The mission of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development is to promote and improve the development, health and well-being of infants, children, youth and families across the lifespan, through research, education and outreach.
From the Director

Facta non verba: Deeds not words

Welcome to our 2014 Biannual Report. In these pages, we document our many past achievements and plans to conquer future challenges. You will see in the impressive statistics that dot these pages, the width and breadth of our impact in the United States, the world, and right here in Detroit.

Research is often incremental. Gains are made in inches, little by little, year by year. Thus we take great pride that much of the research and training done at MPSI not only contributes to the overall progress of science, but has an immediate impact on Detroit’s children and families.

Impact matters. Our work has nationwide significance while being an integral part of the revitalization of our city. None of this would be possible without the strong partnerships and collaborations our faculty and staff have fostered, from non-profits to Fortune 500s, preschools to universities. Here are a few examples of current projects:

- **Training and mentoring preschool teachers** in Detroit to keep the quality of early childhood care and education at its highest.
- **Assessing a group of children born prematurely** to understand how various risk factors contribute to their growth and development over time.
- **Studying how military deployment affects spouses and children left behind**. What interventions can protect against depression, poor school transitions and other coping problems?
- Creating interventions to lessen alcohol and drug use during and after pregnancy. These computer-based interviews are low-cost, maintain anonymity, and are tailored to each woman’s goals and behaviors.
- Evaluating national forensic trainings to combat sexual assault in teens and assessing the extent of substance abuse in adolescents.
- Researching how fathers prepare for a new baby and bond after birth, so programs can be better tailored to male reactions, stress and attachment style.

We also teach approximately 2,000 professionals, 1,000 teens and children, and 500 parents every year about subjects like grief and loss, pregnancy and early parenting, dating violence, positive discipline, and sexual health. Our work is needs-driven, community-centered, and timely.

Take a minute to leaf through this issue to see the statistics that mark our impact. Our days (and years, and people served) are literally numbered, so you can quickly see how our deeds speak for themselves.

Warmly,

Peter A. Lichtenberg, Director
A Thrill to Return to a Strong MPSI

By Hilary Horn Ratner, PhD

I have come home.

From the beginning, my history has been linked with what was then called the Merrill-Palmer Institute (MPI), and I am delighted to have found my way back to an even stronger Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development.

I began my career at Wayne State in 1981 as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology. As part of the new relationship between MPI and the university, Professor Eli Saltz in the Department of Psychology was named MPI director and Professor Carolyn Shantz, also in the Department of Psychology, was named editor of the Merrill Palmer Quarterly.

The halves of their positions dedicated to their new roles were given to Psychology to combine and make into a new position. I was hired into that position. I set up my laboratories at MPI and served on an advisory board for the Early Childhood Center. My work focused on learning and memory among young children and older adults. MPI, along with the affiliated Institute of Gerontology (IOG), was the perfect setting for me and my students.

I went on to serve as Dean of the Graduate School, and then in 2007, when I became Vice President for Research, I had oversight responsibility for MPSI. One of the best decisions I ever made was to ask Peter Lichtenberg to become director of both MPSI and the IOG. The rest, as they say, is history. What a thrill it has been to return to an Institute that has grown tremendously in the number and strength of faculty and students, the engagement with the community, the number of programs, the commitment of the Board, funding, and the amount and quality of research.

My goal is to use my experience as a researcher, educator, and administrator to deepen ties between MPSI and WSU programs and enhance even more the integration of research, teaching, and community engagement. In 1920 Edna Noble White, the first MPI director, identified interdisciplinary study and direct engagement with children and families as foundational principles. These principles have guided MPSI for almost a century.

I hope to further that vision through participation in existing programs such as the Woodward Corridor Early Childhood Consortium, the Children’s Bridge, and the Infant Mental Health program, along with new programs such as DREAM (Developmental Research, Education, Action, Mentoring). DREAM is conceived to support undergraduate student success through learning and research within the community and to provide multiple pathways to careers related to health and human sciences.

I have come full circle and am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to MPSI’s vision and plans for achievement during its next 100 years.

My goal is to use my experience as a researcher, educator, and administrator to deepen ties between MPSI and WSU programs and enhance even more the integration of research, teaching, and community engagement.”
A Few of our Research Partners...

Pennsylvania State University | University of Michigan | University of Pittsburgh | United States Marine Corps | The Steel Magnolias, a non-profit group for wives of injured Green Beret soldier |

U-Mass | The Michigan Infant-Toddler Research Exchange | Michigan State University | Eastern Michigan University | United States Army | The Green Beret Foundation | Department of Veterans Affairs | The National Center for PTSD Clinical Neuroscience Division |

University of California at Berkeley | Kids-TALK Child Advocacy Center | Macomb County Department of Human Services | Yale University | College of New Jersey | Virginia Commonwealth University | Henry Ford Health System | Detroit Medical Center Focus:HOPE | Children’s Hospital of Michigan / Arab American Chaldean Council | Woodward Corridor Early Childhood Consortium | Stanford University | Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health |

MPSI faculty are dedicated to improving our understanding of how young children develop and react to their environment, as well as promoting optimal child development and resilience in urban children.

“By identifying the direct and indirect mechanisms by which parent military deployment and psychological health influence child adjustment, we can join with military collaborators to develop intervention and prevention programs that facilitate child and family psychological resilience.”

Dr. Wargo Aikins is a child clinical psychologist and developmental psychopathologist. Her work largely focuses on disruptions to development and the attenuating influences of parent and peer relationships. One theme of her current work examines the impact of military deployment, and resulting mental health of the service member, on family and child well-being. A second research theme is the role of parent and peer relationships in attenuating the risks of normative developmental challenges in adolescents, such as school transitions, autonomy seeking, and peer pressures.
While Dad Fights for Us …

THE PROBLEM: Few good models exist for researching the impact of long-term separation of children from their parents. Military deployments offer a real life situation where the service member is separated from the family, often multiple times in the course of a career. How do these separations impact the child and the non-deployed mother? How does the mother’s mental health impact the family? What happens when the deployed member comes home, with a 20% chance of post-traumatic stress syndrome and at high risk for depression?

THE RESEARCH: Dr. Julie Wargo Aikins will recruit 240 families from Camp Pendleton, California, at least four months prior to deployment. Each family must have one child between 4 to 7 years old, the prime years for developing the skills to regulate the self and emotion. Without these skills, children lack the building blocks for adult mental health and are at higher risk of psychopathology.

Dr. Wargo Aikins’ team will visit homes three times over 18 months: pre-deployment, mid-deployment (dad will be absent), and post-deployment. Visits will be used to conduct interviews, collect questionnaires from parents, and meet individually with the child. They will also get parental permission to contact the child’s teachers about school behavior and adjustment. Researchers will assign tasks to the parents and children to measure well-being, emotional and self-regulation, and the interactions between children and parents.

THE RESULT: “If we can identify the factors that contribute to how a child responds to these deployments, we can target interventions and preventions,” said Dr. Wargo Aikins. Her earlier research showed a strong negative impact of maternal depression on the function of the family. Depression undermines a mother’s ability to function, which ripples to the children. PTSD in the service member may also have a significant impact on the child and the mother. “Until we know exactly what the key indicators are, we can’t target our interventions and deliver them to the right person,” she said. This research should provide needed answers.
Lt. Gov. Brian Calley learned about key areas of MPSI’s research during a visit here this summer. As chair of a bipartisan commission on mental health and wellness, Calley has worked to strengthen the delivery of mental health services in Michigan. MPSI faculty shared research consistent with the Commission’s goals, including improving infant mental health, computerized interventions to decrease alcohol and drug use in pregnant mothers, and increasing the use of mental health services in cases of child sexual abuse.

Dr. Ann Stacks, who directs the Institute’s Infant Mental Health Program, outlined the Wayne Baby Court project, which is a collaboration between child welfare, legal, and mental health systems to support optimal developmental outcomes for infants and toddlers in the child welfare system. Dr. Stacks shared preliminary results from the Baby Court model that show reductions in developmental delays and improvement in parent-child interactions.

Calley applauded the Institute’s expansive Healthier Urban Families program which trained more than 3,500 parents, children and professionals last year in issues ranging from autism to safe use of social media. “When that many parents and organizations are finding you primarily through word-of-mouth, that’s a very good sign,” he said.
What if you could bring together some of the best thinkers you know for an hour to discuss your research challenges and offer solutions? What if those thinkers came from key fields like psychology, pediatrics, social work, neuroscience and infant mental health? And what if those thinkers were not just seasoned researchers but graduate students with fresh ideas and perspectives?

You’d get the MPSI Research Roundtable, and a formula for success.

Dr. Steve Ondersma coordinates the sessions and said the idea came to him at a strategic planning retreat, where colleagues asked for a forum to get feedback on research quandaries. He set ground rules for the quarterly forums: (1) no PowerPoints, this is informal and interactive, (2) no past results, this is about current or upcoming research, (3) no standing up, this isn’t a presentation, it’s a discussion, (4) don’t prepare, just talk.

At a recent roundtable, Dr. Deane Aikins discussed his project with Veterans’ Affairs to evaluate the effectiveness of support groups for wives of injured Green Beret soldiers. “The military says, ‘We’ve got this program. Can you tell us if it works?’” said Dr. Aikins. “And they want deliverables. For every grant there should be a product.”

Creating brief, low-cost interventions to help mothers avoid substance abuse is a major objective of Dr. Ondersma’s research. He has developed simple computer programs that pregnant women access during a physician’s visit to learn about the effects of drugs and alcohol on the fetus and to motivate self-change. Multiple published clinical trials, including several recent trials, have shown that these interventions at least double the rate of abstinence among women receiving them.

Dr. Ondersma is currently completing an NIH-funded trial of a unique indirect brief intervention approach with 500 post-partum woman identified to be at high risk for drug use. He hopes his computerized intervention will decrease drug use during the often stressful post-partum period, which could also decrease child neglect and abuse. Mothers need not admit to drug use to access the program or for it to be effective. A second current study is evaluating the ability of a similar intervention to reduce marijuana use in pregnancy.

Dr. Aikins appreciated the feedback and captured a few new ideas to pursue. “With the military, it’s all about the doing, the quick deployment,” he said. “Anything that can help with that is a plus.”

Noa Ofen, PhD
Department of Pediatrics

“Understanding typical brain development is key to understanding the etiology of neurodevelopmental disorders, and may also have implications in educational settings.”

Dr. Ofen is a faculty member in Lifespan Cognitive Neuroscience, a joint program of MPSI and the Institute of Gerontology. She investigates structural and functional brain development across a wide age range of typically developing children and adults. Using tests of cognitive abilities combined with neuroimaging techniques, Dr. Ofen probes how brain structure and function shape human cognitive functioning across development. In particular, she has explored the structure and function of the hippocampus, a crucial brain structure for learning and memory. Dr. Ofen is also interested in the clinical implications of understanding brain development especially as it relates to schizophrenia, epilepsy and premature birth.

Steven Ondersma, PhD
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences

“The effects of these brief interventions are quite promising, but even small effects can have a substantial public health impact if they can be achieved in a high proportion of at-risk parents. Technology can allow the reach that will make this impact possible.”

Making their Mark

Open Feedback = Better Research

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The 10 students and colleagues at the session discussed evaluations approaches, pitfalls, asked complex questions, and offered several approaches and caveats. Though the comments were directed at the military project, Dr. Ondersma reminded the group that many of these issues can be generalized. “We are all likely to conduct evaluation research at some point,” he said. “Think about it broadly.”

Dr. Aikins appreciated the feedback and captured a few new ideas to pursue. “With the military, it’s all about the doing, the quick deployment,” he said. “Anything that can help with that is a plus.”
Less Alcohol Means Healthier Newborns

THE PROBLEM: Prenatal exposure to alcohol can have lasting effects on a child’s social, behavioral and neurocognitive functioning. Alcohol poses one of the greatest threats to fetal health and is the leading cause of intellectual disability. Even light to moderate drinking is not recommended in pregnancy. Yet about 10% of women will use alcohol at some point in their pregnancy, a percentage that has remained largely unchanged through decades of education, awareness campaigns, and wider availability of treatment. The vast majority of even heavy drinking women neither receives nor wants treatment.

THE RESEARCH: Technology may be well-suited to easing this problem. Research has proven that brief, computer-based interventions can lead to genuine behavior change. Computers can be used to administer evidence-based treatments and fit neatly into ongoing care. They require almost no medical staff effort, and the mother need not identify herself as needing treatment.

Dr. Ondersma is pilot testing just such an approach at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. He and his team created a 20-minute computerized intervention usually done after the patient’s first prenatal visit. This is followed by three emails (or mailed fliers) tailored to their circumstances and personalized in a deep way based on the information provided in the screening. Messages reflect the patient’s goals, thoughts about the pregnancy, age and priorities, and are inoffensive, respectful and positive. This type of customized information is more likely to be read and to change behavior.

THE RESULTS: First, feedback on the quality of the intervention was overwhelmingly positive. “Women like it, and say that it was extremely helpful,” Dr. Ondersma said. “It does not judge.” Second, the women in the pilot study who received the intervention were three times more likely to abstain from alcohol during pregnancy, and three times more likely to deliver a healthy baby (viable, normal birth weight and needing no time in neonatal intensive care).

“These are powerful results,” Dr. Ondersma said. “These brief, low-cost interventions could easily be offered across large health systems and clinics. Give me that window, with health plans and physicians on board, and we can make an awfully big difference to the health of our children.” He has found similar results for an intervention addressing tobacco use in pregnancy, and just received a new award to develop an intervention for marijuana use in pregnancy. It’s a “golden teachable moment,” he said, to explain the benefits to mom and baby of staying substance-free in pregnancy.
Dr. Raz studies babies born prematurely to assess the development of a battery of skills as they grow. Her lab has collected data from more than 300 children born preterm at the Beaumont Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She has a second data base of about 100 preterm-born preschoolers who have been tested in her lab on language function, memory, and attention.

For preterm babies, an additional two weeks in the womb (from 24 weeks to 26 weeks) can mean major improvements in cognitive and motor skills and overall survival. Her results have been published in the *Journal of International Neuropsychological Society* and in *Neuropsychology*. Dr. Raz continues to collect data on language skills in dozens of children she has been following since birth and teaches graduate courses on Abnormal Psychology and Child Assessment. She also coordinates the MPSI undergraduate research training program to help students working in MPSI labs get accepted into graduate school.

Dr. Resko researches high-risk behavior, especially substance use and interpersonal violence in adolescents and adult women. She is co-principal investigator on a “Substance Use, Violence, and Mental Health Research Collaborative” grant and is also investigating the delivery and evaluation of the Sexual Assault Forensic Examination (SAFE) training programs. Much of her research attempts to scientifically understand the interplay between alcohol and drug use, sexual acting out, poverty, violence and weapons. Dr. Resko is also the principal investigator of a project using a motivational and mindfulness intervention to lessen marijuana use in teen girls.

Dr. Simon studies babies born prematurely to assess the development of a battery of skills as they grow. Her lab has collected data from more than 300 children born preterm at the Beaumont Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She has a second data base of about 100 preterm-born preschoolers who have been tested in her lab on language function, memory, and attention.

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Students completing the Infant Mental Health dual-title program in 2014/15

“*The translation of science for practitioners ensures that young children and families receive support that helps them thrive.*”

As director of MPSI’s Infant Mental Health program, Dr. Stacks trains students and community professionals about the caregiving relationships that support infant optimal social-emotional development, which is a foundation for mental health. Dr. Stacks’ research is community-based and also focuses on parental reflective functioning, a specific aspect of parenting known to support infant mental health. She is the evaluator for the Wayne County Baby Court project, a systems integration approach to child welfare that provides infant mental health services to parents and their infants who are under court jurisdiction for maltreatment.

Dr. Thomason began brain imaging studies while at Stanford University and UCLA. Her research revolves around brain development -- from conception through adolescence -- with a focus on the risk for development of emotional disorders. Dr. Thomason’s lab uses novel methods for detecting and characterizing large-scale human brain networks. Her work has provided new insights into how human brain networks develop, mature, and are altered in children who experience early trauma. Dr. Thomason is also director of the Perinatal Neural Connectivity unit of Wayne States’ Perinatology Research Branch funded through the National Institutes of Health.
THE PROBLEM: Infants and toddlers who experience maltreatment and placement in foster care are at high risk of developmental delays and mental health problems because the attachment relationship between infant and parent is interrupted. But when children must be removed from their home due to allegations of maltreatment, foster care seems like the only answer.

Baby Court teams Keep Families together

THE RESEARCH: Dr. Ann Stacks is the evaluator for the Wayne County Baby Court Project, a model that integrates child welfare, legal, mental health, and judicial systems to improve the lives of maltreated infants removed from their homes. Members of the Baby Court team who serve the family are trained in the science of child development and learn to work collaboratively.

“People who work in child welfare desperately want to help kids and their families,” Dr. Stacks said. “They are excited to learn about the science behind brain development and attachment, and how to promote healthy development. It gives meaning to people’s work. And that gives meaning to the research.”

Baby Court’s goal is to ensure that infants and toddlers in the child welfare system grow up in permanent, nurturing homes that support optimal development. Whenever possible, this happens by returning children to their parents.

In the Baby Court model, the case manager from the Department of Human Services works with an infant mental health (IMH) specialist to help the family address the issues that put the child into foster care. These specialists meet with parents at least once a week to ensure the infant’s attachment relationships are supported and any developmental delays are addressed. IMH specialists also coordinate housing, education and employment needs with the case worker to reduce family stress and insure a safe environment.

THE RESULT: Preliminary results of collaborative teaming in Baby Court are highly promising. For the child, the data show significant improvements in language skills and more compliant behavior when interacting with the parents. Parents show more responsiveness to their children, more positive affect during interactions, and improved insight into their children’s needs. “We have also improved the rates of reunification between parents and children,” Dr. Stacks said. “And none of these families has re-entered the child welfare system.”

Judges, attorneys, and child welfare administrators across the state are interested in Baby Court. Dr. Stacks has conducted trainings on the project for the Foster Care Review Board, the State Court Administrative Office, the Department of Human Services, Michigan Children’s Law Center, referees at Wayne County Court, and several other organizations.

“We are in possession of a vast scientific treasure acquired through the study of normal and deviant infants, a treasure that should be returned to babies and their families as a gift from science.” (1960)

– Selma Fraiberg
MSW (WSU 1940)
A key founder of Infant Mental Health
Affiliate Faculty

Deane Aikins, PhD
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neuroscience

“The key to the military is the spouse.”

Dr. Aikins is a Department of Defense funded researcher interested in novel treatments of combat stress disorders, both in veterans and military families. He is particularly interested in the indirect effects spouse well-being has on child and veteran outcomes. His research focuses on risk and resilience models of post-traumatic stress disorder and potential approaches for its treatment.

Marjorie Beeghly, PhD
Department of Psychology

“Young children learn and thrive in the context of relationships.”

Dr. Beeghly’s research focuses on how risk and resilience factors (e.g., preterm birth, poverty, prenatal substance exposure, and father involvement) contribute to children’s cognitive, language, and social emotional outcomes. She especially is interested in how positive parenting may attenuate the negative impacts of risks on children’s outcomes, with implications for prevention. A passionate teacher and mentor, Dr. Beeghly serves on the Advisory Board of the Infant Mental Health Program at WSU and is core faculty in its Dual Title graduate program. She recently received endorsement as a Level IV Faculty/Research Mentor in Infant Mental Health from the Michigan Association of Infant Mental Health.

Christopher Trentacosta, PhD
Department of Psychology

“My research supports the notion that early social and emotional competencies help build the foundation to learning and other important indicators of children’s adjustment.”

Dr. Trentacosta researches emotional competence and self-regulation in parents and young children, with an emphasis on how these skills affect a child’s risk of behavior problems and ability to adjust to school. Dr. Trentacosta is especially interested in the role of gene-environment interplay in the development of self-regulation as well as translational research to promote emotion regulation and prevent behavior problems. Dr. Trentacosta is also a member of the Population Studies and Disparities Research Program at the Karmanos Cancer Institute.

Attendees at first CURE’s outreach event

More than 160 Detroit residents attend the first CURES forum on environmental toxins.

Safer Healthier Homes

Detroit city life can be challenging. The urban environment stresses residents on multiple fronts. Dirty air, polluted water, toxic cleaning chemicals, lead paint, mercury in fresh-caught fish, preservatives in packaged foods, even emotional stress – these and more conspire to damage our health. But we can only avoid these dangers if we know what and where they are.

CURES is tasked with building awareness and MPSI is helping. CURES is the Center for Urban Responses to Environmental Stressors, created through a three-year, $2.4 million grant to WSU’s Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. As directors of their community outreach and education core, Drs. Lichtenberg and Hannigan are working on a model to educate and train all age groups to detect common environmental stressors and protect themselves.

CURES Community Health Chats started in November with a presentation on “Everyday Toxics & Our Health,” that included health screenings and open discussion.

“Certain populations, such as children, especially those at or near poverty, are at higher risk from these stressors,” said CURES Program Leader Carrie Leach. “And certain times of life heighten the risk, such as pregnancy and puberty.” The goal is to reach those vulnerable residents with a clear and compelling message on how to stay safe, while learning from them about the specific hazards they face.
New Trainings for a New Detroit

The Healthier Urban Families program at MPSI supports and educates thousands of professionals, parents, teens and children every year. HUF’s director, Beverly Weathington, LMSW, does many of these trainings herself and also oversees the dozen or so faculty, staff and area experts who present throughout metro Detroit. Requests from parents for training on stress management, and positive discipline for preschoolers continue to top the list. Professionals have been most interested in learning how to counsel parents on school readiness, adolescent depression, infant development, and how to engage fathers.

While the topics requested by the community haven’t changed much over the past two years, Bev has noted an increase in the number of family trainings in midtown and downtown Detroit. “This means more young families are moving into the city,” she said, “which is a good sign of its revitalization.” HUF is ramping up to meet the need and expanding its speakers’ bureau to include more faculty experts.

“The community wants specific information on certain topics,” she said. “Our researchers are excellent because they provide practical material as well as supporting research in a comprehensive way.” Parents and professionals appreciate the issues being placed into a larger context, knowing that it isn’t just their child or community. “There is no stigma,” Bev said. “We understand the concerns. We offer suggestions. We do not judge.”

HUF has also deepened collaborations with key organizations such as Matrix Human Services, Wayne Metropolitan Head Start and Community Action Agency, the Michigan Department of Human Services, the Institute for Population Health, and the Great Start Collaborative – Wayne. These partnerships open doors to new groups who benefit from...
HUF trainings and also keep HUF informed of changing educational needs.

Each year, HUF also hosts a two-day professional development conference for people who work with children and families, such as social workers and counselors, many of whom have an infant mental health endorsement. The 2014 conference drew near-record numbers to hear Tulane University professor and author Marva Lewis, Ph.D., an internationally recognized expert on the historical trauma of slavery, and Deborah Harris, LISWI, a professor at the University of New Mexico and expert on developing interventions for infants and toddlers who have experienced family trauma. Year after year, the feedback from attendees has been overwhelmingly positive:

“Very powerful presentation with incredibly valuable information. Good for the soul!”

“Dr. Lewis is one of the best presenters and educators I have ever heard. I learned so much. I would recommend this to anyone.”

“It’s so important to discuss and acknowledge the psychological residuals related to historical trauma and depression. Wonderful presentation!”

“Deb Harris gave very important information to us working with at-risk families.”

Bev’s goal for HUF is to positively impact children and their families wherever possible, through education, support, and connecting them to needed resources. “It’s important that the people we serve know they are being heard,” she said. “We don’t necessarily always have the answer, but we can always offer support.”

500+ parents a year receive trainings

“Making their Mark

MPSI Researcher Helps Student Group Win National Award

Student Leadership Services (SLS) of Waterford, MI, won a national Exemplary Award for innovation, thanks in part to a program evaluation conducted by Lisa Ficker, Ph.D., a MPSI research associate. SLS conducts interactive and peer-led trainings throughout Michigan to help all students remain safe, healthy, and alcohol and drug free. This is the first time it has won the award.

The highly competitive award, from the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse, recognizes SLS’s student-focused approach supported by a data-driven evaluation to validate the program’s effectiveness. The evaluation was federally funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which collaborated with SLS staff to create the online instrument, easily accessed by students via computer or mobile device. Dr. Ficker then analyzed the data and created a report and presentation of the results.

Of the 464 SLS participants surveyed, 87% said they increased their ability to resist peer pressure; 78% increased their knowledge of the effects of alcohol and drugs; 79% experienced personal growth and a desire to help others; and 73% said they were modeling healthy choices. “Our award application was strengthened by being able to include this important data to affirm the excellence and effectiveness of our program,” said SLS Executive Director Pamela Voss-Page.

Southfield-Lathrup High School members of award-winning Student Leadership Services discuss a new app for student-led health and safety programs.

“There is no stigma. We understand the concerns. We offer suggestions. We do not judge.”
Those three words are the motto of the Giant Step Teen Conference where students from throughout southeast Michigan get to know each other. Started 31 years ago as a simple way to ease discrimination in the highly segregated Detroit area, Giant Step continues to expose students to peers from other neighborhoods, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Students are placed in small discussion groups that maximize diversity, where trained facilitators guide them through student-led topics.

“I learned to get out of my comfort zone,” said a 15-year-old from Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor. A 10th grader from the private University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods said, “A lot of people have the same problems in high school. We need to get along.” A teen from Allen Park High School said his group talked about the divide between the social classes and the importance of “respecting and maintaining human dignity.”

More than 90% of teens surveyed after Giant Step report they “now find it easier to get to know people who are different from me” and plan to stay in touch with the teens they met at the conference. About 300 students attend Giant Step each year; the conference, including lunch, is free. Educators and parents who bring students are invited to a concurrent continuing education workshop on topics such as teen dating violence, and strategies to stop school bullying.
Wayne State University has two Early Childhood Centers on its campus, one at the College of Education (COE) and the other at MPSI. The schools provide a structured day of learning activities based in play. Children can choose from several activity centers to explore concepts like measurement, season changes, and art. Together the Centers serve nearly 90 children age 2 ½ to 5, preparing them for kindergarten and helping some parents finish college, too.

MPSI holds the larger center with about 60 children. Not long after opening in 1922 as one of the nation’s first preschools, Merrill Palmer Nursery School became a nationally recognized site for research on family and child development and a demonstration site for best practices. Today’s Early Childhood Centers at MPSI and the COE continue the tradition of excellence. They are accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), making them two of only four centers in Detroit to fulfill the more than 400 criteria required to achieve this honor. Both Centers also earned the highest 5-Star rating in the Michigan Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The MPSI Center won a 2014 Bronze Medal for overall quality from Excellent Schools Detroit.

Helping College Parents Graduate

Nearly two-thirds of families at the MPSI Center receive tuition grant aid from the U.S. Department of Education CCAMPIS program. CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in School) supports low-income parents enrolled in postsecondary education by paying for preschool services on campus. Parents must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average, but MPSI Center parents average 2.8. A few parents with GPAs of at least 3.8 have even been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, the most prestigious honor society in the United States. CCAMPIS parents often express gratitude for the program, saying that without dependable, quality childcare for their toddler, they would not have had the focus to finish college.

A Resource for Training

Both Centers serve as field sites for WSU students in psychology, pediatrics, speech and language, occupational therapy, and other disciplines, training 378 students during the past two years. Students use the Centers to observe normal child development for education and psychology courses, while outside childcare centers and community agencies visit the Centers to observe best practices in teaching. Researchers in public health, psychology and social work have also used the Centers for data collection and recruitment into research projects on young children.
Books, Farms and One World

Special projects at the Centers enhance student learning and parent engagement. Book Boom! was launched in 2013 to create mini-lending libraries outside Center classrooms. Several thousand dollars were raised for books, puppets and other manipulatives to build literacy skills at home with families. The libraries have proven more popular than anticipated, with more than 60% of books and materials checked out at any given time.

Spring marks the annual Real Life Day Camp and Farm field trip to Canton, Michigan. Children and parents spend the day milking cows, feeding goats, mucking through hay, and chasing piglets as they learn about nutrition, fresh foods and raising animals. Before and after the trip, classrooms discuss related educational concepts. The children draw pictures of their favorite activities, from “spending the day with Dad,” to “holding a baby pig.” The Real Life Farm owners also run a nursery school, so they know well how to relate to preschoolers.

The children at the Centers come from various religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. (Last year’s families spoke six different languages.) This rich diversity is evident in the family posters created to introduce each child to the preschool. The Center’s “One World” goal is to enrich the cultural learning of each student. Children who understand and appreciate other cultures are more likely to be tolerant, respectful and accepting of differences.

The MPSI Center raised funds to purchase multi-cultural books, costumes and other play-based materials to help the students experience a diversity of cultures. The message of multiculturalism can now be integrated into most aspects of the school day as the curriculum reinforces the learning at each play station.

Helping Detroit’s Young Children to Learn and Thrive

In 2011, early childhood faculty from the College of Education and MPSI created the Woodward Corridor Early Childhood Consortium to enhance the quality of early childhood education and care in Detroit’s downtown, midtown, and north end neighborhoods. Led by MPSI Professor Hilary Ratner, COE Associate Professor Sharon Elliott and Anna Miller, executive director of the Early Childhood Centers, the consortium now includes 24 child care facilities and community partners. The preschools and day cares serve 1,900 children (birth to 5) and employ more than 200 teachers and teaching assistants. Membership is free, voluntary and growing.

Grant funding from the Kresge Foundation and the PNC Foundation provide professional development to consortium partners and a pilot program of small group and individual coaching for teachers to help them bring evidence-based teaching strategies to their classrooms. The Centers are also demonstration sites to observe best practices.

The value of the Consortium is particularly evident as Michigan implements a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for child care and preschool programs. The Consortium has great potential to help centers raise their QRIS ratings through help with issues related to staffing, programs and facilities, while also improving child well-being, school readiness and parent engagement.

1,900 preschoolers currently attend the 24 schools and daycares in the Woodward Corridor Early Childhood Consortium, created by MPSI and the College of Education to provide training and resources to area childcare centers.

5,980+ students have attended the Early Childhood Centers.
Graduate Trainees Bring Fresh Perspectives

Student trainees at MPSI are doctoral candidates selected from WSU’s Psychology Department or School of Social Work who wish to focus more intensely on child and family development. Mentorship, collegiality and research involvement prepare these future scientists to work effectively with families and those who serve them. Interdisciplinary faculty mentoring teams advise these students about research, publishing, doctoral course work, internships, and career planning. Students who are named as Fellows receive additional support from MPSI in exchange for a greater commitment to professional development, presenting research, and attending conferences.
We congratulate our newest class of trainees for the 2014/15 academic year:

Matthew Carroll   Laura Crespo         Amy Graham       Laurel Hicks            Ingrid Haugen      Hilary Marusak       Hasti Raveau          Davia Steinberg

Graduate Trainee Awards

Ann Carrellas, Fellow (2014), Social Work
MPSI Travel award to present research at the Society for Research on Adolescence Biennial Conference, Austin, TX (2014).

Casey Dexter, Fellow (2013), Developmental Psychology
Dr. Dexter is now an assistant professor of psychology at Berry College in Mount Berry, GA, and a 2014-15 faculty fellow with the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation in Oxford, MS.
Early Career Achievement Award , American Psychological Association (2014)
Early Career Travel Grant, Society for Teaching of Psychology (2014)
Early Career Scholarship, National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (2014)
Summer Dissertation Fellowship, WSU Graduate School (2013)
Partial Tuition Scholarship, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (2013)

Tina Dykehouse (2014), Social Work

Travis Goldwire, Fellow (2013), Clinical Psychology
Dr. Travis recently completed his Commissioned Officer Training for the U.S. Air Force and is serving a clinical internship at Lackland AFB in Texas.
Thomas C. Rumble Graduate Fellowship (2013)

Ben Goodlett, Fellow (2013) Clinical Psychology
Graduate Student Service Award, Department of Psychology (2013)

Amy Loree, Fellow (2013, 2014), Clinical Psychology
Amy is currently a doctoral fellow serving a clinical internship at Yale University’s Center or Addiction.
International Symposium for Contemplative Studies Student Scholarship (2014)
Research Society on Alcoholism Student Merit Travel Award (2014)
3rd Place WSU Graduate Research Exhibition Poster Day (2014)
2nd Place WSU Graduate Research Exhibition Poster Day (2013)
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation Student Award (2013)
Thomas C. Rumble University Graduate Fellowship (2013)

Mickey Sperlich, Fellow (2013, 2014), Dual Title PhD in Social Work and Infant Mental Health
Graduate-Professional Scholarship, WSU Graduate School (2014)
WSU Graduate School/School of Social Work Doctoral Student Travel Award (2014)
WSU Faculty Teaching Travel Grant to present Defining Trauma after DSM-5: Theoretical Perspectives on Trauma Exposure in Childbearing Women to the Council for Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, Tampa, FL, Oct. 2014
Thomas C. Rumble University Graduate Fellowship (2013)
Graduate Student Reviewer to Child Maltreatment Journal (2013)

Kristyn Wong, Fellow (2014), Developmental Psychology
MPSI Co-president, Graduate Student Organization (2013, 2014)
1st Place, Wayne County Community Mental Health Research Conference (2013)
Travel awards from MPSI and the Psychology Dept. to present Reflective Functioning as a Moderator in the Relationship between Infant Temperament and Later Behavior Problems at the World Association for Infant Mental Health Biennial Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, June 2014.
ed $985,516 to the MPSI and College of Education Early Childhood Centers to provide tuition for preschoolers of parents attending Wayne State University. Eligible parents must be below income and asset thresholds and maintain a GPA of at least 2.0. By making quality child care affordable, parents in college are more able and likely to obtain their degrees.

Computer-Based SBIRT for Marijuana Use in Pregnancy: Planning a Stage II Trial – Dr. Ondersma, PI. A three-year, $684,000 grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to develop and test a computer-delivered brief intervention approach designed to reduce marijuana use during pregnancy. SBIRT stands for Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral and Treatment. Dr. Ondersma also received a WSU grant of $60,000 to fund a postdoctoral fellowship for two years.

Emergence of Sexual Risk among Sexually Abused Adolescent Females – Dr. Valerie Simon, PI. Little is known about the early sexual development of girls who were victims of child sexual abuse. The National Institutes of Health awarded $609,220 for a five-year study of this relationship that may lead to more effective risk-reduction programs for these adolescents. Dr. Simon also received a two-year $60,000 postdoctoral fellowship award toward this research.

Identifying Military and Combat-specific Risk Factors for Child Adjustment – Dr. Julie Aikins, PI. A three-year, $460,179 grant from the Department of Defense Army Medical Research Acquisition Activity to understand the unique impact of military deployment on risk to family and child well-being. By comparing families of service members with high-risk deployments to two-parent civilian, single-parent civilian, and low-risk deployed service member families, the unique difficulties characteristic of these families will be identified. Prevention and intervention efforts will be designed based on these findings.

Promoting High Quality Early Childhood Education in Detroit’s Woodward Corridor – Drs. Sharon Elliot and Hilary Ratner, and Anna Miller, M.Ed., PIs. A three-year, $246,000 grant from the Kresge Foundation to help MPSI and the College of Education provide leadership, training and resources to early childhood centers in midtown Detroit.

Detroit’s Baby Court: A system of integration initiatives to support infant mental health – Dr. Ann Stacks, PI. Dr. Stacks was awarded $190,000 over two years from the Flinn Family Foundation to study the effectiveness of an integrated system of services for infants and their families who are at risk for adverse outcomes.

Promoting High Quality Early Childhood Education – Anna Miller, M.Ed., PI. The U.S. Department of Education awarded $361,966 to the MPSI and College of Education Early Childhood Centers to provide leadership, training and resources to early childhood centers in midtown Detroit.

Assessment and Intervention for Perinatal Drug Use – Dr. Steve Ondersma, PI. A four-year, $1.73 million grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to test his newly created screening and intervention tool to reduce drug use in new mothers. The tool is low-cost, easy to administer, and designed to be effective even if the mother never confesses to drug use.

Optimizing and Validating a Brief Assessment for Identifying Children of Service Members at Risk for Psychological Health Problems after Parent Deployment – Dr. Julie Aikins, PI. A three-year $1.4 million Department of Defense grant Army Medical Research Acquisition Activity to examine the direct and indirect impact of service members’ psychological health problems post-deployment on the well-being of their young children. Identifying the mechanisms of effect on children’s psychological health will lay the groundwork for prevention and intervention programs.

Child Care Access Means Parents in School – Anna Miller, M.Ed., PI. The U.S. Department of Education awarded $985,516 to the MPSI and College of Education Early Childhood Centers to provide tuition for preschoolers of parents attending Wayne State University. Eligible parents must be below income and asset thresholds and maintain a GPA of at least 2.0. By making quality child care affordable, parents in college are more able and likely to obtain their degrees.
of the “Baby Court” team model. Baby Court brings together infant mental health therapists, foster care workers, and attorneys to give families of children in the state’s custody due to allegations of maltreatment, the best opportunity for success. The team takes into account the fundamental needs of the infant while attempting to significantly improve the parents’ competence to care for their children. The team provides standardized court assessments, supports therapists in delivering an evidence-based Child Parent Psychotherapy, and trains new therapists, attorneys and caseworkers.

Fetal Neuroimaging: Multi-modal pathways to early identification of brain injury – Dr. Moriah Thomason, PI. The Kellogg Foundation granted $121,000 over two years to use prenatal brain imaging to study at-risk infants and the risk of infection.

Strengthening Mental Health Service Utilization to Reduce Negative Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse – Dr. Valerie Simon, PI. An 18-month, $98,000 Research Enhancement Award from WSU to identify barriers to and increase utilization of no-cost mental health services among families with a newly discovered case of child sexual abuse. At present, few families take advantage of early intervention resources, putting children at greater risk of long-term trauma. Dr. Simon received an additional $50,000 grant over two years from the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation toward this research.

Translating Research into Practice: Improving Pregnancy Alcohol Screening – Drs. John Hannigan and Lisa Chiodo (Nursing), Co-Pls. A $75,000 grant from the WSU-HFHS Institute for Population Studies Health Assessment, Administration, Services and Economics to assess training for prenatal care nurses to implement an efficient screen for at-risk drinking in pregnancy.

Great Start Readiness Program – Anna Miller, M.Ed., PI. This one-year grant from the Michigan Department of Education is shared between both Early Childhood Centers on campus. MPSI’s Center receives $65,250 to provide free tuition for qualified four-year-olds who are at-risk of school failure.

Neural and Epigenetic Bases of Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome in Youth – Dr. Thomason, PI. Dr. Thomason will use functional brain imaging to investigate the effects of PTSD on the developing brain. The Brain & Behavior Research Foundation awarded a New Investigator $60,000 grant for this two-year study. She also received a $60,000 WSU grant to fund a postdoctoral fellow position for two years.

Neurodevelopmental Pathways in Adolescent Health Risk Behavior – Dr. Thomason, Co-I. This $57,000 grant is part of a five-year study funded through the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development. The expected research outcomes will help to identify the psychosocial, neurocognitive, and neural mechanisms that contribute to behaviors among adolescents and young adults that put their health at risk. Understanding the developmental mechanisms that contribute to risk behaviors is essential to providing better preventive interventions to reduce the population health burden arising from behavioral misadventure in adolescence and young adulthood.

Freer House Restoration – William Colburn, PI. The Americana Foundation awarded a one-year $40,000 grant to support improvements to the historic Freer House, built in 1892, now the home of MPSI faculty and staff. Monies may go toward programming, materials analysis, and restoring the home’s courtyard garden.
Standing Room Only: The Lecture Series

The Freer House created a ‘world class’ lecture series in partnership with the Detroit Institute of Arts and other sponsors, highlighting the local, national and international legacy of Charles Lang Freer. The lecture series traveled the globe with topics ranging from Freer and the art of China, India and Japan to Philadelphia architect Wilson Eyre’s design of Freer’s landmark home in Detroit. Guest speakers included prominent curators from the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, as well as distinguished professors from Harvard University and Bryn Mawr College.

Today’s lecture series average more than 200 attendees per event, up from the roughly 60 people attending lectures five years ago. The most recent lecture, October’s The Artist’s Garden, garnered a standing-room-only crowd of over 300 guests with more than 250 attending the post-lecture reception at the Freer House and 150 people taking the guided house tour.

Capturing the Vision: Films, Photographs and Research

Freer House previewed a PBS Arts documentary on the life and art of James McNeill Whistler to about 90 members and supporters in 2014. Freer House and the American Art Wing of the DIA also co-sponsored a special presentation by Whistler biographer, distinguished historian and WSU alum, Daniel Sutherland.

A film crew from NHK, Japan’s national broadcasting company, flew to Detroit in 2013 to film the Freer House for a documentary on famous collectors of Japanese art, including Charles Lang Freer. The documentary, including a five-minute segment on the Freer House, was broadcast in primetime across Japan on Culture Day, November 5, 2013.

For the first time ever, the Freer House has been extensively documented by a professional architectural photographer. The renowned photographer, Alex Vertikoff, whose work has appeared in Architectural Digest, and the Getty and Metropolitan museums, photographed the interior and exterior of the house, providing a set of 30 stunning images for use in Freer House fundraising, promotion and publicity. Some of Vertikoff’s images accompany this article.

Public education programs in the past few years include permanent and rotating exhibits on aspects of Freer’s life...
and the art and design of the house. A House and Its History is now on permanent display in the carriage house pas sageway. The former Peacock Room contains a rotating series of exhibits, including: Freer and India; Freer and Japan; Freer’s Pilgrimage to the Buddhist Cave Temples at Longmen; An Art Collectors Garden; and The Peacock Room Comes to Detroit. Each professionally designed exhibit will be posted on the Freer House website and printed in booklet form, making the exhibits permanently accessible to an even wider audience.

Students from WSU, the University of Michigan and the College for Creative Studies have been involved in several projects, including documenting furniture and objects that once belonged to Freer and are now in the private collection of Dr. Thomas W. Brunk, and researching the original contractors, artisans and suppliers for the 1890-92 construction of Freer House. The students received training in primary research using archival collections at the Detroit Public Library, Reuther Library and the Bentley Collection at U-M, as well as instruction in the use of online resources. Their research provides valuable information to guide restoration efforts and augment the Freer House archives.

Major Initiatives Restore and Revive

The staff, board and volunteers of Freer House have worked diligently in recent years to launch initiatives to upgrade the interior and exterior of the house. A courtyard garden and landscaping design plan was completed in 2013 with implementation to start in 2015. With support from the Americana Foundation, donations from professional services, and the expertise of Freer House Garden Project Committee members, the revitalized garden will reflect Freer’s original plan while incorporating space for both quiet contemplation and outdoor events. Design plans have also been created to restore the Whistler Gallery into a public meeting and conference space, and to transform a ground floor room in the carriage house into an exhibit space and visitors welcome center.

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Research Assistant, Freer House, MPSI
Rose Foster, operations coordinator for MPSI for more than a decade, was named WSU’s Building Coordinator of the Year. The university selects one person each year for their outstanding effort coordinating the complex systems and services needed to run a campus building. Rose’s primary territory, the Freer House, encompasses an extra level of complexity. It not only houses the faculty and staff of MPSI, but is historically significant as the 1892 home of Charles L. Freer. Rose was honored for maintaining the integrity of the house as it hosts art-related events for Freer House members and the public. Rose also oversees services for the nearby Skillman Building and the portion of the Knapp building that contains MPSI’s Early Childhood Center.

High Praise for Freer House

THE LECTURE SERIES . . .

“Several of my students attended the lecture at the DIA and even more went to the Freer House tours (some told me they brought their parents, which is great, too!). I was very pleased it was such a success. Looking forward to the next one and hopefully contributing my own Freer research someday!”

Lily Wilson, Instructor, Art History, College for Creative Studies

“I am continuously amazed and thrilled at the increasing profile of Freer House and the growing recognition of it and its owner, Charles Lang Freer, in Detroit. I only wish I were closer to attend your wonderful events. You are all to be congratulated profusely.”

Susan Hobbs, Director, Thomas Dewing Catalogue Raisonne Project, Alexandria, VA

THE TOURS . . .

“On behalf of the Detroit Historical Society, I thank you for providing an exceptional ‘Behind the Scenes’ tour experience at the Freer House. Attendees commented that it was ‘excellent because so much great information was given to us,’ ‘was one of the best tours,’ and ‘lecturer (William Colburn) is top notch! He’s very well informed and communicates well.’ Each time we introduce a group to the Freer House, they come back with glowing reports.”

Rebecca Hope, Manager of Public Programs, Detroit Historical Society

YouTube views of the Detroit version of the Japanese pop song Fortune Cookie in Love, produced by Yukari Katayama, wife of Consul General of Japan in Detroit, Dr. Kazuyuki Katayama. The Katayamas are good friends and supporters of the Freer House, where scenes of MPSI faculty and staff dancing to the song were shot.
Older and Wiser Thanks to Merrill Palmer: 94-year-old Remembers Us Fondly

Preschool alum Adam Samuel Pratt (class of 1924) made a surprise visit to the Freer House recently to re-walk the secluded courtyard where he once played as a toddler. He said his preschool year at Merrill Palmer “is the earliest experience that I have a memory of at 94 years of age.” After graduating from Cooley High, Sam earned a BSCE in civil and structural engineering from MSU, became an ensign in the navy during World War II, and spent his career after discharge as a civil engineer. He enjoyed a 66-year marriage and raised five children. Sam now lives in Kennewick, Washington and visited Detroit with his daughter last year, where they studied archived class photos to spot toddler Sam in the one here.
Making their Mark

is the age when Cleo Backus (MPSI class of 1937) of Croton, Ohio, became the oldest person ever to donate to the Institute. Cleo turned 101 on Oct. 31, 2014.

Ann Nicholson, a longtime member of MPSI’s Board of Visitors, received a special tribute from Wayne State University for more than a decade of service helping children and their families in Detroit. Though MPSI went through a difficult reorganization in the 80s, and a succession of leaders through the 90s, Ann’s commitment to the work of the Institute never wavered.

Board chair Debra Partrich hosted the event at the Detroit Athletic Club. Guests included Ann’s fellow volunteers at the Young Woman’s Home Association and several family members, including husband James and son David, a member of the Wayne State Board of Governors.

The tribute included remarks from friend and fellow board member Phebe Goldstein, and appreciation from Director Lichtenberg for Ann’s advice on integrating MPSI more thoroughly into the university. “I don’t remember being that important to the process,” Ann said humbly. “But I’m very pleased at the growth and successes of Merrill Palmer Skillman.”

Dr. Lichtenberg compared Ann to a “great researcher,” saying she is passionate about her subject, intellectually curious about how things work, focused on impact, and asks penetrating questions that improve the project. “We celebrate all she has done for us,” he said, “and look forward to even greater achievements in the future.”
COVER PHOTOS

1. Preschoolers at the Early Childhood Center enjoy sunshine and friendship in the playground courtyard.
2. “I’m not camera shy.” A four-year-old at the Early Childhood Center poses for a quick snap.
3. MPSI faculty and staff dance along to the popular Japanese song, “Fortune Cookie in Love” in a video highlighting Detroit’s finest features.
4. MRIs safely examine brain structure in at-risk babies before birth.
5. Social workers, counselors and infant mental health specialists pack the auditorium at the annual Explorations in Development conference.
6. Teenagers from more than 30 different schools gather to discuss life issues at the annual Giant Step Teen Conference.