Visit strengthens China project

SIX MONTHS after helping launch a new clearinghouse for evidence-based practices in China, the USC School of Social Work hosted the project’s director to further strengthen ties between the university and its Chinese partners.

You-ping Li, who heads the Chinese Cochrane Center and its subsidiary, the Clearinghouse for Evidence-Based Practice and Policy, spent a week at USC in April as a Provost’s Distinguished Visitor, meeting with students, faculty, and administrators to describe her latest efforts to improve social and health services throughout mainland China.

Conceptualized as a central hub for scholars, researchers, and practitioners to find the most effective and proven tools to address social issues, the clearinghouse is still in its initial phase of development. But Li, who said the online database is the first of its kind in China, has lofty goals for the project.

“We are striving for continuous improvement, striving for perfection,” she said.

The portal is currently being populated with interventions in the field of child welfare, but organizers hope to expand to aging issues and other areas of social and health services soon. Li envisions the clearinghouse as an innovative, user-friendly resource that offers high-quality, tested interventions that are culturally suited to the Chinese context.

Given its sheer size, China faces unique issues in terms of access to health and social care. Li described the nation as being divided into three zones: east, west, and central.
“I came out of college in the ferment of the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was going on, and that very much affected me.”

Bruce Jansson
Professor

A career of action and advocacy

ON A HUMID FRIDAY in August 1966, Bruce Jansson took his place alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and hundreds of others to protest housing segregation in Chicago. A mob of angry whites quickly surrounded the protesters in Marquette Park, shouting and hurling objects. A stone hit King in the head, momentarily stunning him. The marchers pressed on.

“We barely made it out of that neighborhood,” Jansson said, adding that King would later describe the invective he witnessed in Chicago as more excessive than any prior experience with racial hatred, even in the Deep South.

But the protests eventually led to a deal with the city’s real estate officials—the marches would stop, and so would discriminatory housing practices.

Despite graduating with a master’s degree in American history from Harvard University a year prior, Jansson had decided he wanted action. History just felt too remote and disconnected.

“I came out of college in the ferment of the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was going on, and that very much affected me,” he said. As a community organizer for tenant rights, first in Philadelphia and then in Chicago, he got his initial taste for advocacy, a passion that blossomed into a lengthy and prolific research career at the USC School of Social Work.

After returning to college to earn a master’s degree and doctorate in social work from the University of Chicago in 1967 and 1975, respectively, Jansson joined the USC faculty in 1973 and now serves as the Margaret W. Driscoll and Louise M. Clevenger Professor of Social Policy and Administration.

In the decades that followed, he authored journal articles, gave presentations, and taught courses in social welfare history, policy analysis, social planning, advocacy, and health policy. But more than anything, he became known for undertaking expansive book projects on complicated topics such as the history of the U.S. welfare state and methods for effective case advocacy in health care, weaving common threads through historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Jansson compares himself to a landscape artist. Portrait painters focus in on narrow aspects of life; landscape artists take the wide-angle view.

In 1984, Jansson unveiled the first of many groundbreaking ideas in the field of advocacy, coining the term “policy practice” in The Theory and Practice of Social Welfare Policy. Until that point, social policy had been largely an analytical, philosophical, and historical subject of study.

“We needed to have a bit more activist orientation,” he said. “I used the word practice to make it clear to other social workers that it is something you actually do, much like clinical practice. To my good fortune, it caught on.”

Essentially a framework to aid professionals seeking to change policy at governmental, organizational, and community levels, the step-by-step process he developed consists of a set of tasks and skills.

Policy analysis, already part of the research lexicon, remained a necessary rung on the ladder, but Jansson fleshed out methods for enacting and implementing policies—from tasks as seemingly basic as placing a proposal on the agenda of decision makers to the often complex ethical issues involved in changing longstanding social policies.

Necessary skills included the ability to develop continued on page 3
a credible proposal, as well as the political adroitness to ferry it through the bureaucratic or legislative process.

“You have to be able to develop and use power,” he said.

Interactional skills are also key; the ability to communicate effectively and organize coalitions around a cause is crucial to successful policy initiatives.

One recent example Jansson cited involves a colleague, Ralph Fertig, a clinical professor with the USC School of Social Work, who organized a group of master’s students around the issue of homelessness in Los Angeles County and throughout the state. The team succeeded in enacting state legislation that requires local governments to build affordable housing units for homeless populations.

“It’s actually required by law because of their work,” Jansson said, adding that the students put the skills and tasks in his framework to use by traveling to Sacramento to meet with legislators and persuading the U.S. House of Representatives to pass a resolution declaring that children living on the street have a constitutional right to shelter.

In Jansson’s most recent book, Improving Healthcare Through Advocacy: A Guide for the Health and Helping Professions, he shifts his policy framework to focus on consumer advocacy in the health care sector. After examining research in the field, he discovered a startling lack of direction and guidance for social workers, nurses, and other health professionals in terms of how to advocate for patients.

Without an effective case advocate, many patients face an assortment of problems, ranging from prohibitive health care costs for the millions who lack insurance or have inadequate coverage to violations of patient rights, such as the right to informed consent and confidentiality.

Some patients don’t receive quality or evidence-based care, such as the estimated 40,000 to 90,000 Americans who die unnecessarily from medical errors in hospitals every year.

Others are deprived of culturally competent care, such as translation services for those with limited English proficiency, while some patients don’t receive preventive care, such as diabetes screenings, that could catch serious issues early and improve health outcomes.

Other concerns include inadequate treatment of mental distress and poor follow-up care, as well as an insular and specialized approach to medicine that results in poor communication between health care providers and the community and fails to address the holistic needs of patients.

“These are staggeringly huge problems,” Jansson said, adding that many patients experience several of them concurrently. “Somebody needs to step forward and come to their aid.”

Health professionals may be overwhelmed by workload, face repercussions for highlighting the failure of others to address these issues, or simply disregard advocacy because it isn’t included in their job description.

But others take on the burden, helping patients navigate the complex health care system on their own time, in spite of potentially negative consequences. Jansson described a nurse working in a clinic in the Bronx that served a largely low-income population. She noticed many patients who underwent biopsies for cancer didn’t return for another appointment, even to learn of their diagnosis.

“Nobody seemed to care,” Jansson said, describing how other clinic staff did little follow-up with patients. The nurse ended up tracking down patients at their homes, informing them of their diagnosis, and urging them to seek treatment. She succeeded in helping a large percentage receive necessary care.

“It’s a dramatic example of why we need case advocates,” he said.

In his book, Jansson utilizes 118 scenarios to illustrate various problems, or “red-flag situations,” and the skills and methods needed to address those issues. In addition to outlining the process of case advocacy, he also discusses the larger context of policy advocacy, such as efforts to make hospitals and health care providers more accepting of case advocacy. He advises professionals to track their encounters with patients and provide that information to administrators to illustrate the issues faced by many clients.

“It will lead to better health care for continued on page 5
Experts to develop science of social work

A GROUP of preeminent scholars at an invitation-only conference hosted by the USC School of Social Work will strive to articulate exactly what it means to practice or conduct research in the field of social work.

John Brekke, the Hamovitch Center’s associate dean of research, said defining the scientific focus of social work would bring great maturity and recognition to the profession.

“Our research enterprise has become infinitely improved over the last 15 to 20 years, but we’ve never articulated a science of social work,” he said. “When people articulate a science, as in physics or psychology or chemistry, it’s that combination of theory and empirical method that they apply to a defined set of phenomena in the universe.”

A group of 25 experts and prominent scholars in the field of social work will meet during a two-day conference at USC in late May to hash out the underpinnings of the profession. Attendees will travel from as far away as Europe and the East Coast, and Brekke said he would be hard-pressed to highlight any of the participants.

“There are some extremely prominent social work scholars and thinkers that are coming,” he said. “The collection of people is really impressive, so I couldn’t single anybody out.”

The group will meet at the school’s on-campus Hamovitch Research Center, where they will discuss a handful of papers prepared by some of the participants in advance of the conference.

Brekke, who first proposed the concept of a science of social work during the Aaron Rosen lecture at this year’s Society for Social Work and Research conference, is currently outlining his own paper on the core constructs, domains of inquiry, and distinguishing characteristics of social work.

By defining these areas, including the profession’s approach to science, theory, and method, he said social work practitioners and scholars will benefit from a sharper understanding of their field.

“It would articulate the fact that we do have a unique approach to understanding a set of phenomena in the world,” Brekke said. “We have something unique to contribute, and it would allow us to develop our methods and our strategies with more coherence and more focus.”

John Brekke
Associate Dean of Research

Social work has been a strong profession in terms of practice for decades, he said. In recent years, the field has experienced a significant push to improve the presence and sophistication of its research.

“Our research enterprise really only got strong legs in the past 20 years,” he said. “I think we mobilized so much of the intellectual energy of our profession in growing those strong research legs that we didn’t take the time to focus on [a science of social work].”

Among the specific goals and pursuits he hopes to outline as central to the social work profession are to be multi- and interdisciplinary, to utilize leading-edge human services technology to improve public health and eliminate disparities for marginalized populations, and to create new paradigms for the delivery and dissemination of social work science education.

Other participants are crafting their own ideas on the topic, including a presentation on the history of ideas in social work that are relevant to defining the profession in scientific terms.

A third paper will focus on social work education from the perspective of a science of social work, while another discussion will center on the philosophical underpinnings of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological frameworks of the profession. Attendees will also examine the concept from a European perspective.

continued on page 5
Brekke said the social work profession deals with incredible complex problems, and he doesn’t expect the process of defining its scientific focus to be a simple matter.

“There is plenty of room to argue about these things,” he said, adding that he expects robust discussion and constructive disagreement during the two-day event.

Brekke credited Marilyn Flynn, dean of the School of Social Work, with the idea of holding a small invitational conference, explaining that she approached him with the suggestion following his lecture in January.

Colleagues also seemed energized by the presentation and Brekke said he received favorable feedback from nearly everyone he talked with at the annual SSWR confab. When seeking participants for the upcoming discussion, he said few of those contacted turned down the offer.

“We had almost no refusals, which is really remarkable,” he said. “I think maybe people are ready for it, and I think that’s what it speaks to, that people are engaged and excited about the topic.”

These patients, and will actually make the patients more satisfied with the care they receive, because they will feel their needs are being tended to,” he said.

Despite recent changes on the health care front—including, perhaps most significantly, national health care reform—Jansson said patients still need someone looking out for their interests. Even when the new health care policies are fully implemented by 2021, an estimated 16 million Americans will still lack health insurance.

“The need for case advocacy will be all the greater with the enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Obama-inspired health care plan,” he said.

For example, the act mandates that hospitals and care providers offer wellness exams, but many patients do not know they are entitled to such services. Other rights are guaranteed by the legislation, but consumers need someone to guide them through the system.

Although Jansson recently celebrated the publication of his guide to health care case advocacy, he is already wrapping up the first six chapters of a new book that will meld his concepts of policy and case advocacy with a handful of social sectors: child welfare, mental health, gerontology, schools, immigrant populations, and the correctional system. He hopes to finish the project, with help from doctoral students, by spring 2012.

Jansson has also completed the bulk of his research for a critical analysis of why the United States has yet to seriously tackle health disparities, using Los Angeles County as a case study. While the health of low-income populations and minority groups has improved considerably during the last 40 years, he said, so has the health of affluent people.

“The gap remains completely intact,” he said. “We haven’t closed the gap at all in those last 40 years.”

He plans to present an overview of the evolution of the Los Angeles County public health system from 1960 to the present, and has already conducted several hundred interviews and collected internal documents, memos, and other materials.

It’s not the first time Jansson has tackled such a wide-ranging topic from a historical perspective. He examined the evolution of the American welfare system in The Reluctant Welfare State, analyzing its failure to address social problems despite its continued expansion.

After six years of research for The Sixteen-Trillion-Dollar Mistake: How the U.S. Bungled its National Priorities from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, he determined the United States had squandered trillions of dollars on corporate subsidies and imprudent tax policies, defense spending and ill-advised military engagements, and excessive interest payments on soaring levels of national debt.

Budget issues remain a top issue for national leaders, and Jansson said he hopes the book has proven useful as a historical lens through which to view and understand the current controversy. He is mulling over the idea of updating The Sixteen-Trillion-Dollar Mistake through President Obama’s term in office.

But when prompted to describe the most rewarding or memorable aspect of his career, Jansson said developing advocacy as a theme in his work, both at a policy and case level, has proven most gratifying.

“It gives the people in our field the tools, at a very practical level, to actually change policy,” he said. “You can’t do it if you don’t have a way to think about it.”
China. A vast majority (94%) of people live in the east, a region that spans just 43% of the country’s landmass.

Economic development, education, and health care vary widely from one region to the next, and the west has greater diversity in terms of cultural and religious backgrounds. Additionally, young men often leave the rural areas in western China to find work in the east.

“At home, only the children, the women, and the elderly population remain,” Li said.

The Chinese government has rolled out ambitious plans to provide equal access to essential health care by 2020, she said, describing that task as a “huge challenge.” It wasn’t until recently that practitioners expanded the concept of health beyond physical ailments, and Li said there is a tremendous need for expanded interdisciplinary research.

“This is the weakest part of China’s health system right now,” she said.

The clearinghouse is located in Chengdu, Li’s hometown in the southwestern Sichuan province. Staff members there have already translated a handful of tested interventions from the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse into Chinese.

Haluk Soydan, director of the Hamovitch Center, heads a scientific committee that oversees the content of the clearinghouse. He said while the ultimate goal of the center is to create and test its own interventions, its initial development involves feedback from a panel of culturally competent experts who will examine the feasibility of Western methods in China.

“The best way of knowing whether an intervention works is to test that intervention in the site of intended use,” Soydan said. “But testing this in a new context is an expensive and time-intensive process.”

For now, the committee will recommend changes to social intervention models to fit Chinese cultural and societal norms. Eventually, the clearinghouse will support its own outcome studies to develop its own effective interventions, and feed that data back into the system.

“It’s a circle,” Li said. “This is evidence-based medicine.”

Soydan, who helped found the prestigious Campbell Collaboration, an international organization for evidence on education, crime and justice, and social welfare, conceived of the Chinese database after aiding in the development of a handful of other clearinghouses. He knew Li through her previous work with the Campbell Collaboration, and the two quickly sketched out the concept in a few days.

“She is a person of action,” Soydan said of Li. “She plays a major role in developing China’s health system.”

After establishing the scientific committee, developing the technology and online platform for the database, and beginning to assess the feasibility of Western psychosocial interventions in China, the project team launched the clearinghouse in September 2010 using seed money from USC.

Future plans include developing methods of providing information on evidence-based practices to social service agencies. Li and her staff are also establishing virtual reference centers at leading medical universities throughout China, to serve as a resource for students and staff.

During her visit to USC, Li visited several schools with strong connections to China, and is interested in strengthening the strategic partnership between USC and Sichuan University, where she is the director of West China Hospital’s Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Evidence-Based Medicine.

Ultimately, the two institutions hope to expand beyond the Chinese clearinghouse project to pursue joint research activities on social work practice and human services, organize international conferences and symposia, and develop a truly international exchange of students, faculty, and knowledge.
Breaking ties with the street

A NEW STUDY finds homeless women are more likely to seek treatment for substance abuse if they have positive links in their social network.

Results published in the Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment reveal that having primarily street-based relationships has a deleterious effect on accessing substance abuse treatment, while having an intimate partner who offers support and information about treatment has a strong positive influence.

“Having partners or others around you who are not supportive of treatment and recovery can seriously interfere with treatment access and recovery,” said Suzanne Wenzel, lead author and professor with the USC School of Social Work. “Social workers might help women explore the sources of support and difficulties in their social networks, and make efforts to reconnect women with relatives or others who are helpful to them.”

Wenzel and her colleagues at the RAND Corporation delved into the social circles of homeless women in shelters throughout Los Angeles County in an effort to identify factors that promote or inhibit seeking help for drug or alcohol dependence.

Using data from interviews with 273 homeless women who screened positive for substance abuse during the previous year, the researchers analyzed potential barriers and facilitators to treatment.

A critical component of developing positive social connections away from the streets is providing safe, stable housing, Wenzel said. “A major human need is for sustenance and safety, the freedom to not worry where one is going to sleep or whether one is going to be victimized on the street,” she said. “When those fundamental needs are met, one can then pay more attention to self-care and healing.”

She cited the case of a young woman who had been living with her sister and mother. When her sister had a baby, the apartment felt overcrowded and the woman moved out. She wound up on Skid Row, a 50-square-block area of downtown Los Angeles with a large population of homeless people.

Wenzel said the woman felt too embarrassed to tell her family that she was living on the streets. Strategies designed to strengthen those family relationships could help the woman find a place to live, either with her family or in supportive housing.

Another important finding suggested that homeless women with substance abuse issues who have to care for children are less likely to pursue treatment. This is due in part to simple logistics—it can be difficult to seek help if there is no one else to care for the children—but there is also a need for more treatment facilities that offer childcare services, Wenzel said. Only 6.5 percent of treatment providers nationwide offer such services, according to a national survey.

Lastly, the study revealed that women were less likely to access treatment for substance abuse if they had recently been treated for mental health issues. Wenzel said this may illustrate a lack of integration between mental health and substance abuse treatment services due to separate funding streams and administrative oversight.

“This seems very obvious but is critical: There must be firm and consistent recognition by agency and program directors and staff that providing care for co-occurring disorders is important, and that it is not appropriate to simply assume, for example, that once people stop using substances their mental health problems will subside,” she said.

Additional training for treatment staff in both mental health and substance use disorders is one strategy to address this gap, along with increased efforts to provide multiple services under one roof.

In concluding the study, which was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Wenzel and her colleagues called for additional research to begin developing interventions and strategies to help homeless women with substance use problems disconnect from their street lives and begin the path to recovery.

“We must nevertheless be respectful of each woman as an individual and work with her to understand her particular circumstances,” she said, “and we must not assume that every community with challenges—such as Skid Row—can only harbor unhealthy relationships.”

[ publications ]

Four books by USC Social Work faculty hit the shelves


Aided by more than 100 case studies, Jansson outlines strategies for health care professionals to better navigate the health care system on behalf of their clients. His book offers practical tips and examines policy frameworks to determine effective methods of advocacy by social workers, nurses, and other professionals in order to bring about positive change in the often complex world of public health services.

Wendy B. Smith, Youth Leaving Foster Care: A Developmental, Relationship-Based Approach to Practice

As the first comprehensive examination of youth emerging from foster care, Smith’s new book outlines a theoretical framework to guide programs, policies, and services while arguing that foster care professionals should focus on psychological and interpersonal needs as a strategy to aid the successful transition of youth entering adulthood.


Through the use of evidence-based practice and other theories, Jordan-Marsh examines the vast array of resources utilized by proactive health consumers when making decisions about their health care, including supportive social networking, online interactive treatment, and other health-related technology.

Jose E. Coll and Eugenia L. Weiss, A Civilian Counselor’s Primer for Counseling Veterans, 2nd Edition

Crafted to educate civilian social workers and other health care professionals about military culture and signs of distress among service members, this primer offers a strategy to establishing a therapeutic relationship and offering mental health services to military personnel and their families.
The mission of the Hamovitch Center is to support faculty engaged in basic and applied research focused on the needs, behaviors, and problems of groups that are vulnerable in society due to their at-risk status, and to study the service delivery systems related to these populations.

[ accolades ]

Associate Professor Maria Aranda has been appointed to the Institute of Medicine’s Committee on the Mental Health Workforce for Geriatric Populations, a body whose goal is to determine the behavioral and mental health care needs of Americans older than 65 and make policy recommendations.

Ron Astor, a professor with the USC School of Social Work, received the 2011 Excellence in Research Award from the Society for Social Work and Research in recognition of his article on school violence and the importance of principals in orchestrating safe schools. Published in American Educational Research Journal and co-authored by doctoral candidate Joey Nuñez Estrada Jr. and Rami Benbenishty, of Bar Ilan University, the study examined nine schools in Israel that experienced little violence despite their location in violent areas.

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare has nominated Professor John Brekke, the Hamovitch Center’s associate dean for research, to be elected to its honor society, which recognizes distinguished scholars and practitioners in the field of social work and social welfare. Brekke is being honored for his efforts to advance a science of social work, his leadership in the field, and ongoing interest in improving the life status of people with severe mental illness.

Maryalice Jordan-Marsh has been awarded the 2011 Distinguished Achievement Award by the Nurses’ Alumni Organization of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In announcing the honor, the organization cited her research, teaching, service, and policy contributions to the profession of nursing.

[ events ]

USC Commencement
May 13, 2011 — 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
University Park Campus

Graduating students celebrate their accomplishments during the 2011 USC commencement ceremonies. The university-wide event begins at 8 a.m., the School of Social Work hosts a brunch on North Leavey Lawn at 11 a.m., and the school’s ceremony takes place on Howard Jones Field at 2 p.m.

Mónica García, Los Angeles Unified School District board president and MSW Class of 2001 graduate, will deliver the keynote address. The ceremony theme is “Striving to Strengthen, Empower, and Inspire.” Tickets are not required to attend either ceremony. ■■■

Replicating Randomized Results
May 17, 2011 — 10 a.m. to noon
Hamovitch Research Center, UPC

In a free lecture at the School of Social Work’s campus research center, William R. Shadish will discuss several decades of study on how to design nonrandomized experiments to approximate results from randomized studies.

A professor and founding faculty at UC Merced’s School of Social Sciences, Shadish is known as one of the most influential researchers in recent decades in the field of experimental research.

A discussion with USC’s Chih-Ping Chou and Lawrence Palinkas will follow the lecture, and lunch will be served. Send an email to hrc@usc.edu for more information. ■■■

[ grants ]

Eric Rice, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, recently received a three-year, $2.1-million grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to examine the use of social media and cell phones by homeless youth to form positive relationships away from the streets. Working with a youth center and an HIV community center, Rice and his colleagues hope to develop a better understanding of how social networks impact HIV prevention and to develop improved interventions to combat risky drug and sexual behaviors among homeless youth. More details are available by clicking here.

Third-year doctoral student Ian Holloway will use a $70,000 grant to examine social network and environmental influences on HIV/AIDS risk and substance abuse among young men who have sex with men in Los Angeles County. Findings will be used to help develop new interventions or revise existing strategies to improve substance abuse and HIV prevention outcomes. The grant, a Kirchstein National Research Service Award from the National Institute of Drug Abuse, runs through April 2013. ■■■