Engaging state, national and global communities and improving lives through teaching, research and public service
Teaching
For nearly a century, the School of Social Work has been connecting with North Carolina through teaching, research and public service. But over the last few years, the School’s reach has begun to extend far beyond the state’s borders and into international communities. These connections include China, where social work as a discipline is still fairly new, and the number of trained professionals is relatively low.

During the summer of 2009, the School formally agreed to help Chinese social work leaders address the nation’s need for qualified practitioners by offering assistance with training and research. The School signed a five-year agreement with Shanghai’s School of Social and Public Administration at the East China University of Science and Technology.

Although informal interest in a partnership grew over the years following several study abroad trips to China, the School realized that a deeper commitment was needed as more Chinese universities began offering social work programs and exploring ways to address the country’s social problems, including the health-care needs of migrant workers, said School Dean Jack Richman.

The School also saw an opportunity to learn from China’s innovative practices and policies, Richman said. Among other issues, faculty members are interested in the country’s comprehensive plan to assist its growing elderly population, including services that would enable older residents to be cared for in the home. Faculty members are excited about the chance to work more closely with China’s educational institutions, Richman said.

“This is a real win-win collaboration.”

Educating social workers internationally
School faculty members are actively involved in North Carolina’s classrooms, directing projects and programs designed to help all children succeed academically.

Associate professor Natasha Bowen and clinical assistant professor Joelle Powers are directing a three-year longitudinal study at four North Carolina elementary schools. They are looking at how experiences in neighborhoods, schools, families and with friends affect learning, and how to help schools develop interventions to improve student achievement.

The information is collected from students, parents and teachers using an assessment called the Elementary School Success Profile (ESSP), created by Natasha Bowen.

The ESSP is based on the School Success Profile (SSP) tool, which is for middle and high school students. The original SSP assessment was developed by faculty members Gary Bowen and Jack Richman at the School of Social Work and since 1991, has been helping educators nationwide to identify barriers to learning.

The elementary profile helps schools “prioritize concerns and develop intervention plans,” Natasha Bowen said.

The project partially focuses on data collected from an online questionnaire that gives educators a glimpse into a child’s experiences, well-being and social skills. Students are asked, for example, about peer relationships, parental involvement with homework and other activities, the safety of their communities and school behavior.

“A child’s exposure to neighborhood violence is a risk factor for academic and mental health problems, while access to caring adults in the neighborhood and school is protective of well-being,” Bowen said.

“So if, for example, a student is being bullied every day on the bus or on the walk home from school, the effects of the harassment may show up in the student’s grades,” Powers added.

The project doesn’t dictate what solutions should be applied but offers an online database of evidence-based practices for educators to consider. Teachers at the participating schools have used a variety of strategies over the past two and a half years to improve achievement.

Ultimately, the assessment tool and strategies are about giving young students the greatest chance to succeed, Bowen said.

“If you don’t know or understand what factors are impacting kids’ performances,” Bowen said, “then how are you going to be able to help kids do better?”

Identifying barriers to learning among young students

Natasha Bowen, Ph.D. (seated) and Joelle Powers, Ph.D.
Addressing mental health needs of Latino youth

Although researchers know that a child’s mental health can influence academic success, there have been very few resources to assist Hispanic children. Associate professor Mimi Chapman is working to change that.

For the past two years, Chapman has been directing “Creating Confianza,” a project that addresses the mental health needs of Latino youth and aims to improve their overall well-being through early intervention and referral and treatment services.

“The program really focuses on [helping families and educators] … recognize mental health problems and then intervene with them,” Chapman said.

Chatham County Schools and El Futuro, a nonprofit group that focuses on Latino behavioral health, partnered with Chapman on the three-year project, which targets Spanish-speaking students at two Chatham County, North Carolina schools. Creating Confianza is funded by a $300,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Chapman’s work with immigrant and refugee youth continues to earn financial support and recognition. In January, UNC’s Carolina Women’s Center named Chapman its Fall 2010 Faculty Scholar. The honor will enable the associate professor to pursue a new study that explores gang activity among Latina youth.

The project emerged from Chapman’s work with Creating Confianza and will focus on strategies to prevent Hispanic girls from getting involved with gangs.

Helping children succeed in middle school

CareerStart, which professor Dennis Orthner helped launch in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools four years ago, continues to show success in keeping middle school students in school.

The intervention program helps students connect what they are learning in the classroom to future career opportunities as a way to reach those most at-risk of failing. The program currently serves about 15,000 students in school districts across the state, though Orthner hopes the program will expand.

CareerStart has produced promising results, including fewer unexcused absences and school suspensions and higher test scores in reading and math on the state’s eighth-grade End-of-Grade tests.

CareerStart has even shown potential in narrowing the achievement gap that has long separated minority and disadvantaged children and their white peers.

Maintaining student interest in school, especially during the middle-grade years, is a vital way of ensuring that more children graduate from high school, Orthner said.

“We want all students to feel like school has value.”
Research
Finding new solutions for eliminating poverty in Africa

Assistant professor Gina Chowa has long been interested in building economic stability in developing countries, where many families lack employment, educational opportunities, and access to public health and medical care. Her recent research has focused on Sub-Saharan Africa and how the ability to accumulate property and financial assets — such as farmland, livestock, houses, bank accounts and savings — impact the poor, especially youth.

Five years ago in a rural district of Masindi, Uganda, Chowa started AssetsAfrica’s Pilot Project, a matched savings project that helps households build savings and assets. Such programs are valuable, Chowa noted, because they not only help stave off physical threats to a rural community’s survival but potentially bolster a family’s psychological and social welfare by enabling them to support themselves and pursue their goals.

Chowa views AssetsAfrica as a real solution for “improving the well-being of poor households.” So far, project participants have saved enough money to purchase motorcycles, bicycles, goats, oxen and land.

“Asset development is a bread and butter issue in rural Sub-Saharan Africa. Assets generate income for families to help pay for their children’s education, health care, nutrition and provide capital for investment in the next generation.”

Empowering students with mental illnesses, support services to prepare for ‘what-if’ scenarios

Nationally, an estimated 15 percent of students experience some form of mental illness such as major depression while in college, and many often struggle with where to get support. But a School of Social Work study aims to close this gap by encouraging students to consider their needs and treatment options well in advance.

The research project explores whether students with mental illnesses will document their mental health issues, outline the care they prefer and provide copies of this information to people and agencies that students agree could assist if a crisis occurred.

Known as “advance directives for mental health,” these legal documents enable someone to communicate their wishes while they are capable of making decisions on their own and could ensure that young people get the help they need sooner, said Anna Scheyett, the project’s lead investigator and associate dean for academic affairs at the School of Social Work. Scheyett is currently working on the study’s first phase, which involves interviewing students with mental illnesses, in part, to ensure that the advanced directives and the process for developing them are tailored to meet their needs.

Because of confidentiality laws, administrators often struggle with the legal and ethical dilemmas of how to respond when a student shows symptoms of a mental illness. An advanced directive could help the University to act more responsibly, Scheyett said. And students are encouraged to include as much information as they are comfortable sharing, she added.

“It’s almost like a living will,” she said. “It gives you a chance up front when you’re healthy to speak for yourself and your needs—to keep your autonomy when the illness might be trying to take that away from you.”

Anna Scheyett, Ph.D.
Improving the quality of care and outcomes for seniors

Sheryl Zimmerman has well-established herself as a national expert in the field of aging. As a School professor and director of aging research, she is widely published on a variety of issues affecting seniors, including understanding and improving the quality of care and outcomes in nursing homes and residential care/assisted living communities, and the causes, consequences, and treatment of hip fractures, dementia and depression.

One report Zimmerman wrote last spring found that over two years, Medicare expenses were lower for nursing home residents with dementia than for those without.

Yet, the report noted, more and more residents with dementia are moving to residential care/assisted living communities, which may not be as prepared to monitor their healthcare needs — a trend that will likely result in increasing Medicare costs in the long-term.

Over the years, Zimmerman’s research in the field of residential long-term care has significantly influenced policy and practice. Her overall work has also earned her high honors.

In 2009, UNC named Zimmerman its Mary Lily Kenan Flagler Bingham Distinguished Professor, one of the most prestigious honors the University can bestow upon a faculty member. The recognition joins Zimmerman’s lengthy list of titles and responsibilities, including director of UNC’s Interdisciplinary Certificate in Aging; co-director of UNC’s Interdisciplinary Center for Aging Research; co-director of the Program on Aging, Disability and Long-Term Care at UNC’s Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research; and adjunct professor in the Department of Epidemiology at the School of Public Health.

The prolific scholar maintains her passionate research interest largely because she understands that issues of aging affect everyone — not only older adults — and because there is tremendous potential for growth in this field. “There now are many ways to promote a good quality of life for persons with dementia, something we never dreamed of in the past.”

Helping low-income families cope in a troubled economy

Where many have seen challenges in the nation’s housing crisis, Michal Grinstein-Weiss continues to see possibilities and potential solutions to helping more struggling low-income families find affordable homes, strengthen their economic security and potentially escape poverty altogether.

Grinstein-Weiss, a School assistant professor, believes the answer largely rests with the asset-building program known as Individual Development Accounts or IDAs. IDAs enable low-income residents to save for a down payment on a house, college tuition or a start-up business. The program also provides a “financial cushion” for families during times of crisis, such as a job loss or illness, Grinstein-Weiss said. IDAs, which are funded by federal and state grants, encourage savings by doubling and sometimes tripling every dollar a participant sets aside.

Grinstein-Weiss, who is conducting the country’s first large scale test of IDAs, has found that the long-term impact of the asset-building program appears promising. According to her research, low-income families who participated in an IDA program from 1998 to 2003 were more likely than other low-income people to save for a down payment on a house, decrease debt to improve their credit scores and purchase a home within four years.

IDAs, the assistant professor added, should be considered a valuable tool for moving low-income families “into the financial mainstream.”

“This study will provide policymakers, practitioners and researchers with a better understanding of the long-term impacts of asset-building and IDA program effectiveness so they can design innovative policies and programs to promote social and economic development among low-income families.”
Boosting support for domestic violence victims and substance abusers

With national studies showing that nearly 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence or sexual assault in their lifetimes, School associate professor Rebecca Macy is committed to helping victims receive the assistance they deserve.

And across North Carolina, there is a growing need among survivors for more services in mental health and substance abuse issues. This need, Macy said, is based on a growing body of evidence that domestic violence and sexual assault victims are more likely to abuse substances and battle anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.

Macy recently completed a two-year study that found that many state agencies “feel unprepared” to deal with their clients’ complex problems. Her report examined what sexual assault and domestic violence services are working effectively and where gaps exist. Although some organizations offer 24-hour crisis lines and group counseling, not all have the expertise, for example, to deal with depression or alcoholism. Furthermore, limited funding often prevents agencies and shelters from providing ideal services, such as transportation to help survivors access services, transitional housing and specialized services for children.

Understanding what’s working and where more attention is needed can help the state improve support for survivors, Macy said.

“With better information … we will be better able to prevent re-victimization, help survivors with safety and to live violence-free.”
The School of Social Work remains on the front lines of shoring up services and support for the military and their families. Because of the Behavioral Healthcare Resource Program (BHRP) at the School’s Jordan Institute for Families, many of North Carolina’s social workers, mental health providers, licensed clinical addiction specialists and case managers are now better prepared to recognize and treat the thousands of troops who are expected to return from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI).

For the last several years, BHRP has offered training in substance abuse issues and in PTSD assessment and treatment. Class discussions have also focused on the signs and symptoms in post-deployment, coping strategies and clinical implications and challenges. More than 400 professionals from across the state have completed training so far.

Helping clinicians better understand military culture is also vital to ensuring that troops get the mental health care they need. School associate professor Amelia Roberts-Lewis developed a workshop last year designed to teach mental health care workers about the armed service's values, traditions and customs. During the workshop, clinicians learned about the military’s myriad rules and regulations, including unquestioned allegiance. Such an environment promotes toughness and can dissuade troubled troops from asking for help.

Recognizing the internal environment of the armed services, Roberts-Lewis said, can help professionals establish better connections with their clients and identify problems sooner.

“…To provide good mental health services to the military folks who are coming home, you must understand the culture of this group. Understanding the culture will assist you in becoming a better clinician.”

Gary Bowen, a Kenan Distinguished Professor, has also been helping the Army develop a better way of identifying and assisting service members who may need additional support to enhance their physical and emotional health, welfare and combat readiness. The result has been the development of an online assessment that Bowen and School Dean Jack Richman originally created to identify the barriers that at-risk children face and how those barriers affect school performance.

Bowen helped redesign the online evaluation to help the Army assess the personal resilience of soldiers and their loved ones. The Web-based assessment uses a series of statements that service members click through to help them determine if they have sufficient support networks in place — family, friends, neighbors and co-workers — to effectively cope during stressful times.

The U.S. Air Force was the first to use the online tool and similar models are being developed for the U.S. Marine Corps and possibly to assist North Carolina’s guard and reserve families, Bowen added.

“This work has enormous implications for informing and improving program planning and development for military members and their families. It’s really about strengthening the informal system of support.”
Building financially sustainable communities and households

When you see the word, “sustainability” you most likely think of environmental preservation and eco-friendly phrases such as “building green.” But did you know that it also applies to living wages, accessible health care and affordable housing?

At UNC’s School of Social Work, students and faculty have long understood the value of building social equity. Now, they are helping to educate others.

Several years ago, the School joined the UNC Center for Global Initiatives, the Duke Center for International Development, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce, corporate sponsors and others to create a joint venture to influence research, policy and practices in sustainable development.

The collaboration, known as the Institute for Sustainable Development, promotes the importance of employers investing in resources that advance the triple bottom line: environmental stewardship, social equity and economic prosperity, said Gary Nelson, a School professor and institute founding member.

The institute encourages small businesses and nonprofit agencies to join its Green Plus program, which offers affordable expertise on how to preserve water, air quality and fossil fuel. But participants must also consider their social responsibility, including whether their employees receive a living wage, paid leave for volunteer work and opportunities for professional advancement, Nelson said.

“If we don’t make investments in social equity, we will not be able to compete successfully in a global economy."

Long-term, such sustainable development results in communities that are healthier and safer, economically viable and more desirable places to live, Nelson said. Thirteen businesses in three states already have been recognized for their sustainability efforts.
Many of the country’s studies surrounding addiction and substance use originate at the School of Social Work. Associate professor Amelia Roberts-Lewis is among the researchers examining treatment services, especially among homeless adults with substance abuse and mental health disorders.

Last year, Roberts-Lewis was awarded a federal $2 million grant to provide evidence-based practices to Durham’s Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers (TROSA), a therapeutic community developed, governed and managed by recovering substance abusers. As principal investigator for the five-year study, Roberts-Lewis, along with TROSA leaders, are aiming to ensure that the overall mental health of homeless clients improves by focusing on programs and services that research has proven are successful and effective.

Other goals include increasing program retention rates, preventing relapse, assisting with stable housing, reducing recidivism and promoting long-term recovery and stability.

The evidenced-base approach is a far different tactic than the focus years ago when addiction services in many communities mainly targeted client behavior. Current studies center on a greater understanding of the biological, psychological, social and spiritual framework behind addictive diseases and addressing the co-occurring disorders. For example, in her work with TROSA, Roberts-Lewis has found that many homeless clients are battling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of past interpersonal violence, domestic violence or sexual abuse.

This summer, as part of her grant study, the associate professor helped lead a group in teaching these clients how to redirect their attention and better cope with situations that trigger their PTSD symptoms. Translating this “new empirically-based knowledge” into community programs quickly is vital for helping those who are addicted to substances, she said.

“For the consumer, I’m providing the best evidence-based practices sooner and hopefully, with more promising outcomes that helps to improve their overall functioning and understanding of their addiction.”
Helping unmarried new parents create stable families

Studies have shown that children from single-parent households are more likely to live in poverty and are at greater risk for problems affecting their health, cognitive development and behavioral and academic success.

But Anne Jones, a School clinical associate professor, thinks a Durham-based initiative geared toward strengthening the relationships of unmarried, low-income parents holds great promise in breaking the links of this poverty chain.

Strong Couples-Strong Children is a five-year, federally funded program designed to create stable families in which children grow up in healthy, safe and secure environments with both parents actively involved in their lives. Jones, the project’s lead investigator, received a nearly $2.5 million grant to fund the program, which operates with Durham County’s Department of Public Health and Cooperative Extension Services.

Couples who are expecting a baby or who have a child under 3 months old are selected for the project, which focuses on improving communication, problem solving and conflict management skills.

Parents also receive in-home family support services and are linked to resources such as job training and affordable housing. The hope, said Jones, is that families will “envision and build a better future together,” by strengthening their income, marriage and education — all factors in reducing poverty.

More than three dozen unwed couples have completed the program so far, though Jones hopes a few hundred eventually will do so.

“We love that this came along to help us through some troubling times,” said one couple, ages 31 and 25. “We are learning better ways to communicate and that we need to stick together in order to better understand each other.”
For more than 20 years, faculty and staff within the Center for Aging Research and Educational Services (CARES) have been working to improve the lives of older and disabled adults and their families. CARES operates as part of the School’s Jordan Institute for Families, and among other projects, works closely with the state to offer human services workers continuing education training, such as behavioral approaches to dementia and crisis intervention skills.

CARES also focuses on research that addresses issues such as accessibility to care, quality of care and affordable care, said Tanya Richmond, CARES program coordinator.

CARES is very visible among the state’s senior centers. About 10 years ago, the group helped create a voluntary certification process to strengthen the centers. The certification helped set high standards for the centers, ensuring that all have adequate space and provide services, such as health screenings, insurance counseling and legal assistance. CARES and the state’s Division of Aging and Adult Services consult with centers, review applications for certification and conduct site visits.

At least 40 percent of the state’s 163 senior centers have been certified.

“Our whole purpose,” Richmond said, “is to ensure there are good outcomes with older adults and adults with disabilities.”