession or from the disciplines that so acutely inform our work, could not find its way into educational policy because the curriculum areas to which all programs were held hostage were so ossified and constrained that they didn't lend themselves to such an outward view. This shift in curriculum focus affords us the opportunity to make the most of exciting research, of sound heuristics, of technology and of opportunities for innovation. Such changes ultimately redound to the benefit those whom we faithfully serve. We are, of course, obliged to hold ourselves accountable to high educational standards which result in educating competent social workers for the complicated environments in which we practice. We believe the 2008 EPAS delivers on this obligation.

We know that social workers practice in diverse and complex environments. We also know that the characteristics of those environments profoundly affect practice. This reality has informed the new educational policy; it says "context matters!" The person and environment construct at its very heart is about context. As these new standards invite programs to utilize context in shaping program direction, our practice has finally caught up with our own knowledge. On the face of it, it seems odd to have embraced context in practice, but not in education even though we "educate for practice." Now we have come full circle and the weaving of context through all that we do will likely have profound consequences, offering new and real choices in educational programming.

A further possible implication of the revised EPAS is that it structures faculty roles in a fashion which provides opportunities to collaborate in new and more meaningful ways. It requires that faculty work together in the building of competencies in a way that our past focus on content did not. It challenges faculty to invent and to create, to test their frameworks and their methods in ways that were more constrained under previous educational policy. Hopefully these new opportunities will result in a flurry of exciting papers at APM and research on students and competencies that may finally place social work back into its central role in this society.

Certainly we realize the 2008 EPAS is far from a perfect document and acknowledge its limitations. However, it will be monitored assiduously, and we expect many critiques and analyses and much questioning to occur in our academic settings as well as in practice. That is how it should be. No document is perfect; no idea is ever complete. What we are sure of is that the 2008 EPAS does turn social work education in a new direction, and it surely challenges us to significantly improve our enterprise. It is our sincere expectation that the experience which will be gained in the application of this EPAS will lead to future refinements only improving upon the promise we believe it holds for professional education and the profession as a whole.