

## Kahler's Research Bridges Behavioral/Social Sciences and Medical Care

MARY KORR  
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

PROVIDENCE – For Christopher Kahler, professor of behavior and social sciences at Brown, the path from poet to psychologist intersected in New Mexico. Upon graduation from Brown in 1991, with a concentration in literature and creative writing, he drove cross-country, stopped to visit a friend in Santa Fe, and decided to stay awhile.

He found a job working with adolescents in an addiction treatment center. “I learned pretty quickly that just as the purely creative process of writing poetry wasn’t a good match for me, purely clinical work wasn’t either,” he reflected. “I missed the academic connection.”

He decided to pursue a career in clinical psychology, and earned his master’s and doctoral degrees in that discipline at Rutgers University. His final year was spent interning at Brown, which he described as having “one of the best research-focused clinical psychology internship programs in the country.”

In his office overlooking the Providence Riverwalk, Kahler reflected on his serendipitous career choice. “What I do now is a creative process but it’s also a scientific and quantitative process. Working as part of a team in a helping field ended up being a good middle ground for me.”

That is somewhat of an understatement. In 2011, two decades after graduating from Brown, Kahler was appointed the inaugural chair of the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown. It is one of four departments within the Brown School of Public Health. He enumerated the benefits of the program-to-school transition.

“For the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, connecting with a school of public health clarifies our identity across the kinds of behaviors we address. We can attract faculty and students as we leverage the different sciences that fall under the umbrella of the social sciences. And it’s a real help for us in defining our areas of expertise within the state and nationally,” Kahler said.



MIKE COHEA/BROWN

### Alcohol and HIV (ARCH) grant collaborations

Kahler’s area of expertise is on the etiology, assessment, and treatment of excessive drinking and alcohol dependence and the comorbidities between alcohol and smoking.

As the associate director of the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies (CAAS) at Brown, he works on a wide array of multidisciplinary research related to these areas.

Currently, he is scientific director and primary investigator of the research components of a five-year, \$7.5 million grant, funded in 2010 by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcohol (NIAAA). The Alcohol Research Center on HIV (ARCH) study is focused on reducing the impact of alcohol on the HIV epidemic.

“The interesting part of ARCH as compared to other grants is that we took a very strong Center for Alcohol and Addiction study that’s been at Brown for almost 30 years now and aligned it with Lifespan/Tufts/Brown Center for Aids Research (CFAR),” Kahler said.

One of CFAR’s directors, Dr. Kenneth Mayer, adjunct professor of epidemiology at the Brown School of Public Health, has had a long-standing research relationship with the Fenway Community Health Center (FCHC) in Boston, and it serves as the main primary-care site for ARCH’s randomized clinical trial of brief interventions for excessive drinking among HIV-infected men who have sex with men (MSM).

In addition, at the Immunology Center at The Miriam Hospital, ARCH researchers are investigating how alcohol use affects changes in brain structure and function, and examining how much those

changes result from HIV versus the affects of alcohol over time. Within that, Kahler said, “we bring in expertise in liver function, and how that may be affected by HIV and alcohol, looking at basic factors in immunology and replication of the virus and how alcohol may be involved there.”

Kahler expects the NIAAA to compile ARCH’s “broad

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sweep” by synthesizing the results of nationwide clinical trials at the completion of the grant cycle in 2015 and assessing its impact on population health and costs nationwide.

### Pharmacotherapy, behavioral approaches in smoking cessation

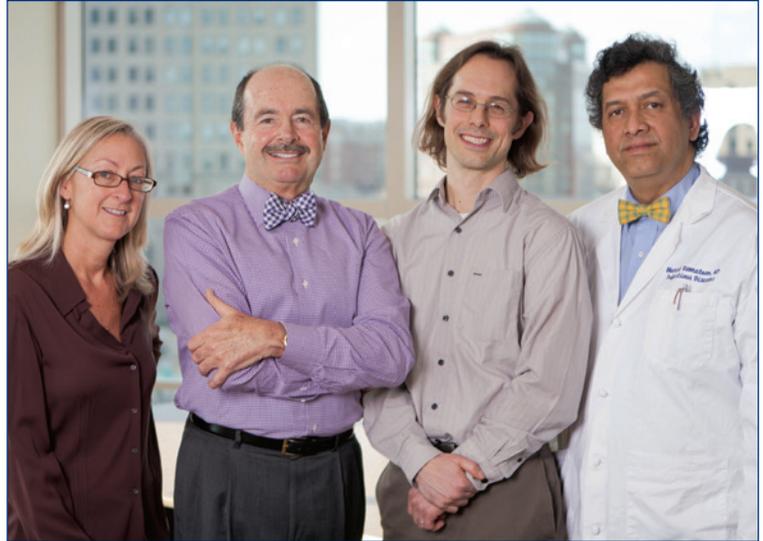
In the area of smoking cessation, Kahler’s research focuses on pharmacotherapy and/or behavioral interventions. “One of the things we are doing right now is looking at heavy drinkers who want to quit smoking. Can we treat the alcohol use at the same time with a medication, in this case naltrexone, so that their alcohol use is reduced while they’re quitting smoking? The goal is to increase the likelihood that they quit smoking successfully but also down the road this lays the groundwork for making and retaining changes in their drinking,” he said.

Another area under investigation in smoking cessation is the use of what is known as positive psychology. “We are examining strength-based interventions for people who are trying to quit smoking,” Kahler said. “We’re looking at traits that help people adapt and cope. It could be humor, gratitude, spirituality, leadership, or willingness to help others. The question is: Can we harness those traits, to help them change health behaviors?”

### Public health momentum

In addition to his research, Kahler has played a key role in teaching and training students. He said the master’s program applicant pool in public health continues to increase each year and he expects his department to offer a doctoral program in 2014.

He also noted the program-to-school public health transition will give Brown undergraduate students exposure to a wider breadth of public health experiences. For example, he



SCOTT KINGSLEY

Faculty and research collaborators at the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies include, from left:

**Suzanne Colby**, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior (Research), Director of Postdoctoral Training, CAAS;

**Peter M. Monti**, PhD, Donald G. Millar Distinguished Professor of Alcohol and Addiction Studies, Director of CAAS, Director of ARCH;

**Christopher Kahler**, PhD, Chair of the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Scientific Director of ARCH, and

**Bharat Ramratnam**, MD, Associate Professor of Medicine and Director of the Laboratory of Retrovirology, Department of Medicine

said, “students could be learning how to get antiretrovirals distributed to HIV-infected people in Africa, or how to address obesity in inner-city kids.” In addition, students will see a broader and diverse spectrum of health career options.

And Kahler expects fruitful and interdisciplinary teaching and research partnerships to flourish between the Brown School of Public Health and the Alpert Medical School.