

Perkins and Craig Form Research Partnership

PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY
H. WESLEY PERKINS AND
PROFESSOR OF CHEMISTRY
DAVID CRAIG P'05



PHOTO BY KEVIN COLTON

Promoting Public Health and Reducing Youth Risk Behaviors

by Cynthia L. McVey

Spend enough time on the second floor of Stern Hall and you'll hear the term 'socio-chemist' bounced around. HWS harbors the first and only socio-chemist in the country – David Craig P'05. A professor of chemistry, Craig's unofficial title of 'socio-chemist' is the result of a long partnership with Professor of Sociology H. Wesley Perkins. The two have collaborated for more than 15 years on a number of initiatives surrounding public health promotion and reducing risky behaviors among students.

Perkins' long and successful partnership with Craig began by happenstance, with a discussion about Perkins' earlier work on student drinking while they each ran data in a campus computer lab. "We were talking about how there really was no place in the curriculum where issues surrounding alcohol use in the collegiate population was discussed," explains Craig. "We also thought it would be interesting to simultaneously look at the biochemical and biomedical aspects and examine the sociocultural dimensions of alcohol use, so we created the course 'Alcohol Use and Abuse: Causes and Consequences.'"

Perkins adds, "It was an opportune time on campus for such a partnership in the curriculum. A number of bidisciplinary and multidisciplinary courses were being developed and the Colleges really encouraged and embraced such approaches."

Each brought complementary experiences, skills and knowledge to the table. "Wes has the sociocultural dimension of alcohol use and methodology surrounding the research, design and statistical analysis of data, and I have the biomedical/chemical dimension of alcohol use and the skills of computer software design," explains Craig.

"Our partnership has really been cemented not only in the context of teaching, but also in the research and prevention program we've developed," explains Perkins. Both Perkins and Craig direct the Alcohol Education Project (www.AlcoholEducationProject.org) based at Hobart and William Smith, an initiative serving not only HWS students but also universities, colleges and secondary schools throughout the United States and internationally. The Project has received multiple national awards from the U.S. Department of Education.

Their research methodologies and prevention-related work on alcohol abuse now range from large scale population surveys of student drinking attitudes and practices to the delivery of information through computer program software and to late night anonymous breathalyzer testing of blood alcohol concentrations documenting actual patterns and problems of drinking.

As their partnership and bidisciplinary

research has evolved, it has helped spur a revolution in the way schools approach unhealthy behaviors. Perkins had been developing the original research and theory for what is now known as the "social norms approach" to promote health and prevent problem behaviors. It is based on the pervasive finding that most people misperceive the healthy norms that really exist as they think it is most typical for peers to engage in problem behavior. This misperception actually causes much of the problem that does exist among students.

Social norms researchers begin by gathering credible data about behavior such as drinking, tobacco use, or other drug use, for example. Then, they intensively communicate the actual healthy norms through media campaigns, interactive programs and other educational venues. Perkins and Craig surveyed students about actual alcohol use and effects (such as missing class, fighting, and impact on relationships) and then implemented an extensive on-campus campaign showing the reality was that, although high-risk drinking is a significant problem, the majority of students are not involved in problem drinking as was commonly perceived.

They used this research both in their campus-wide campaigns and in their course. As a result of their interventions, evidence showed Hobart and William Smith students demonstrating more realistic perceptions of peer behavior, decreased problem behavior, and growth in positive behavior.

When they later set out to develop a social norms program specifically aimed at student-athletes, the NCAA saw enough potential in the program to sponsor a nine-school pilot, copying the HWS model. Due to the tremendous success of the program at HWS creating more realistic perceptions and decreasing negative behaviors among student-athletes, the NCAA and the U.S. Department of Education provided support for other schools to follow the model that Perkins and Craig developed.

In addition to helping other colleges, Perkins and Craig have conducted research and helped implement social norms programs in diverse middle and high schools throughout the U.S. In recent years, Perkins' daughter, Jessica, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Health Policy at Harvard University, has joined the team as a researcher and co-author. As a threesome, this team has expanded the work beyond substance abuse to other youth-related problems such as bullying, sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, and underweight and obesity issues. Their work has also expanded to include Spanish-language surveys and surveys among students in the United Kingdom.

It's not surprising that the groundbreaking

work Perkins and Craig have done over the past decade and a half has gained notoriety within academic circles. They have participated in hundreds of conferences throughout the U.S. and internationally, and their research has made it into numerous academic journals in the social sciences and public health. Perkins and Craig have also been featured in news outlets like the *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Newsweek*, *L.A. Times*, "20/20," *Shape*, *Men's Health*, *Delta Sky Magazine*, and *Marie Claire*, among many others in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

Both Perkins and Craig say that each has learned far more about the other's field than he would have imagined.

"Over the years, David has become quite skilled in a lot of the research methods of sociology and that's quite unusual for someone in the natural sciences," explains Perkins. "He is one of the strongest advocates for social norms because he gets it. For my part, I've picked up a lot more of the computer programming skills and the biochemical effects of alcohol through our work together. Rather than being two distinct competencies, I'd say we're overlapping."

Craig adds, "Every faculty member should do something like this. I gained a perspective as to the beauty and complexity of sociology I never could have had looking at it from the outside."

As common as it has become on the HWS campus to see Perkins and Craig working together in the lab, teaching or presenting together, it is far less commonplace in the academic community at large.

"Having people working across disciplines is still unusual across the nation. At HWS, there's more interest; programs include interdisciplinary collaboration much more than at other institutions," explains Perkins. "David and I constantly get the question of how we started working together. And, as much as finding people working across disciplines is rare, it's even more difficult to think of a social scientist and a natural scientist working together."

It's not that they don't understand the surprised expressions; both say they never would have imagined such a union – or its benefits – either.

"Without the partnership, we could never have achieved as much as we have together. The added skill set just meshed together so nicely," says Craig.

Perkins adds, "With each new research project that comes our way, we spur each other on to ask new questions and come up with new intervention innovations. Research can often be a lonely experience. It is a lot more fun to have a collaborator and good friend working with you." ●