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O'Connor '14 Investigating Therapeutic Value of Creative Writing

August 14, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— It's Sunday morning at the Addiction Recovery Center at Advocate BroMenn Medical Center in Normal, and Colleen O'Connor '14 (Palatine, Ill.) is writing a letter she will never mail.

O'Connor is leading a creative writing group for all the patients on the unit. She is investigating creative writing as an affordable mental health intervention as one of this year's recipients of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's *Re-Centering the Humanities* grant for student scholars at Illinois Wesleyan University.

The story of the never-to-be-mailed letter began when O'Connor interned at PATH Crisis Center as an Illinois Wesleyan student. She regularly spoke with callers who needed help coping with the symptoms of mental illness. Unfortunately, many of the callers could not afford to see a therapist regularly.



Colleen O'Connor

"For those with few resources, creative writing may provide a low-cost alternative for the management of persistent mental health disorders," said O'Connor, who double majored in **psychology** and **English-Writing**. "For this project, I was interested in investigating how creative writing can best be used as a low-cost supplementary aid or replacement for traditional therapy techniques."

Although the study of creative writing as a therapeutic technique is a relatively recent pursuit, research suggests that a variety of techniques including expressive writing, autobiography and journaling can help to ease symptoms of both mental and physical ailments, according to O'Connor. "Many health professionals have begun to use creative writing with their patients to encourage them to explore their thoughts and feelings between sessions," she said.

In her new job as a case manager in the Addiction Recovery Center at Advocate BroMenn, O'Connor leads daily group therapy and behavioral health workshops for the patients on the unit. She began leading the creative writing groups as a part of her Mellon grant research to investigate various forms of writing as therapy.

"If my group designs are successful, they will hopefully be integrated into the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery (IIAR) curriculum and implemented at other branches of IIAR in the state," said O'Connor, who is mentored by Assistant Professor of Psychology Amanda Vicary.

For now, however, O'Connor looks forward to her weekly writing sessions. "I am often surprised by how quickly my patients become willing to talk openly about sensitive topics when prompted by thoughtful questions and a caring facilitator," said O'Connor. "One of the most important lessons I've learned is that I can't disconnect emotionally if I want to encourage my patients to feel comfortable being vulnerable."

"I complete the exercises alongside the patients and share my answers, too," she added. "If I want my patients to be honest with me, with their peers, and with themselves, I have to be willing to be honest, too."

So O'Connor and the group make lists of character traits that they like (or don't like) and draft letters to people who will never read them. It's part of therapy to help patients identify feelings, recognize recurrent thoughts and address unresolved issues.

O'Connor plans to work for a few more years before pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology. "The Mellon grant has reinforced for me that I am a scholar at heart, and I have been delighted by the opportunity to spend time foraging for research, taking notes, and drafting new designs for groups," she said. "Most of all, I have been blessed to be able to see my work make a genuine difference in the daily lives of my patients, who can use these skills after they leave our unit and start the next leg of their journey on the road to recovery."

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