

**Council on Social Work Education
Commission on Accreditation**

**Some Suggestions on Educational Program Assessment and Continuous Improvement
for the 2008 EPAS**

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed an increasing emphasis on the assessment of educational outcomes in higher education. This trend is noted in the regional organizations that accredit American universities as well as in the specialized accrediting organizations such as those that accredit educational programs in nursing, social work or law. The trend has been associated with an increasing resistance on the part of educational institutions to accommodate various “input prescriptions” mandated by accrediting bodies, be they related to staffing or budget minimums, space or other physical requirements, or personnel characteristics or the like. The philosophy behind these trends holds that the domain of accreditation should be the “what” of education – what should graduates know and be able to do; what are the requisite skills, capabilities and competencies needed for effective professional practice. The “how” of education – how these competencies are achieved, the personnel utilized, the resources allocated and the strategies employed – should be the domain of the educational institution in question. Accordingly, when accrediting bodies cross the boundary from the “what” to the “how,” they are viewed as treading upon institutional prerogatives.

Social work accreditation has mirrored these trends. A major emphasis in the 2001 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2001 **EPAS**) was the assessment of educational outcomes – what was referred to as “*the evaluation of each program objective.*”

The 2008 **EPAS** has advanced issues of educational outcome assessment another step forward. Because the standards in the 2008 **EPAS** have replaced the notion of educational program objectives with that of practice competencies the emphasis upon the behavioral outcomes of professional education have been emphasized and strengthened. The 2008 **EPAS** has also advanced its definition of curriculum by distinguishing between **explicit** and **implicit** curriculum. The document defines **explicit** curriculum as its instructional program and courses. **Implicit** curriculum is defined as the educational environment in which the **explicit** curriculum is delivered. The **implicit** curriculum is comprised of such elements as the program’s commitment to diversity; admissions policies and procedures; advisement, retention, and termination policies; student participation in governance; faculty; administrative structure; and resources.

This notion of **implicit** curriculum represents a new understanding of what the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) considers the curricular domain. It suggests that student learning outcomes are not only affected by the formal course of instruction but also by policies and procedures which govern program conduct and guide social interaction within the educational setting. It also modifies the distinction made above about the “what” and the “how” of the education, advancing the prerogatives of accreditation to offer guidance and standards regarding the administration of the educational program.

*This document was first posted shortly after the publishing of 2008 **EPAS**. Since that time experience with the application of the standards has led to some new insights which are reflected in the edits to this document detailed below. Special thanks to Wynne Sandra Korr for her substantial assistance on this draft. The author also wishes to acknowledge the vision, diligence and creativity extended by the members of COCEI, COA and the Joint Editing Group. These efforts gave us the 2008 **EPAS** which this document discusses.

For some time, the members of the Commission on Accreditation (COA) have been aware that the heightened emphasis on program assessment and educational outcomes has represented a challenge for many programs. In the interest of providing some assistance with these tasks, the COA published the first version of this assessment document in conjunction with the 2001 **EPAS**. It represented an effort to clarify the basic rationale and procedures of educational assessment as required by the 2001 **EPAS**. This revision represents the same effort in relationship to the 2008 **EPAS**.

Educational Program Assessment

Educational program assessment is the activity of investigating the extent to which an educational effort has succeeded in building the practice competencies that it set out for its graduates to attain. The activity shifts the emphasis from a focus on what *goes into* the education to a focus on what *comes out* -- the results of the educational process. That is, as a consequence of the educational experience, do the graduates demonstrate the requisite educational outcomes as specified by the Educational Policy and curriculum design? Assessment provides programs with information about the extent to which their educational intent has been realized in the intellectual and practice capabilities their students possess as they complete their program of study.

Understanding this, we begin to appreciate that success in educational program assessment will not be a function of the number or character of the measurement tools utilized by a program. Rather, it is found in the **logical linkages** among the **desired competencies, the curriculum** that is designed to build those competencies, and the **educational outcomes or acquired competencies of the program's graduates**. In this context, the assessment tools are the means for measuring educational outcomes, not the end product of assessment. Unless measurement tools measure the specific practice behaviors selected to operationalize the desired program competencies, they do not meet the requirements of program assessment as defined by the 2008 **EPAS**.

In important ways, the 2008 **EPAS** has simplified the assessment task over that required in the 2001 **EPAS**. Those standards required programs to develop program objectives to guide curriculum design and then measure the outcome of those program objectives through its assessment procedures. If a program wrote program objectives which were unclear, not discrete or not articulated in behavioral terms, they set themselves up for an ineffective or problematic outcome assessment. But the guidance for what to assess in the 2008 **EPAS** is already presented in behavioral and measurable terms. In asserting the core competencies required in **EP 2.1** through **EP 2.1.10(a)–(d)**, the CSWE offers a set of behavioral descriptors which programs may adopt as presented or modify and elaborate for purposes of outcome assessment.

EP M2.2 directs master's programs to apply the competencies in a concentration or concentrations. It suggests that advanced practice builds upon all of the core competencies by augmenting them with knowledge and practice behaviors specific to a concentration(s). Concentration curricula apply these competencies to one or more specializations, fields of practice, modalities or some other dimension. For purposes of outcome assessment competencies for advanced practice must be detailed in the same fashion as the core competencies; that is they must be discrete, behavioral and written in measurable terms.

The term “core competencies” can be misleading as it could be interpreted to suggest that there are also “advanced” competencies. This is not the case. The ten competencies specified in the 2008 **EPAS** are those considered to be “core” to social work practice. At the foundation level they are operationalized by their associated practice behaviors as detailed in the 2008 **EPAS** (or modified and rationalized with related practice behaviors at the discretion of individual programs). In the case of MSW programs *these same ten competencies* are elaborated by additional practice behaviors associated with a concentration or concentrations.

PROGRAM MISSION AND GOALS: Accreditation Standard 1

As the focus of this document is educational outcome assessment, we only comment here on mission and goals as well as curriculum as they might inform that assessment. **AS 1.0.1** requires programs to develop a statement of mission. Mission statements assert a vision of the program's direction and intent. It is global and brief in nature. The 2008 **EPAS** requires that the mission reflect at least three components; (1) the profession's purpose, (2) the core values of the profession, and (3) the program's context (see Purpose, **EP 1.1**, & **EP 1.2**).

The first paragraph of the 2008 **EPAS** offers the current CSWE interpretation of the purposes of the social work profession. **EP 1.1** identifies the current CSWE view of the profession's core values. Context, the third component of mission, is new to the 2008 **EPAS**. Attention to context is found throughout the new standards. In essence it represents a highlighting of the “environment” component of the person and environment construct so elemental to our profession's world view. The emphasis is particularly evident in reference to mission and also in the notion of *implicit* curriculum. Its significance for mission is defined in **EP 1.2**. The notion of *implicit* curriculum suggests that the learning “context” or learning environment can be as important as the *explicit* curriculum in terms of what students take away from the program. It asserts that the larger context in which learning occurs must be viewed as a critical set of variables influencing what students learn in their professional education.

In relation to mission, the focus on context requires programs to ensure that their mission incorporates attention to the larger setting in which they are embedded. **EP 1.2** specifies the key factors which might contribute to context including the congruence of the program's mission with that of the institution. Programs should note that CSWE introduces the notion of choice here as it describes the possible components of context with the language “and by the ways they elect to engage these factors.”

Finally, **AS 1.0.2** asks programs to develop goals which are derived from the mission. The goals flesh out the mission. Goals remain aspirational. They are consistent with the mission but begin to detail its components. As such, they attempt to specify the elements of professional purpose and values -- as well as context -- which are found in the program's mission. The goals also must be consistent with the core competencies which define generalist practice or are applied and augmented in advanced practice. So, for example, a BSW program located in a rural setting might write program goals which relate to educating practitioners who have mastered the core competencies as they apply to the circumstances of generalist practice in a particularized rural setting.

The term “core competencies” can be misleading as it could be interpreted to suggest that there are also “advanced” competencies. This is not the case. The ten competencies specified in the 2008 **EPAS** are those considered to be “core” to social work practice. At the foundation level they are operationalized by their associated practice behaviors as detailed in the 2008 **EPAS** (or

modified and rationalized with related practice behaviors at the discretion of individual programs). In the case of MSW programs *these same ten competencies* are elaborated by additional practice behaviors associated with a concentration or concentrations.

EXPLICIT CURRICULUM: Accreditation Standard 2

The character of the policy and standards related to curriculum represents one of the more significant advances of the 2008 **EPAS**. It replaces the curricular program objectives and mandated course content of the 2001 **EPAS** with competencies – behavioral descriptors of practice capabilities – as the framework for curriculum design. These competencies represent a clear specification of what students should be able to do upon graduation. Programs are free to design courses in whatever fashion they see fit to build these competencies among their graduating students. The innovation has real significance for program outcome assessment. With program outcomes identified in behavioral terms – that is, operationalized competencies – the measurement task becomes clear and specific. To what extent do our graduating students demonstrate the mastery of these dimensions of professional practice?

The ten competencies are detailed in **EP 2.1.1** through **EP 2.1.10 (a)–(d)**. Programs are free to add competencies, but it is presumed this would only occur in cases where a program's mission asserts a special character beyond the core of the social work domain as defined by the ten core competencies. An example might be a program located in South Florida which defines its geographic “context” to include the Latin American Basin, tailoring its programming and field placements to that geographical area. Under those circumstances, a competency necessary to implement this mission might well be facility in Spanish.

The competencies with their associated practice behaviors constitute generalist practice as described in **EP B2.2**. MSW programs are required to specify these competencies for concentration curricula as described in **EP M2.2**. *The required competency is described in the paragraph found in EP 2.1 through EP2.1.0 (a)–(d). The bullets under each paragraph offer suggestions of measurable practice behaviors which may be utilized to operationalize each competency.*

Once a program has determined if its mission dictates any additional competencies, the standards (**AS B2.0.3** and **AS M2.0.4**) require programs to develop an “operational definition” for each competency. That is, each competency must be elaborated with a set of measurable practice behaviors that operationalize that competency. The “bullets” offer examples of measurable practice behaviors which could be understood to operationalize each competency at the foundation level. Programs may utilize these as presented in **EP 2.1.1** through **2.1.10** and may develop additional ones. If programs modify the language of the EPAS practice behaviors it is important that these modifications retain the essential meanings of the bulleted items found in **EPAS 2008**. In the case of MSW programs, competencies must also be elaborated with a set of measurable practice behaviors for advanced practice. Different concentrations focused on developing practice specializations each require differing elaborated practice behaviors for the various competencies.

This task of developing, elaborating and operationalizing the competencies informs the pathway for both the design of the curriculum and that of the outcome assessment plan. Let us focus first on curriculum. Consider, for example, **EP 2.1.3 – Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments**. Following a thoughtful consideration of the knowledge, values and skills suggested in the descriptive paragraph under **EP 2.1.3**, a faculty might decide

that the three bullets offered under this paragraph capture their understanding of what this competency looks like in practice. That being the case, they then move on to the identification of what units of course and/or field content they believe will best help students learn the practice behaviors which they have determined comprise the competency. With the competencies articulated in such clear terms, the content is readily identified. Such a list might include units on “ways of knowing” or philosophy of science, assumption vs. “true” knowledge, procedures for organization and interpretation of data, or pitfalls in translating experience into working assumptions.

Faculty proceeds in this fashion with the analysis of each competency. Measurable practice behaviors are identified for each competency such that faculty feel confident that the selected set of behaviors operationalizes their comprehension of the competency in question. This accomplished, these behaviors are plumbed for the components of instructional content which inform these behaviors. Faculty struggle with such questions as “how do we teach it?” and “where does it go in the curriculum?” as well as “how do we organize it?”; “how will it be featured in various courses and /or field?” and “what assignments will we use to help students learn it?” As this process approaches completion, courses are identified and units of content are clustered according to standards of pedagogical practice such as developmental order, theory versus applied, class and field, and vertical and horizontal integration.

Ultimately this process will result in a set of courses and field curricula which the faculty believes can best be expected to develop all the core competencies. The context dimension of mission is especially reflected in the program’s competencies. MSW programs repeat the process for the concentration curriculum, applying and augmenting the generalist practice behaviors for the competencies at the foundation level with practice behaviors specific to the concentration(s). Building on generalist practice behaviors at the foundation level, practice behaviors elaborating the competencies for advanced practice also respond to the program’s mission and goals. The competencies are operationalized, content identified and ultimately the concentration curriculum is devised.

Two models for advanced competencies and associated practice behaviors have recently been developed by CSWE interest groups. One addresses an advanced concentration in the prevention of substance abuse and the second addresses advanced clinical social work. These have been developed as models to assist programs in the development of their own concentration curricula as opposed to prototypes for programs to adopt as presented. They can be found on the CSWE website under “centers and initiatives/curriculum resources/**EPAS** and advanced practice”.

Curriculum Matrix

In their self study, program faculty will respond to **AS 2** by describing the components of the curriculum and demonstrate, course-by-course, how and where the content suggested by the identified practice behaviors for each competency are taught. Graphics are often helpful in this task. One frequently used method is a curriculum matrix.

Competencies are listed in the first column, practice behaviors and associated curriculum content in the second, courses and course objectives in the next columns, units of course content or weeks content is covered and course assignments follow in the next columns until the entire curriculum – all courses and field -- are represented (see example below). Using this method, faculty trace the practice behaviors of each competency through the curriculum, identify

linkages to various course objectives, and show how course units and assignments address each practice behavior. To the extent that a given course, such as “Practice I” for example, implements components of a given competency, it is listed in the course column with the subsequent columns indicating the unit(s) of study and assignments in which that content is found. One then moves to the next practice behavior of the competency and lists relevant core competencies, courses, etc. So, for example, we may find that we list “Practice I” as associated with the practice behaviors of five, six or more competencies. In the case of MSW programs, the process is repeated for the competencies which have been identified to inform the concentration(s).

As the entire curriculum is articulated in this kind of logic model, including the concentration(s) in the case of master’s programs, one is ultimately able to lay out the entire curriculum and trace the curricular components – content, course objectives, units of content or weeks covered, and assignments developmentally **as they foster development of the practice behaviors comprising each of the program’s competencies.**

Below is an example of this kind of format. It provides graphic representation of the curriculum structure as it systematically fosters the development of the practice behaviors associated with each competency.

**Table 2.1
Location of Curriculum Content Associated with Competency Practice Behaviors**

Competency	Practice Behavior and Course Content	Courses	Course Objectives (# in syllabus)	Course Units or week covered	Assignments
Critical Thinking	Distinguish sources of knowledge: Basic research methods; Distinguish practice wisdom from empirical fact; Associational vs. casual relations; Procedures for evaluating of own practice.	Rsh I	1,2,4	1,3	2,3
	Engage alternate theories of human behavior; Understand what constitutes “data” in various theories; Develop ability to communicate understanding of theories in writing; Distinguish environmental vs. intrapersonal variables.	HBSE I	2,3	2,4	1,3
	Relate theories of human behavior to client work; Assessing and integrating sources of knowledge from client interviews; Demonstrate relationship of client variables to theory writing; Demonstrate ability to distinguish sources of knowledge in writing.	Practice I	2,3	2,4	All
	Knowledge of structure of US social policy; Understand how policy influences services received; Distinguish policy components	Policy I	2,4	3,5	All

	related to prevention, assessment and intervention; Understand how values shape social policy. Demonstrate ability to communicate in writing contact and experience with client; Demonstrate understanding of interview procedures in writing; Apply human behavior theories to particular client contact; Demonstrate rudiments of assessment in written form.	Field I			Process Recording
		Field I			Process Recording
	Analyze models of Assessment <i>(Develop as above)</i>				
Effective Communication <i>(Develop as above)</i>					

Developing this kind of matrix provides faculty with a kind of accountability mechanism that enables them to continually check the extent to which their curricular components fully flesh out the competencies. The value of this approach is that curriculum design and refinement are driven not by preference, ideology, comfort level or whatever **but by the competencies as operationalized through the practice behaviors which characterize each.**

One of the more significant implications of this competency based approach to curriculum merits highlighting here. That is the potential the approach holds for altering relationships among and between faculty colleagues. Under the 2001 **EPAS** where the curriculum was delivered by discrete content areas, faculty responsibility for content areas was fairly discrete. Faculty often viewed themselves primarily as “practice faculty”, “policy faculty” or whatever. They were clear about their area of content and proceeded to deliver it in their assigned courses. But the movement to the competency orientation makes curricular areas of responsibility less clear as the bottom line of the curriculum is to ensure that student’s master a set of competencies **and those competencies will frequently transcend the content of specific courses.**

As the above matrix graphically demonstrates in the case of critical thinking, content for the practice behaviors occurs in several courses. As the curriculum builds, that content must be integrated in assignments which bring the practice behaviors together and ultimately integrate them to build and test the competency or competencies in question. As such, faculty may well find themselves engaged in a much more collaborative effort than was the case under **EPAS** 2001. To effectively deliver this new conception of curriculum, enhanced faculty interdependence and collaboration may be required both in curriculum design and implementation. This may also require collaboration and compromise around the possibly conflicting issues of curriculum coherence on the one hand and academic freedom on the other.

A final observation about curriculum design in the interest of assessment -- programs are encouraged to seek embedded (see “Instrument Selection” section below) assessment opportunities as they develop the curriculum. We discuss various measurement alternatives

below. Here we simply wish to suggest that given the primacy of outcome assessment to the 2008 **EPAS**, programs can build assessment mechanisms into the curriculum as it is being fashioned. For example, a rubric used to grade an assignment which is based on one or more practice behaviors can provide evidence of the extent to which the student achieved them in that assignment. Such information is also important to students as they wish to understand their own evolving level of competency.

IMPLICIT CURRICULUM: Accreditation Standard 3

As noted above, a significant change in the 2008 **EPAS** is the decision to consider the items under this standard to be elements of curriculum. Curriculum, of course, is defined as the educational activities which result in student learning. When we include such things as commitment to diversity, advisement, student participation and faculty, for instance, to be elements affecting student learning they also have implications for educational outcome assessment.

The assessment standard – **AS 4** – does not direct programs to assess the components of the *implicit* curriculum with respect to their impact upon student learning. However it does ask programs to look to the *implicit* curriculum as well as the *explicit* curriculum as possible culprits should they discover substandard achievement of one or another core competency. As such, we would advise programs to employ some of the more standard formative assessment tools (see “Instrument Selection and Utilization” below) such as instructor effectiveness ratings, advising ratings, educational climate ratings, and field placement quality evaluations in order to monitor for their own purposes these components of the educational environment.

ASSESSMENT: Accreditation Standard 4

An enormous benefit of the competency-based approach is its amenability to educational outcome assessment. By operationalizing the competencies into measurable practice behaviors for purposes of curriculum design, programs have also addressed perhaps the most challenging assessment task: that of specifying what is to be measured. With their outcome behaviors already identified, programs approach the assessment task following the requirements of **AS 4.0** as discussed below.

The five components of this standard could have been written more clearly. As written, most could be interpreted as asking for responses which have been addressed in a previous component. The redundancy in the components of this standard need not be addressed by program responses. That is, **4.0.2** and **4.0.3** both ask for a discussion of the curriculum changes associated with the findings of the assessment. As long as all of the required components of that discussion are addressed somewhere, the COA will not require a repeat of the discussion under the next component of the standard.

4.0.1 *The program presents its plan to assess the attainment of its competencies. The plan specifies procedures, multiple measures, and benchmarks to assess the attainment of each of the program’s competencies.*

The assessment plan is a thoughtful system for collecting and reviewing information focused on determining the extent to which the competencies have been achieved. A plan includes – for each individual competency – the following components:

- 1) a set of practice behaviors that operationalize each competency;

- 2) a benchmark identifying the level of student achievement defining “success” for the competency;
- 3) a set of quantitative or qualitative measures, instruments, or items from instruments;
- 4) a system for administering or implementing each measure, including the method and frequency of implementation; and
- 5) a system for aggregating, reviewing and analyzing student outcomes including the determination of the percentage of students achieving each competency.

The requirement here is that each of these elements of the assessment plan be described. The COA expects to see copies of instruments used. These might be appended to the chapter so as to avoid excess clutter. It also expects a description of the procedures by which the assessment is administered and the findings for each competency are calculated. A complete plan should clearly articulate – competency by competency – just how student learning’s are assessed.

Of particular importance in the plan is the identification of target benchmarks that the program will use to define “success” for the achievement of each competency. This task is complicated both conceptually and operationally. Because we have operationally defined each competency by a set of practice behaviors, each of those behaviors must be measured. Consider the competency “Apply critical thinking” We have agreed that we will use the three practice behaviors presented in the “bullets” under that competency to operationalize it. As such, we must assess or measure student achievement of **each of these behaviors** in order to capture information on student acquisition of this competency. So, for each of the three behaviors, measures must be identified.

For the behavior “*distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom*” we might select two or three measures. They might be items in a self efficacy survey, items on an exit exam and/or a grade on a classroom assignment. This process is repeated until measures for each practice behavior have been selected. So, to continue the critical thinking example, the next practice behavior is “*analyze models of assessment*” Here we might utilize items on a self efficacy measure, items on a field evaluation and items on an exit exam. Finally, for the practice behavior “*demonstrate effective oral and written communication . . .*” we would similarly select two or three measures.

So much for the operational complexities of this task. We must next turn our attention to the conceptual ones. If we have operationalized the critical thinking competency through three practice behaviors and we have measures for each behavior, what combination of findings can we say assures us that we have indeed demonstrated student competence in critical thinking? After all we have three findings for each of three different behaviors; nine findings in all. Is it necessary to meet “benchmark” for all nine or will seven suffice? If we say seven, which seven and why those and not others? The challenge we encounter here is the perennial one we face in our yet primitive science of assessment. We understand what we mean when we discuss and describe critical thinking. We recognize it when we see it operating in practice just as we recognize its absence in poor practice. But to measure it we must particularize its behavioral components and assess them individually. And as we do that, we run the compelling risk of losing the essence of that which we seek in our primitive and perhaps overly determined measurement procedures.

So, like so much else we struggle with in practice, we must make a judgment call. Of course the answer to our question is not categorical but a matter of nuance and degree. That is, if we discover our students are doing well in analyzing models of assessment and multiple sources of

knowledge but not so well on effective communication, we might conclude that they are learning critical thinking but require more assistance in communicating it. But if they are effective at communicating but their analysis is inept, we know we face more of a challenge with this competency.

The standard, however, requires a benchmark for the attainment of **each competency**. As such, programs must make a determination of what combination of measures at what level will be utilized to provide assurance that the competency has been achieved.

This determination, like the one about what set of practice behaviors will be utilized to operationalize the competency, is the program's to make. The COA will not second guess the program's choice in this regard as long as the criteria for selection are clear and have a sensible rationale. One possible way to systematize the process of integrating findings on the assessment of individual practice behaviors to determine whether or not they meet the "benchmark" set for the competency is to weight the value which each practice behavior contributes to the achievement of the competency. All practice behaviors can be weighted equally or weights can vary from practice behavior to practice behavior. In other words, programs must determine the percentage contribution the aggregate findings for each practice behavior will contribute to meeting the benchmark.

If all practice behaviors are weighted equally and all measures are structured along a five point Likert Scale, the determination of the competency threshold is a simple mathematical determination of the mean of all individual scores. (When using categorical measures like "right" or "wrong" on exam items, for example, these findings must be converted so as to integrate with the five point Likert scale. That is, some five point equivalent of "right" and "wrong" must be employed.) If, on the other hand, some of the measures utilized to assess individual practice behaviors cannot be meaningfully transformed into a five point scale, the program must devise some rubric which integrates findings on the individual measures in a fashion which addresses the benchmark for the competency.

Programs may find that sticking with the five point scale for all measures and possibly using a weighting strategy for individual practice behaviors will be the most manageable assessment strategy. For example, assume that a program determines that the practice behaviors "distinguish sources of knowledge" and "analyze models of assessment" carry more weight than "effective communication". Assume further that they set the benchmark for achievement of the competency at the level of 4.0 on a five point Likert Scale. The program might determine that each of the first two practice behaviors are weighted 40% and the third is weighted 20%. To determine whether or not the competency is achieved one would similarly scale all the individual measures over five points and multiply the mean of the findings for each of the first two practice behaviors by .4 while multiplying the mean of the findings third practice behavior by .2. The sum of the multiple of the means for these three practice behaviors would indicate whether or not the benchmark for critical thinking had been achieved. This enables a determination of the percentage of students who met or exceeded benchmark.

The complexity of the process described above is such that we strongly suggest a graphic be employed to summarize the elements and details of one's assessment plan. The example of "critical thinking" is summarized in the graphic below.

Table 4.1
Plan for Assessment of Individual Practice Behaviors Associated with Practice Competencies

Competency	Competency Benchmark	Practice Behavior	Measures	Percentage Contribution to Benchmark	Analysis Procedure(s)
Critical Thinking	Mean of 4.0: (For each practice behavior an average score of measures is computed. The mean of those average scores constitutes the statistic employed to address the benchmark)	Distinguish sources of knowledge	1. items on student survey 2. Items on an exit exam 3. class assignment	40%	1. Aggregate mean 2. Interviewer ranking "strong" or "very strong" 3. Aggregate mean
		Analyze models of assessment	1. items on student survey 2. items on field evaluation 3. items on an exit exam	40%	1. Aggregate mean 2. Aggregate mean 3. Aggregate mean
		Effective communication	1. class assignments 2. questions in an exit interview 3. class presentation	20%	1. Aggregate mean 2. Interviewer ranking "strong" or "very strong" 3. Aggregate mean

A couple of final observations regarding the selection of measures for the assessment plan are in order. One concerns the reliability and validity of the particular measures utilized (see description of various measures below). Unfortunately, all the measures currently available to us present validity and reliability challenges of one sort or another. To some degree these challenges can be mitigated as we add more measures. That is, aggregation of findings from differing measures will partially compensate for weakness associated with one or another specific measure.

The COA recommends multiple measures for each practice behavior. The example above employs three. Each competency will be operationalized by several practice behaviors and the “two or more measures” norm for each practice behavior to some degree addresses validity and reliability problems associated with individual measures as noted above.

The COA also understands that in some cases programs may deem this “two or more” guideline to be unnecessarily onerous and may consider one measure to be sufficient. In making these choices programs should consider their assessment of the validity of the measure(s) in question, the number of practice behaviors comprising the competency and the fact that some practice behaviors are much more significant in their relative contribution to the competency than are others. Programs are advised to provide a rationale for choices they make in this regard.

Feasibility will also inform a program’s assessment plan. A self efficacy exit survey, for example, is much simpler to administer and compile results than is, for example, the aggregation of grades on various classroom assignments deemed to approximate for particular practice behaviors. Trade-offs between validity, reliability, feasibility and effectiveness in the design of an assessment plan will all be weighed by programs in relationship to issues such as program size, available resources, program complexity and the like. Ultimately a set of measures must be identified and specified. With that specification, including the procedures for implementation and review determined, the program has an assessment plan responsive to this standard.

4.0.2 *The program provides evidence of ongoing data collection and analysis and discusses how it uses assessment data to affirm and/or make changes in the **explicit** and **implicit** curriculum to enhance student performance.*

In essence this standard says “the program reports on the implementation of its plan”. Implementation requires that a program must (1) present a description of the process of data collection during the students’ program tenure (“evidence of ongoing data collection”), (2) an analysis of the findings as they inform the degree of accomplishment of each competency in the context of benchmarks specified in the assessment plan, and (3) a discussion of the procedure(s) employed by the program to make changes in both the **explicit** and **implicit** curriculum if indicated by assessment findings. This should be a narrative discussion of the findings and their meaning for program renewal.

The first element of this standard – “evidence of ongoing data collection” is accomplished (a) through the description of the assessment plan (**AS 4.0.1** above), (b) presentation of evidence that assessment has been continuous over years on a predictable timetable and (c) with the presentation of the results here. The presentation of results should include a set of summary tables illustrating the findings (see Table 4.2 below).

The “analysis” is a discussion of the results for each competency in relation to the benchmark identified for that competency in the plan (**AS 4.0.1** above). Of course each competency will have several behavioral descriptors, each typically with multiple measures. The plan must make a determination of which combination of findings it judges to constitute “benchmark” for that competency. Again, this analysis must be done **for each and every competency** to meet the requirements of the standard.

A final observation about the requirements of this assessment must be emphasized. In contrast

to 2001 **EPAS** where the unit of attention was a program’s accomplishment of its program objectives, with 2008 **EPAS**, *the unit of attention is individual student learning*. That is, in assessing competencies, programs are being asked to determine what percentage of students has achieved benchmark on each of the competencies. So, in addition to reporting aggregate scores and means (or whatever other statistics are utilized to address the benchmark), the standard requires that the program report how many students achieved benchmark and how many did not.

In the example below the mean score for “distinguish sources of knowledge” was 4.2. Multiplied by .4 we get 1.68. The mean for “analyze models of assessment” was 3.5. That multiplied by .4 is 1.4. The mean for “effective communication” was 3.6. That multiplied by .2 gives us .6. Added together we get a mean score of 3.68 or 3.7.

**Table 4.2
Results for Assessment of Practice Competencies**

Competency: Critical Thinking			
Competency Benchmark	Practice Behavior	Mean for Practice Behavior Measures	Percent Contribution to Benchmark
Mean of 4.0 for means of practice behavior measures	Distinguish sources of knowledge	4.2	40%
	Analyze models of assessment	3.5	40%
	Effective Communication	3.0	20%
Results for Competency:		Mean Score	Percent of Students Achieving Competency
		3.7	86%

The standard also requires programs to describe the administrative structure(s) used to evaluate assessment findings and discuss program improvement based on the utilization of the findings. While the program is certainly free to determine the process and means for such review, the COA is particularly concerned that it occurs on a sustained and reliable basis within a routine time frame. This ensures ongoing examination of the curriculum’s outcomes as a regular – not occasional – program activity.

The statistic referencing percentage of students achieving competency, of course, serves as the point of departure for the other key element of this component of the standard. That is, the procedures the program employs to make changes in the curriculum as dictated by the findings of the assessment. This discussion should describe the organizational mechanism (faculty retreat, curriculum committee review, etc.) employed to make requisite curricular changes as well as a description of the guidelines employed and changes contemplated in light of the findings reported in the self study. Programs should present a considered rationale for the choices they make about the threshold at which they elect to make changes as well as the character of the changes themselves. Perhaps the procedures and criteria for program change

can be discussed under this component and the substance of changes can be discussed under the next component, **4.0.3**.

4.0.3 *The program identifies any changes in the explicit and implicit curriculum based on the analysis of the assessment data.*

Programs should discuss how the information collected and analyzed has been used to improve or affirm the explicit curriculum and where indicated the implicit curriculum. The results of the assessment processes may lead to program changes, to affirmations of what is being done, or to the need to collect additional or different information. Programs need to fully describe how the results of their assessment have been/will be used to make changes or affirm existing procedures. Thus, the overall intent of the standard is to insure that necessary and sufficient data relevant to each competency serve as the basis for program review and revision.

4.0.4 *The program describes how it makes its constituencies aware of its assessment outcomes.*

This standard requires that programs make assessment results public. Programs identify mechanisms for this disclosure such as the catalog, website, or annual reports.

4.0.5 *The program appends the summary data for each measure used to assess the attainment of each competency for at least one academic year prior to the submission of the self study.*

This standard dictates the timeframe for data for the self study assessment and specifies that assessment findings be fully reported (see 4.0.2 above).

Instrument Selection and Utilization

As suggested throughout, instruments are the *means* of program assessment rather than the evidence of it. Thus, in responding to **Standard 4.0**, the self study narrative should not be driven by the instruments used but by the competencies being measured. The narrative should be presented competency by competency rather than instrument by instrument.

There are two rather broad categories of educational assessment tools -- formative and summative. Formative measures, sometimes called *process measures*, are those which provide us with information about how students' progress through and experience their educational experience. Typical of these are course evaluations, advising evaluations, early or mid-point evaluations of the field experience, and the like. Summative measures, sometimes called *outcome measures*, provide information about student competencies. Examples of these are aggregated exam results or field instructor evaluations of student performance at the end of practicum. While formative results are critical to the management of the educational enterprise, the kind of educational assessment required by **AS 4** relies primarily on summative measures.

We say "primarily" because the 2008 **EPAS** has included attention to the *implicit* curriculum as well as the *explicit* curriculum. **AS 4.0.2** expects programs to look to both dimensions of curriculum as potential sources of difficulty in maximizing student performance. As such, while not required by AS 4.0.2, programs are advised to consider maintaining a parallel assessment plan focused on the dimensions of the *implicit* curriculum as these impact student attainment of the program's competencies. This would include "instructor effectiveness" measures in course

evaluations, advisor evaluations, student evaluations of field experience, program ambiance evaluations and the like.

The distinction between formative and summative tools is sometimes obscure, less dependent upon the tool and more dependent upon what is being assessed. So, for example, student grades are typically seen as a formative measure. Grades indicate that individual students are progressing well in their program of study. But a grade on a particular assignment – let us say one which explores the complexities of ethical decisions in a practice setting – might well, if aggregated, provide us with insight into student capacities related to a behavioral dimension of the competency in question. Here it becomes a summative measure. In general, however, such measures as standard course evaluations, individual student grades, advising evaluations and the like are seen as formative tools and may not be particularly helpful in assessing student attainment of the program's competencies. In contrast, a graded assignment that asks students to demonstrate learning related to a specific practice behavior associated with a competency may offer information that could be useful when combined with data from other measures in evaluating the program's effectiveness in achieving that competency.

There are many different types of measurement tools that programs can employ to assess educational program outcomes. It is important to note that the COA currently pays less attention to the sophistication of the instrument in question than it does to the relevance of the instrument to the competency being measured. This point cannot be over emphasized. The same instrument is an excellent or a poor choice depending upon its utility and effectiveness in assessing the educational outcome in question. For example, the COA has been frequently asked by baccalaureate educators whether or not the BEAP Instruments are "useful assessment tools?" The answer is that if items on the BEAP instruments can be demonstrated to measure one or more of the practice behaviors that operationalize one of the **EPAS** 2008 competencies, then using BEAP in that instance is appropriate. On the other hand, simply presenting the results of the BEAP instruments without tying them to specific assessment targets does not constitute an appropriate assessment strategy.

It is important that the assessment plan be comprised of a complementary set of measures so that the program can demonstrate its confidence that the findings from varying tools build on one another to provide comprehensive information on the competency in question. As a general rule, one would expect information about each competency from multiple measures to feel relatively confident that the program has a valid reading on the accomplishment of that competency.

The following discussion focuses on types of instruments programs may use or develop in assessing student achievement of competencies. In considering these tools, let us use the competency "*Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice*" as an example. Further let us assume that we have adopted the "bullets" listed in **EP 2.1.2** to operationalize this competency.

Portfolio

Portfolios are essentially a scrapbook featuring examples or products of student learning. They have been a standard tool in teacher education for some time and more recently are being utilized in schools of social work. Portfolios can perform a variety of educational functions. These include serving as a demonstration of student competence not unlike curriculum vitae, facilitating an integrative or reflective function not unlike the log common to group work instruction and serving as an assessment tool. With the advent of computers, portfolios have

become electronic documents significantly enhancing their construction and utility. Depending upon the purpose for which they have been designed, portfolios can follow a predetermined structure or can be developed ad hoc, evidencing the creativity and intent of the individual student. Contents can include assignments or student essays, reflections on categories of learning from class or field, videos of role plays, classroom presentations or practice vignettes and descriptions or demonstrations by the student of specific learning's such as the practice behaviors associated with competencies.

For purposes of assessment, portfolios should be designed and structured to focus specifically upon the practice behaviors one wishes to measure. Like other assessment tools, portfolios are more amenable to the assessment of certain competencies than they are to others. For example, it might be easier to design a portfolio rubric to include documents demonstrating the practice behaviors associated with "apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments" than it would to design a rubric to demonstrate the practice behaviors associated with "identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly." Obviously, to serve an assessment function the portfolio must be structured around the competencies one wishes to assess and a uniform evaluation protocol must be developed to effectuate the assessment. We noted above that not all assessment tools are equally amenable to instrumentation along a five point Likert Scale. While not impossible, the portfolio presents challenges in this regard.

Embedded Measures

This term refers to tools *embedded within the curriculum or within a specific course* that can offer insight into student mastery of one or another of a competency's practice behaviors. For example, there may be a class assignment that asks students to demonstrate their ability to solve ethical problems. A program might then report aggregated results of student achievement on that assignment. To use this measure, however, one would need to be sure that all students completed the same assignment, faculty grading the assignment utilized common criteria, and the findings were aggregated so that the outcome would provide a measure of *program-wide* student capacity. The use of embedded measures can also be applied to a capstone assignment or comprehensive exam, research project, final essay, or oral presentation. Although no single assignment or group of assignments can adequately measure the complexities of assessing the application of ethical principles, the findings on specified assignments could be combined with findings from other un-embedded measures such as a field evaluation or an exit survey which also addresses the practice behaviors of this competency. Together the results would give a better idea of educational achievement on this competency.

Exit Interviews

Some programs, particularly smaller programs, use individual interviews of graduating students for the purpose of determining the accomplishment of student competencies. To be effective, the interview schedule needs to be tailored to include a set of questions related to each competency being assessed along with uniform criteria for determining mastery. For example, using the competency related to applying ethical principles, there may be interview questions that probe student understanding of the NASW Code of Ethics and ask about ethical decisions or dilemmas in particular situations. A system of analysis must be used which is credible in its claim to distinguish degrees of mastery. These systems are rather labor intensive, but some programs report that the exercise not only gives them great confidence in their effectiveness but

it provides formative information which they find valuable in their attempts to monitor program climate, student satisfaction and the like. They also address the attention paid to the *implicit* as well as the *explicit* curriculum in the 2008 EPAS.

Exit Exams

The quantitative alternative to the exit interview would be an exit exam. Here the program would devise a set of questions designed to measure student mastery of content related to each competency. Given the behavioral dimensions of the competency formulation, construction of exit exams presents significant design challenges. On the other hand, if done well, it poses significant advantages. In essence, we are talking here about something which would approximate a valid social work licensure exam. Its comprehensive character makes it very attractive as an element of an assessment plan.

Focus Groups

These can be used with existing students, field instructors or some other mixed set of informants familiar with the capabilities of graduating students. Again, the interview schedule must hue closely to the practice behaviors that operationalize the program's competencies and the methods of analysis must be refined to provide the faculty sufficient confidence that they are effective in providing a reliable and consistent assessment of student attainment of the program's competencies. As suggested above, there are several techniques which are helpful in making these determinations such as a set of probing questions related to the practice behaviors of each competency. This should be followed with the application of a scale for the final question related to the competency being assessed in order to provide a quantifiable determination of the degree to which the competency – or the practice behaviors of the competency – has been assessed. In other words, "please raise your hands (on a scale of one to five, five being perfect), indicating how familiar are you with the NASW Code of Ethics? Raise your hands for five, four, etc."

Surveys

Employer surveys, field instructor surveys, student exit surveys and alumni surveys are frequently used by programs as assessment tools. Again, the trick is the extent to which these surveys provide credible data on specific competencies. Note that return rates are a perennial problem with these instruments. Respondents may rate the perceived knowledge, values and skills of students/graduates on a five point scale from "Excellent" to "Good" to "Fair" on, for example, "the graduates understanding of and adherence to the profession's values and ethics." Programs should articulate benchmarks for success, such as 75% (or 80% or 90%) of respondents will report "excellent or outstanding" and then report results.

Self Efficacy Measures

These are tools which ask graduating students themselves to assess their attainment of the program's competencies. Using the example above, the student may rate "I am knowledgeable about the profession's values and ethics" or "I am able to engage in ethical problem-solving in practice" from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." These tools pose some validity concerns since they are not really measuring student competencies but student *perceptions of their competence*. Clearly, we would normally consider the competency assessment of student capability to be more valid when done by a professional such as a seasoned field educator rather than by the student. On the other hand, all of the measures here pose validity concerns of

one or another character. So, to the extent that findings from such assessments correlate positively with other measures of the same capability, they do lend a degree of confidence to our knowledge about student attainment of the competencies.

Field Performance Evaluation

Whatever role the field evaluation may play in assessment, the shift in the 2008 **EPAS** from content to competencies has significant implications for the field evaluation. Historically the field evaluation has taken many forms and often did not play a particularly significant role in accreditation curriculum review. With the advent of a competency-based curriculum, however, the field evaluation (along with classroom assignments) becomes a potent vehicle for assessing student accomplishment of curricular competencies. Whatever choices programs make about the field evaluation with respect to their assessment plan, it is clear that under these new standards field evaluations must be reconfigured to conform to the competency model.

That done, the evaluation holds significant potential as a tool in the program's assessment plan. The evaluation not only holds the potential for assessing individual practice behaviors but can also be designed to explore the extent to which students have integrated component practice behaviors to master their associated competencies. Should programs elect to utilize the evaluation in their assessment plan, obviously it is not sufficient simply to assert that the fieldwork evaluation is an element of the assessment plan. The program must identify the practice behaviors and competencies which it is employed to measure and specify the items which accomplish this/these task(s). The must also show how the data from all field evaluations are aggregated so as to provide program-wide findings as they relate to the practice behaviors and competencies being measured.

Standardized Cases

Standardized cases are descriptions of practice situations which are construct to focus on various competencies of components of competencies. They can focus attention on any phase of practice as well as on a range of client systems from the micro to the macro. They are vignettes which are constructed to elicit student descriptions of how they would engage the practice challenge presented in the case. In that sense they are not unlike exam questions or assignments frequently utilized in the classroom. But to serve as components of an assessment plan they naturally must be specified with respect to the competencies or practice behaviors they are designed to assess. The form in which they are administered must be standardized and the rubric utilized to measure the practice behaviors in question must be presented in the plan. As well, the fashion in which the data is collected and analyzed must be explicated.

License Exam Results

Many programs cite student passage rates on licensure exams as a measure of program success. While these data can provide useful information, they are seldom helpful in demonstrating student attainment of the program's competencies. Unless programs can tie passage rates on particular items to program competencies passage rates on these exams will not be helpful in assessment.