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

May 2010

Peer Helping Programs: When Students Care for Each Other, Academic Achievement Goes Up, Bullying Goes Down

by Jonathan Lee Hurst, Ed.D.

Bullying at school not only traumatizes the victims, but it has far-reaching effects on an entire school. Academic achievement suffers, and all students are at risk for failing to learn appropriate social behaviors, failing to learn respect, and failing to embrace the values of diversity and tolerance.

High schools across the country are trying various “peer helping” programs to teach students appropriate behaviors in order to improve student relationships, and in turn improve the learning environment and enhance academic achievements. One such pilot program, Students Teaching Acceptance and Respect (STAAR), was developed four years ago at high school in southern California. For his doctoral work, Jonathan Lee Hurst evaluated the STAAR program to see how well it worked.

“As it turned out, this program is much more than a program evaluation of a peer helping program…It is evidence that a democratic approach to discipline can be effective. It demonstrates how a cadre of trained students can have a positive effect on the environment and climate of an entire school,” Hurst wrote.

Over the four years of the program, he said, there were “significant school-wide decreases in fighting, disrupting, and defiance.” The school’s D/F rate also steadily decreased over four years, and the academic achievement for the participants in the STAAR program improved significantly.

As for bullying, “Incidents of bullying decreased and students’ attitudes about bullying changed significantly,” becoming “less tolerant of bullying and more likely to take a stand against bullying.”

Hurst called his study of the STAAR program “a testament to the positive benefits of student empowerment.” He plans to “continue to work on increasing the caring environment at my school and on moving the school more toward a democratic approach to discipline.” Both, he has concluded, will increase student achievement.

Hurst is currently principal of Elsinore High School in southern California.

If You Can’t Exercise, Maybe You Should Laugh Instead – Study Shows Watching Humorous Videos Lowers Cholesterol and Systolic Blood Pressure

TITLE: Laughercise: Health Benefits Similar to Exercise Lowers Cholesterol and Systolic Blood Pressure
by Jeff Brascia, DPT, and Tenay Cox, DPT

Laughter may not be the best medicine, but it certainly seems to be good medicine. That’s one apparent conclusion reached by the doctoral research of Jeff Brascia and Tenay Cox.

Cox and Brascia tested 14 college students before and after 20 minutes of “laughercise,” the
“cinematic viewing of a humorous or comical video which induces the physiological response of mirthful laughter.” They measured both total cholesterol and systolic blood pressure.

Both levels were “significantly lower” in the students after they watched a humorous video compared to their levels before they watched.

“It was our hypothesis that laughter-induced alterations of the neuroendocrine and immune systems would have an effect on blood pressure response and cholesterol levels much like physical exercise,” they wrote. “The findings of our study support that viewing a humorous video for 20 minutes, with an associative response of mirthful laughter, produced a significant and immediate reduction in both systolic blood pressure and total cholesterol levels.”

In fact, the change in levels were “similar to the health benefits obtained from performing physical exercise as outlined by previous studies,” they wrote.

The study compared the laughercise results to those obtained after the participants watched a distressful video, a 20-minute segment from Saving Private Ryan. They discovered that “these responses were not observed after viewing a distressful video.”

**Literature Review Suggests Better Mental Health Services for African Americans Depends on Greater Collaboration with the Black Church**

**TITLE:**
*The Role of the Black Church in Fulfiling the Therapeutic Needs of the African American Population: A Review of the Literature*
by Davitta R. Love, Psy.D.

Throughout their long history first as an enslaved population, then as a persecuted minority, the African American community has developed and depended upon the multidimensional framework of the Black church as a source for comfort, support, well-being, community, and identity. In addition, the Black church has been and continues to be one of the chief methods by which the African American community has achieved transcendence in its darkest periods of oppression.

Despite its powerful and pervasive presence in African American identity and life, the influence of the Black church is still largely unrecognized by mental health professionals, concludes Davitta R. Love (Psy.D., 2010). In fact, the Black church may be interpreted as a barrier to African Americans seeking professional therapeutic services and a competitor, rather than a collaborator in the therapeutic process.

In trying to work with the African American community, Love explained, “One of the difficulties many therapists experience is how to understand the history of African Americans’ past and how African Americans view themselves today.” There is a significant gap, she said, between the understandings of the average African American as a child of the Black church and the psychological community.

The largely underdeveloped ability of the psychological community to relate to the cultural and historical consciousness of the religious African American often hinders both clergy and lay person to seek formal mental health services, which are often viewed as “foreign.” At the same time, many therapists, by compartmentalizing religion and culture, rather than integrating these into the therapeutic process, can miss key opportunities to connect with and understand the mind and nature of the religious African American.

Love became interested in this topic because of “the dissonance I experienced being a part of the psychological profession as well as a member of the Black church.” She plans to continue to work toward “an integrative treatment approach” as well as address “ways in which working alliances can be developed among mental health professionals, pastoral counselors, and clergy.”

Love is currently completing an internship at Aurora Mental Health Center in Aurora, CO, where she works with adults and older adults (55 and older).

**Home Visitation Programs Can Bridge the Gap between Home and School to Raise Achievement Levels, Especially for the Disadvantaged**

**TITLE:**
*The Impact of a Targeted Home Visitation Program on Teacher Attitudes, Teacher Practice, and Parent Participation in Selected Urban Elementary School Classrooms*
by La Kecia Smith, Ed.D.

Research in education shows that academic success in school is best predicted by the level of parent involvement. When the parent is involved,
the student achieves more – regardless of socio-economic conditions.

Since the 1960s schools have striven to increase parent involvement. Lately, they have turned to home visitation programs, where a few times a year a teacher travels to the home of students to visit with parents. Here in California, one of the largest programs implemented in the late 1990’s in nine schools in the Sacramento Unified School District helped show significant gains in standardized test scores, higher than other schools in the district.

La Kecia Smith,(Ed.D., 2010) looked at 100 elementary school teachers currently involved in home visitation programs at select schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District to see if their participation “significantly impacted student learning, parent involvement, and the use of culturally responsive strategies” in teacher practices.

The qualitative and quantitative findings from her study did indicate that home visitation programs “positively impacted” these elements. While the data did not demonstrate any long-term gains in increasing parent involvement, she said, the participants in the study “did report a significant increase in the number of parents visiting the classroom and requesting visits of the teacher.”

“Parents are a child’s first teacher,” commented Smith. “Schools need to capitalize on this valuable resource. There is often a disconnect between home and school. Many parents are intimidated by the educational jargon, school climate, and leadership. I believe that teachers can be a critical link to removing the [barriers that parents feel] by just going out into the community… It is my belief that most successful schools create and maintain an environment where parents feel heard, respected and welcomed.”

Smith is currently works for the Los Angeles Unified School District as an assistant principal, elementary instructional specialist.

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Course on Black Theology Strives to Make the Bible Relevant to At-Risk African American Teens at Compton Church

TITLE:  
A Black Theology Curriculum for the Spiritual Formation of United Methodist Youth in Compton, California
by Coston J. Charles III

With more than 300 murders a year and turf wars that rage among more than 50 gangs contending within its 10 square miles, Compton, California, is ranked as the 14th most dangerous city in the United States.

How can the Christian church effectively serve and save in such a violent and fear-ridden place? In his work with youth at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Coston J. Charles III said, the youth have told him that “black history is irrelevant, community is suspicious, and theology is non-applicable.”

Charles refutes these claims. Rather, by being instructed in black history alongside Scripture, he argues, the youth are able to see that God’s presence is always with the oppressed. In his curriculum, he uses the example of the Israelites as an oppressed people and the teachings of Jesus as a “ministry to the marginalized” to help today’s youth understand that God is available to them in their pain and struggles.

“The youth at Crossroads…are African American; therefore, Black Theology is vital for their spiritual formation because it makes the Gospel relevant to the struggle of African Americans,” Charles wrote. “Black Theology seeks to interpret the Bible from the context of the oppression of black people engaged in the struggle for spiritual, social, economic, and political liberation. When read through the lens of oppression, Scripture reveals that God is on the side of the oppressed.”

As harsh and traumatic as the African American’s experience with oppression has been, the experience nonetheless has allowed them to relate to the Bible’s message of liberation and to believe that Christ’s teachings are meant for them.

“It is important for the youth not to turn a deaf ear to the teachings of Jesus because his message is applicable to their oppressive situation….God has given the youth at Crossroads the right to cry out to him. The youth can rest assured that God hears their cries and feels their pain,” Charles concluded.