APU has nearly 400 students pursuing degrees in seven doctoral programs. The following are summaries of just a few of these students’ dissertation research.

April 2009

Plant Trees, Save Lives:
Stephen Fitch, DMin,
Explains How the Church Resolves the Deforestation Crisis

TITLE:
A Convenient Answer to an Inconvenient Truth: How the Church Provides a Solution to the Global Environmental Deforestation Crisis
by Stephen Paul Fitch

Trees absorb carbon emissions and release oxygen, an essential process for keeping the world’s ecosystem in balance and preventing the escalation of catastrophic climate change. Over the past few decades developing countries like Ethiopia, Stephen Fitch (DMin, December 2008) says, where as much as 90 percent of land is deforested, have fallen into cycles of drought, famine, and poverty.

Fitch is president of Eden Projects, a reforestation ministry operating in Ethiopia, Madagascar, Kenya, and by the end of the year Haiti. (To see videos on its work, visit www.edenprojects.org.) Using the phrase “Plant Trees, Save Lives,” the organization has “demonstrated beyond question that a church group can plant millions of trees in a highly cost effective manner.”

They are successfully reforesting, he said, at a cost of about 10 trees for a dollar. By comparison, the UN reforestation programs, the largest in the world, charge at least a dollar a tree.

A growing percentage of the more than 11.5 million Christian missionaries and their national co-workers, Fitch says, “are living in the real world consequences of deforestation.” This ministry force is calling for “creation care” to be added to the holistic ministry agenda or the church will be limited to disaster management in the future in these needy nations.

“The Church has a solution to the third world deforestation crisis...Jesus said ‘go out into all the world’ and we did. Our potential to positively impact the deforestation crisis is enormous.”

They Call It ‘Funk’:
Keneshia Bryant, PhD, Nursing,
Uncovers the Language African American Men Use to Describe Their Depression

TITLE:
The Impact of Depression on Middle-aged African American Men: A Grounded Theory Approach
by Keneshia Bryant

When in it, they isolate themselves, they experience physical and mental changes and strained interpersonal relationships, and they mask their true feelings.

What is “it”? African American men often call it “funk,” but in reality, it is most likely Major Depressive Disorder (MDD),” a serious condition requiring medical treatment. But such men probably won’t get treatment because “there is a disconnect between what African American men experience and their understanding of depression,” concludes Keneshia Bryant (PhD, Nursing, December 2008).

“Depression is more complex than the list of symptoms we use to diagnose it,” Bryant explains, “People from different genders, ethnicities, and generations may use different terminology to describe [their] depression.”

When patients express themselves differently than textbook definitions, Bryant says, the patient may be misdiagnosed, and treatment may be delayed— or not prescribed at all.
“How we currently diagnose persons with MDD may actually cause us to under-diagnose,” she concludes. She suggests that healthcare providers need to “approach MDD from a broader view” and “listen to patients and allow them to express themselves, respecting them as unique individuals that may express depression in different ways.”

For her study, Bryant interviewed 10 African American males between the ages of 35 and 65 with a history of MDD.

She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock.

Is Good Leadership Perceived as Male?
Shawna Lafreniere, PhD, Higher Education, Studies the Lack of Women Leaders in Evangelical Christian Colleges and Universities

TITLE: Navigating the Labyrinth: A Study of Gender and Positional Effects on Individuals’ Perceptions of Ideal Leadership Qualities within Evangelical Higher Education by Shawna L. Lafreniere

It’s a startling statistic: only three percent of evangelical Christian college and university presidents are women compared to 23 percent at public and 33 percent at Catholic college and universities. Overall, in the 105 member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) only 16.5 percent of cabinet level positions are held by women.

Shawna Lafreniere (PhD, Higher Education, December 2008) wants to get at why. So she studied the leadership perceptions of 1,032 faculty, staff, and administrators at five CCCU member institutions.

Her conclusions? “Basically, men and women viewed ideal leadership qualities very similarly regardless of the type of leadership position being rated,” Lafreniere said. The significance, she said, is that “since men and women view ideal leadership qualities similarly and have the same expectations for leader roles, there should be no perceived barriers for women to enter high-level leadership positions in evangelical Christian higher education.”

Lafreniere’s research did not address why there were so few women in evangelical Christian higher education. She said it’s probably not because there aren’t enough qualified women, known as the “pipeline issue.” “Plenty of women have the experience and credentials needed to succeed. There is some truth, however, that many women lack the confidence to serve at this level,” she said.

Lafreniere, currently an adjunct professor at APU teaching leadership studies, hopes to replicate her research with public universities and colleges.

What’s Hope Got to Do with It?
Marie Wisner, PhD, Higher Education, Finds It is the Strongest Predictor of Effective Leadership in Students

TITLE: Psychological Capital and Strengths Ownership as Predictors of Effective Student Leadership by Marie Diane Wisner

Several emerging theories of college student leadership suggest that a student’s awareness of his or her strengths contributes to effective leadership practices, but until now no research has been done to confirm that strengths awareness makes someone a better leader.

Marie Wisner (PhD, Higher Education, December 2008) decided to investigate whether or not students’ awareness of their strengths and their “psychological capital” would make them more effective leaders. By strengths she meant those defined by Tom Rath’s book StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Gallup Press, 2007), and by psychological capital as that defined by Fred Luthans, Carolyn Youssef and Bruce Avolio in their book Psychological Capital: Developing the Human Competitive Edge (Oxford University Press, 2006): “an individual’s positive psychological state of development that is characterized by four things: confidence, optimism, hope, and resiliency.” (http://gmj.gallup.com/content/25708/Hope-Optimism-Other-Business-Assets.aspx)

In her study of 153 students in leadership positions at five colleges and universities, Wisner found that “hope was the strongest predictor of students’ self ratings of effective leadership and that strengths awareness was not a significant predictor” in her research model. Efficacy and optimism were also shown to be significant predictors.

“These findings are significant for higher education professionals working in leadership development programs,” commented Wisner. “Helping students to increase their levels of hope, efficacy and optimism may result in more effective leadership practices.”
Wisner is as an associate dean of students at Bethel University, St. Paul, MN, leading student development programs and services and teaching the leadership minor there.

After Sunday School:
Robin Dugall, DMin,
Studies How to Turn More Teen-age Disciples into Long-term Leaders

TITLE:
The Formation of a Spiritual Leader: A Diversified Strategy for Adolescent Spiritual Leadership Development
by Robin J. Dugall

After completing his dissertation on how teenagers in youth ministry programs develop into life-time disciples and leaders in the Christian faith, Robin Dugall (DMin, December 2008) says the verdict is in: They don’t – or at least not as often as they need to for the future of the faith.

“A new praxis is needed for youth to be able to develop and mature spiritually,” Dugan concludes. “That praxis must focus on a diverse strategy of pedagogies that take youth’s cognitive and spiritual potential seriously as well as adopt a program that is more concerned with student’s long-term involvement in the faith and not on short-term participation.”

In addition, Dugall argues, “studies are demonstrating an alarming non-orthodoxy of beliefs that are affecting individual and communal religious praxis.”

Dugall asserts that “classic spiritual disciplines must be taught, intentional community must be developed, and an intentionality of challenge for world difference making must be communicated consistently to youth as they grow.”

Dugall’s research is based on a review of currently used youth ministry spiritual development materials as well as surveys and questionnaires of more than 600 students of the Youth Leadership Institute of the Lilly Endowment Program that was part of the APU community from 2003 to 2007.

Active in youth ministry for 30 years, Dugall is an adjunct professor in the APU Biblical Studies Department and a creative consultant to a Christian media company that produces discipleship materials for students.

Tobacco Use Among Arab Americans:
Research by Najood Azar, PhD, Nursing, Shows In a Culture that Uses Smoking to Socialize, the Barriers to Quitting are Greater than Benefits to Quitting

TITLE:
Health Beliefs, Acculturation and Tobacco Use among Arab-Americans Living in California
by Najood G. Azar

Tobacco use is prevalent in the Arab American culture, with smoking rates higher than the general U.S. population, especially among the men. In a study of 132 Arab Americans in southern California, Najood Azar (PhD, Nursing, October 2008) found that despite significant awareness of the health risks from its use, tobacco use was still high.

In addition, she said, even among the more highly educated, “barriers surrounding tobacco cessation were greater than the benefits of quitting and those with lower levels of acculturation had higher levels of tobacco use” no matter how long they had lived in the U.S.

She offered several explanations. First is the fact that tobacco use, especially with a narghile or water pipe, is an accepted, culture-bound social activity. “For some families,” she said, “smoking the narghile is …often shared with guests as a form of hospitality.”

Along with that, she said, is a common misconception that narghile smoking is not as harmful as cigarette smoking.

The Arab culture, she said, “emphasizes both fatalism and reliance on God’s will, but disease prevention programs in the U.S. emphasize the individual’s role in health promotion.”

Her study, she said, supports the idea that culturally sensitive tobacco cessation programs should be tailored to meet the needs of this high risk population.

Azar is a clinical registered nurse at Loma Linda University Children’s Hospital in a pediatric medical-surgical ICU unit, caring for children who are critically ill and typically on ventilators, dialysis machines, and other critical care equipment.

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