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## Student research focuses on marriage and health

By **Dawn Pauli**, contributing writer

Eric Tong ('04 SECS) was awarded the provost's **Student Research Scholar Award** during the winter 2004 semester to study the quality of marriage and how it relates to risk behavior and developing future health problems.

He was intrigued by studies that indicate marriage helps people live longer.

"I have seen studies on how marriage can help people live longer. Yet, what bothers me with that statement is it does not make much sense when you see the current percentage of around 51 percent divorce rate," said Tong, who is not married. "That is why I want to research the quality of marriage to shed some light on what an unhealthy marriage can do to a person."

Tong's preliminary findings show that quality of marriage plays a significant role for women in developing serious future health problems ranging from ulcers to heart problems.

"The results show that even if the couple argues over kids, this has no significant relation with health problems within an eight-year span," said Tong, who is writing a paper based on this research.

A recent Time Magazine article cited a Harvard Men's Health Watch that relates poor marriage with heart problems.

"My research is based on a longer period of time and other health problems as well," Tong said. "And mine specifically covers women's health problems."

Although Harvard beat him to the punch, Tong said, "This should be good for me since it shows that this topic has sparked interest. I still wish I had finished my research earlier and was able to present my work before Harvard's research came out."

Tong was a research assistant for Sherman Folland, associate professor of economics, last fall. He studied Folland's research on social capital and population health status and quickly developed an interest of his own.

"My work suggested that community sociability as well as marriage and children affect a person's choices regarding health risks," Folland said. "Eric's growing interest was in the potential negative effect of deterioration in the quality of the marriage, so I recommended he apply for the provost's student scholarship, which he promptly got."

The pair downloaded the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Together, we learned to operate it, and this large sample proved satisfactory for both his separate work, mine and our joint work," Folland said. "The context proved motivating for Eric. Instead of classroom, hypothetical questions, his questions, particularly on econometrics and theory design, had an immediate, practical relevance."

Folland and Tong traveled to London to attend the Fifth European Health Economics Conference hosted by the London School of Economics, where Folland presented his abstract based on the NLSY79 sample.

"I served as adviser and trouble-shooter for Eric, but the work is his beginning with the idea regarding quality of marriage," Folland said. "He broke the code of the NLSY79 and this helped both of us set up the samples."

Tong is planning to apply for a Ph.D. program in economics and plans to begin his career in research.

"My goal is to work in a job that will make me ask questions with no easy answers and to apply what I discover," Tong said. "I owe my mentor, Professor Folland, a great deal of gratitude for his help with my research and encouragement

in pursuing my ideas. Oakland University is great to give this type of grant.”

**SUMMARY**

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