Building Networks in LGBT Research
Putting UC Smiles on People’s Faces
Gaining International Field Experience
Helping Students Through Fund for Field
Working to End Homelessness
Bringing New Energy
Instilling Passion Through Internships
A project that was borne out of isolation has multiplied into a fruitful national, and even international, network of researchers and practitioners studying lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered populations.

It all started with a conversation between two PhD students, Megan Paceley and Elizabeth Holman, each of whom received their MSWs from Illinois. Both women were feeling isolated in their LGBT research, and they decided to apply for a yearlong Focal Point grant from the Graduate College, with the initial idea of creating networks and connections across campus. But that idea quickly expanded.

“We made connections and networks not just on campus, but throughout the US and internationally,” says Holman. “We’ve had people from Taiwan, the UK, and Canada connect with us on our projects. It speaks to the amount of dispersal and isolation that LGBT researchers tend to feel, and having this network of researchers has been a really cool outcome of this project.”

Paceley acknowledges researchers face collaboration problems nationwide in LGBT research. “Unless you’re in a department that has it as a primary focus, whether it’s social work or family studies or whatever, if you have just a student and a faculty member doing the research, it’s pretty isolating,” she says. “So we’ve been excited about building this community of researchers and seeing how can we collaborate.”

Through the grant, Paceley and Holman created bimonthly readings that focused on various topics LGBT researchers face, and they also held quarterly panels where speakers from across the nation spoke about research and related issues.

“One of the focuses of our group has been highlighting the intersection of research and practice and policy,” Holman says. “It’s not just a network of researchers but a network of people who are using research on the LGBT population for direct practice with that group. And we can use research on the LGBT population to inform and change policy that then affects the people that we’re researching.”

The crowning point of their efforts was their symposium in May, which drew speakers from across the country and attendees from the UK and other countries.

“Again, it speaks to the need to have something to draw us together,” Holman says. “If you’re willing to come from Florida to speak for a one-day presentation, it talks about how isolated you are feeling.”

Holman says what excites her is “Being able to do cutting-edge research with an LGBT population, and then thinking about where that research goes as far as working with the families, with the youth, and changing policies to make a more supportive atmosphere for those people.”

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The roots of Seonmi Kim’s idea for UC Smiles can be traced to her years as a policy director for a progressive women’s movement in South Korea. “I was interested in how we could develop an alternative economy lifestyle and opportunities, especially for low-income women,” she says of her work in South Korea. “So I was interested in local currency movements and other alternative business models,” Kim says.

Kim, who will receive her PhD in August, translated her South Korean experience into a local currency program in Urbana-Champaign called UC Smiles. One dollar equals one UC Smile, and people can purchase Smiles at three locally-owned stores. They can spend their Smiles at any of 75 local member stores.

Kim, executive director of the program, received a grant from UIUC Public Engagement and launched UC Smiles last November. She printed $97,000 worth of Smiles, about $30,000 of which have been distributed. Many stores offer a 5 to 10 percent discount for customers using Smiles.

“I’m surprised at the response,” she says. “It’s hard for people to change their behavior, so I’m encouraged.” She adds that she hopes all $97,000 worth of Smiles will be distributed within the first year.

One purpose of the program, she says, is to retain money in the community. “If we use our money at local stores, more money will be kept in the community, and our local stores have a unique culture. This helps to retain our local culture,” she says.

“Also, we want to develop relationships among community members. By meeting local business owners we can develop a trust and a relationship.”

It was not easy for Kim to develop those relationships with business owners, partly because she didn’t have good local networks, and partly because “We had to establish trust with the owners. They wondered who would use the UC Smiles.”

Kim found that smaller business owners tended to be more receptive to the program. “They were willing to take a risk to see if it would boost their business,” she says. “And many owners were very interested in community movement.”

Some businesses, she says, reported gains in customers directly through UC Smiles. “Before seeing fliers about the participating stores, many customers hadn’t heard about their businesses,” Kim notes. Once they did, they spent their Smiles at the stores. Consumers who use UC Smiles tend to “have psychological satisfaction because they are helping their community and helping their neighbor,” Kim says. “When you use a UC Smile, business owners identify you as a person who is engaged in the community. It builds a sense of community.”
Dana Cohen holds dual citizenship in the US and Israel. She has been to Israel numerous times, including serving a two-year stint in the Israeli Defense Forces, where she worked as a medic during the Second Lebanon War between 2005-2007. As she was getting married, and her husband would be living in Israel, it was only natural that her placement would be in Israel – the first international placement for the School.

“We thought it was a wonderful opportunity for the School to learn through her experience the needs of a student doing an internship abroad,” says Mary Maurer, Assistant Dean for Field Education.

Maurer and Cohen together identified the internship site, the Genstil Institute in Mevasseret Zion, Israel. For her 8-month internship, she worked with two distinct populations: people with Prader-Willi Syndrome, and at-risk youth from ages 13-24. Prader-Willi is a debilitating genetic disorder that, among other things, causes people to have an insatiable appetite. “If they don’t live in structured environments,” Cohen says, “they could eat themselves to death in one sitting.” She helped her clients manage and reduce their anxiety and depression, and worked on control issues surrounding food and other obsessive-compulsive disorder tendencies.

For her at-risk youth clients, Cohen developed a Canine Therapy Program. “My supervisor asked me if I like dogs,” she recalls. “I said, yes, and he told me four dogs would be arriving within the next two weeks, and we had no program set up. I did a lot of research and set up a program.” She also met with clients for individual and group psychotherapy, set up treatment plans, and used different modalities to work with clients.

Cohen received the Becca Nimmer Marcus Award for Excellence in the Concentration of Mental Health, as well as the Frank Itzin Award for Excellence in Field Instruction. Both included scholarships. “This was very helpful, as my internship is unpaid and a full-time commitment,” she says.

It was Cohen’s experience as an army medic that influenced her decision to go into mental health. “We were the ‘first line of defense’ for the army psychologists to detect PTSD, ASD, and other psychological trauma in soldiers,” she explains. “I became very interested in the subject.”

She credits her internship with giving her the opportunity to put to use the tools she had learned in the classroom, and with teaching her skills that she could only apply in the field. “Because of all of this I feel very ready to enter this career and become a competent and ethical social worker,” she says.

As for future international placements, Maurer says the School is excited about the prospects. “The opportunity to expose students to other cultures, as well as providing them an experience where they can have a first-hand look at social work practice on an international level are invaluable teaching opportunities and can have a great impact on a student’s life.”
The field experience is truly invaluable to our students – but the costs associated with it can be a heavy burden.

“They’re living off campus,” Alicia Beck, Assistant Dean for Advancement, explains. “They can’t take on a part-time job, or they have to quit their part-time job to do their internship.

To help students out, the School began, in 2011, Fund for Field to ease the financial burden for BSW and MSW students in their placements. To fund the program, the School reaches out to alumni and to community members who are interested in social services.

“It’s a way for them to assist in providing quality services for communities. Agencies rely on our students as a pipeline for new employees, and our students also fill gaps and provide a huge amount – $2 million worth – of in-kind services to communities.”

The School has between 200 and 225 students in internships each year. This past year, 29 BSW and 13 MSW students applied for the Fund. The School awarded 10 scholarships to BSW students and 8 to MSW students. That means that barely 40 percent of the students who applied received funds – underscoring the need for additional and ongoing funds to be given.

Beck notes, “When people support a student through Fund for Field, they are supporting community agencies, too. Oftentimes students are providing services that are not otherwise provided in communities. So it’s important for donors to recognize that they are making a huge contribution beyond the student.”
Amanda Borta knew what she wanted going into her internship with the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness: systems-level experience. “I wanted to explore systems change rather than working on an individual level or doing programs work,” the Chicago suburbs native says. “I’m a systems thinker. I like seeing the larger picture behind social work. And I found I enjoy that work. I’ve found my niche.”

Borta, who received her MSW this spring, started her work with the Alliance last August. The Alliance, staffed by about 15 people, manages $54 million in Housing and Urban Development grants for all the homeless programs in Chicago. The smallness of the staff afforded Amanda opportunities to work in a variety of areas.

“I worked in development as well as fund raising, and with the emergency fund and prevention side as well, so I’ve been able to work directly with most of the staff in one way or another,” she says. “That’s helped me get a broad range of skills and experiences, which is what I hoped for.”

Borta also undertook policy and advocacy work, including Plan 2.0, a 7-year plan to end homelessness in Chicago. And she managed projects related to implementing that plan, which includes strategies in areas such as crisis response, affordable housing, youth homelessness, employment, and cross-systems integration, making sure that people and organizations who interact with each other do so with high efficiency.

Of particular interest to her is youth homelessness. She did a significant amount of work on the homelessness census, which is taken in January each year. “Most of the work I did was with the youth count,” she says. “We hadn’t done that before, but there’s an emphasis on it now. The youth homelessness population is easily hidden.” In addition to the census work, she put best practice recommendations together for Chicago, based on what other cities have done.

The homeless numbers in Chicago, she says, have risen slightly, but steadied over the past few years. “We’ve seen a decrease in chronic and veteran homelessness nationally. But the general population has stayed pretty steady for a few years,” Borta says. Borta played an integral role in planning and implementing this year’s census. “It takes a lot of planning and organization,” she says. “We train over 300 volunteers in how to do the survey, how to communicate with the homeless, how to approach them, and how to remain safe. The police are involved as well.” Volunteers are assigned in teams to cover the entire city, with bigger teams of volunteers in higher-trafficked homeless areas.

“I didn’t know what to expect going in,” Borta says. “But I think homelessness is a solvable problem, and that’s why I’m drawn to it. It’s something that doesn’t have to exist. Everyone should have a home.”
Illinois’ School of Social Work is one of the oldest programs in the country, and one of the first to offer a BSW. But in the mid-1990s, the accredited BSW program was a victim of budget cuts. From then until now, students who wanted to pursue an MSW had to take additional classes in their masters’ program to make up for what they missed by not having a BSW.

No longer.

Now, Illinois’ School of Social Work has another distinction: It is the first school in the country to go through the BSW accreditation process in 3 years, rather than the customary 4.

“We initiated the accreditation process in the fall of 2009,” says Brenda Lindsey, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Programs. That fall the School began recruiting its first class of students. But the planning for the accreditation began several years before 2009. That’s when, Lindsey says, “We started developing the additional courses that we needed, put things in place, and got approvals across campus” to move toward accreditation.

With the accreditation, which came in February, BSW students are eligible to apply for advanced standing in MSW programs, Lindsey says. “Future students will know that they are going through a program that has high academic standards, and that we have sufficient resources not just in our social work program but on campus to meet their needs,” she says.

“Students are better prepared for their masters program,” she adds, “because they will have had a good foundation in their social work practice, policy and research, and they’ll also have an undergrad internship that gives them a context where they can figure out how all the puzzle pieces fit together.”

The accreditation has benefited not only BSW students, but the School itself, Lindsey notes. “The heart of this campus is our undergraduate students,” she says. “They bring an enthusiasm to the School. They believe they can change the world. They get involved in lots of things on campus, and they come up with interesting and unique ideas. It’s inspiring to be around them. To be honest, we didn’t realize what we were missing by not having more undergraduates in our School.”

That shouldn’t be a problem anymore. Since 2009, the BSW annual enrollment has grown from 50 students to 75 to 125 to 150.

“We plan to keep growing,” Lindsey says. Spurring part of that growth is the addition of a social work minor, which will attract students who have different career paths but who are interested in social justice issues.

“...we plan to keep growing.”
At first, Madeline Root wasn’t sure about her internship with RACES (Rape Advocacy, Counseling, & Education Services). “I thought it might be too intense. I didn’t know if this was the population for me,” the recently-graduated BSW student says.

Root and Emily Lee, another BSW grad, received their baptism by fire their first week, which was spent in Springfield. They were inundated with 40 hours of presentations and instruction on sexual assault. “I became very passionate about the work,” Root says.

That first week, Lee acknowledges, was “pretty intense. It was a little intimidating and emotionally draining. But we both became more passionate the more that we learned.”

Kerri True-Funk, Executive Director of RACES, kept Root and Lee busy with varied responsibilities. “They both were able to do some hotline crisis work and observe criminal justice advocacy as well as attend no contact order hearings,” True-Funk says. “They also helped staff information and referral tables and do other outreach in the community.”

In addition, Lee and Root conducted prevention programming at numerous schools in the four-county area that RACES covers, speaking to students in pre-K-12 about prevention and awareness issues. “It was great to see light bulbs go on for kids when you say something and they say, ‘Oh, that makes so much sense!’” Root says.

They also took part in lobbying in Springfield under the tutelage of Polly Poskin, executive director of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault. Poskin was impressed with their professionalism and persistence.

“There was a lot of standing around waiting, trying to catch the Representatives and Senators as they were on their way to and from the floor, and get your 30 seconds to talk to them after you’ve waited an hour,” Root says.

The internship added up to a big learning experience for each student. “We learned about the process of healing for a survivor,” Lee says. “We learned how to lobby, how to do prevention education, and what it means to be an advocate.”

They also learned about self-care, which, Root says, “is important to prevent burnout, especially in this field.” Some days could be emotionally draining, Lee noted, but both students learned how to leave work at work.

The experience was great for Lee, who says, “I didn’t expect to learn as much as I did. I was very passionate about sex trafficking, but I never expected to learn so much about sexual assault and how common it is in our society.”

The internship was pivotal for Root as well. “The whole internship has been very transformative,” she says. “Though I kind of stumbled upon it, it’s been life-changing. It’s become a passion and something I would like to continue working in, probably on the medical side of it.”