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

October 2009

When the Terminally Ill Is a Child: Beth Barber, PsyD, Creates A Scrapbook To Help Children, Parents, Caregivers Process and Cope

**TITLE:**
An Autobiographical Scrapbook for Terminally Ill Children: A Guide to Processing Death

by Beth Barber

When facing childhood terminal illness, how do caregivers approach the topic of death in order to meet the child’s needs, ensuring that the child is heard, understood, and remembered?

Children as young as age 3 years are able to reveal a basic awareness of death, comments Beth Barber (PsyD, 2011), yet her research revealed that a majority of experts in the field believed that children between the ages of seven and 11 years, do not understand death or their illness and most are unable to express their concerns. As a result, these children along with their parents are left alone to face their fears and confusion.

So Barber has created a scrapbook for terminally ill children and those who care for them as a resource to enhance communication and relationships while easing the dying process.

“For the medical staff, it provides a useful tool in their relationship with dying children and their parents,” explains Barber, “For parents, this scrapbook not only serves as an educational tool, but also as permanent evidence of their child’s past, present, and future designed to be used over and over again. For children who are facing death long before they should, it offers a valuable tool in their attempt to communicate with the adults in their lives.”

“By using photographs, collages, and artwork, the book appeals to the language of children, granting them a safe way to externally project and document their inner worlds.”

Barber is currently doing her clinical externship at Children’s Hospital Orange County. She works in the neurology department, conducting neuropsychological assessments on pediatrics suffering from various neurological disorders such as seizures or brain tumors.

Not Grown Up Enough to Graduate? Dana Khudaverdyan, EdD, Measures Emotional-Social Intelligence As Predictor of Dropout Risk in Teens

**TITLE:**
The Impact of Emotional-Social Competencies on Academic Outcomes of At-risk Youth

by Dana Khudaverdyan

Despite continued efforts by educators and policy makers, the national high school graduation rate has remained fairly constant at about 67 percent. Why do students drop out and who is a risk? More importantly, what areas of strengths, beyond traditional IQ, contribute to academic success?

Dana Khudaverdyan (EdD, 2009) measured the emotional-social intelligence of 130 at-risk students in southern California to find some intriguing results.

“The study found that students with the highest emotional-social intelligence scores were significantly more likely to pass the high school exit exam,” she comments. However, no significant differences were found between level of emotional-social intelligence and a student’s ability to persist or achieve academic progress.

In addition, at-risk students demonstrated significantly lower interpersonal skills. In comparison to his or her peers, a student with low interpersonal skills has more difficulty cooperating with others, understanding their feelings, and...
cultivating and maintaining relationships with others.

Khudaverdyan explains that after several years working as a school psychologist she saw that “traditional cognitive and processing measures do surprisingly little to shed light on academic success... Students with similar cognitive profiles could have very differing academic outcomes, one student succeeding academically and the other failing.” She also saw that “the deficit model of identification and intervention was inadequate. I wondered what areas of strength, beyond traditional IQ, contribute to academic success.”

Khudaverdyan is a school psychologist and supervisor of special education for an organization that serves at-risk students.

Ellen Veenstra, PsyD, Studies How Theater Principles Might Help Heal Those Who Can Show, But Not Tell Their Problems

TITLE: Improvisational Theater and Psychotherapy: A New Model
by Ellen Veenstra

After many years of education and training, psychological therapists are ready to help people talk about their problems. But what if the people they are trained to serve aren’t ready to talk? “Traditional therapy is comfortable for us,” comments Ellen Veenstra (PsyD, 2009), meaning trained therapists, “but what about clients who aren’t comfortable with this format?”

People who go into therapy for a career have to be insight-oriented, “we have to be verbal people,” she explains. “Insight is one of the tenets of psychology where you try to dig around your past and try to figure out why you do what you do. Once a person has ‘insight,’ then he or she has the clarity to change the behavior.”

In her dissertation Veenstra lays the theoretical groundwork for a different type of psychotherapy, one not based on insight, but the principles of improvisational theater, or “improv”.

“Hopefully, this creates a model of therapy that is more accessible to more people...more accessible to specific groups of people...who don’t take well to traditional psychotherapy,” such as those who struggle with personality disorders, schizophrenia and/or substance abuse.

‘In the improv psychotherapy model, rather than talking directly about their problems, the clients instead actively work through their obstacles, drawing on their whole bodies to utilize the theater principle of showing, rather than telling,” explains Veenstra. “Through engaging in improv, clients learn to experience themselves, others, the world, and their problems in new ways ... their past experiences are synthesized at the same time as they are trying on new ways of being in the world.”

To help test her new therapy model, Veenstra is putting it into practice at her current position working with male prisoners at a federal prison in Long Beach. So far, she says, “they are doing it and enjoying it.”

Getting Better All The Time: Gino Pasquariello, EdD, HE, Looks at Transformative Learning In Graduate Adult Learners

TITLE: The Way In and the Way On: A Qualitative Study of the Catalysts and Outcomes of Transformative Learning
by Gino Pasquariello

Later in life many college graduates reflect upon their college years as a time of discovery, a time when they not only gained a sense of who they were, but what the world was about in a much broader and more critical sense.

Educators see this outcome as one of the most important for the betterment of society and fulfillment of the individual.

Do older students, returning to higher education, typically for professional development and career advancement, also experience a broader understanding of self and society?

Yes, says Gino Pasquariello (Ed.D. in Higher Education, 2009), but not in the same way. His dissertation explored the nature of transformative learning among adult graduate students.

“Rather than discovering a sense of identity and vocation through critical reflection as indicated by transformative learning theory, these students experienced a refinement of their well-established sense of identity, vocation, and educational goals,” he says.

As a result of a transformative learning experience, these adult learners reported a “positive improvement over previous ways of knowing, perceiving and being, rather than a radical replacement...”

This experience, he concludes, created “feelings of confidence and empowerment” and an “affirmation of purpose and vocation.” These personal development outcomes, he says, helped transform these students professionally to have
more confidence in their professional abilities, accept more risk and manage failure more positively, be more caring and appreciative of others, and demonstrate a more tolerant and inclusive leadership style.

Currently dean of students at Horizon College San Diego, he hopes to continue researching ways to foster transformative learning in adult learners, particularly in adult professional degree programs.

Plastic or Leather? Delia Godinez, DPT, and Trevor Hopkins, DPT, Test The Pressures of Sitting Based on Wheelchair Seat and Pushing Position

TITLE: Determining Pressure Measurements based on Seating Surface and Wheelchair Expulsion by Delia Godinez and Trevor Hopkins

Some 1.6 million Americans use wheelchairs, and in addition to the problems of accessibility, they also must contend with pressure ulcers, sore areas and even open sores that develop on the area of the buttocks that makes the most contact with the wheelchair seat.

Research shows that up to 80 percent of paraplegics will develop pressure ulcers, says Delia Godinez (DPT, 2009), a health issue that costs $1.2 billion a year.

Godinez, together with Trevor Hopkins (DPT, 2009) measured the seating pressure of both a polypropylene wheelchair seat and a standard leather wheelchair seat, in three positions: sitting still, reaching back to begin wheeling, and arms forward after a moderate push. They wanted to know which set of conditions exerted the least pressure.

They found two unlikely results: first, the plastic chair seemed to be better at diffusing sitting pressure than the leather seat.

Second, “there was less seating pressure in the position of forward propulsion than either the position of reaching back or in static sitting…These results could suggest that the simple act of wheeling assists in pressure relief.”

For those who cannot wheel themselves, Godinez says, they need to learn and practice proper pressure relieving techniques and regularly inspect their skin for the signs of a forming pressure ulcer. If they cannot reposition themselves, they need to be repositioned manually and have proper cushioning.

Future research at APU, she says, will continue to study the best surfaces and cushions to help relieve sitting pressure.

Godinez and Hopkins are now studying for her licensing exam in physical therapy and each plans to specialize in outpatient orthopedic physical therapy.

Postcolonial Theory and Nursing: Donna Scemons, PhD, Nursing, Researches the Marginalization of Acute Care RNs in Southern California

TITLE: The Lived Experience of Junior Registered Nursing Staff in Southern California Acute Care Hospitals by Donna Scemons

Does nursing “eat its young,” as the old saying goes? Looking at the experiences of 12 junior staff nurses in southern California, Donna Scemons (PhD, Nursing, 2009) would lean toward “probably.”

Using narrative analysis and postcolonial theory as a “lens through which to view social, organizational, and other forces that give rise to…marginalization, sexism, racism and oppressive forces that shape behaviors by nurses and others who work in the healthcare system in the U.S.,” Scemons interviewed the nurses about their experiences with others in their clinical settings, “recount[ing] instances in which they had felt listened to and valued” as well as “instances in which they had not felt listened to or valued.”

Her results showed that “marginalization was confirmed by a majority of the participant RNs” and that “In several of the interviews the participants remarked that ‘nursing really does eat its young.'”

As the United States faces a shortage of nursing as well as the challenges of increasing globalization, Scemons concludes that her study “highlight[s] some of the behaviors that may be driving young men and women out of the field or making recruitment more difficult…If RNs are not encouraged to speak up, not encouraged to effect change, and not encouraged to seek more fulfilling nursing roles, the likelihood of a nursing shortage continuing and worsening is quite high.”

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