



From left to right: Dr. Brent Small, Elizabeth Handing, and Dr. Ross Andel

Studying the Link between Nutrition and Alcohol in Aging Adults: International Opportunity for CBCS School of Aging Studies Student

Elizabeth Handing, a doctoral candidate in the School of Aging Studies in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida, can now state that not only is she a member of an international study team, she is also a published author of an international study.

Ms. Handing is interested in the relationship among nutrition, cognitive functioning and risk factors for developing Alzheimer's disease. Since 2012, she has been presenting, with Aging Studies faculty, results of studies addressing nutrition and its effects on cognitive functioning in older adults. Surprisingly, alcohol and nutrition in older adults are closely linked. Nutritional deficiencies are common in older adults and drinking too much alcohol can make nutritional deficiencies worse.

When offered the opportunity to work with Dr. Ross Andel on a longitudinal study using data from the Swedish Twins Registry, her advisor, Dr. Brent Small, advised her to take advantage of the opportunity. "In a Ph.D. program, research is a critical focus. Trying to understand cognitive performance and protective and/or risk requires an interdisciplinary approach. Liz's work nicely illustrates that alcohol can be seen as both a risk or as a protective factor."

Dr. Andel agrees, "There is an increasing focus on team science, so research projects such as this are central to our program. Students become more marketable, with publications and actual research experience, especially on international studies."

Ms. Handing added, "International studies are very challenging. You have to learn to read data across cultural perspectives and with specific cultural nuances. For example, when looking at

the amount of alcohol consumed, you may need to look at the amount of wine consumed compared to other types of alcohol to address trends to underestimation.” Two other challenges she noted are dealing with large data sets with millions of records across time and having to adjust the research question you want to study. “You come in with an idea but the research question needs to be adapted despite the richness of the data because the data you need to answer your question may not be available for analysis.”

In addition to her graduate studies, teaching, and publications, Ms. Handing is currently the Graduate Student Representative for the Division 20 (Adult Development and Aging) Executive Board of the American Psychological Association and is a past Task Force member of the Division 20 Education Board. Ms. Handing sees involvement in these kinds of activities as a great opportunity for students to become involved in early in their careers. “I’ve been able to be a national voice for students in adult aging and development. In addition, I’ve enjoyed a great leadership position and been able to connect with other nationally known researchers in the field.”

Her goal post graduation is to become tenured faculty at a private academic college that allows her to integrate her love of teaching and research and to continue to collaborate on national and international projects.

Ms. Handing sees the School of Aging Studies as an incredible environment for mentoring her as a researcher and as an educator. “This program is unique in its faculty and an emphasis on student success. It’s one of the best decisions I made in the field and for moving forward. USF’s reputation in Aging Studies says a lot about the faculty research and the quality of the program.”

For more information on the academic programs in the School of Aging Studies, please see the School’s [Academics website](#).

CITATIONS: Kadlecova, P., Andel, R., Mikulik, R., Handing, E.P., & Pedersen, N.L. (2015). Alcohol consumption at midlife and risk of stroke over 43 years of follow-up: Cohort and twin analyses. *Stroke* 46(3), 627-633. doi: 10.1161/STROKEAHA.114.006724

Handing, E. P., Andel, R., Kadlecova, P., Gatz, M., Pedersen, N. L. (2015). Midlife alcohol consumption and risk of dementia over 43 years of follow-up: A population-based study from the Swedish Twin Registry. *Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological & Medical Sciences*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1093/gerona/glv038

Handing, E.P., Small, B.J., & Reynolds, S.L. (2015). Impact of dietary factors and inflammation on cognition among older adults. *Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer’s Disease*. Advance online publication. doi:10.14283/jpad.2015.50

Serving nearly 48,000 students, the [University of South Florida](#) is one of the largest public universities in the nation, and among the top 50 universities, public or private, for federal research expenditures. The [College of Behavioral & Community Sciences](#) serves more than 2,600 students with six undergraduate, nine masters, and five doctoral programs housed in seven academic departments/schools. Its [School of Aging Studies](#), established in 1967, is one of the nation’s oldest and largest degree-awarding programs in

Gerontology, and its Ph.D. in Aging Studies program, which began in 1994, has gained national prominence.