How does research make an impact in the field of Human Services? Sylvia Mignon, PhD, the Program Director for the Master of Science in Human Services program has studied the topic of substance abuse and its lasting effect on communities in flux. Recently named to Boston Mayor Marty Walsh’s council to develop the new Office of Recovery Services for the City of Boston, her ongoing research examines the needs of at-risk populations dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues.

Her current research focuses on the social and economic development as well as criminal justice issues among Native American populations. She has collaborated with faculty member William Holmes to research New England Native American Grandparents raising grandchildren due to substance abuse among parents. The most recent report by Mignon and Holmes, "Substance Abuse and Mental Health Issues within Native American Grandparenting Families," was published in the Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse in 2013. Along with the Institute for New England Native American Studies and the North American Indian Center of Boston (NAICOB), the research group has presented a comprehensive print publication “Grandparents’ Resource Guidebook,” which is also available online: http://www.naicobfamilyresources.org/. The manual of child care, healthcare, employment, legal aid and cultural resources is presented in a positive and uplifting manner and helps provide support to caregivers. “Total wellness requires a healthy mind, body and spirit—all qualities that are characteristic of American Indian traditional teachings...” encourages further reading and review in the illustrated guide.

After conducting interviews with fifty grand parenting families, their findings paint a picture of the particular needs and cultural sensitivities of Native Americans in the New England/Greater Boston area. The study included a variety of demographic data from questionnaires and interviews conducted in targeted focus groups. For instance, the research respondents’ attitudes around treatment for substance and alcohol abuse may be shaped by Native American cultural beliefs. Centered on life harmony and balance, a grandparents’ role in the community is “the keeper of traditional wisdom.” The report concludes that Native American grandparents face challenges contributing from substance abuse, an issue which correlates to family violence and financial stress. Grandparents often need assistance reducing and preventing further problems with young children. Mignon and Holmes conclude cultivating community-university partnerships may support and enhance health education and training programs. They also recommend recognizing Native American traditional customs like healing ceremonies to adjunct health services are one way to address cultural health challenges.

Mignon cites Cedric Woods, Director of UMass Boston’s Institute for New England Native American Studies, as a natural connector, bringing community members together to draw out discussion and help further understand social issues and complex needs for Native Americans. Woods collaborated with the tribe members to begin the research study and has continued to be involved in networking among tribes across the New England region. In addition, grant writer, Elena Stone has been instrumental in helping secure national grant funding to further this important research. With more research and collaboration, further understanding will help address the needs of at-risk populations in the human services field.

About

William Holmes research and publishing explores family violence, capital punishment, and social services to children and families. He has served as an officer in professional associations and his research has been recognized by the American Sociological Association and the U.S. Department of Justice. His book "Using Propensity Scores in Quasi-Experimental Designs" was published by Sage Publications in 2014.

Sylvia Mignon is the Director of the Master of Science in Human Services Program. She has over 35 years of experience in the human services field in settings such as hospitals, substance abuse treatment programs, and correctional facilities. Her research and publication specialty areas include substance abuse, family violence, and the death penalty. A new text book, Substance Abuse Treatment: Options, Challenges and Effectiveness, will be available in July 2014 from Springer Publishing Company.

Institute for New England Native American Studies (INENAS), was established at the University of Massachusetts Boston in June 2009. Its mission is to develop collaborative relationships, projects, and programs between Native American tribes of the New England region and all of the UMass campuses so that the tribes may participate in and benefit from university research, innovation, scholarship, and education.