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Two Laurier graduate students win prestigious awards for research on discrimination against Muslim women and brain injury resulting from intimate partner violence

WATERLOO – Graduate students from Wilfrid Laurier University have won **two of the 10** provincial [Women's Health Scholars Awards](#) for 2018/19. **Brianna Hunt**, a master's student of [Community Psychology](#), and **Halina (Lin) Haag**, a doctoral student at the [Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work](#), will receive substantial scholarships to assist them in continuing their research on women's health.

The annual awards are funded by the **Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care** and administered by the **Council of Ontario Universities**. The awards are aimed at fostering a community of women's health scholars, creating new knowledge about women's health and translating that knowledge into improved health for women.

"These are significant awards that reflect the high quality of research conducted by Laurier graduate students and our faculty," said **Robert Gordon**, Laurier's provost and vice-president: academic. "We are extremely proud of Lin and Brianna. This recognition highlights their hard work and the strength of applied health research at Laurier."

Hunt, who is receiving the award for the first time, is researching the impact of discrimination on the mental health of Muslim women in Canada. In partnership with the **Coalition of Muslim Women of Kitchener-Waterloo (K-W)**, she is investigating the experiences of diverse groups of Muslim women and the links between discrimination and anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and feelings of isolation.

"Through our strong community research connections in the Community Psychology program, I was able to connect with the Coalition of Muslim Women," said Hunt, who is starting the second year of her program in September. "The women I met with indicated that in our community, gendered discrimination against Muslim women is an important area that is under-researched, and *voilà*, the idea for the study was born."

"Brianna's thesis work is timely, relevant and important," said Assistant Professor [Ciann Wilson](#), Hunt's supervisor. "I am truly very proud of Brianna for her diligence in successfully applying for this award and her hard work in building relationships with our community partners to conceptualize a project that I believe will have important implications."

Hunt plans to share her findings in community workshops in Waterloo Region involving Muslim and non-Muslim community members. Her project proposal notes that Waterloo Region was among three Canadian census areas with the highest increase in hate crimes between 2014 and 2015, and that the highest increases in Canadian hate crimes were on the basis of religious and racial discrimination.

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"We hope that in sharing our findings with local organizations and service providers, we are able to improve service access and provision for Muslim women in Waterloo Region," said Hunt. "The long-term goal, in an ideal world, is to foster a community in K-W where Muslim women do not experience gendered discrimination."

Haag, who is receiving a renewal of the [award she first received last year](#), researches intimate partner violence and brain injury. Her research investigates the barriers women survivors of violence encounter in the areas of mental health, return to work, service accessibility and social inclusion. Her work is partly inspired by her own traumatic brain injury, which occurred due to a car accident 15 years ago.

"Once engaged in a program of research at Laurier in conjunction with the **Acquired Brain Injury Research Lab** in Toronto, I became aware of the significant health issue of undiagnosed and unsupported brain injury in women who have been exposed to intimate partner violence," said Haag. "Once I became aware of the significance of the intersection, I felt committed to actively doing what I can to understand it, increase education and awareness around it, and address it through improved support interventions within the community."

Under the joint supervision of Laurier Professor [Eli Teram](#) and University of Toronto Professor **Angela Colantonio**, Haag is working to develop the first Canadian traumatic brain injury toolkit for use by frontline workers in intimate partner violence support services. She is also looking at ways to partner with Indigenous communities in Canada to address their unique challenges and the barriers they face to effective services.

"I hope to continue this research and provide our community partners with valuable support and traumatic brain injury education for their ongoing efforts to offer the best services possible to all women across Canada who are experiencing intimate partner violence," said Haag. "I am grateful to the institutions and individuals who make this happen for me and to the Council of Ontario Universities for honouring me with this award."

Hunt will receive an award of \$25,000 plus \$1,000 research allowance, while Haag will receive an award of \$35,000 plus \$2,000 research allowance.

Learn More

- [Award-winning researchers working to improve women's health and well-being](#) (Council of Ontario Universities news release)