[ from the director ]

As the 2011 winter issue of Hamovitch P.I. comes out, we are proud to note that the USC School of Social Work continues to rank among the most highly regarded and elite schools of social work worldwide. Some of the credit can be attributed to the research excellence of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services, as our strong research culture is reflected in all aspects of the scholarship and community dedication of the school.

The cover story of this issue features the Virtual Academic Center, ranked "the very best school for an online social work degree" by thebestcolleges.org. However, the VAC—powered by research excellence and cutting-edge technology—is much more than a simple online degree program, as illustrated by the story.

In this issue, we also dedicate a special section to the school’s doctoral program, which is fully embedded in our research culture and excellence. Our PhD program trains students to be the leaders of future generations of social work researchers who will serve the nation and beyond. This issue’s doctoral feature provides a taste of how our most advanced students are participating in real-world research projects that are making a difference in communities and the lives of vulnerable populations. I hope you enjoy these exciting stories!

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

[ news ]

Creating a virtual classroom

When a paperwork mix-up caused Kate Barlow to miss her chance to enroll in the social work master’s program at USC, she had two options. She could wait around for another year, or she could start taking classes through the Virtual Academic Center.

She chose the VAC. The web-based master’s program launched just one year ago by the USC School of Social Work has experienced tremendous success, expanding throughout much of the United States and enrolling nearly 1,000 students.

For Barlow, who decided to stick with the program during her second year rather than commuting from Culver City to take classes on campus, the decision has paid off.

“My experience has been very, very favorable,” she said. “I’ve established relationships with students and faculty members. There is a rigor to it as much as there is on the ground.”

School officials emphasize that rigor when describing the program, in addition to distinguishing the VAC from other “online” programs that don’t feature virtual technology or live interaction between students and professors.

VAC director June Wiley, who also teaches

continued on page 9

[ inside this issue ]

Professor focuses research on impact of stressful experiences page 2
Project seeks to address issues facing military children page 4
Master’s student lends helping hand in remote Alaska villages page 8
University of Chicago in 1974, he began his graduate studies at UC San Diego. When his efforts to explore the racial strife between Chinese immigrants and indigenous populations in Malaysia failed due to political pressure and travel restrictions, Palinkas shifted his focus to Chinese immigrants in Southern California. Specifically, he became interested in how ministers in Chinese churches use their sermons as a form of therapy to help their congregations deal with the stress of migration and acculturation. Following a year of qualitative research in two churches, he penned a two-volume, 650-page dissertation that ultimately became a book on rhetoric and the religious experience in Chinese churches.

Despite his lengthy exploration of spirituality as a coping mechanism, Palinkas felt he didn’t truly get a handle on how vulnerable populations deal with stress and whether it became so debilitating they couldn’t function. Spurred on by this realization, he took a postdoctoral fellowship in psychiatric epidemiology at a naval research center in San Diego, where he began studying ethnic differences and health outcomes.
among service members.

Although they had access to the same health care system, he found that military personnel had varying rates of chronic disease, accidental deaths, violent deaths, and mental health disorders. Having completed his fellowship, Palinkas took a position as a research psychologist at the center and delved into cultural patterns and prior health influences among service members in an effort to better understand those health disparities.

During that time, his mentor at the research center, renowned psychologist Eric Gunderson, had been asked by NASA to use research on Americans stationed in Antarctica during the 1950s to help develop medical requirements for astronauts who would be spending extended amounts of time in space. As a young child in Canada, Palinkas had been interested in polar exploration and traced the routes of early arctic adventurers. Invited by Gunderson to assist with research in Antarctica, Palinkas expected that being separated from family and living in minus-100-degree temperatures with six months of darkness would have negative health consequences.

“I wanted to see just how bad living in these environments was from a health standpoint,” he said. “What I found was the exact opposite. Generally, people were healthier after the end of an experience like that.”

His findings led Palinkas on a series of trips to Antarctica to study personality characteristics and coping styles of polar expeditioners in an attempt to determine factors that improved their health rather than making them vulnerable to illness. That line of research carried over as he transitioned to the faculty at UC San Diego, where he spent 10 years in the Division of Family Medicine and another six years in the Division of International and Cross-Cultural Medicine.

Palinkas continued his research on health disparities and extreme environments during those years, but about 10 years ago his career path shifted somewhat when he was contacted by the directors of several mental health research centers. They were looking for an anthropologist who understood mental health issues and had a strong background in both qualitative and quantitative methods to train investigators in an increasingly popular approach: mixed-methods research.

He soon became involved with a study in San Diego involving a series of shootings in high schools, utilizing a mixed-methods strategy to explore how the community adjusted to trauma and how students, teachers, and parents coped with tragedy. Palinkas’s growing expertise in mixed-methods research led to a flood of different projects focused on the delivery of evidence-based practices in various settings, most prominently child welfare and mental health.

In the following years, he collaborated on studies in Oklahoma involving the implementation of an in-home parent training program by child welfare agencies and pioneered a research network on youth mental health that adapted various evidence-based practices for treatment of depression, anxiety, and conduct disorders.
[ conference ]

Spreading the word

SOCIAL WORK scholars and researchers from throughout China will gather in November at a conference co-organized by the USC School of Social Work to discuss how a new database of high-quality interventions can help the world’s most populous country address its pressing social challenges.

Hosted by the Population Research Institute at Southwestern University of Finance and Economics in Chengdu, Sichuan, the conference will focus on developing evidence-based solutions to problems related to population development. Organizers hope the gathering will spark the creation of a nationwide network of universities and human service agencies that supports the spread of effective and proven services.

“We want to initiate a conversation among these key players,” said Haluk Soydan, director of the Hamovitch Center for Human Services at the USC School of Social Work. In addition to inviting representatives from the top schools of social work in China, organizers are also bringing in social service agencies and leading policy makers.

China’s population development has led to a host of social issues, most notably problems related to rural-to-urban migration, overpopulation of cities, dissolution of family structures, and aging issues linked to the one-child policy.

By 2020, China will likely experience even more challenges due to the quickly aging population, Soydan said, and despite plans to improve health care for all populations, the country is also plagued by bureaucratic issues.

Soydan views a newly established portal—the Chinese Clearinghouse for Evidence-Based Practice and Policy—as

[ news ]

Project builds support for military children

A HIDDEN POPULATION exists within public schools throughout the United States. They are children from military families.

More than 2 million children have had a parent on active duty in the armed services since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began, including approximately 1.3 million currently in the school system.

These students and their families have shown tremendous strength and resiliency during the longest military conflict in U.S. history. The average military child moves nine times during their childhood. Some endure multiple deployments of one or both parents. Most demonstrate leadership skills, are quick to adapt to new environments, and often blend in with their peers at school.

However, a smaller but significant proportion has greater difficulty handling the impact of war on their family. These students may act out due to depression, anger, stress, or anxiety. And they are not always understood in terms of their family’s unique situation.

National studies consistently show that a significant proportion of these highly impacted students face an increased risk of bullying, substance use, dropout, and even suicide. There are many schools that have informally helped address the needs of military students, but their wisdom, knowledge, and skills need to be shared with the rest of the nation.

Ron Astor, a professor at the USC School of Social Work, is seeking to transform the way these students are supported within the school system. Through a $7.6 million project funded by the Department of Defense Educational Activity, USC is partnering with a consortium of eight school districts in San Diego and Riverside counties.

“We want to help share good ideas of what works in local and national military-connected schools so school staff can deal with the unique issues military children face,” Astor said.

The goal of the consortium, known as Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools, is to identify, develop, and ramp-up effective support programs for military children who deal with frequent relocation, parental deployments, and changing family structures.

Researchers are also gathering data from the perspective of students, parents, teachers, and school administrators about the specific needs of military families, and are using the information to support and create school environments designed to improve the social and academic outcomes of military-connected children.

The prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed increasing pressure on military families, and multiple recent studies have shown that children are more likely to have mental health problems if one of their parents has deployed just one time to Iraq or Afghanistan.

continued on page 5

A student at Temecula Elementary School waves a miniature American flag during a military appreciation ceremony. USC professor Ron Astor is seeking to increase awareness of issues facing children from military families.
For First Sgt. Darren Sullivan, leaving his family for long deployments has become a common theme. He has completed seven tours overseas, including stints in Somalia, Kuwait and Afghanistan, as well as three trips to Iraq.

“It’s definitely difficult—we deploy all the time,” said Sullivan, who has spent 21 years in the Marines. “I’m gone for seven months and my kids look at me like I’m a stranger. You have to build [those relationships] back up.”

Two of his daughters, 5-year-old Cailyn and 8-year-old Dara, attend Temecula Elementary School, where officials recently held a military appreciation day to honor active-duty soldiers, veterans, and their families. The school has approximately 50 children with parents in the armed services.

Pilar Byham, the school’s principal, said she was unaware of how many students at her school came from military families when she took the job three years ago. Since then, she has started seeking out ways to recognize those students and address any issues they might face.

“We’re already talking about plans for next year,” Byham said, adding that supporting new military students as they transition to the school will be a major goal.

Astor acknowledged that frequent relocation without support from the school system can be a stumbling block for some children, particularly when it comes to adapting to a new school, making new friends, and adjusting to different academic standards and curriculum.

“Many military-connected schools have huge transition rates,” he said.

Through lessons learned in the consortium, the Building Capacity team is developing a series of guides for teachers, principals, parents, and social services professionals outlining proven and effective practices that help military children make that transition smoothly, in addition to showcasing local and national programs that are successful in creating a supportive school environment for students from military families.

Other initiatives being pursued through the Building Capacity consortium include helping school districts map out resources for military families in their communities.

“There are services out there in local community agencies and on military bases, but some schools are not always aware of it,” Astor said. “Military school liaison officers do a wonderful job in connecting schools to resources, but every staff position in military-connected schools needs to be part of the effort to support military families.

“Some districts are not aware of how many military students they have,” he continued. “Working with school districts, the county, and military organizations to help coordinate that regional and national effort is critical.”

Getting universities involved is another major focus. More than 90 master’s students in social work, counseling, psychology, and education from USC and San Diego State University have worked or are working with schools in the consortium to support military families. This year, the consortium is encouraging nearly 100 undergraduate students from UC San Diego to offer tutoring assistance to military children and learn more about military culture through service learning projects.

Astor hopes to create a model for other universities to infuse military-related material into their curriculum to build a foundation of professionals who will be adept at addressing issues faced by children with parents in the armed services.

Staff Sgt. Jason Arredondo, a member of the 416th Civil Affairs Battalion of the U.S. Army Reserve, said he is encouraged by the show of support for military families. He recently returned from a tour in Afghanistan as a company medic and had previously been deployed to the East Coast to help wounded soldiers transition back to civilian life.

Due to deployments and training, he has missed out on much of his 8-year-old daughter’s experiences in first and second grade at Temecula Elementary School, as well as the early childhood of his 4-year-old son.

“I feel really guilty about it,” he said. “A lot of people just don’t know about the different things families go through during deployments.”

Britney Molina, a first-year master’s student in the USC School of Social Work, has been meeting with students at Temecula Elementary School since September, and said her presence has been well received by the community.

“The parents I’ve talked to have been very receptive,” she said. “They tell me how their continued on page 11
CRAMPED IN POOR working conditions and dispirited by the austere approach of their employers, workers in a Mexican garment factory were struggling with high levels of work-related stress. Their Korean managers, concerned about the productivity of the factory, felt the workers socialized too much and, due to cultural misunderstanding, perceived them as having a lazy mentality.

By the time a group of doctoral students from the USC School of Social Work arrived to assist faculty researchers with a study on communication and production processes, productivity had slowed to a crawl and discord between employees and managers had caused morale to plummet. The factory seemed to be destined for closure.

It would have been a serious blow to the small Mexican town, which derives much of its livelihood from the manufacturing plant.

“Every Mexican town has a manufacturing plant,” said Erica Lizano, a member of the student team that began working on the research project in 2008.

Lizano, a native Spanish speaker, noted that managers seemed most excited about implementing the new manufacturing process, which emphasizes efficiency and teamwork. In contrast to feedback from workers, they felt they had a solid understanding of Mexican culture.

“If this factory isn’t functioning, everyone is out of work,” said Erica Lizano, a member of the student team that began working on the research project in 2008.

Led by Michælle Mor Barak, a social work professor at USC, and several researchers from the USC Marshall School of Business, the study sought to address challenges in workplace management, cross-cultural miscommunication, and productivity. With funding from one of the factory’s contractors, a large U.S.-based sportswear company, the research team hoped to improve cross-cultural relationships and implement Lean production processes made famous by the automobile manufacturer Toyota.

“The students were involved at each and every stage of the process,” Mor Barak said.

Using information gleaned from a series of initial interviews with workers and management, Lizano and her fellow PhD students—Hsin-Yi Hsaio, Ahraemi Kim, and Min-Kyoung Rhee—began outlining areas of conflict.

Rhee, who is fluent in Korean, found that managers seemed most excited about implementing the new manufacturing process, which emphasizes efficiency and teamwork. In contrast to feedback from workers, they felt they had a solid understanding of Mexican culture.

“I could see there was a cultural miscommunication or misunderstanding,” Rhee said. “I think one of the key elements in the study was the cross-cultural piece.”

Lizano, a native Spanish speaker, noted that
workers found their Korean managers particularly distant. Poor balance between work and family life also had a negative effect on workers, who reported having little flexibility in terms of family leave or vacation. “One of the workers mentioned she had to leave her 8-year-old daughter at home alone,” Hsiao said. Few top managers spoke Spanish, she added, further complicating their relationship with employees.

Through training sessions that brought together managers and workers, the intervention team began addressing issues of workplace inclusion, stress, and cultural communication. Despite some struggles at first, the students and other researchers quickly became adept at translating between three languages, improving exchanges between management and employees.

“Being together in the cultural training session, they kind of naturally realized the similarities and differences in their cultures,” Rhee said.

Workers realized that their bosses in middle management also had to deal with work and family imbalance, as they also received limited vacation time and had few chances to travel home to Korea.

Other misunderstandings were resolved, such as a conflict between workers and one Korean manager in particular. Workers felt he rarely smiled and was blunt in his interaction with employees, causing them to feel intimidated, as well as concerned for his well-being.

“He was pretty moved by [their concern]. He didn’t know they felt that way,” said Rhee, adding that as a result of the emotional connections he made with the workers during the training, the manager made a concerted effort to be less intimidating and more friendly toward workers.

Production changes also had a positive impact on efficiency and morale at the factory. Instead of working on a typical sweatshop assembly line, with their backs to each other and surrounded by heaps of excess material, the workers clustered in teams and worked together in a neater environment, improving the flow of production and reducing waste.

In qualitative interviews following the cultural and Lean training sessions, Lizano said workers felt productive, more integrated as a team, and increasingly empowered to make suggestions to their managers without fear of reprisal. She was particularly surprised that they embraced stress management techniques such as mindful breathing and dance.

During the 18-month study period, the student team traveled to Mexico four times and stayed in modest dormitories at the factory. Despite the occasional lack of hot water and meager lodging, Mor Barak said the students remained professional, astute, and helpful. “We couldn’t have done it without them,” she said. “They were willing to work anytime, anywhere.”

With data collection completed, the team is focused on publishing and presenting their results at academic conferences. In particular, they are encouraged by the positive response to cross-cultural training and believe it to be an effective buffer against work-related stress in the garment production industry.

The doctoral team also noted that the results underscore the growing importance of the social work profession in promoting social and economic justice for vulnerable populations around the world. This is particularly critical in Mexico’s sweatshop industry, which employed an estimated 1.2 million workers in 2006 and is notorious for poor working conditions.

As large international corporations begin to shift toward corporate and social responsibility, the student team feels that social workers are uniquely positioned to develop and support the movement.
VAC master’s student finds unique field placement

Most students enrolled in the web-based master’s program at the USC School of Social Work either drive or take public transportation to their field placements.

Jennifer Williams takes a float plane.

The 29-year-old lives on the Alaskan island of Kodiak with her husband, a helicopter pilot in the Coast Guard. The remote destination, located roughly 250 miles to the southwest of Anchorage in the Gulf of Alaska, can only be reached by plane or ferry. Most residents carry guns to ward off hungry wildlife.

“You definitely get cabin fever, or I guess I should say island fever, living here,” Williams said by phone from the city of Kodiak, the island’s largest community with approximately 10,000 residents.

When she moved to the island a year and a half ago, Williams was unsure how she would pursue her goal of earning a master’s degree in social work. She had studied pre-law and political science at Michigan State University and worked in the court system in Florida and Alaska, but became discouraged with its one-size-fits-all approach to social services.

After reviewing a few other options, she settled on USC’s Virtual Academic Center (VAC). “USC seemed to be the best fit,” she said. “I really liked that they had a military subconcentration since my husband is active duty.”

But she had serious concerns about field work. Despite living on the largest Coast Guard base in the country, Williams was worried that the air station didn’t have enough personnel to meet the school’s requirements for a placement.

Then she discovered the Kodiak Area Native Association, a nonprofit corporation that provides health and social services to Alaska Natives in the city of Kodiak and six villages. As an intern working with the association’s psychologist, Williams is helping run an afterschool program for at-risk youth, meeting with pregnant women to offer counseling and discuss postpartum depression, and traveling to remote villages to conduct home visits.

“It’s not something I thought I would ever do, but it really is a wonderful group to work with and I really enjoy the experience,” she said. “It’s very humbling.”

The issues facing natives on the island are daunting. Depression, substance use, and other forms of trauma such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, and incest are not uncommon in the small, relatively isolated villages of the Alutiiq people.

During recent counseling sessions, Williams has helped native elders navigate the often labyrinthine process of applying for social security and disability benefits, as well as other services. Many of her clients have spent their lives working as commercial fisherman, and don’t have much experience dealing with forms and bureaucratic jargon.

“They are given a lot of services but many of them just don’t know how to utilize those services,” she said.

Williams also is working with a small group of native children who have risk factors for delinquency, substance use, and other unhealthy behaviors. Through an afterschool program, she is building relationships and working with youth to set positive goals.

Group discussions and activities provide a forum for the children to discuss issues they are facing and receive validation. Although Williams had been worried about being seen as an outsider, she said the group has welcomed her presence.

“They’ve been really receptive to me,” she said, adding that several students told her they appreciate her positive attitude and nonjudgmental approach.

In addition to her interest in social work policy, she said she has enjoyed VAC classes that focus on practice with individuals, and is looking forward to working one-on-one with clients through the native association.

“It’s very satisfying to help empower people, to give them that hope at the end of the day, especially for some of my older clients who come in so frustrated and so upset but leave with a sense of relief or hope or completion,” she said. “It’s very self-gratifying that I was able to make their day a little bit better.”

When weather allows, Williams will travel by float plane to outlying villages—typically consisting of 50 to 200 residents each—to meet with natives and conduct
in the web-based program, believes the VAC offers a number of outstanding elements to students, including state-of-the-art technology and exposure to the cutting-edge research at the Hamovitch Center. One dynamic feature is its live synchronous sessions, during which students log on with webcams and engage in face-to-face discussions with their professors and classmates.

“I think that’s made the biggest difference in terms of virtual teaching—that level of interaction,” Wiley said. “I find the students come to class well prepared and attentive and eager to learn, and it’s helpful to be able to communicate with such ease on the platform.”

Available in all but four states, in which approval is pending, the VAC offers a two-year full-time program, a three-year accelerated part-time program, and a four-year part-time option. As the center continues to increase enrollment and hire new adjunct faculty throughout the country, school officials said they hope to enroll 1,000 students a year in addition to hiring up to 200 part-time lecturers.

Classes have a small instructor-to-student ratio, and each student has a faculty advisor. A national field placement coordinator works with a team of specialists to ensure that students find an internship in their home community.

In addition to downloading course materials and other pertinent information through the platform, students log on once a week at specified lecture times. As students enter the “classroom,” their screens fill up with video feeds from other classmates and the professor.

“It looks like Hollywood Squares,” said R. Paul Maiden, vice dean of academic and student affairs. In addition to offering a quality education to those unable to attend USC in person, he said the virtual platform offers other advantages, such as highlighting groundbreaking research by senior Hamovitch professors.

“Students are getting exposed to social work researchers who are not always able to be in the classroom,” he said.

Although the school is planning to conduct research on learning outcomes between students who take classes on campus and through the VAC, Maiden said he has seen little difference in class quality between what he called the “ground” and the “cloud.”

In fact, some materials developed specifically for VAC courses are enhancing lectures held in brick-and-mortar classrooms, he said. For example, professors who teach courses on substance abuse have access to a series of video segments with a world-renowned addiction specialist who was interviewed in his office at Harvard University.

“We would have never been able to bring him here to campus,” Maiden said.

Other materials, such as audio presentations and case vignettes that follow a character through early adulthood into older age, are also available to professors on campus. The professionally produced content has proven particularly valuable to those in the VAC, including Barlow, who said she doesn’t have the opportunity to interact with people suffering from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or posttraumatic stress disorder.

“It gives us at least a taste of what interaction with an individual with those disorders would be like,” she said.

Wiley said professors are able to create a more captivating experience by interspersing videos and YouTube clips into their live discussions, in addition to bringing in the Hamovitch Center’s leading researchers for cameo appearances.

“It’s a wonderful way to present concepts and again provide that interactive experience that is engaging and lively for students,” she said.

Sam Mistrano, a clinical associate professor who teaches three classes in the VAC, said the experience is virtually the same as teaching a course in a traditional classroom. Other

continued on page 10

from page 8

home visits with those requiring assistance or referrals for services.

Climate is an ever-present factor, she said, noting that a recent planned trip to a village had to be canceled due to a major storm in northern Alaska that brought heavy snowfall to the island.

When she does travel to a village, she will bring a sleeping bag and a change of clothes, in the event she is stuck overnight due to inclement weather.

It has been a significant transition from Florida, where she lived with her husband prior to his transfer to Kodiak. Grocery stores on the island get weekly shipments via barge and it’s not uncommon for those shipments to be delayed or canceled, leaving residents without fresh fruit or produce for lengthy periods of time.

“Here you have to be much more careful,” Williams said. “If there is bad weather, which there is all the time, the barge is not going to come in that day. You really have to plan ahead.”

Although her husband gets to leave the island frequently due to his Coast Guard duties, Williams rarely makes it to the mainland more than once every six months.

She expects to remain in Alaska for another year and should be able to finish her master’s degree before her husband is transferred. She is entering her third semester as a part-time student in the VAC, and is focusing her studies on mental health with a military subconcentration.

She hopes to eventually work as a licensed clinical social worker with military or veterans populations on issues related to trauma.
than adjusting to shorter class periods and dealing with the occasional technical glitch, he hasn’t made any drastic changes to his teaching style.

However, he has noticed that students in the web-based program seem to be more self-reliant and are often professionals with experience in the field. “They seem to have a stronger sense of why they are in school,” Mistrano said.

Doni Whitsett, a clinical professor who has taught at USC for nearly 20 years, said she has also noticed subtle differences between web-based and ground classes.

“Building the relationships was slower, but once you get the hang of it, it’s actually a little more intimate,” she said.

She has found it easier to conduct roleplaying exercises during class due to a feature that allows her to pair off students in their own individual “rooms,” allowing her to move from one pair to the next without disturbing their interaction.

Some groups of students have been very engaged, even giving each other mock high-fives on the computer screen. Other classes have been more subdued, she said, with much less interaction than she would expect in traditional classrooms.

Whitsett also noticed more technical glitches when the VAC launched, but said most seemed to be the result of user errors and have largely been eliminated.

As a member of the first cohort to enter the program, Barlow said she expected the occasional technical issue.

“Anytime you are dealing with a new format of any sort, it’s not going to be a clean run all the way through,” she said.

Many of those issues have been resolved as students become more comfortable with the platform and professors adjust to using the technology, she said. Despite having the option to switch to ground classes, Barlow decided to avoid the hassle of driving to campus and trying to find parking.

Although she acknowledged she likely has less daily interaction with fellow students than if she went to campus, the 54-year-old said socializing is more of an undergraduate experience. In addition, the VAC program offers opportunities for students to get together outside of class for live video sessions and study groups.

With just one more semester before she completes the program, Barlow said she is looking forward to finding a job working with seniors in the mental health field. Asked whether she is worried that misperceptions about virtual education might hinder her job prospects, Barlow said she would simply explain to any potential employers that she had to complete the same coursework and meet the same ideals as any student on campus.

“USC had a very high standard to maintain and they had a lot to lose,” she said. “But they have produced a program that is very much the equivalent of what is on the ground. It is rigorous and the expectations are the same.”
in older children and young teens. Around the time he helped launch the research network, Palinkas was asked to help someone revise a federal grant proposal. That person turned out to be Kathleen Ell, a well-known professor at the USC School of Social Work.

Impressed by his qualitative expertise—his assistance helped secure funding for a major depression and diabetes project—Ell invited Palinkas to visit USC and meet with faculty and school leaders. “I think I was even more impressed with the potential, not only in working with faculty who had experience and knowledge in the kinds of research I was familiar with, but even the faculty in the clinical series who were not necessarily involved in research but whose potential involvement could be a great asset,” Palinkas said.

He joined the school as a professor in 2005 and immediately felt at home. “As much as I enjoyed being at UCSD—as a graduate student for six or seven years, then on the faculty for 16 years—I really felt as though I had found a purpose and a place at USC. I think a lot of it had to do with the sense of enthusiasm and excitement within the school itself, the strategy and innovation that the university had established as a whole, and the feeling that this is the place to be.”

In addition to continuing his diverse portfolio of research projects, Palinkas recently authored a book with Haluk Soydan, director of the school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services, on evidence-based practice, translational research, and mixed methods. He is already working on a follow-up book on the cultural divide between research and practice.

In the coming years, Palinkas will be developing a research cluster on behavioral health at USC and plans to focus on integrating health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment services. He is also interested in exploring a worldwide perspective on health—for example, how economic activity can affect mental health on a global scale.

“If you know what the specific issues are in each school, the school district doesn’t need this one-size-fits-all approach,” he said. “Maybe one school has an issue with bullying but another has an issue with afterschool supervision.”

It’s the same model Astor developed in the Israeli school system with his longtime colleague Rami Benbenishty, a professor at Bar-Ilan University in Israel; together, they are working to implement the model in France, Chile, and other nations. The approach has proven effective in Israel, which has seen a 25 to 50 percent drop in at-risk behaviors during the past decade, depending on the location and behavior.

When data is collected and presented at a state level, Astor explained, there is a sense of dissociation at each school site or grade level. Teachers and principals may feel that national or state-level data does not apply to their school or class. But when principals and teachers are given a grade-level look at issues such as school connectedness, resiliency, violence, and drug use—or that 35 percent of students in their school considered suicide during the past year, for example—they begin to see their role as educators in a new light.

“It changes the whole argument of why we’re here to educate these kids,” he said. “You know how much it means. You know how much pain and suffering you can alleviate, and you know those kids may be sitting right in front of you while you teach.”

In all, the Building Capacity project will reach an estimated 117,000 students, including 10 percent with parents in the military. Astor hopes that the ideas created through the program will spread throughout California and eventually the nation.
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.

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[ accolades ]

Professor Penelope Trickett has received the 2012 Excellence in Research Award from the Society for Social Work Research for her work on cortisol levels among victims of sexual abuse over time. The organization cited her rigorous approach, contribution to the field, and the critical nature of the problem as the basis for the award, which recognized her recent article, “Attenuation of Cortisol across Development for Victims of Sexual Abuse.”

In recognition of her dissertation examining injury mortality among maltreated children, the Society for Social Work Research has honored assistant professor Emily Putnam-Hornstein with the Outstanding Social Work Dissertation Award. Putnam-Hornstein combined birth and death records in California with child protective services data to create a unique data set that can be used to direct services to at-risk families.

Iris Chi has been named honorary associate director of the Sau Po Centre on Ageing at the University of Hong Kong in recognition of her career accomplishments and commitment to improving the quality of life and welfare of the elderly. Chi has served as a director of the center since 1999 and is currently the Chinese-American Golden Age Association and Frances Wu Chair for the Chinese Elderly at the USC School of Social Work. She also directs the school’s China Program and holds a joint appointment in the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

Associate professors Maria Aranda and Concepción Barrio have received special recognition from the Council on the Role and Status of Women in Social Work Education for their work on behalf of students and the social work profession. The council, a subcommittee of the Council on Social Work Education’s Commission on Diversity and Social Economic Justice, recognizes mentors who increase the visibility of women in social work education through its Mentor Recognition Fund.

[ grants ]

Assistant professor Michael Hurlburt recently secured $3.3 million in funding from the National Institute of Mental Health in partnership with UC San Diego professor Gregory Aarons for a five-year project to examine an evidence-based practice designed to address child neglect. The study will involve testing a new strategy to implement SafeCare, a parent training program shown to directly improve parent neglect behaviors and reduce staff turnover, in child welfare service networks. Specifically, the researchers will explore the effectiveness of using interagency collaborative teams to develop local expertise and teamwork among service providers in San Diego County.

Maryalice Jordan-Marsh, an associate professor with the USC School of Social Work, has received $235,307 from software firm Soar Tech to study the safety and effectiveness of a new role-playing game designed to improve the support of returning military service members. In a yearlong partnership with Marientina Gotsis and Mark Hantoot, who codirect the USC Creative Media & Behavioral Health Center, Jordan-Marsh will explore the pedagogical and psychosocial support outcomes of the PsychEd game, which seeks to educate the social network of individual service members such as family, friends, and peers about issues facing veterans and how they can help.

Research assistant professor Jan Nissly received $110,718 from the United States Veterans Initiative for an evaluation study of two programs at a transitional housing facility for veterans in Long Beach, Calif. The study, which runs through December 2013, will assess the Veterans Reentry Project, a 12-bed pilot program that offers comprehensive services to homeless and at-risk veterans, as well as the impact of outreach and service provision to veterans returning from recent deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Hamovitch P.I. is a publication of the USC School of Social Work. Send suggestions and comments to eric.lindberg@usc.edu