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The Institute for Prevention of Addictions (IPA) has been working to reduce and prevent alcohol and drug dependence through research and education since 1985, and has contributed to a number of socially influential projects. Because of a recent trend of projects involving community-based evaluations, Curtis VanderWaal, chair of the Department of Social Work, recently helped to establish a new branch of the IPA: the Center for Community Impact Research.

Over the past four years, VanderWaal and his team, which includes Duane McBride, director of the IPA and chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences, have been evaluating four different projects throughout Michigan. These projects are unrelated, yet they are all “focused on reducing high-risk behaviors and removing barriers that prevent individuals from accessing substance abuse, mental health or other services,” says the new proposal.

Project Get Connected is a partnership between five churches in Grand Rapids and the Department of Human Services of Kent County, Mich. The pilot program, sponsored by the Doug and Maria DeVos Foundation, aims to use churches as the primary referral points to mental health and substance abuse services in the African-American community. The churches provide a stable environment where those in need of help can find the services they need with the help of people they trust. Although the program is still in the preliminary stages of evaluation, the results are already promising. Survey results showed that the subjects’ primary concerns were housing and mental health services. Most of those surveyed were referred to services in the community, and 80% of those referred kept their appointments. Over half of these continue to receive services.

The Better Life Initiative, sponsored by Goodwill Industries of Grand Rapids, is intended to help those who have developed a long-term dependence on welfare and drugs or alcohol become autonomous, employed and productive citizens. The program works to change the entitlement mentality of dependents, connect them with service agencies, and employs a positive reinforcement system that provides increasing amounts of money for each step made towards productive citizenship. VanderWaal and his team plan to spend three years on this project, which is currently in the data-collection stage.

VanderWaal and McBride were recently asked to conduct an evaluation of the United Way of Southwest Michigan, to “determine the extent to which they are meeting their impact goals for the community,” says VanderWaal. United Way works to improve lives in four areas: education, basic needs, health and income generation. United Way wants to develop an annual report card that will show the success of their programs to potential donors.

The team has worked with the DeVos Foundation in the past, and recently completed an assessment of the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative, a faith-based program that trains youth leaders in urban areas to be “more effective in their ministries.” The program’s participants receive “intensive training from national leadership experts in areas such as core values, leadership skills, self-care strategies, and collaboration with community partners,” says VanderWaal. When the researchers evaluated the program, DVULI had trained 450 leaders in 22 cities nationwide. Program outcomes demonstrated remarkable success in the areas of leadership skills and concrete community development skills such as community capacity building, resource networking, and collaboration with other community organizations.

Over the four projects, VanderWaal has had eight graduate and undergraduate students helping with his research. The research assistants primarily help with literature reviews, instrument development and review—choosing which surveys and questions that are considered the most effective—data collection and analysis, scholarly poster and presentation development, and writing for professional reports and journal articles.

In addition to numerous applications in the medical fields, specifically neurobiology, the research Kwon conducts has lasting academic and professional impacts on her student assistants. Sandra Prieto has “discovered a love of research” she didn't know she had.

Kwon has been working in the field of biosensor technology since her PhD studies in 2002. She has been at Andrews for the past five years, and in that time has developed a laboratory specially designed for her research. Experiments are conducted primarily in the summer, and papers are published throughout the year.

The team hopes to present papers on their current research in the fall, and Kwon is currently working on a manuscript. The team has presented their QCM-D sensor research (quartz crystal microbalance with dissipation) at the annual meeting of the Biomedical Engineering Society in 2008 and 2010 (planned), and the Comsol Conference in Boston, Mass., in 2009. Undergraduate students participated in writing the paper.

Because the field of biosensor technology is continually developing, Kwon’s team will have no shortage of research opportunities.