Students net unprecedented funding

Federal grants are becoming increasingly competitive, but four PhD students met the challenge.

A few years ago, having one PhD student secure a federal grant from the National Institutes of Health to support dissertation-related research would have been impressive. Now it’s becoming an expectation at the USC School of Social Work. This year, four students received dissertation awards, a prestigious honor that signals the beginning of a promising research career.

“These grants are difficult to get for a reason,” said Michalle Mor Barak, Dean’s Professor of Social Work and Business and outgoing director of the school’s doctoral program. “The selection committees are very rigorous in terms of the science behind the proposals. It’s not just about the funding either. It’s the recognition that your work is important.”

FUNDING | continued on page 10
A trio of new assistant professors joining the USC School of Social Work this fall is continuing the school’s trend toward diverse and interdisciplinary scholarship.

Daniel Hackman, Mónica Pérez Jolles and B.K. Elizabeth Kim have multifaceted research interests that range from exploring how early life socioenvironmental factors influence later risk of psychopathology and health problems to examining how to improve services and opportunities for vulnerable children and their caregivers.

“These three new assistant professors are highly skilled scholars whose innovative research represents a valuable contribution to the school,” said Haluk Soydan, dean for faculty affairs and senior fellow for global research impact.

“We are excited to welcome them to our faculty and look forward to helping them continue their development as outstanding independent researchers.”

Hackman grew up in Santa Monica in a family that emphasized social justice and equality, instilling a sense that he should do what he could to help people and improve the world.

After studying neuroscience at Brown University as an undergraduate, he returned to Los Angeles County General Hospital as a public health policy advocate involved in grassroots community organizing. In particular, he focused on seeking broad solutions to reduce children’s risk of developing chronic diseases.

“One of the formative aspects of that experience is that it really shaped how I see my work through a social justice lens,” Hackman said.

When examining rates of chronic disease and risk factors by legislative districts, it became clear that individuals living in areas with the most socioeconomic disadvantages had much higher risk.

“What is it about poverty and the different types of experiences people have growing up that shapes their development and risk of chronic disease?” he said. “Right now, we are learning more about how context influences psychological and neurobiological development, but the implications of that for health and the outcomes we care about for children and adolescents as they age are less known.

Intrigued by the interplay between early social and environmental experiences and later health and developmental outcomes, he pursued a doctorate in clinical psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and recently served as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholar at the University of Wisconsin.

During his studies and burgeoning research career, Hackman has continued to focus on two aspects of psychology and neurobiology: stress reactivity and child development. The former refers to how people respond to challenges in their environment, whereas the latter deals with how individuals regulate their responses to stress.

This unusual confluence of fields, including population health, sociology, psychology and neuroscience, left Hackman primed for a setting that would not only permit but encourage an interdisciplinary mindset.

“It’s certainly part of what drew me to USC,” he said. “I’m excited about the interest, openness and leadership in taking that transdisciplinary approach, both at the school and the university more broadly.”

In his new position, Hackman plans to continue exploring the connections among early experiences, psychology, neuroscience and human development, in addition to testing the use of virtual reality technology in his work.

In recent years, he has started developing virtual models of neighborhood environments, in collaboration with colleagues at ETTI-Florida. Today, he is real-time how different contexts and conditions can affect an individual’s response to stress and capacity to manage challenges. He hopes to continue and expand this work at USC.

“Something has always attracted me to bringing together different fields to address big questions,” Hackman said.

Similar to her new colleague, Pérez Jolles is also interested in issues of social justice, socioeconomic status and child development. Her research interests center on underserved children and caregivers, including racial and ethnic minorities and individuals with co-occurring physical and mental health problems.

A Colombia native, Pérez Jolles began her professional career in Bogotá after earning a doctorate in social policy from Santander University. She worked with families experiencing extreme poverty and limited access to basic services, many of whom had migrated from rural areas due to violence or lack of opportunities.

“The common denominator that struck me was the lack of access and isolation of these families,” she said. “I just found it extremely unfair. That certainly informed my efforts when I came to the United States.”

Pérez Jolles completed a master’s degree in psychology from North Carolina Central University. Based on her experience working in the community, she recognized the need to work with real policy makers and find practical solutions to the lack of health services access and quality for underserved families.

To that end, she obtained a doctorate in health policy and management from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and recently received a postdoctoral fellowship at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, where she focused on addressing health and social inequities by evaluating system capacity and individual-level interventions.

“I’m concerned with the quality of services that children and youth receive, especially those from low-income or racially and ethnically diverse back­grounds,” she said. “My research focuses on why and how safety-net agencies innovate and get communities and clients involved in innovation.”

Because social work is grounded in values of equality, social justice and inclusion, Pérez Jolles found it an ideal match for her research agenda. In particular, she is encouraged by the increasing focus on interdisciplinary collaboration in social work, in addition to USC’s strength in systems and organizational research.

As chair of the department, Hackman has dedicated resources for junior faculty members to move their research forward, including starting a lab in psychology focusing on developmental research, which forms an important steppingstone for health, psychology and vulnerable populations, such as children from disadvantaged backgrounds and individuals with co-occurring physical and mental health problems.

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Students showcase their research

**Once intimidating and foreign, research is slowly but surely becoming a common pursuit in the master’s program at the USC School of Social Work.**

During a recent symposium hosted by the Phi Alpha Honor Society, several master’s students described their recent forays into the research world, from spending time with chronically homeless individuals who had just received housing to refining an application for tablet computers designed to help older adults in Taiwan manage their diabetes.

“As a social worker, research is very important because that’s how we learn more about vulnerable populations,” said Sumala Haque, the honor society’s research liaison. “We try to find solutions, and without research you don’t know.”

The success of developing programs and preventive measures that are effective at addressing social problems depends largely on rigorous scientific studies, she explained. Events like the student research symposium are also critical to the success of the school, and not only because of new national accreditation guidelines for schools of social work that call for getting master’s students involved in research.

“Schools must develop ways of engaging master’s students in research that is effective and makes a difference,” said Charles Kaplan, research professor and associate dean of research at the USC School of Social Work. “Phi Alpha has taken the lead in helping students do research that is real — not just a class assignment or term paper but really integrated into a research program that results in publications and grants.”

He noted that the quality of the student symposiums — this was the second spring event — has led school leaders to provide additional resources to help the honor society inverte more students in research culture. “This is a student movement,” Kaplan said. “If it’s going to succeed, it’s not going to come from the administration or the faculty but students seeing the value of this experience and the value of research in their professional career development.”

One student leading the charge is Huang Pham, president of Phi Alpha at USC and a second-year MSW student. She entered the master’s program with little interest in research until she joined the honor society, which recognizes and promotes outstanding scholarship and student achievement in social work.

“She certainly wasn’t planning to pursue a doctorate, which she is now considering after becoming involved with a research project assessing the needs of homeless women living in the Skid Row area and other regions of downtown Los Angeles. “Every student has to take a research course, but nobody talks about what you can do with that knowledge — how it translates into your profession and what you can do with it on the side,” she said.

Pham encouraged her fellow students to look for research opportunities, not only because of the experience of engaging in a real-world study and presenting findings at events like the student symposium but also because understanding how research evolves serves as a foundation for practice.

“There is an importance in talking about research and how impactful it can be. One is the only way you can talk about and solve issues in if you have evidence, which comes from research.”

Unlike Pham, Siying “Shelley” Wang joined the master’s program with a strong desire to get involved in research. In fact, the first-year MSW student began volunteering as a member of Associate Professor Shinyi Wu’s research team, which is developing and testing a program on tablet computers that might help Taiwanese older adults manage their diabetes and related health issues.

While taking a user experience design class at UCLA Extension prior to entering the MSW program, Wang stumbled across a description of Wu’s project and thought it might be a good opportunity to practice her new skills. She emailed the associate professor and asked if she could volunteer, explaining that she could help evaluate and test the functionality of the diabetes self-care app from the user perspective.

“She let me sit in on the research meetings,” Wang said. “I just took the initiative to suggest doing user testing on the app. Through this project I demonstrated my passion for research and technical skills, so they brought me on as a research assistant.”

When she heard that Caroline Lim, a PhD student who is evaluating treatment and recovery among Asian Americans with schizophrenia as her dissertation project, needed master’s students who could speak Chinese or Vietnamese, Wang jumped at the opportunity.

After two months of training on the research process and how to evaluate symptoms of schizophrenia, the Shanghai native has been helping Lim collect data on bar- riers and facilitators of recovery, including envisioning what participants understand and complete the informed consent process.

Wang plans to earn her clinical license in social work and practice in the field after graduating, although she didn’t rule out pursuing a doctorate at some point. Regardless of her ultimate career path, she is confident that developing research skills and knowledge of the evidence base behind clinical practices will be valuable.

“Research is essential, especially to clinicians,” she said. “It helps clinicians not only become more accountable and consistent in their practice, but also demonstrate how clinical practices play a role in fostering social change.”

In fact, the first-year MSW student is particularly interested in pursuing research on trauma experienced during migration.

During her field placement with the Los Angeles Unified School District, she helped develop a support group for undocumented immigrants and their families, particularly youth who had migrated during the previous 3 months and spoke little English.

“I’ve seen some articles, but I feel there isn’t enough research about the trauma of migration and how it’s affecting their assimilation and quality of life,” she said.

The issue is also personal for Palma, whose parents both immigrated to the United States in the 1980s to escape civil war in Central America.

“I’ve seen how that trauma has played out in their lives,” she said. “It’s not something we talk about, but now that I have this education and trauma lens, I am able to understand it better. A lot of the youths I’m seeing now have had similar experiences.”

She also is helping Lim with her study on schizophrenia and Asian Americans, many of whom are first-generation immigrants and have similar struggles with assimilation and trauma.

Palma said conducting research with these vulnerable groups can help her and other students gain a better understanding of their challenges and needs.

“Most of us are going to be on the front lines, working with these populations that don’t have a voice or someone to advocate for them,” she said. “We can advocate for them, we can advocate for policy change, we can advocate for funding.”

She added that she is grateful for the opportunity to share some of the lessons she has learned during the student symposium and is hopeful that the work of the honor society and school leaders will encourage other MSW students to collect their own data and give similar presentations.

“I’ve grown so much in the program, personally and professionally,” she said. “It has research and technical skills, so they brought me on as a research assistant.”

Gilma Palma, a second-year master’s student in social work, speaks with an attendee following a student research symposium. She is interested in exploring the effects of trauma during migration.

First-year MSW student Siying “Shelley” Wang discusses her work on a research team evaluating the use of technology to improve diabetes self-care among older adults in Taiwan.

Siying “Shelley” Wang, first-year MSW student at USC, talks about her work on a research team evaluating the use of technology to improve diabetes self-care among older adults in Taiwan.
Is pop culture perpetuating rape culture?

A new research study delved into a frequently unpalatable environment, the comment section of online news articles, to explore public attitudes toward rape and sexual assault.

Led by Kristen Zaleski, a clinical assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work, and Kristin Kay Gundersen, a research fellow who recently completed her MSW at the USC School of Social Work, examined public attitudes toward sexual assault and rape following online news articles.

"People would say it’s OK for a young boy to be sexually assaulted by an older woman, but it’s not OK for a young girl to be sexually assaulted by an older man," she said. "It definitely changed my perspective on how society views this as acceptable."

It has also changed how she engages in discussions of sexual assault and rape. Estupinian has several friends in the military and had even considered joining herself; now when they discuss sexual assault in the armed forces, she is more forceful in expressing her opinions and confronting others who contend that women should not serve in combat roles.

"I probably wouldn’t have challenged them as much," she said. "I’ve heard them talk about this before, but I would just say, oh, that sucks. Now I tell them that it’s not OK."

"I think it has changed," Vergara said. "I have always been especially sensitive to issues surrounding sexual assault, partly because by her late teens she knew about a dozen women who had been raped."

"It had already touched me through the people I know and love," she said. "When people make comments in that vein, I always call them on it right away."
**Professor selected for national mentoring program**

**ONE OF USC’S foremost experts on homelessness and HIV/AIDS will share her knowledge with promising scholars as part of a prestigious national mentoring initiative.**

Suzanne Wenzel, the Richard M. and Ann L. Thor Professor in Urban Social Development at the USC School of Social Work, has been selected by the American Psychological Association to participate in its Cyber Mentors program. The project is designed to prepare doctoral-level behavioral and social scientists for an independent research career focused on HIV/AIDS among vulnerable populations, including racial and ethnic minority communities.

“I see this initiative as critical because persons of color are disproportionately burdened by the AIDS epidemic, as are gay and bisexual men and people living in poverty and homelessness,” Wenzel said. “This over-representation among people of color has persisted since the early 1980s; they make up the majority of people living with and dying from AIDS.”

As a researcher, Wenzel has devoted much of her career to exploring and addressing the health-related needs of vulnerable individuals, particularly those experiencing homelessness in urban settings. She will work with a protégé in the Cyber Mentors program, offering one-on-one consultation, crafting an individualized career development plan and reviewing research proposals and manuscripts.

The two-year program also features online seminars that address issues related to research, methods and ethics relevant to developing a successful independent research career. According to the American Psychological Association, a major goal of the initiative is to increase the number of underrepresented scholars and researchers interested in exploring HIV/AIDS issues. EAPs are generally intended to help employees address personal issues that might affect their job performance, such as substance abuse, work-related stress, financial or legal problems and work-family balance. They typically involve services like short-term counseling and referrals to other health or mental health providers. Although the programs have flourished among U.S. businesses for decades, they are relatively new to the international scene.

Maiden has witnessed the model expand in popularity worldwide since the 1990s, when he worked in the South African mining industry to develop an EAP for serious drug and alcohol problems, workplace violence and HIV/AIDS issues. He later helped launch a similar program in the Russian oil fields and ultimately received two Senior Fulbright Scholar awards related to his work in both countries. As international companies have begun embracing the idea and professional organizations for EAP providers emerged, Maiden said demand increased for guidance on how to adopt EAPs in new, diverse settings.

Maiden has also addressed the challenge of working in countries where the standards are often different from the ones he is accustomed to. He said, “I was working in a country where the standards were really high, and the companies were very, very international. It was a real challenge to do the work there.”

**How can global businesses support their employees?**

A new book examines how companies in diverse international settings can assist their employees with personal problems that adversely affect performance and productivity.

*Global Perspectives of Employee Assistance Programs* is the first book to explore the employee assistance program (EAP) concept in the international context, said R. Paul Maiden, executive vice dean and professor at the USC School of Social Work.

“There has been enormous growth in this field in the global marketplace,” said Maiden, who coedited the book. “These companies all have the same problems we do, but there are people out there doing a lot of different things we aren’t doing in the United States.”

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**BOOK | continued on page 12**

**FACULTY | from page 3**

Kim is also interested in child and youth development, specifically in terms of prevention and intervention efforts that promote social, behavioral and emotional health and reduce delinquency and violence during adolescence.

As an undergraduate at UCLA, she volunteered at Camp Kilpatrick, a youth probation program in the Santa Monica Mountains. Once a week, she traveled to the camp to tutor young men who were preparing for their high school exit exam.

One 17-year-old stood out to her in particular. He had made tremendous progress in the program but seemed to become more fearful as his release date approached. She was worried he would return to his neighborhood and fall back into his old habits.

“That made me really think about what we could do outside of these locked-up facilities, what we could do outside of prying these young men so they don’t end up coming back,” Kim said. “That pushed me toward social work.”

While completing her MSW at the University of Michigan, Kim conducted a yearlong ethnographic study of expatriates in the complex journey of homeless pregnant and parenting teenagers. Witnessing young women who faced homelessness, domestic violence, foster care, expulsion and other negative outcomes opened her eyes to the importance of prevention.

She collaborated with a local homeless shelter to secure funding for a science-based prevention program that mobilizes community coalitions to promote healthy youth development. Although she enjoyed working at the grassroots level, Kim felt drawn to policy work as she entered the doctoral program at the University of Washington.

“I needed to do something on the macro or level,” she said. “Clinical work is really important, but I wanted to have a broader impact, to use research to inform policy and practice.”
This year, the program launched a new course focused on grantwriting, with a specific emphasis on seeking dissertation funding from the National Institutes of Health. For Gibbs, who is receiving approximately $107,000 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the funding support will enable him to test a new strategy that may improve the ability of researchers to recruit young adults who identify as sexual minorities to participate in research studies.

“Having four students get great scores and funding shows our school is becoming really competitive, not just as a social work school, but as a school of social and health research. It also means we are able to do cutting-edge research, but it also means our students are graduating and have the potential to go to schools that are very competitive and well respected.”

That has been Mor Barak’s vision since she took the helm of the doctoral program seven years ago. She instituted a three-pronged approach to promoting a culture of rigorous research, starting with what she termed as socialization into the intellectual community by holding seminars and creating teams of graduate students, postdoctoral scholars and peers. This helps them transition from students to researchers and scientists, Mor Barak said, an identity formation process that constitutes the second element of their preparation to be independent scholars.

Finally, the school fosters an interdepartmental community by holding seminars and creating teams of mentors to guide doctoral students through their coursework and dissertation work.

“The goal is to set our doctoral students on a trajectory that is based in rigorous scientific research.”

Michelle Mor Barak

In particular, he is interested in exploring causes of mental health disparities and substance abuse among lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young adults. However, previous studies that have examined these issues among young men who have sex with men, for example, primarily relied on samples recruited from gay venues. “If you are interested in studying substance use in a population and the places you are going to recruit them are gay bars, it suggests that maybe you are dealing with a sample that is fairly biased,” Gibbs said. “Are we really developing interventions that respond to the full population of men who have sex with men, or are they only focused on men who happen to go to bars?”

Advances in technology during the past decade now mean that many of these individuals no longer need to visit those types of places to interact with peers, particularly with the advent of social networking applications like Grindr that allow individuals to connect based on geographic proximity.

Gibbs is testing a new method of recruitment that relies on these apps to identify and invite potential study participants. His working hypothesis is that the strategy will result in a different, perhaps more representative sample of young men who have sex with men than venue-based sampling. He will also test the cost effectiveness and recruitment efficiency of the new approach.

Although he has already started the project with a small pilot grant from the Behavior, Health, and Society research cluster at the USC School of Social Work, the federal award will enable him to purchase hardware, hire student workers for project support, provide participant incentives and develop a panel of experts to advise him during the two-year funding period.

Similarly, Brimhall’s dissertation research is already underway thanks to support from the school’s Management, Organizations and Policy Transformation cluster. A grant from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality will allow her to extend the study and collect much more data. “It’s huge deal to this funding, because it means my ideas can be marketable and potentially valuable to others,” she said. “I also wanted this award to be longitudinal and I wanted to do qualitative interviews, but I had no money for participant incentives. If I didn’t get this funding, I wouldn’t have been able to collect any more data.”

Her project delves into issues of diversity and inclusion among staff members in a particular department at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. She is conducting surveys with frontline employees, supervisors and administrators to determine whether inclusive leadership can lead to increased job satisfaction, innovation and improved quality of care.

Although these concepts of inclusion and transformational leadership have been anecdotally linked with improved morale, performance and commitment, Brimhall said little empirical research has been conducted on the topic, particularly in the strongly hierarchical context of the hospital environment.

“Nobody really knows what inclusive leadership means,” she said. “She credited the school’s emphasis on preparing its doctoral students to apply for federal grants for her success in securing a dissertation award, particularly a series of presentations from former PhD students and staff members at the school’s organized research unit, the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services.

“That helped give me a very realistic view of the process,” Brimhall said. “I don’t think it would have been awarded without this large team helping me.”

Support from the school also helped Petering polish a grant proposal that received a perfect score on its second submission. After hovering in bureaucratic limbo following an unexpected change in funding priorities related to HIV/AIDS research, the award money recently came through.

In addition to a rigorous mock review led by the Homelessness, Housing, and Social Environment research cluster, Petering received guidance from dozens of faculty members and consultants as she developed her proposal.

“They provide so much support,” she said. “I feel they are invested in training me to become an independent scholar, and they really treat me as a peer. I haven’t heard of people in other programs that have received as much support as this.”

Her dissertation focuses on home- less youth who are involved or affiliated with gangs, a subpopulation that has received little attention from researchers despite significantly
Knowing these are two extremely at-risk grants, 8 percent of youths are gang members, whereas those figures are closer to 17 and 33 percent are considered gang-affiliated and marginalized populations, what does this intersection mean?”

Robin Petering

GRANTS | from page 11

higher rates of gang involvement among homeless adolescents and young adults.

In the general population, an estimated 8 percent of youths are gang members and 33 percent are considered gang affiliates, whereas those figures are closer to 17 percent and 56 percent, respectively, in the homeless population.

“We know homeless youths and those who are gang involved are at high risk of a lot of negative outcomes,” Petering said. “Knowing these are two extremely at-risk and marginalized populations, what does this intersection mean?”

Her research examines how social networks and connections to gang-involved peers relate to risk behaviors, including depression, suicidal ideation, posttraumatic stress disorder, heavy drug use and sexual risk. She is also interested in protective factors that promote resilience in the face of these negative consequences.

With her federal funding now officially approved, Petering will be able to complete more in-depth interviews with homeless youths and present her results at conferences, in addition to attending workshops and classes to build her research skills.

“Just the experience of writing the proposal, revising it, and submitting it sets me up to move forward as a junior faculty member,” she said. “I definitely want to continue pursuing this research and building myself up as an independent scholar.”

Sullivan is also working toward an independent research career after netting a one-year grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. She is gaining rare access to administrative data from the U.S. Army to complete her dissertation, a benefit of being associated with the school’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR).

“I’m interested in how families cope with the risk factors they face as part of military deployment and larger stressors that military families deal with,” she said.

Pairing data gleaned from a reintegration and resilience training program completed by all Army service members with information on deployment history, medical records, relocations and other family-related factors will allow her to consider how military life affects the spouses and children of service members.

Sullivan received a perfect score on her proposal, an outcome she credited to the support of faculty members who conducted an internal review before she submitted the application. In addition to acknowledging the help of Carl Castro, CIR’s director, she recognized Associate Professor Michael Hurlburt for his one-on-one tutoring during the process.

“He was incredibly instrumental in shaping the proposal I submitted,” she said. “He wanted us to reach out to faculty members we normally wouldn’t have contact with to get their feedback.”

As part of her dissertation, Sullivan developed a training plan and formed partnerships with scholars outside of the USC School of Social Work, including a faculty member in the USC Department of Psychology and a senior researcher at UCLA, a network she plans to draw on in the future as she launches her career.

BOOK | from page 9

mistakes of U.S. businesses, Maiden noted. When supportive programs for employees first appeared in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, they typically focused only on substance abuse problems and were informally overseen by recovering alcohol or drug addicts as part of their recovery process.

It wasn’t until the 1970s that occupational social workers recognized the emerging area of practice and introduced a broader focus on work and family well-being.

“Overseas companies came into the picture when the field had already been professionalized,” Maiden said. “As they emerged and matured, they had a more holistic approach, they were much more work and life focused and they were more focused on health and wellness.”

Illustrating the diverse array of global approaches to EAPs, the book features articles on topics ranging from employee support programs for indigenous populations within nations, evaluation of employee counseling services in the Chinese workplace and substance abuse intervention at a large Russian manufacturing worksite.

Maiden said this broad cross-section of how the EAP model is being deployed in different cultures and work settings should prove valuable to students, employers and professionals interested in workplace behavioral health and well-being from a global perspective.

The book is coedited by David Sharar, managing director of domestic and international EAP provider Chestnut Global Partners, and available from Routledge.