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The California Social Welfare Archives are also housed at the center, featuring the most extensive and complete collection of welfare history in Southern California. Finally, the school’s journal holdings, including four international publications, fall under the umbrella of the research center.

By working with and supporting the Campbell and Cochrane Collaborations, as

Creating a research paradigm

Strategically situated in downtown Los Angeles, at the crux of critical metropolitan issues such as homelessness, mental health care, children’s services, and community well-being, the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services seeks to address complex societal problems that cannot be solved within a single discipline.

Secured by a $5 million endowment, the research center is the core of funded research within the USC School of Social Work and has been identified as one of the best research centers at the university, as well nationwide.

Four objectives guide its activities: improving university–community collaboration, conducting research that improves human services, fostering and promoting interdisciplinary research, and training the next generation of researchers in sophisticated methodologies.

By blending basic and applied research and relying on interdisciplinary teamwork, researchers develop greater cultural understanding and pursue change within diverse community environments with a specific focus on evidence-based interventions and translational research.

This theme of intervention science within a translational framework has become central to the center’s identity and the school’s hiring and promotion criteria, retention considerations, and resource allocation.

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[ from the director ]

Hamovitch P.I., a new quarterly publication created by the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services, seeks to inform colleagues, professionals, and students in the field of social work about the innovative and translational research conducted at the center.

Located in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, the Hamovitch Center enjoys a diverse setting that reflects many modern, complex urban environments.

As the hub of funded research activity at the USC School of Social Work, the center generates approximately 90 percent of its research funding from several highly competitive federal agencies. Since 1997, its award portfolio has blossomed from less than $1 million to $40 million, and the center consistently ranks among the top five social work research institutes nationwide.

Beyond the numbers, the center strives to connect researchers, students, policy makers, and social work practitioners to create a dynamic community equipped to tackle the problems of the future.

Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.
Director of the Hamovitch Center

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[ news ]
LOS ANGELES is arguably the capital of homelessness in the United States. Recent studies have found that on any given day, nearly 50,000 people are living on the streets of Los Angeles County—including 4,200 youth and 6,500 veterans. Along with an increase in supportive housing, effective and proven interventions are desperately needed to address the myriad issues plaguing the homeless population: drug and alcohol abuse, violence, sexual assault, disease, and a general lack of shelter, food, and vital resources. A newly formed core of researchers at the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services is focusing its efforts on those very topics. Backed largely by funding from the National Institutes of Health, faculty researchers are engaging in pilot programs, clinical trials, and qualitative studies in pursuit of a singular goal: developing better methods to help those living on the streets to escape poverty. “We’re all working for the same good cause,” said Suzanne Wenzel, a professor with the USC School of Social Work who has devoted much of her career to understanding the health needs of homeless populations. Wenzel is joined by assistant professors Seth Kurzban and Eric Rice, as well as associate professor Kristin Ferguson, a group that has formed the nucleus of homelessness research at the Hamovitch Center.

While their interests are varied—Wenzel and Kurzban tend to work more with homeless adults, while Rice and Ferguson focus on youth living on the streets—the researchers are slowly building the center’s reputation as a hub of inquiry into the lives and circumstances of homeless people. “If you want to do this kind of work, there’s really no better place to be,” Rice said. “We should become known as the place where this is happening.”

Surveying the social terrain

In her pursuit of effective solutions for the health-related issues of homeless people, Wenzel has conducted studies on the relationship between trauma, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS risk among homeless women; examined the social context surrounding similar risk factors among homeless men; and developed programs to treat post-traumatic stress disorder and prevent victimization, risky sexual behaviors, and substance abuse. The Hamovitch Center’s proximity to downtown Los Angeles, and particularly Skid Row—about 50 square blocks that contain one of the largest stable populations of homeless people in the country—has proven useful to Wenzel as she examines health risks among the homeless population. “The downtown metropolitan area of Los Angeles is a hot spot for HIV infection,” she said, noting that Skid Row itself has a disproportionately higher rate of HIV and AIDS than surrounding areas.

Higher levels of alcohol and drug use tend to lead to risky behavior, she explained, but the general state of poverty and lack of access to resources leads to a greater risk of exposure. Homeless adults tend to be more worried about finding shelter and food, and avoiding violence, than protecting themselves from sexually transmitted diseases, Wenzel said. “A homeless woman might be trading sex to survive, and she’s not going to get as much money if she makes the guy use a condom,” she said. Delving into that social context is the objec-
and spiritual aspects of street life. Her previous projects include an effort to identify best practices in faith-based organizations working with youth on the street in Los Angeles, Mumbai, and Nairobi.

A $745,581 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health that runs through September 2011 has allowed Ferguson to pursue a pilot study to test the feasibility of employment support for youth with mental illness.

By integrating employment services with individualized clinical support at two drop-in centers in Hollywood, she hopes to create a program that helps street youth obtain competitive employment.

Participants who complete the training program will help operate a small business, with the goal of replacing any street earnings with comparable income. The two-year grant builds on a previous pilot study that taught graphic design skills to homeless youth, along with marketing and accounting practices.

Kurzban is also pursuing interventions that aid individuals dealing with severe and persistent mental illness, as well as chronic homelessness, incarceration, and substance abuse. He is currently testing a program to reduce social isolation and improve self-care and wellness among homeless adults.

As a post-doctoral fellow at USC, Kurzban received a Larson Endowment to adapt the intervention for use at a county mental health clinic with women suffering from mental illness who are returning to their community after being released from jail.

Building alliances

Key to the researchers’ success is meaningful interaction and involvement with community-based organizations and service providers. Reflecting the Hamovitch Center’s innovative focus on translational research, they are developing strong ties to community groups and ensuring that programs and interventions are feasible options for social work practitioners.

A decade ago, Wenzel admits she didn’t spend too much time worrying about how her research would translate into action on the streets. Now, developing best practices and understanding how the research-to-practice pipeline works is a significant factor.

“That collaboration is absolutely critical in improving the status of homeless people,” Wenzel said.
Maurice B. Hamovitch, a visionary social work educator and namesake of the Hamovitch Center, is remembered as one of the most influential and popular faculty members of the USC School of Social Work.

Born in 1919 in Toronto, Canada, Hamovitch received a bachelor’s degree from Queen’s University and completed a master’s in social work at McGill University. After pursuing a doctorate in medical social work at the University of Chicago, he became the first social worker in the Canadian Army Medical Corps.

Hamovitch arrived in Los Angeles in 1949, joining USC’s graduate program in social work. During the next four decades, he had a profound effect on the school, recruiting more minority students and professors, broadening the curriculum to reflect the concerns of marginalized groups, and remaining famously accessible to students and colleagues.

Assuming the role of dean in 1968, Hamovitch served in that capacity until voluntarily retiring in 1980, only to take up the mantle of director of the doctoral program for the next five years. He remained an influential member of the Council on Social Work Education and held numerous positions with various organizations, including the Jewish Family Service, the Veterans Administration, and the California Social Welfare Archives.

Significant changes have taken place during the two-decade life of the center, which began solely as a technical support site within the USC School of Social Work. Since 1997, leaders at the research center have focused on hiring faculty with a strong interdisciplinary background, the intensity and willingness to pursue competitive federal grants, and passion for the collective research culture of the school.

An increased focus on faculty mentoring, coupled with the development of doctorate student research profiles, has bolstered the growth of the center. Headed by the associate dean of research, the mentoring effort represents one of the most powerful aspects of culture building within the school.

In addition to linking the center with the school’s doctorate and master’s programs, it also provides a point of attachment, encouragement, and review for junior and senior faculty to support their research efforts from the point of inception.

Beyond mentoring services, the center also boasts a knowledgeable staff that works with researchers to flesh out the basic costs, timetables, and bureaucratic components of a research proposal.

By allowing staff to handle budgeting, biostatistics, and other technical aspects of research preparation, the center relieves its faculty of the administrative details that can bog down initiatives.

Its research strength is evident—research funding has grown from less than $1 million in 1997 to approximately $40 million in 2010, while publication activity has doubled during the same period.

Much like any other major institution, the research center faces its share of challenges, primarily tension surrounding faculty workload, as well as a need to sustain infrastructure and manage costs.

Research faculty often use course buyouts from grants and are less engaged in curriculum leadership or concentration committees, generating some friction. Leadership from the dean and senior faculty, however, has resolved this issue over time.

Given the increasing sophistication of research initiatives, along with the costs of maintaining competent technical and administrative staff, creating a sustainable funding model has also presented some challenges. In order to maintain growth, researchers must remain competitive in the battle for limited resources.

Center leaders have sustained the rate of successful research proposals by mentoring junior faculty and recruiting researchers with current funding or high potential for success.

In all, the Hamovitch Center has proven to be a successful model for developing and maintaining a strong research profile that is fundamental to the USC School of Social Work. While a number of factors have contributed to its success, one deserves reiteration: the commitment of the entire faculty to the research mission of the school.

Note: This article is derived from “The Hamovitch Research Center: An experiment in collective responsibility for advancing science in the human services,” authored by Marilyn Flynn, John S. Brekke, and Haluk Soydan (2008).
As a leading institution in its field, the USC School of Social Work typically has a significant presence at the Society for Social Work and Research’s annual conference. This year was no different, with researchers, faculty, and students from the school leading some 20 workshops and panel discussions on a variety of topics ranging from meeting the linguistic needs of Latinos seeking substance abuse treatment to interventions to meet diverse local needs.

The response from attendees proved to be gratifying, Palinkas said, with many colleagues asking for advice on their own projects or seeking copies of his presentation. In addition, other keynote addresses and major presentations, including Brekke’s lecture, touched on themes discussed during his plenary session—namely, a concerted effort to reinforce the fact that social work is a science. “It felt like there was some coherence to it all that was very enjoyable,” Palinkas said.

The Hamovitch Center’s recent focus on military social work—a rapidly expanding area of interest within social work research—also led to a series of special events at the conference. Anthony Hassan, director of the school’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, joined assistant research professor Jan Nissly to host a panel discussion on conducting research with service members, veterans, and military families. In addition to providing an opportunity to promote military-related social work research, the event allowed Hassan, Nissly, and others to offer best practices and practical tips for conducting such research.

“There’s so much we need to know,” Nissly said. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq differ from previous conflicts, she noted, pointing out the absence of a draft and an increase in repeated deployments. Due to the increase in soldiers returning with significant physical or mental problems, the Veterans Administration—described by Nissly as a largely insular institution—is being overwhelmed.

“Just by sheer number, the systems have been overloaded,” she said.

As a result, there is a pressing need to train civilian social workers to handle cases involving service members and their families. In addition to the panel discussion, which offered suggestions for tracking down funding sources and accessing military populations, Nissly said the conference included a special meeting for those interested in military social work research.

Haluk Soydan, director of the Hamovitch Center, credited the innovative research being conducted at the center, as well as the strong leadership of faculty researchers, for the school’s significant involvement in the annual conference. He also highlighted the center’s focus on translational research—that is, seeking ways to translate academic findings into effective practices in the field. Palinkas summed up the school’s presence succinctly: “What can I say,” he said, “we were awesome.”

While social work has been a strong practice profession for decades, it wasn’t until the late 1980s that the field saw a push to improve the quality of its research. And although funding and grant reviews for innovative social work research have increased, one significant area remains undeveloped.

“One of the big things we haven’t tackled is to what degree social work has its own science,” said John Brekke, the Hamovitch Center’s associate dean of research. Delivering the Aaron Rosen Lecture at the annual Society for Social Work and Research conference, he outlined the need to define domains of inquiry, core constructs, and distinguishing research characteristics of the social work field.

“It felt like a bit of a risk in that I didn’t really know how this was going to be received,” he said, adding, “I had to take the profession to task for not doing this. Our code of ethics doesn’t mention science or research much.” It turns out he wasn’t the only one itching for change. Dozens of colleagues echoed Brekke’s sentiments following the talk, praising his argument that creating a science of social work will fuel and shape the profession’s intellectual maturity and status.

Brekke plans to write up his initial ideas for publication, and is considering inviting scholars to discuss the framework at a small conference.

As for the positive response he’s already received, Brekke said, “It’s really gratifying for me and for the profession.”

[lecture] Down to a science
In recognition of her outstanding academic achievements, Iris Chi has been selected for membership in the Phi Tau Phi Scholastic Honor Society of America, the only honor society in the country that commends scholastic excellence by ethnic Chinese scholars.

Chi is the Chinese-American Golden Age Association/ Frances Wu Chair for the Chinese Elderly and leads the China Program at the Hamovitch Center. She holds a joint appointment with the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

An expert in elderly health and gerontology, Chi has lead or participated in more than 60 studies and published more than 150 articles on issues related to aging, including long-term care, mental health chronic illness, community service, dementia, and social support.

Prior to joining the USC School of Social Work faculty, she taught for 17 years at the University of Hong Kong. She received recognition for her public service with the city’s aging residents in the form of the prestigious Bronze Bauhina Star.


In addition to teaching aging-related courses at the USC School of Social Work, Chi is a frequent lecturer at many universities throughout Asia.