Institute for Society, Culture and Environment names Summer Scholars

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BLACKSBURG, Va., Aug. 6, 2015 – Virginia Tech researchers are examining high-impact issues this summer with support from the Institute of Society, Culture and Environment's Summer Scholars award program.

Ten faculty members from three colleges received awards, which carry financial support ranging from $9,000 to more than $30,000. Funds can be used for participant incentives, equipment, faculty stipends, student wages, and travel. Each awardee also has the opportunity to meet with Betsey McDonel Herr, senior research scientist, experienced grant writer, past program officer.

"The overall goal of the program is to give researchers the resources they need to collect pilot data useful for seeking external support," said Karen Roberto, the institute's director. Research topics range from the affect of parental incarceration on high-risk youth to the identification of changing tissue in relation to breast cancer.

Carla Finkielstein, an associate professor of biological sciences in the College of Science, and Tina Savla, an associate professor of human development in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, are using the support to collect biological data from healthy female volunteers to create an over-the-counter biomarker tool that could help women evaluate their own breast health.

"The idea is simple in concept and based in other successful stories. The development of a molecular kit or biotool that could be both reliable and sensitive in detecting changes in breast physiology while being accessible and affordable to all women should have the tremendous benefit of early detection of breast-related diseases," said Finkielstein. "There is a large group of 'at risk' women who fail to have their regular mammogram screening because of social, economic, cultural, behavioral, or geographic reasons. A tool like the one we are developing can break these barriers."

Christine Labuski, an assistant professor of women's and gender studies in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, is using the funds to further her study of gender dynamics in the Bakken oil fields of North Dakota.

"This is a project about social and economic inequalities, the gendered wage gap, and what anthropologists call 'cultures of energy,' i.e. the social and political worlds that develop around the consumption of and struggles over fossil fuels and their alternatives," Labuski said.

The funds allow Joyce Arditti, a professor of human development in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, valuable time and resources to examine the effects of parental incarceration on youth's mental health.
"Approximately 52 percent of state inmates and 63 percent of federal inmates are parents to an estimated 1.7 million minor children, accounting for 2.3 percent of the U.S. population under the age of 18," said Arditti. "We hope to gather sufficient data so that it will not only serve to enrich our external grant proposals, but also stand alone and add to the empirical work on the effects of parental incarceration on children and families."

The data will help address a gap in the literature that assesses family processes such as parenting stress, family visitation at prisons, and the nature of children's relationships with their incarcerated parent.

A complete list of this summer's awardees projects include:

- Arditti, with Elizabeth Johnson of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and Tom Ollendick, University Distinguished Professor of psychology in the College of Science, is exploring "A Stress Process Model of How Parental Incarceration Impacts Youth Mental Health: The Role of Stigma, Stress, and Coping in Contributing to Child Psychopathology and Adjustment."
- Finkielstein and Savla are researching "A New Biomarker Tool for Breast Cancer Detection in Populations at Risk."
- Kathy Hosig, an associate professor of population health sciences in the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, with Eileen Smith Andersen-Bill of the Center for Public Health Practice and Research and Ann Forburger, senior project associate in the department of population health sciences in the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, are examining "Health Literacy and Self-regulation in Community-based Type 2 Diabetes Intervention."
- Labuski is exploring "(Wo)Men Working: Gender, Labor, and Extraction in the Bakken Oil Fields."
- Assistant Professor Bradley White, University Distinguished Professor Thomas Ollendick, and Associate Professor Robin Panneton, all from the department of psychology in the College of Science, are investigating "Eye Gaze and Empathy Deficits in Children with Callous-Unemotional Tendencies."

The Institute for Society, Culture and Environment also funded an interdisciplinary team of researchers under the Summer Scholar In-Residence Program. Associate Professor Angela Scarpa, Professor Martha Ann Bell and Associate Professor Julie Dunsmore, all from the psychology department, and Richard Ashley, a professor of economics in the Pamplin College of Business, are exploring "A New Construct for Studying Social Reciprocity in Autism."

The Institute for Society, Culture and Environment serves the university as one of Virginia Tech's research investment institutes. A core goal is to strengthen the university's competitive position in the social sciences, humanities, and the arts. The Summer Scholars program is one mechanism of that mandate.

Written by Katie Williams.

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