



The University of Vermont  
LARNER COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

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## **UVM Center on Behavior and Health Receives \$30 Million+ in Grant Renewals**

The Vermont Center on Behavior and Health (VCBH) at the University of Vermont has announced the successful renewal of two grants that will bring in more than \$30 million in new federal funding to support another five years of research on addressing and better understanding the unhealthy behaviors that negatively impact health and cost the U.S. healthcare system billions of dollars.

The grants, which are led by Stephen Higgins, Ph.D., director of the VCBH and professor of psychiatry, include \$11.7 million in renewal funding for the Center of Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) award from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), and \$19.6 million from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and U.S. Federal and Drug Administration (FDA) for the Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science (TCORS) program – both programs that were first funded in 2013.

The NIGMS-supported COBRE will continue its focus on increasing understanding of the mechanisms underpinning vulnerability to unhealthy behavior patterns (i.e., lifestyle) and developing effective behavior-change interventions, with the end goal of establishing a productive, standalone center of research excellence in biomedical research. The VCBH has already made considerable progress. Higgins and the UVM COBRE faculty and collaborators have published an impressive 185 peer-reviewed publications in the area of behavior and health in the past five years, garnered nearly \$60 million in additional external grant funding, and have established a successful early-career faculty mentoring program.

Professor of Medicine Philip Ades, M.D., is associate director of the COBRE, Professor of Psychiatry John Hughes, M.D., and Associate Professor of Psychiatry Andrea Villanti, Ph.D., M.P.H., serve in that role for the TCORS. Associate Professors of Psychiatry Sarah Heil, Ph.D., and Stacey Sigmon, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry Hugh Garavan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychiatry Diann Gaalema, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry Richard Rawson, Ph.D., Associate

Professor of Surgery Brian Sprague, Ph.D., and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry Alexandra Potter, Ph.D., play substantial roles as core leaders, mentors, and investigators in both centers. Administrative team members at both centers include Diana Cain, Marissa Wells, and Susan Enos.

Higgins notes “This is a UVM team effort involving many highly dedicated and talented senior, mid-career, and early-career investigators from academic departments and colleges throughout UVM, center administrators, and tremendous support from President Tom Sullivan, Vice President for Research Richard Galbraith, Provost David Rosowsky, Larner College of Medicine Dean Frederick Morin, Senior Associate Dean for Research Gordon Jensen, and Department of Psychiatry Chair Robert Pierattini.”

The \$19.6 million NIH/FDA-supported UVM TCORS will continue to focus on research relating to a major policy currently under consideration by the FDA’s Center for Tobacco Products (CTP) – reducing the nicotine content of cigarettes to fall below the addiction threshold. Specifically, UVM’s TCORS will be examining how such a policy might (a) impact populations that are highly vulnerable to tobacco addiction – for example, those with mental illness, other substance use disorders, or socioeconomic disadvantage – and (b) interact with the availability of emerging nicotine delivery products like e-cigarettes that are less toxic than conventional combusted cigarettes and other combusted tobacco products.

“For the FDA to effectively execute its tobacco regulatory responsibilities, it must have sound scientific evidence on how new policies impact vulnerable populations, possible adverse impacts, and how they will intersect with a rapidly changing tobacco marketplace,” says Higgins. “Our goal is to assist in providing the FDA’s CTP with that evidence.”

The UVM COBRE team will continue to partner with collaborators at Brown University, University of Kentucky School of Medicine, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Laureate Institute for Brain Research, and Oviedo University (Spain), among others, in addition to UVM internal advisors from across the university.

In Phase II of the COBRE, five new research projects led by junior faculty members will investigate such issues as: breast cancer incidence in high-risk women, led by Thomas Ahern, Ph.D., assistant professor of surgery; improving linkage to care after ocular telehealth screening in diabetic adults, led by Assistant Professor of Surgery Christopher Brady, M.D.; smartphone-based financial incentives to promote smoking cessation in pregnant women, led by Assistant

Professor of Psychiatry Allison Kurti, Ph.D.; the effects of stress on capillary-to-arteriole communication in the brain, led by Assistant Professor of Pharmacology Thomas Longden, Ph.D.; and improving smoking cessation in socioeconomically disadvantaged young adults, led by Villanti.

During its first five years, the UVM TCORS program has produced a total of 85 peer-reviewed publications and numerous national scientific meeting presentations. The center will continue to work closely with collaborators and consultants at Brown University, Johns Hopkins University, University of Minnesota, and Wake Forest School of Medicine.

“The outstanding productivity of Dr. Higgins and colleagues is highlighted by the renewal of the COBRE and TCORS grants,” said Larner College of Medicine Senior Associate Dean for Research Gordon Jensen, M.D., Ph.D. “These funds will leverage UVM’s existing interdisciplinary strengths to target major public health concerns that adversely impact Vermont and our nation, in addition to supporting the training of our next generation of scientists to take on the challenges of smoking and other addictive behaviors.”

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