Dr. Huss Strikes Again

Nabilaa Azimi

Dr. Matthew T. Huss, professor and chair of the Department of Psychology, was awarded the 2016 American Psychology-Law Society Outstanding Teaching and Mentoring in the Field of Psychology and Law award. This award is given to those who have made great efforts to training and mentoring students in the field, something Dr. Huss has demonstrated in the last 15 years at Creighton amid his studies in forensic-clinical psychology focusing on sex offenders, predictions of violence, and domestic violence.

When asked what motivates him to do more for students, he responded with the fact that “others did it for [him].” Through his own experiences, he had professors who went above and beyond to make him a better researcher and scholar. These experiences motivate him to offer the same opportunities and training for his own students. By approaching students to take initiative with research, offering honest and constructive advice to students with graduate plans, and even counseling students beyond their time at Creighton, Dr. Huss has consistently done an outstanding job as a teacher and mentor. His award is well deserved.

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Neuroscientists in Nebraska, New Mexico and Louisiana now have the opportunity to collect new information about the development of the brain as it transitions from childhood to early adolescence. The cross-sequential study will focused on the brain development in youth ages 9-15.

Two Creighton University researchers, Professor of Psychology, Amy Badura Brack, Ph.D., and Associate Professor of Psychology, Maya Khanna, Ph.D., are fortunate to be part of a four-year, $5.9 million grant from the National Science Foundation Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) grant. This grant funds intriguing state-of-the-art neuroimaging research exploring the brains of children, and it also funds the development of the Nebraska Cognitive Neuroscience Training Program.

The grant is led by Tony Wilson, Ph.D., an Associate Professor of Pharmacology and Experimental Neuroscience at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and will involve research partners at the Mind Research Network at the University of New Mexico and Tulane University in New Orleans.

“We’re very blessed to be a part of this grant,” said Badura Brack, whose particular interests in the grant run to the effects of childhood trauma on brain development. “The science behind this initiative is very exciting. We have an exceptional opportunity to bring together neuroimaging, psychological, and genetic data to model the process of brain development in children.”

Khanna also expressed a high level of excitement for the study, stating that receiving such a large grant was surprising, given the large number of submissions and the small number of awards granted. “It will be really good for our community and for science, in general,” Khanna said.

Researchers will use two noninvasive brain imaging tools, genetic modeling and a battery of psychological and behavioral tests that measure IQ, executive function, language processing, and emotional responses in hundreds of children. The researchers hope to better understand some of the long-standing questions about childhood brain development.

Using functional MRI, researchers can observe where in the brain blood is flowing during the performance of tasks. Magnetoencephalography (MEG) complements this approach by allowing researchers to determine not only where activity is taking place but also when specific parts of the brain are busy during a task — right down to the millisecond. Combining these approaches in a cross-sequential study opens new prospects for research into the developing brain, including deeper study into whether brain structure dictates function or if experiences and associated brain activity determine brain structural development.

In the Omaha area, about 20 neuroscientists will contribute to this project. Given the amount and the nature of the data being collected, the study could have far-reaching implications for future neuroscience research. Major goals for the study include understanding brain development from childhood through adolescence, strengthening neuroscience communication in the area and increasing knowledge, and providing opportunities for students to become engaged in neuroscience research. In addition, individual researchers will have the opportunity to study side projects, which both Badura Brack and Khanna plan to do.

Khanna plans to examine the potential effects of lead exposure in children. She said while studies have examined brain differences in adults exposed to lead as children, very little has been done to examine the effects of lead exposure on the brains of children and adolescents themselves. This area of study is especially relevant today considering how some cities, like Flint, Michigan, have experienced traumatic effects due to lead pipes carrying water.

Badura Brack, who has done extensive work in posttraumatic stress disorder, will look at how traumatic childhood experiences and psychological distress affect brain growth. She also plans to study resiliency in children by exploring psychological, neural, and genetic factors that protect children faced with adversity.

The researchers are currently recruiting participants for the study (call 402-552-6444 if you know interested children who are 9 - 14). The plan is to establish a publicly accessible database with the study findings in order to provide society with important information on brain development. The implications of this study are enormous, and Badura Brack and Khanna are excited about the project!
“I think the real questions of democracy start in your heart,” says Dr. Jill Brown, associate professor of Creighton University’s psychology department. “If I have more than you, what do I do with it? If I have less than you, how do I act?”

According to Dr. Brown, many such questions have gone unanswered, especially in her city of Omaha, Nebraska, which deals heavily with mental health and income disparity problems. In order to be an advocate for the underrepresented and a voice for positive change, Dr. Brown is throwing her hat in for a four-year term in the Nebraska Legislature in November 2016 as a representative of Nebraska’s 13th District.

While a newcomer to the state political scene, few can match her experience and perspective. Dr. Brown, it seems, has had many callings in life and has made an effort to pursue most, if not all, of them.

In her 20s, she joined the Peace Corps and left her childhood home of Minden, Nebraska for Ovamboland, Namibia, where she learned to speak Oshiwambo, the language of many Namibian nationals. During her time in Namibia, Dr. Brown’s perspective widened greatly and she saw early on that there are “a whole lot of ways to be human.”

After her call to service in Namibia, Dr. Brown soon found herself in another completely different part of the world - Delhi, India, where she studied poetry with a Fulbright fellowship and became familiar with yet another completely different way of life.

Years later, her focus turned closer to her home of Nebraska while she devoted herself to her family and five children. Since then, however, she has found many ways to integrate her multiple legacies: familial, academic, and cross-cultural.

Naala, her youngest daughter, has seen many of the tracks her mother left abroad, as her mother has brought her along on her various academic missions to Tanzania, the Dominican Republic, and Namibia (where a young lady bears the name “Jill” in Dr. Brown’s honor).

Her latest calling to public service, however, was a bit tougher to come to terms with. It took several phone calls from her earliest supporters, including Tanya Cook, the current representative of Nebraska’s 13th District, before she decided not that she wanted to run, but that she needed to “listen to life” and give voice to the many Nebraskan constituents that have inadequate representation at the state level.

Of the 49 Nebraska state senators, only nine are women, and only one (Tanya Cook herself) is African-American. Dr. Brown says her vast life experience has taught her that we are all interconnected in ways that many of us do not even perceive, and that she feels called to use her understanding for the betterment of our society.

“We’re all better when we’re all better,” she says, and while she cannot fix every equity problem in the world, she will certainly do her best to start with Nebraska.

In the meantime, whether elected or not, Dr. Brown will continue to devote herself to the sharing of such wisdom with her students in her career as a psychology professor and academic.

Her current projects include Culture and Categorization (a cross-cultural study of classification concerned with samples from the United States, the Dominican Republic and Zimbabwe), a book contract with Oxford Press about child fosterage and raising children from a geographic distance, and teaching at Creighton University’s psychology department, not to mention serving as a mother, mentor, and organizing her run at the Nebraska Legislature.

At home, abroad, in the classroom or even the state legislature, Dr. Brown will certainly continue to inspire those around her with her perspective, experience, and the passion with which she pursues her interests.
Dr. Stairs Finds Low-Novelty Environments Cause “High Sensation-Seeking” Tendencies

Rachel Heinen

Dr. Stairs’ lab work follows a program of research that uses animal models to examine individual difference factors and how these factors influence vulnerability to drug addiction, specifically to stimulant abuse.

The lab’s current research project includes genetically identical rats that are raised in two different extreme conditions: high novelty environments and low novelty environments. The high novelty environments include several toys that vary daily, along with an environment that varies daily. The rats in the high novelty condition also live in cohorts of 8-12 rats. In contrast, rats in the low novelty environment have no toys and do not live in a cohort.

The findings have shown that rats raised in the high novelty environments seem to be better protected against the effects of drugs than their relatively deprived counterparts, who are much more likely to engage in stimulant abuse. In other words, rats in the high novelty environment engage in less self-administering of the drug.

Why does this happen? In the lab, through the control of the environment, Dr. Stairs and his research assistants are creating high sensation-seeking and low sensation-seeking rats. The rats in the low novelty environment are hypothesized to be high sensation-seeking because they require more stimulation (due to the lack of stimulation from their environment). The opposite is true for the other group. The rats in the high novelty environment are low sensation-seeking because they do not require as much stimulation from drugs (because their environment already has a high baseline of stimulation).

Dr. Stairs has also been a part of innovative research in the pharmaceutical development of medications to treat addictions to other drugs, similar to the way the common nicotine patch works. Rats are pre-treated with a novel compound and this significantly decreases the rat’s self-administering intake of drugs like methamphetamine in comparison to rats that have not been pre-treated with the novel compound!

Students have had a large role in the success of the lab from the beginning. They are responsible for daily handling and care of the rats. This includes changing the toys or environment of the rats and distributing food and water. How involved any particular student is depends on the student’s preference, and working in the lab gives students a unique opportunity to learn numerous techniques in behavioral pharmacology and neuroscience. Some students take part in giving injections, mixing drugs, and even assisting with animal surgeries.

“I've learned a lot about the research process. Working with fellow peers and the faculty has been a great experience,” said Kaitlin Clancy, one of the research assistants in Dr. Stairs’ lab.

Dr. Stairs is currently conducting interviews for research assistants this coming fall. For more information on joining the lab, please email Dr. Stairs at dustinstairs@creighton.edu. All of Dr. Stairs’ research is closely examined for approval and follows specific regulations to ensure adequate treatment for the animals involved.
What Can I Do With My Bachelor’s in Psychology?

Kaitlin Clancy

According to internal data from Creighton University’s career center, half of Creighton psychology students will pursue advanced education, a third of our graduates start their careers, and a significant portion volunteer following a call to serve others consistent with Creighton University’s mission.

The point here is that there are a number of feasible (and respectable) options for recent psychology graduates.

All during my undergraduate experience, I felt pressure to know exactly what I wanted to do after graduation. I was under the impression that attending a Ph.D. program immediately was expected. While that might seem extreme to some, many Creighton students feel that same pressure. Of the 54% of our graduates going on to graduate or professional school, many choose to study psychology, but nearly as many study in other fields including medicine, law, nursing, and business graduate programs.

During the second semester of my junior year, I realized I wasn’t ready to decide on the direction I wanted to take with my psychology degree. I wanted more experience in the field to practice and implement concepts I had learned about in class and through my internships. Currently, I work as a Behavioral Health Technician in a therapeutic group home for adolescents with severe substance use disorders and other mental illnesses. My position gives me the opportunity to facilitate psycho-educational groups, engage with clients individually, manage the milieu, and follow through with interventions on a client’s individual treatment plan.

Creighton’s psychology department has prepared me well for this type of work. I have solidified a steady, educational, and fulfilling job for after graduation that will further my knowledge of psychology and prepare me for my future endeavors. I attribute much of this success to the bachelor’s degree I will receive in May and the Creighton faculty who have helped me along the way.

There are several other ways to use a bachelor’s degree in psychology after college. By studying psychology, students develop excellent interpersonal skills that are valuable in any job. Having a strong background of communication skills makes psychology majors great for positions in marketing, case management, social work, and human resources, as well as numerous other areas. The College Majors Handbook identifies management, administration, business services, and real estate as some of the leading employers of individuals with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Psychology majors’ experience with individual and group communication also makes them strong candidates for seeking out careers in childcare and education. Clearly, psychology majors are not limited in the variety of disciplines their degree can be utilized for.

Other skills that your undergraduate training instills in you include research and writing skills, which lay the groundwork for several career options. If you’ve found that you enjoy working with faculty and in laboratory settings, you might be a qualified candidate for a research assistant position. Conducting research after undergraduate work would also be a great way to enhance your résumé or CV, should you decide to apply for graduate programs in the future.

Attending graduate school in psychology is not the only option that undergraduate psychology majors have available after graduation. Some graduates are ready to work and begin their careers in business, research, and mental health care. Others are called to serve, and volunteer their time with well-known organizations including the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Peace Corps, and Teach for America. As a Creighton University Psychology Department graduate, your options are limitless, and the skills you acquired related to understanding and influencing others will always benefit you!
Announcing the Psychology Department of Creighton University’s appearance on social media. Facebook and Twitter are accessible to and widely used by the general public, so what does Creighton Psychology hope to accomplish with social media?

“We started the social media accounts because we’re looking for more ways to connect with current students, potential students, and alumni. We want to have a platform to share the success stories of our students and our faculty. We’re hoping to eventually set up pathways for Creighton psychology majors to network with alumni,” said Cyndi Condrey, the office coordinator for the department.

Through the use of these social media sites, both current and future Creighton psychology students can gain a better understanding of the university’s psychology department. Prospective students will be able to learn more about the faculty and their work, and alumni can keep themselves up-to-date with the department. Likewise, prospective students can better understand what kind of work they will undertake in the future and become familiar with the department as a whole.

Just as social media plays an important role in Creighton’s psychology department, so too does psychology play a large role in the technological world. This leads us to consider the amount of psychological resources that are available to the general public. As technology becomes more advanced, it seems that almost everyone can obtain access to these psychological resources.

Consider the many psychology-related iPhone apps available, some of which are free to download. One app, called “Psych Terms: Medical Dictionary,” gives downloaders the access to over one thousand mental health terms and their corresponding definitions. The developers recommend this app for a wide range of consumers, from the general public to health professionals. There is even a section within the app itself where users can save their favorite psychological terms.

A more popular app is “AP Psych Cardology.” This app not only has flashcards that are divided into different sections about various elements of psychology, but it also tracks the user’s progress on how much (s)he has learned. The sections are divided into: History and Approaches, Methods, Biological Bases of Behavior, Sensation and Perception, States of Consciousness, Learning, Cognition, Motivation and Emotion, Developmental Psychology, Personality, Testing and Individual Differences, Abnormal Psychology, Treatment of Psychological Disorders, Social Psychology, and Review Theorists.

“Mobile Psychology,” an article published on the website of the American Psychological Association, is a review of apps made by psychologists and a discussion of how these apps benefit different people. From aiding people with PTSD (“PTSD Coach”) to preventing suicide (“ReliefLink”), these apps are accessible on devices like iPhones and iPads, and some are free to download. The author, Anna Miller, says that some psychologists create these apps “as a way to circumvent barriers to mental health care, and bridge gaps in it, by putting psychology directly into people’s palms.”

Information corresponding to this article can be found here. If general audiences have access to apps like these, they may very well have a beneficial tool that can help them in many small ways, especially if mental health care is not readily available to them.

Overall, increasing our technological accessibility to psychological knowledge with apps and websites is a highly scalable and inexpensive way to familiarize the public with psychological theories and self-help tools. By using social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, the psychology department at Creighton University is using familiar tools to facilitate and enhance connections with our students and alumni!
THE DAHL FUND

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For more information, please contact Dr. Amy Badura Brack at amybadurabrack@creighton.edu!

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