### Small program with big results: school psychologists find jobs, fill needs


Left to Right: Stephanie Benson, Abby Fritz, Miranda
Carrier, Tracy Ogren and Lara Hart

If one wants to get a student’s attention quickly these days, one surefire attention getter is the phrase “100 percent placement record.”

Professor Jim Larson, coordinator of the School Psychology training program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, says the program’s record of job placement is certainly one of its attractions to graduate students.

The catch? It’s not an easy program to get into.

“We get about 85 applications each year and we choose 12 students,” he said. “Those 12 stay together as a cohort through all their classes and then they do an in-school internship.”

“We look for good people skills,” Larson added. “We do a four-hour interview with the students, looking not just for articulate, bright people, but also people who like others. We generally end up with 12 really smart, enjoyable people. It’s a dream job.”

There are a couple of reasons for UW-Whitewater’s high placement rate, Larson said.

One is that there is a need for school psychologists in Wisconsin and throughout the nation and another is the UW-Whitewater program emphasizes applied research.

“We work hard to help our students become data-based decision makers,” he continued. “We want them to evaluate new ideas on the basis of saying ‘that sounds good; but where are the supporting data?’ We want our programs to actually help students.”

One of those students, Tracy Ogren, who is completing an internship in the Tomah Area School District, said that emphasis has been helpful in the real world she now inhabits.

“Through my classes I wouldn’t say I have learned every fact there is to know about school psychology, but I learned how to problem-solve and where to find the answers I needed,” she said.

A particular feature of UW-Whitewater’s program is that it encourages students to conduct professional-level research, Larson noted.

“We encourage the students to submit their research to the National Association of School Psychologists to be presented at the group’s annual convention. They don’t have a special student category, so any research chosen competes on a professional basis,” Larson said.

Two of the students, Ogren and Stephanie Benson, who interned with the Beaver Dam School District, presented research on a mathematics intervention at the national association’s meeting in Boston this year.

“It was a wonderful experience that allowed me to make contacts with psychologists from around the United States and to learn more about hot topics in school psychology,” Ogren said.

The research projects were coordinated by Assistant Professor Christine Neddenriep.

“For my research area, I conduct research evaluating the effectiveness of academic interventions on students’ basic skills,” Neddenriep said. “Currently, my research is being conducted at Washington Elementary School in Whitewater with fourth-grade students who have been identified as reading below expected levels.”

Neddenriep trains the graduate students to assess each fourth-grader three times per school year, asking each student to read from three grade-level reading passages. She and the graduate students provide information regarding each student’s progress throughout the school year to teachers and parents. “Those students who are performing below expectations are invited to participate in an after-school reading program that the graduate students and I implement two days a week from October through May,” Neddenriep said.

Helping students improve provides a special satisfaction for the school psychologist, Benson said.

Laura Hart, who is doing an internship with the Mundelein Elementary School in Mundelein, Ill., also said working with parents has turned out to be one of the joys of her job.

“I think that seeing the results in my work with students and in the intervention program I consult on lets me feel that I have made a difference in the life of the child,” she said. “But, as much as that success is satisfying, I love working with parents. Building trusting relationships with parents can go so far with students. Some of my most satisfying moments have been working with parents in accepting their children’s difficulties and teaching them ways to help their children move forward and be successful people.”

Larson says the nature of students in public schools has changed greatly over the past two decades and, with it, the kind of work required of school psychologists.

“There are fewer students in private, residential treatment programs and more in the public schools who need help,” he said. “We’ve found that when they get that help many are successful.”

The school psychologist, then, needs a variety of skills that go beyond testing – a traditional task of the psychologist.

“One major role is to be a consultant to teachers,” Larson said. “A teacher will say, ‘I’m having trouble with a youngster who’s falling behind in reading’ and that student might have a need for an academic intervention in reading or perhaps also a behavioral intervention. When the school psychologist works with the teacher to help with one student, the teacher is also gaining skills to be used with the next – so we multiply our efforts.”

The changing nature of the student body has impressed Benson as she works with Beaver Dam students.

“Unfortunately, what has been most surprising to me are the effects of the economic recession on local families. Our demographics have changed dramatically in the last few years and schools are having to find ways to meet needs on a large scale. Not only have I had to learn the different community resources available to support families in finding food, clothes, medical, etc., but I now must always be conscious of how changing family dynamics impact this student’s success in school.”

Assistant Professor Tracey Scherr says she is impressed with the empathy her students are able to show young people having problems.

“It is essential for school psychologists-to-be to understand how particular life experiences can not only put students at risk for social-emotional problems but, also, how they might prompt resiliency,” she said. “I have been impressed by how much our students grow professionally and personally while in our program. Their passion for understanding and advocating for children is energizing to me.”