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Merrill Palmer Skillman Researcher Helps Student Group Win National Award

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WATERFORD, MI – Student Leadership Services won a national award for innovation, thanks in part to a program evaluation conducted by Lisa Ficker, Ph.D., a research associate at Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. The National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, and its component group, the National Prevention Network, designates only a few Exemplary Awards each year for innovative substance abuse prevention programs, practices and policies. Student Leadership Services (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 SLS has won the award.

The Exemplary Award recognizes SLS's student-focused approach supported by a data-driven program evaluation to validate the effectiveness of the program. 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. 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. "These evaluations are also critical to show us what we do well and what we could strengthen as we try to reach a wide array of students." Boys and ethnic minority students were found to be more likely to minimize the impact of drugs and alcohol and to have less confidence in their refusal skills for alcohol and other drugs. SLS is working to reach these vulnerable groups and to increase awareness of cultural differences.

Exemplary Awards are highly competitive, with applications for the 2014 awards at a record high. The extensive requirements include sections on needs assessment, building capacity, strategic planning, implementation, evaluation and program management. Each application is reviewed and scored by a conferring panel of prevention and health care professionals. In the past few years only 2-4 programs a year have scored high enough to receive an award. This year, SLS was the only organization to receive a National Exemplary Award for Innovative Substance Abuse Prevention Programs, Practices, and Policies.

As an award winner, SLS will present at the National Prevention Network's annual conference in Connecticut in September and also received an unrestricted \$1,650 grant. Since its founding in 1982, SLS has directly affected the lives of over 1,000,000 youth. The youth-led and adult supported programs include alcohol and drug awareness, community service, assertiveness, social skills, safe driving, parent education, life skills and leadership opportunities.

The Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development promotes and improves the development, health and well-being of infants, children, youth and their families through research, education and outreach. The institute is part of Wayne State University, a premier urban research institution offering more than 370 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to nearly 28,000 students.

Photo: Southfield-Lathrup High School students at a Student Leadership Services chapter meeting, preparing to announce a new app to connect students to student-led health and safety programs.

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