

Psychology department doing great work

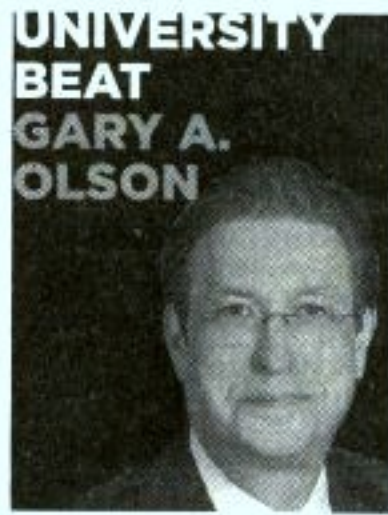
I have been discussing how research universities like ISU are about much more than training the nation's future workforce. They are also about creating new knowledge.

At ISU's Department of Psychology, for example, researchers are studying human behavior and are making discoveries that could change how we treat maladies such as substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Since 2004, developmental psychologist Maria Wong has studied how sleep problems in children might relate to substance abuse problems later in life. She worked on her initial study with co-researchers from Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. Together, they discovered that children's behavior, at an age as early as 3, can predict whether they will abuse alcohol and drugs in adolescence. Professor Wong is now looking at how sleep problems in 3-year-olds could affect them even later in life.

Professor Wong's research is funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, and her findings could have important implications for programs aimed at preventing drug and alcohol abuse. She hopes that the knowledge gained about early childhood behavior will help others create more effective prevention programs.

Professor Wong's nationally respected work is the type that brings some of the best students in the nation to Idaho State University. Did you know that the national scholarly journal *Psychological Reports* has ranked ISU's PhD program in



clinical psychology first among 207 programs in North America, based on its students' performances on a national professional examination? This is but one of ISU's academic programs that enjoys a high national ranking.

Students who attend ISU also have the opportunity to work

with researchers like professor Shannon Lynch, who is studying whether women in prison can benefit from simultaneous treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse disorders. Professor Lynch has found that many incarcerated women have experienced high exposure to violence in addition to substance abuse problems, and women who are victims of both problems are more likely to violate prison rules and less likely to benefit from prison programming. She and a team of doctoral students are currently working with incarcerated women at the Pocatello Women's Correctional Facility to treat both issues, and preliminary analysis shows promising results.

A number of students work with professor Steven Lawyer, whose research focuses on decision-making, especially impulsive and risky decision-making patterns. He has a long history of laboratory research studying anxiety disorders, using experimental methods that could improve clinical treatment. He also studies trauma-related disorders, focusing on understanding predictors of mental health symptoms not just in adults and adolescents, but also in those affected by the Sept. 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center.

An especially interesting line of investigation is being conducted

by professor Erin Rasmussen. She studies the behavioral economics of food in obese animals and humans. She examines obese and lean rats to determine how sensitive they are to "price" increases for food. For example, her rats press levers for foods of different palatabilities (sugar-based, carrot-flavored or plain alfalfa-flavored pellets, for example). The number of lever presses required for a food pellet starts small and then increases until the rats will no longer press for food. The point at which a rat no longer presses for food determines how valued the food is to the animal.

Professor Rasmussen also collaborates with professor Lawyer on his decision-making research. As you might expect, she is especially interested in how humans make decisions regarding food. In one study, college students are asked questions about their favorite foods and how likely they are to choose them based on the amount offered, the delay in receiving it, and the probability of receiving it. The researchers have found that individuals who have higher percentages of body fat make more impulsive food decisions than those who have lower body fat percentages.

These are but a sampling of the kinds of research being conducted by students and faculty in ISU's Department of Psychology. As you can see, these researchers are conducting studies that will likely improve both the mental and physical health of our families and friends. Their work will help change our treatment and prevention programs and help us better understand ourselves and others.

Gary A. Olson is provost and vice president at Idaho State University.