

SSWR Roots & Wings Roundtable Series: Roots Session 2019
SSWR Research Capacity Development Committee (RCDC)

Preparing Doctoral Students for Impactful Research through Qualifying/Comprehensive Examinations

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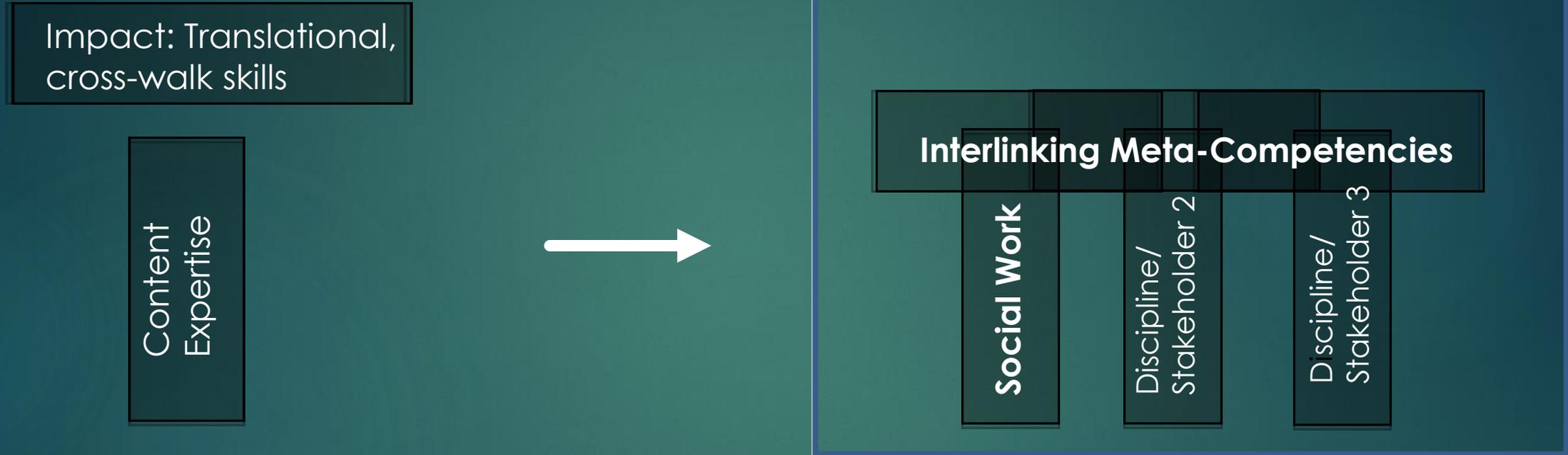
Overview

- ▶ Context for Roundtable focus
- ▶ 4 segments: Brief presentations & discussion
 1. Competencies to prepare graduates for high impact research addressing complex challenges of our time
 2. Exam structure/process: strengths & gaps (consumer perspectives)
 3. GADE survey findings: Do aspirations contrast with current practices?
 4. Role of doctoral exams as strategy toward equipping with these skills and competencies
- Concluding discussion: Where are we now, where do we aim to be

Context for Roundtable focus

- ▶ Well equipped contributors: complex scientific pursuits & translation; impact expectations
- ▶ SW doctoral training often limited pedagogical models, evidence to guide structure & process
- ▶ Without accreditation-type guidelines, need ongoing assessment of educational strategies to priority outcomes
- ▶ GADE & SSWR collaboration stimulate reflection, support aspirational intentionality
- ▶ Recognize ranging contexts, priorities, approaches

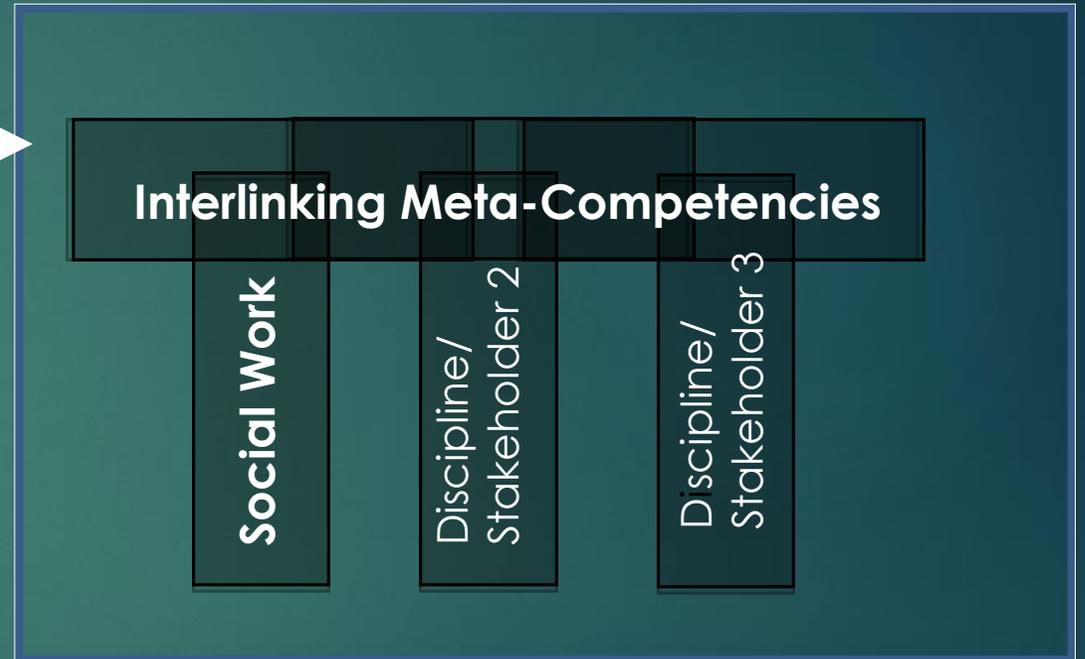
T-shaped Scholar: Depth + Cross-cutting Meta-competencies



- Educational models that span across (meta-competencies) but also support depth within (specialization expertise, socialization)

Getting to impact: Examples of meta-competencies

- Non-defensive reflectiveness
- Critical thinking
- Cross-disciplinary content synthesis
- Inter/trans-disciplinary communication
Understanding & being understood
- Inter/trans-disciplinary communication
Managing differences
- “Translation” to stakeholders, others
related to impact



- Educational models that span meta-competencies and depth within (specialization expertise, socialization): What does this take?

Range of Aims & Formats

- ▶ Qualifying exam, comprehensive exam & other types of formats
 - ▶ Lack of clarity about what these mean across programs
- ▶ Goals range from preparing students for high impact equity-driven research to mastery of content & gatekeeping function to prep for dissertation
- ▶ Strong interest by PhD directors to learn about others' exam experiences
 - ▶ No “perfect” structure/process
 - ▶ Do exams have unintended negative consequences (e.g., slowing students' progress toward completion)?

Priority competencies → readiness for impactful research careers...?

- ▶ Broadly, end goals doctoral preparation for contemporary research careers? Trained to do?
- ▶ Priority competencies important to achieve these end goals?
- ▶ These features of scientific context and readiness skills: Resonate with your own/program perspectives?

Brief discussion

Exam structure/process examples:
Strengths & gaps (consumer
perspectives)



Student experience, perspective

Exam Structure

- ▶ Two part, take-home exam:
 1. In-depth article critique; choice of 5 published articles selected by program
 2. Analysis of a social problem of interest, similar to a Grand Challenges white paper; incorporate social justice theory
- ▶ Assessment: double blind review by faculty members

Student experience, perspective

Key Knowledge & Skills

- ▶ Perceived overall goals:
 - ▶ Demonstrate synthesis of core knowledge from coursework
 - ▶ Demonstrate critical thinking and analysis skills
- ▶ Specific content and skills assessed:
 - ▶ Comprehensive skills and substantive knowledge to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of academic research
 - ▶ Integrate understanding of a body of research with assessment of gaps in evidence and knowledge
 - ▶ Articulate specific policy, practice, and research recommendations
 - ▶ Operationalize social justice concepts through application of concrete theories of social justice to social problems

Student experience, perspective

Preparation for Future Work

▶ Article Critique

- ▶ Underscored value of range of methodological & substantive knowledge
- ▶ Encouraged specific, constructive critique of others' research
- ▶ Did not represent a typical form of academic research/writing

Student experience, perspective

Preparation for Future Work

- ▶ Grand Challenges paper
 - ▶ Encouraged viability of taking on “wicked” problems
 - ▶ Promoted complex, cross-competency thinking
 - ▶ Required identification of multi-domain, real world impacts
 - ▶ Asked for individual work on project that would benefit from multiple perspectives

Early career experience, perspective

↳ Dr. Liz Aparicio Retweeted

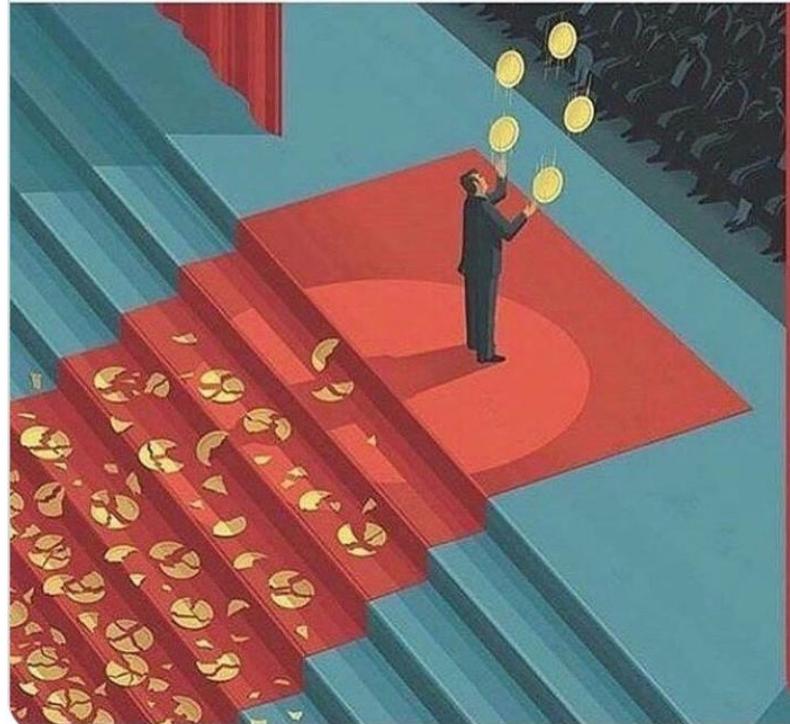


Sarah Kark

@sarah_kark

i love this message for academia

A pic with a message:



Early career experience, perspective

- ▶ Integrative Seminar
- ▶ Exam: Comprehensive Review Paper (8-10 articles; or 4-5 ethnographic books; 25-35 p. plus matrix, tables, figures, references)
- ▶ 2 months, typically between years 2 & 3 for FT students
- ▶ Benchmarks
 - ▶ June 1st:
 - ▶ Topic or central problem
 - ▶ Central research question(s)/hypothesis(es) guide comprehensive paper
 - ▶ Search strategy, includes databases to search, keywords, inclusion/exclusion criteria
 - ▶ June 21th:
 - ▶ Complete data matrix studies be included
 - ▶ August 1st:
 - ▶ Complete comprehensive review paper, submit

Early career experience, perspective

- ▶ Provided structure targeted attention to topic within broader area of interest
- ▶ Critical thinking throughout
- ▶ Structured methods critique (Methodological Quality Rating Scale, Miller et al., 1995)
- ▶ Led well into dissertation proposal process year 3
 - ▶ Topic of comprehensive review: impact of teen mothers' own maltreatment
 - ▶ Topic of dissertation: experience of motherhood among teen mothers in foster care
- ▶ Led well into next steps as faculty member
 - ▶ Provided potential solo-authored manuscript product
- ▶ Advancing equity and social justice not an explicit focus

Early career experience, perspective

- ▶ Current institution's qualifying exam structure (UMD Department of Behavioral and Community Health, not Social Work)
- ▶ Two parts over two weeks plus oral examination with review committee
 - ▶ R21 grant responding to one of two FOAs
 - ▶ Selected by committee differ from current students' areas of interest
 - ▶ Detailed article critique
- ▶ Much more intensive (full time+ for two weeks)
- ▶ Unlikely product be directly usable, though skills are invaluable
- ▶ In common: assessment of prior literature
- ▶ Distinct: grant writing experience; distilled methods presentation

Brief discussion

GADE Survey

- ▶ Stimulus for survey administered to directors and chairs of doctoral social work programs
 - ▶ N=46
- ▶ What do program directors/chairs report be their purpose and pedagogical intentions in regard to the doctoral exam?
- ▶ Closed- and open-ended responses from survey
 - ✓ Begin with closed ended items on pedagogical intentions

Pedagogical Intentions, 9 items

In consideration of the primary pedagogical intentions of your doctoral program's exam(s), how important are each of the following?

Competencies for Basic Knowledge

To assess competency in a body of social work knowledge that your program believes is fundamental to the broader social work discipline

To assess competency in specific content that has relevance for each student's specialization

To prepare students for a specific aspect of the dissertation process

Competencies for Critical Analysis

To assess students' critical thinking skills

To prepare students to be critical users of scientific evidence

To prepare students to conduct high impact research consistent with social work ethics and values

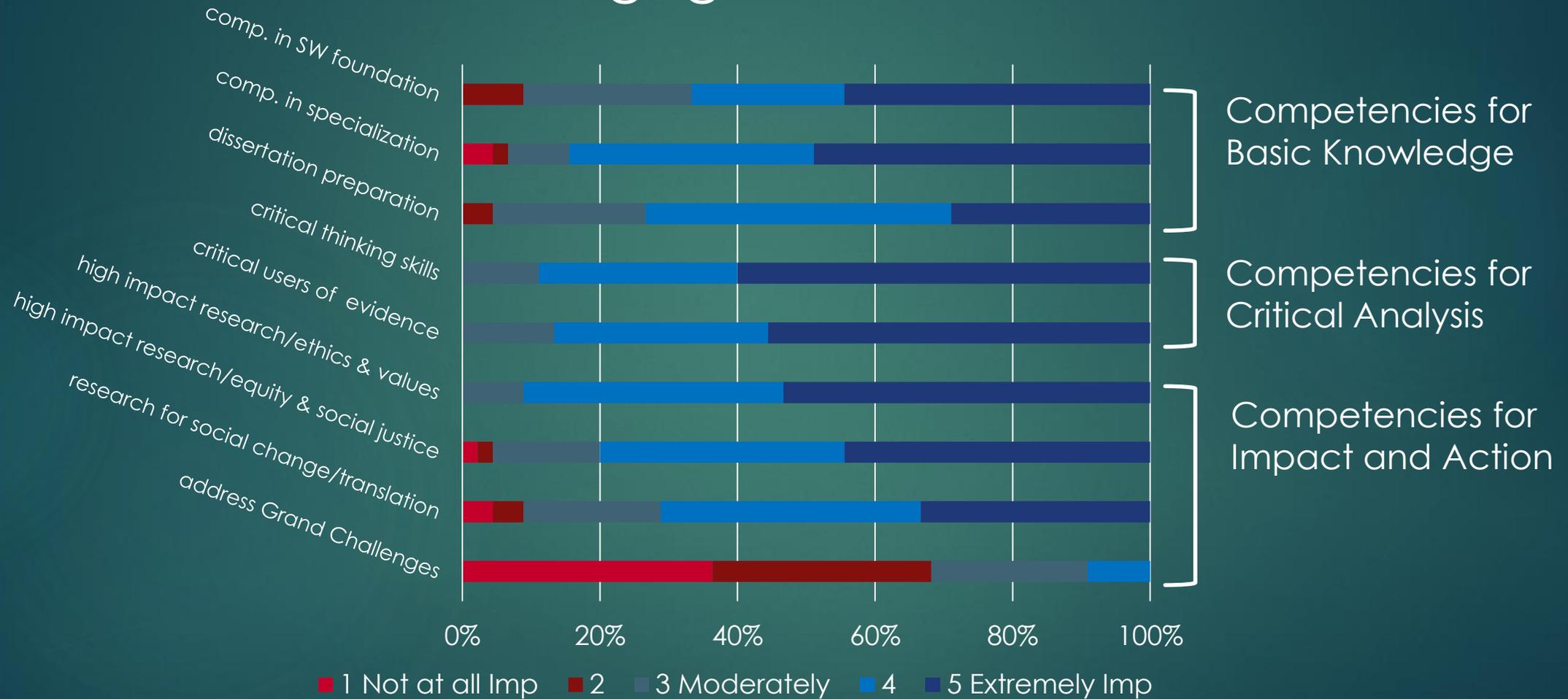
Competencies for Impact and Action

To prepare students to conduct high impact research that has potential to advance social work's equity and social justice aims

To prepare students to use research for the purpose of social change and translation to policy, practice, and/or community impact

To prepare students to address the Grand Challenges in Social Work

Distribution of responses, Pedagogical Intentions



Purpose of Exams: Competencies for Basic Knowledge (open-ended responses)

- ▶ Assess students “mastery/synthesis of foundation or core (minimal level of) theoretical & research curriculum content (may or may not be in substantive area) to advance to next year of program”
 - ▶ Content of year 1 & 2 drives most exams: “Structure of exam based on design of course work & overall curriculum”
- ▶ Ensure “quality control”/monitor performance (“gatekeeper function”), although rarely used to remove students from program
- ▶ Ensure students are prepared for/ready for the dissertation (“springboard for dissertation proposal”)

Purpose of Exams: Competencies for Critical Analysis (open-ended responses)

- ▶ Ensure preparation to conduct independent (but mentored) research
 - ▶ “Develop a testable research question”
- ▶ Demonstrate “analytic & critical reasoning skills”
- ▶ Assess ability “to integrate & apply content from core curriculum (integrated & critical review of literature/research)”
- ▶ Demonstrate “an engagement with intellectual thought & ability to articulate that engagement through writing, oral presentation & discussion”

Purpose of Exams: Competencies for Impact & Action (open-ended responses)

- ▶ No mention of goals re: equity, social justice, translational science or impact in open-ended responses.
- ▶ A “disconnect” between open –ended responses about exam purpose & quantitative responses re: “high impact research/equity & social justice” & “research for social change/translation.”
- ▶ One mention “produce advocates for social change capable of providing leadership in communities & organizations”
 - ▶ Appears to be from a practice-oriented program
- ▶ One mention “prepare students to articulate contribution to moving the field forward”

Closing Discussion: “Where” are we now, where do we aim to be?

- ▶ Are our exams effective for complex contemporary needs?
- ▶ Are they achieving what we want?
- ▶ Are they producing the graduates we want?