Happy New Year! I am proud to report we had a truly successful 2013 at the Research Center. There is so much good news to report. On behalf of our team, I want to thank all of you for supporting our efforts to make an impact here in the Milwaukee area, as well as regionally and nationally.

In November, I presented our anti-bullying research findings to Professional Dimensions, Wisconsin's largest networking organization for professional women. This was an ideal venue and audience for the information, and our findings immediately sparked dialogue regarding how we as a community can identify, prevent and confront bullying behavior in our homes, schools and communities. With the help of organizations like Professional Dimensions, our work is getting out there. We want to continue to build relationships like these so we can extend our reach to the greatest possible numbers.

In addition, I’m pleased to report we finalized the Self-Development Curriculum project for PEARLS for Teen Girls, Inc. We at Alverno cherish our long-standing, dynamic relationship with PEARLS, which has enabled us to work together to help equip girls aged 10-19 with tools to be their best selves.

Also, we continue to tap into our Alverno College faculty resources. In this issue, you can read information on Associate Professor Kim Skerven’s research findings, entitled “Enhancing College Students’ Mental Health: Contributions from the Perspective of Community Psychology.” The research will certainly open dialogue and inspire leadership regarding ways in which communities can respond to mental health issues facing college students and beyond.

As we move forward into 2014 and beyond, know that we will continue to raise awareness on issues that influence and affect women and girls, identify strategies and solutions, and inspire the creation of programs to transform the lives of women and girls.

Thank you again for partnering with us to make an impact.

Rhonda M. Ware, Executive Director
Research Center for Women and Girls
When Professional Dimensions (PD) president Donna Bembenek met Rhonda Ware at a networking breakfast in early 2012, she knew there was a match. The Research Center’s anti-bullying research and its potential impact aligned well with the tenets of the professional women’s organization. PD empowers women to make change through leadership, diversity, networking and community. The 350 members of the Milwaukee-based organization promote the professional and personal growth of women through social and business exchange and community participation.

The alignment led to Ware’s acceptance of an invitation to present the anti-bullying research findings at a membership meeting in November. “As leaders in the community, PD members are interested in understanding community issues relating to women and how they can work to make positive change,” says Bembenek, MBA ’11. It was important for PD to understand what bullying is, how to identify it and then offer available research and resources. The compelling information illuminated findings on best strategies, including how to collaborate between home and school, implement a peer-reporting system and develop intervention strategies. PD members now have the knowledge and ability to share the information in their homes, in their professions and with other community organizations. Bembenek, SVP for External Relations at the YMCA of Metropolitan Milwaukee, found application within her own organization and its work with teens. “The research informs people and gets them talking. It provides better understanding of the tools that educators, employers and families can use to help young people.”

Bembenek sees an opportunity for companies and the community to benefit from resources offered by the Research Center, which she considers a local expert. She also encourages other women-focused organizations to learn about the Research Center. Bembenek says, “The work offers a deeper understanding of women and girls, what their needs are and what drives them. You will find the expertise, an understanding of the nuances of the audience, and a proven track record of success.”

The latest project in the partnership was to update the Self-Development Curriculum, first developed in 2004 with the expertise of Alverno College. In 2012, it was time to refresh the activities in the curriculum. Originally targeted to middle schoolers, the curriculum needed to expand to reach students in high school. It was also necessary to keep the information topical, to meet changing and relevant social issues (such as bullying), and to address a cultural application for Latin and Hmong students.

Danae Davis, CEO of PEARLS, considers the update to have been a relatively easy, one-year process because the two organizations share longevity and knowledge. “It was really a team effort to reinvigorate the curriculum,” says Davis. “We speak a similar language to the Research Center and are so well aligned in being women- and girl-centric. The new curriculum is awesome.”

What didn’t change from the original curriculum is that the work remained evidence-based, incorporated abilities and described outcomes. The work is built around choices, is flexible and allows the seven program leaders at 25 partner sites—who, with teens and PEARLS alums, lead 35 PEARLS groups—to structure the work according to their needs. The curriculum, which caters to a school-year-long program, continues to deliver awareness and changes in behavior.

An outcome Davis had not anticipated in the update was just how much the staff at PEARLS grew from the experience. “By working closely with the Research Center, our team was positively affected. Our staff has developed new skills and proficiencies through this process,” says Davis. “Plus, by seeing the fruits of their labor and the impact on the girls, they’ve also experienced significant professional development.”

Davis has advice for other organizations looking to partner with the Research Center: “Be sure to invest in the partnership and be involved throughout the process. You can rely on the Research Center to lead the work and be confident in the product.”
To determine the topic of her latest research project, Psychology Department chair and Associate Professor Kim Skerven, M.S.W., Ph.D., didn’t look far. Recent tragic events on college campuses across the nation pointed to a need to study the current status of mental health in college students along with viable interventions to increase students’ psychological well-being. “I wanted to organize intervention ideas in a way that aligns with community psychology principles and values,” says Skerven.

The paper, entitled “Enhancing College Students’ Mental Health: Contributions from the Perspective of Community Psychology,” is available through the Research Center.

In her research, Skerven reviewed a tremendous amount of data pertaining to the current status of college students’ mental health. This included demographic and diversity data, and trends affecting students’ academic functions and beyond. The results defined common problems such as depression, anxiety and stress, but also listed suicide as the second leading cause of death in college students. Skerven says, “The data suggested that in addition to higher numbers of students with mental health needs, the severity of mental health problems might also be increasing.”

Skerven was surprised not only by the number of students who struggle but also by the number of students who do not receive the help they need. The research highlighted a need to enhance the mental health of students. “Intervention is not only the job of the counseling staff on campus,” says Skerven. “The entire campus community should be attentive to the mental health of its students.”

The findings are intended to provide a basis for future work that increases the dialogue on this topic and perhaps even improves current practices that may lead to creating empirically informed interventions. Skerven hopes the findings will prioritize psychosocial functioning and the well-being of students. Contact the Research Center for more information.

Alverno Forum
Human Trafficking; April 24, 2014, 6:00 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. Visit alverno.edu/forum to register.