What a wonderful challenge to read the arguments of Professors Tucker and Delva. I hope more discussion develops. I would like to respond by first noting several areas where we agree. First, part of science is a collective enterprise, and this kind of debate is important and essential. Second, I agree that nothing about science or its role in social work should distract us from social work’s extraordinariness in caring for the most vulnerable in our society and in other societies where it exists (Tucker and Delva state it far more poetically than I). That is actually a central premise of the science of social work I began to define.

A few clarifications are needed. I have not proposed that social work be renamed ‘the science of social work’. In the second paper of mine that Tucker and Delva cite, I offer a definition of social work that includes a service dimension and a scientific dimension. But it is still called social work, and in my judgment that should not change. Perhaps I could stop here because their argument seems quite centered around the issue of what we call this rose. But, they do raise other issues.

In terms of impact factors and journal foundings, if we accept their conclusion that I failed to prove that science is not central to social work, then the problem is not about the centrality of science to social work. Perhaps the issue is that science is as central as it can be to social work given the number of PhDs we produce, which is now far less than nursing or psychology, and it does not appear to be increasing. Tucker and Delva further suggest that our PhDs spend more time disseminating knowledge than producing it.

I have attempted to argue that our presence on the landscape of producing scientific knowledge has matured, and that we have an identity as a profession that has not been complemented with an articulated scientific identity. I have pushed this issue in two papers by proposing a science of social work, and by defining one dimension of social work as an integrative scientific discipline. Those are propositions that rest on two assumptions: that we need and, therefore, should develop a scientific identity. My goal was to generate discussion and thought around these issues. I could be wrong in both my assumptions and on my proposed solutions. Further, even if it is agreed that we need to develop a scientific identity, that identity could be articulated in many different ways. It could develop around the idea of eclecticism, or trans-disciplinary inquiry, as others have suggested.

So, perhaps we can focus some discussion on a few central questions. Is developing a scientific identity useful and important to social work? If so, what would it be? If such an identity is not useful, what implications does that have for our profession and for the PhDs we train? I have made my notions on that clear. Tucker and Delva have responded about certain aspects of my argument. It remains to be seen whether we stay on this road or not, and what path we take. If we can believe Robert Frost, these decisions do matter.

John Brekke
University of Southern California
brekke@usc.edu