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New center aims to advance sexual and reproductive health worldwide

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The University of Chicago has launched the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry & Innovation in Sexual & Reproductive Health (Ci3), one of its most collaborative and far-reaching initiatives to address adolescent and women's health.

Ci3 aims to promote research, education and community involvement in issues related to sexuality and reproduction across systems, disciplines, generations and life stages. The center is under the direction of Melissa Gilliam, MD, MPH, professor of obstetrics and gynecology and pediatrics, chief of the section of family planning and contraceptive research, and associate dean for diversity and inclusion at University of Chicago Medicine and Biological Sciences Division.

Drawing on the University of Chicago's resources, the new center involves a network of researchers in diverse fields such as medicine, English, sociology, economics, law, public policy, human development, gender studies, epidemiology, demography, divinity, neuroscience and psychology to tackle some of the most intransigent problems in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

A concept three years in the making, Ci3 examines the issues surrounding reproductive processes, functions and systems at various stages of life and their impact on physical, emotional, social and economic well-being. The center's programs and research span a spectrum of issues, from unintended pregnancy, preterm delivery and postpartum hemorrhage to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), abortion, adolescent risk behaviors, reproductive cancers, violence against women, even obesity.

"I was inspired to create Ci3 because I saw that many of the problems related to sexual and reproductive health transcend one discipline," Gilliam said. "I started looking at the university's tremendous capacity to conduct compelling research, and I felt there were under-tapped resources to effect real change in many of the issues affecting women and children locally, nationally and globally."

Ci3's executive board includes Alida Bouris, PhD, School of Social Service Administration; Kathleen Cagney, PhD, Departments of Sociology and Health Studies; Patrick Jagoda, PhD, Department of English Language and Literature; Karen Kim, MD, Department of Medicine; John List, PhD, Department of Economics; Alicia Menendez, PhD, Harris School of Public Policy; Beth Plunkett, MD, Obstetrics and Gynecology, NorthShore Medical Group; Matthew Stagner, PhD, Chapin Hall Center for Children and Harris School of Public Policy; and Dexter Voisin, PhD, School of Social Service Administration.

"Ci3 brings enthusiasm, energy and creativity to investigating these issues of great importance to our society," said Kenneth S. Polonsky, MD, executive vice president for medical affairs at the University of Chicago and dean of the Biological Sciences Division and Pritzker School of Medicine. "I believe the most remarkable element is its interdisciplinary approach. The University of Chicago is rich in resources, infrastructure and dedicated people who don't shy away from difficult problems. Ci3 has taken full advantage of those opportunities."

Other University leaders also trumpeted the center's goals.

"We prize this center not only for its content, but for the exceptional level of leadership and excitement they've been able to generate around a vision," University of Chicago Provost Thomas Rosenbaum said. "I'm deeply optimistic about this assemblage of people with good ideas interacting in worlds beyond their own. Together, they have the power to make a real impact. "

Among the new center's early successes is its [Game Changer Chicago](#) initiative, a series of youth workshops that combine game design using social networking, websites, text messaging and traditional media, with storytelling to spread sexual health awareness. Patrick Jagoda, one of the architects of the initiative, said he's seeing evidence that the workshops could fill a gap left by less formal sexual education.

"We started Game Changer based on the conviction that sex education was failing in this country and has been for a long time," Jagoda said. "Most sex education programs focus on giving kids information about STIs and contraception. We decided that we wanted to think about sexuality in a more networked way -- as a system with emotional and social components."

Ci3 also will take on national and global health matters. The center is collaborating with the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in conjunction with the University of Chicago Center for Global Health.

"When I look at the challenges facing women around the world," said Gilliam, "many of them stem from a woman's inability to control the timing of her reproduction, which can lead to unintended and undesired pregnancy and high rates of maternal mortality from postpartum hemorrhage, infection and unsafe abortion, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, India and South America."

For more information on Ci3 projects, research and partners, visit ci3.uchicago.edu.

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