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Outstanding Community Service—Karen Horobin

Karen Horobin, professor of Child Development, knows first-hand that growing up in a poor family doesn't mean you don't have a future. She dropped out of high school in England at age 15. It would be 11 years before she would return to school to earn her high school equivalency certificate.

Horobin attributes the change of direction to several people in her life who served as mentors and encouraged her to overcome the barriers of a disadvantaged background. Today she strives to return the favor as a mentor to students from similar backgrounds and encourages them to give back to their community through service.

Through her work in the community, Horobin tries to instill that same sense of hope for Head Start children and their families in the Sacramento area. Horobin has created programs that bring Sacramento State students into Head Start sites to help economically disadvantaged preschool students prepare for kindergarten. As a result of her dedication, Horobin received the College of Education's Outstanding Community Service Award.



Karen Horobin

The award recognizes faculty members who apply their knowledge and skills in the community to enhance the public good, and not to enhance personal income or corporate profit.

"The Head Start children are faced with issues of poverty such as hunger, health problems and sometimes violence, and they are often not ready for the academic expectations of today's kindergarten classroom," said Horobin. "Our students go into sites to work one-on-one with the children. I think the University and our students are really making a difference and helping to create a better life for the children and their families."

But Horobin said she does not see community service as a one-way benefit. Faculty and students engaged in community service also have much to learn and gain from their experiences in the community, she said. "Part of the role of a university is to prepare students to be participating citizens who want to have a positive impact on the world around them, and learning through service enables students to recognize that they can make a difference."

Horobin earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and her doctorate from UC Davis. Throughout her studies Horobin has always wanted to work in the area of applied research to better the lives of children. "I decided to study child development to better understand how early intervention programs can help children develop to their fullest, despite the surroundings that they grow up in," she said.

Horobin joined the Sacramento State faculty in 1994 after teaching at UC Davis for seven years. Soon after joining the faculty, Horobin recognized a community need Sacramento State students could help fill at Head Start in Sacramento, which is operated by the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency or SETA.

"Head Start needed more people to help children develop emergent literacy and math concepts so that they will be better prepared for kindergarten," Horobin said. "We know that economically

disadvantaged children typically do not fare so well academically in school from the beginning. This is often because they have not had as much of the experience that fosters their academic development, such as being read to and one-on-one attention from an adult.”

Horobin then began placing Sacramento State students in a few Head Start sites to work with preschool children, who range in age from 3 to 5. The college students receive weekly class-based instruction in child development and early academic growth in literacy and math concepts and then spend about 10 hours each week in the Head Start early learning centers, working with children individually or in small groups. The effort has since grown to involve approximately 100 students at 30 Head Start sites today.

In addition to the Head Start community service learning program, Horobin has also set up a program with SETA that allows Sacramento State students to work as substitute teachers in the organization’s early learning centers. About 50 students work 10 hours a week in the program. They report to a hub site and then are dispatched to centers that need a teacher for the day. “This is a program that has been helpful for both the centers and our students. If a regular teacher is absent, the level of adult attention and engagement continues for the children and our students gain valuable experience working in a classroom setting,” she said. “The University fills a real need in the community when we can help give children a good start in school.”