

# ARETE

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*FOCUS ON WELL-BEING:  
A KEY TO GRADUATE STUDENT SUCCESS*



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# A Message from the Dean

As a virologist by training, I find the COVID-19 pandemic both fearsome and fascinating. As I write this in late January 2022, the World Health Organization is reporting a fearsome 352.8 million confirmed cases and more than 5.6 million deaths across the globe. In the United States, 70.2 million people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and more than 860,000 have died. The causative coronavirus, SARS CoV-2, displays fascinating resilience and adaptability with new variants emerging as previous ones wane—the consequence of virus replication in non-immune people and mutation of its RNA genome. The pandemic is teaching us that Southern Miss is adaptable as well.

A successful pivot to fully online classes, the efficient return to campus, and the willingness to respect space, wear masks, and get vaccinated all reflect the resilience of the university community. Yet, the challenges associated with abrupt change, social isolation, uncertainty, and concern for staying well have taken a toll on graduate students in particular. The mental health and well-being of graduate students is of national concern. Why? Because even under the best of circumstances graduate school is tough.

To become an expert in one's field involves hard work, mental toughness, commitment, skillful time management, and sheer will to succeed. To acknowledge these challenges to students' physical and mental wellness, this 2021-22 issue of *Arete* focuses on that theme. In this magazine, you will read about faculty and student research, personal stories and campus resources that inform our knowledge of mental health and well-being and assist students facing challenges. I hope you find this magazine informative and helpful. In closing, I would like to offer kudos and express my appreciation to Abby Cawley, who designed this magazine and wrote all the feature articles, and Ashura Lewis, who aided in editing the featured articles. Both of these talented women are pursuing graduate degrees in English. They say, "We hope this year's issue inspires a reconsideration of the role of well-being and overall satisfaction in your life as we share this journey of graduate education together."

I hope you enjoy,

*Karen S. Coats*

**Karen S. Coats, PhD**  
**Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School**



# Seek Assistance

## *Campus Counseling and Research*

A 2021 Harvard mental health study states, “A growing body of evidence indicates that the mental health of graduate students has become a pressing concern for graduate institutions. Recent events in the United States and internationally have, no doubt, increased and intensified student stress and anxiety.” On the Hattiesburg campus of USM, there are many resources available to students who desire help-seeking services. One of the counseling locations is the Student Counseling Services (SCS) at Bond Hall. Mr. Casey Johnson serves as one of the mental wellness counselors and spokesperson for the SCS. As he discusses the importance of graduate student health, Johnson explains, “We know for sure that academic performance is tied to health and mental health in particular. We know that if someone’s mental health declines then their grades also decline...Also, it is a critical time developmentally. We know that suicide, specifically, is the second leading cause of death in students ages 18-24 (a lot of traditional-aged graduate students would fit in that range).” For most students, their time during graduate school can

be identified as one of the most stressful and busiest periods of their lives. Johnson continued, “There is always room for education in mental health and wellness. In the past, you may have people not coming in to seek counseling because of the stigma attached to being labeled with a disorder or if you are recommended medication and such.” He also stated that he thinks that over this past year, the emerging social media presence, nationwide marketing campaigns and vocal, honest celebrities have helped reduce the negative stigma of prioritizing one’s mental health.

Students currently have access to both new and old methods of help-seeking services. Social media advertisements for apps, such as “Talkspace” or “Headspace,” have grown increasingly more common. Mr. Johnson shared, “I think it is also important not to over pathologize people. Every human being on the planet experiences sadness,

homesickness, loneliness, so the importance is just coming in to talk to somebody and seeing where those lines are. What interventions need to take place? See, if you move here across the country, or a different region of the country, and you have left your support system, plus you are under this pressure to succeed—it is a quite normal response to experience some anxiety.” These are some reasons why the university has resources in place to emphasize mental wellness.

The university also has a support network called EagleCARES for “free and anonymous chats with trained active listeners.” The SCS can be reached by calling 601.266.4829 or 601.606.4357 (open 8 a.m. to noon, 1 to 5 p.m.) or emailing [counseling@usm.edu](mailto:counseling@usm.edu). Once contacted, the SCS conducts a free 30-minute assessment for the first scheduled session. After the initial assessment, future care can be discussed. The Student Counseling

Services functions as a hub for the other student services on USM’s campus; future care could include further appointments through the SCS or a referral to other on-campus resources, such as USM Counseling



*Student Counseling Services' Zen Room*



and Assessment Clinic, USM Psychology Clinic, and USM Family Therapy Clinic. Each of these clinics assess payments based on a discounted, sliding scale for students. In addition, the Jimmy A. Payne Foundation is providing expanded access to mental health care called the graduate student voucher. This voucher is available for graduate students of the Hattiesburg and Gulf Park, as well as the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory. Students requiring care during peak periods may be referred off-campus to mental health professionals at no cost through this voucher program. The 2021 Harvard Graduate Student Mental Health Report states, “Students are most likely to succeed when graduate programs recognize that physical, social and emotional experiences—in addition to academics—are important aspects of any student’s life,” and also acknowledges how, “too often, graduate students receive the message that academic success can only come at the expense of physical and mental well-being.” Mr. Johnson urges students to take advantage of the many resources and events the university offers. The Payne Center schedules many opportunities for outdoor activities that are good for students’ physical and mental health. There are also events, such as a new SCC Wellness Festival that was held on October 19, 2021. These events remind students to unwind with activities like dunking booths, graffiti walls, secret walls, canvas painting and dancing. The SCS hopes to make the Wellness Festival an annual October event. USM has intentionally worked to make the campuses mental-health

friendly with a variety of different resources available to students in need.

Dr. Michael Madson, professor of counseling psychology, specializes in substance abuse and “brief interventions to improve health-related behavior.” He has been a part of the USM faculty for nearly 17 years. After receiving his PhD in counseling psychology from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and working with the Center for Addiction and Behavioral Health Research in Milwaukee, Dr. Madson is an authority in his field. His publications for the American Psychological Association journals, written alongside graduate students and other professors, focused on drinking behaviors among college students. He also partners with the Hattiesburg campus Moffitt Health Center. Many of his projects involve brief motivational interventions, such as healthy eating and exercise.

Dr. Madson’s graduate students work in USM’s Behavior and Addiction Lab on cognitive health factors that predict harmful and safe use of substances among college students. In Dr. Madson’s words, “A more pragmatic line of research for graduate students looks at these social cognitive and mental health predictors with harmful and safe use of different substances like cannabis.” Predictors include such attributes as depression, anxiety, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress and more. Dr. Madson and his students study how such traits relate to these behaviors and apply a harm-reduction approach to provide care and guidance to clients. He explains, “We essentially look



*Dr. Michael Madson*

at how we might work with people to minimize any harm or negative consequences that they experience when they use those substances.” In partnership with Moffitt Health Center, Dr. Madson and graduate students use this approach to aid in facilitating the Eagle Check-Up program, where they implement a prevention plan with a two to three session model, including in-person assessments and problem solving sessions. Dr. Madson reiterates how important it is for students to have a healthy balance of good habits and activities while getting their education. An imbalance can lead to substance abuse.

In fall of 2021, Dr. Madson, along with his students, conducted a survey specific to USM graduate students. While the survey has not been officially published, he shares one conclusion: roughly 63% of graduate students reported moderate or severe levels of depression. Similarly, 62% had moderate or severe levels of anxiety. He states that these preliminary numbers

**Moffitt Health Center**

*“The University of Southern Mississippi’s Student Health Services offers general medical care for all currently enrolled students, faculty and staff of this university.” The center offers a variety of health resources; these services can also be explored on their website ([usm.edu/student-health-services](http://usm.edu/student-health-services)).*



are concerning and points toward COVID-19 stress factors, lack of in-person classes and community, and a heightened sense of uncertainty as having a significant impact on these local statistics. He reminds students to choose their stress, depression and anxiety coping mechanisms wisely, recommending activities

such as going outside, exercising, doing yoga, or a hobby. He says, “We tend to find in our research with mental health factors that there is a link to people with those factors turning to substances as their coping mechanism.” One of the largest contributors to that link is the emotion in immediate versus long-term gratification. Dr.

Madson states, “We usually find that instead of those unhealthy coping mechanisms helping in any way, they actually exacerbate the pre-existing problems.” There are many barriers that prevent students from getting help, but both Mr. Johnson and Dr. Madson admire the steps USM has taken to make assistance widely available for university students.

SOURCE: Council of Graduate Schools, & The Jed Foundation. (2021). *Supporting graduate student mental health and well-being: Evidence-informed recommendations for the graduate community*. The Authors.



# Being Well Doing Well

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, struggles with mental and physical health have become more apparent. One of the difficulties graduate students encounter is the feeling of unique isolation. A report by The Council of Graduate Schools and The Jed Foundation adds, "Graduate students represent a wide variety of contexts and circumstances" causing a gap in student-to-student relatability. *Arete* staff reached out to a variety of individuals that place significant emphasis on their mental health. An important component to well-being is realizing that difficulties need not be faced in isolation. These individuals wish



Dr. Monika Gehlawat

for their testimonies to serve as a inspiration for others.

**Dr. Monika Gehlawat**, the associate director and associate professor in the School of Humanities, joined Southern Miss in 2008 after graduating from the University of California Berkeley with a PhD in English. She teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in English and serves as the critic for the Center for Writers. Her book, *In Defense of Dialogue: Reading Habermas and Postwar American Literature*, was published by Routledge in 2020, and she serves as the series editor for *Literary Conversations*. Her personal scholarly interests include contemporary literature and art, and critical and aesthetic theory. Dr. Gehlawat's trajectory from a graduate student at UC Berkeley to a becoming faculty at USM can serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of prioritizing mental health.

She states, "As with many graduate students, I was ambitious, but I also needed to balance my work with activities that supported my emotional and mental health. In Berkeley, I was fortunate to be able to walk everywhere: to and from school, up into the hills, or just to run errands. Being outside and moving my body after hours of sitting and reading created a habit that I practice to this day. I enjoyed creative hobbies in the evening, like making art and cooking (neither of which I'm very good at), but my brain could rest. I also made time for friends. Having scheduled time for leisure and fun was my reward for working hard. Also, I've never been someone who can function on just a couple hours of sleep. As a result, I developed good sleep habits, went to bed at

a decent hour, and woke up early to work. During a tough year, I saw a therapist. I am glad I was able to admit that I needed help managing my stress and anxiety at that time."

"In 2016, I began a daily meditation practice because I was struggling to concentrate when I had to work long hours. Within weeks, I began to notice many positive benefits. Not only was I more focused, I was also calmer and happier. I started a meditation group to give graduate students another resource for stress management. Faculty, staff and students are welcome to participate. We meet twice a week on campus for 20 minutes of silent meditation. I know that lots of people-especially graduate students!-don't feel they have any time to spare, but spending a few minutes in stillness will always make you feel better, I guarantee. If you're interested, please email me!"

**Raegan Bishop** is a PhD student in the Psychology (Brain and Behavior) program. She began her degree program at USM in 2019 after finishing her undergraduate degree at the University of Mobile. Her scholarly interest is in health behaviors, specifically minority health disparities. Recently completing her master's thesis, titled "Racial Bias in Pain Perception and Treatment Among Healthcare Pre-Professionals," Raegan strives to be a voice for marginalized people. She shares her personal journey to encourage others' success.

Raegan attests, "Like many people interested in obtaining a graduate degree, I was excited to start my journey in graduate school as soon as I finished my undergraduate degree. However, I was aware that graduate school would be challenging, even with



Raegan Bishop

good mental health, so I decided to take a gap year and ensure that I entered graduate school with the best mental health possible. I really believe that taking the gap year was beneficial to my mental health and helped me prioritize my well-being throughout my time here at USM. Some of the many ways I maintain positive mental health are through journaling, meditation, quality time with friends, setting boundaries and attending regular therapy sessions. To my friends, I've become known as somewhat of a therapy advocate! I also incorporate relaxing activities (like a brief walk or using my foot massager while reading an article or writing)."

"It's important to me to make sure I maintain balance. Finding day-to-day relaxation has been the most critical point of my graduate school mental health journey. All of the big things like meditation and therapy are helpful and important, but discerning the tools that help during the unexpected moments of overwhelming stress has been an extremely significant obstacle for me. It's a regular struggle, but I recognize wellness as crucial for success in my program."

**Clayton Bradshaw**, PhD student

in English, holds an MFA from Texas State University. He is a 2021 Emerging Artist for the Partners for the Arts and was a short fiction finalist for the 2021 Kinder-Crump Award at *Pleiades* magazine. His work can be found in *Barren Magazine*; *Collateral*; *r.kv.r.y journal*; *The Deadly Writers Patrol*; and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. He is currently working on a collection of magical realism stories based in Texas and the South. As a veteran, Clayton aspires for his creative voice to shine through to others.

Clayton muses, "For me, well-being has come to refer to protecting the fragile state of mental health that graduate school often leaves us with. Mental health requires balance that is difficult to come by, given the schedules and work required of graduate students. In working on my PhD at USM, I have discovered how to achieve this balance. Here, I have discovered the importance of internal support from peers, faculty and staff, and external support."

"Grad school often feels as though it exists in our headspace 24/7, but this is where much of our wear and tear comes from. In the same way you should not run

a computer or car perpetually, you should not put yourself through repeated mental marathons. Scheduling breaks becomes vital. I make time for physical exercise. My spin class provides 45 minutes to lean into a hobby. Also, I no longer work on scholarly projects on Saturdays. Saturdays are reserved for creative work only. This is when I write my book of ghost stories, watch movies or binge Netflix. I have never been more productive or achieved so much peace-of-mind than when giving my mind this space."

"While working on my MFA, I learned from a dear friend—the late Dr. Arun Raman—we must care for one another because we share in our struggles. When we uplift one another and refuse to engage in the petty variety of competition that sometimes occurs in graduate programs, we build up a community. It is together that we succeed in building a better world. We must share in each other's successes and failures. When one of us achieves something great, we are all elevated in an advancing world."



Clayton Bradshaw

SOURCE: Hazelrigg, Katherine. Council of Graduate Schools & Manuela McDonough, The Jed Foundation. cgsnet.org. 4/29/21.



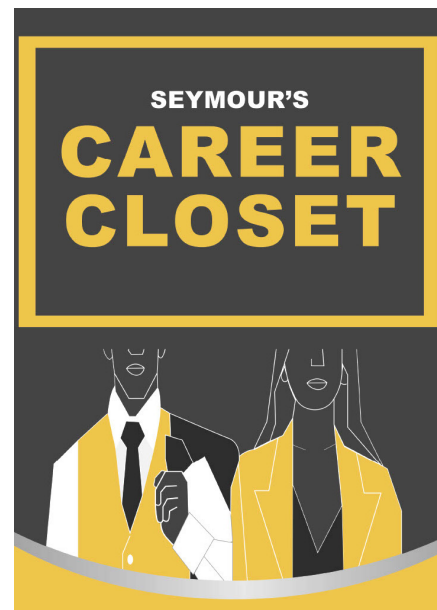
# Campus Resources to Aid Financial Well-Being

## *Office of Sustainability and Eagle's Nest Food Pantry*

Programs from the Office of Sustainability and the Eagle's Nest Food Pantry are only a few of the University of Southern Mississippi's campus resources that can aid graduate student financial well-being. The Office of Sustainability is located on 3403 Morningside Drive on the far side of campus by the Center for Child Development, and it maintains several programs that can benefit students. Sustainability coordinator, Melissa Covington-Olsen states, "Overall, we want to bring awareness to the rising concerns of social, economic and environmental issues and to teach what we can do to offset them." Students seen riding around campus on yellow and black bikes have most likely participated in the office's EcoEagle Bike Program. The bikes are absolutely free to students! The EcoEagle Bike Program has operated since 2008 and now has over 60 bikes available on a first-come, first-serve system. Besides the benefits of reducing one's carbon footprint, the program also gives students a reliable mode of transportation, allows for more physical activity on an individual basis, and helps personal budgets by saving money on gas. Graduate student, Mary Alden Wing, says that she often spreads the word

about the program because it is a great resource. "I've used it several times, and I plan to keep using it in the future. It's such an easy and quick process, and being able to bike to and around campus is a nice option, especially knowing that I am doing something good for the environment at the same time." Joining the EcoEagle Bike Program is easy. Students simply apply at the Office of Sustainability's website ([usm.edu/sustainability](http://usm.edu/sustainability)).

Another program is Seymour's Career Closet, located in Bolton Hall, which started this past year. Mrs. Olsen recalls that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Arien Faucett, a PhD student in kinesiology, did a personal closet cleanout and "realized that a career closet would be most beneficial to students in need." This program is a cooperative project brought to life by the Graduate Student Senate, Office of Sustainability, and the Division of Student Affairs. After advertising, the donations flooded the program from both on and off campus locations. Seymour's Career Closet houses items such as men's and women's suits, blazers, blouses, slacks,



dressess, skirts, belts, ties, shoes, jewelry, handbags and professional portfolios. This program allows students to shop for two free outfits per semester to prepare for professional activities such as conferences, job interviews, internships and networking events. Donors and students can email [sustainability@usm.edu](mailto:sustainability@usm.edu) to schedule an appointment.

The Office of Sustainability also facilitates Move Out Madness, which takes usable donations from students moving off-campus. Partnered with Move Out Madness

is Eagle's Nest Food Pantry, which receives all non-perishable foods from the event.

The Eagle's Nest Food Pantry is located in the Hub basement beside "The Rock" stadium. By the end of the 2021



fall semester, the Eagle's Nest already received more than 701 visits for supportive resources and served over 5,230 pounds of food! This amazing community asset was opened in October 2016 by Dr. Tamara Hurst and Jennifer Martin and flourished with the help of graduate social work students. Dr. Hurst states, "The graduate students worked hard to create all aspects of a nonprofit food pantry, including plans for donor relations, volunteer management, safety plans, financial management and marketing. Many of the plans are still followed today." The founding graduate student, now Jennifer Martin McNulty, works as president/CEO at the United Way of Northwest Alabama. While Dr. Hurst provides supervision for the social work students, Sirena Cantrell, associate vice president for Student Affairs and dean of students, has assumed management of the resource.

Dean Cantrell, along with two graduate interns, Catherine Neal and Amanda King, and a graduate assistant appointed from the School of Social Work, perform the weekly operations. Aside from being open 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays to students and faculty, the Eagle's Nest also runs a program with the Swipe Out Hunger Organization. Swipe Out Hunger ([swipeouthunger.org](http://swipeouthunger.org)) is championed by 140 campuses across the U.S. USM's program helps distribute hot meals to the members of the USM community. Dr. Hurst explains, "Basically, the program encourages students with meal plans to donate swipes that are then redistributed to others who need food. The meals provide social opportunities for students and can help them



*Dean Cantrell, Catherine Neal, Aria Grant and Amanda King*

feel part of campus activities." Graduate interns Catherine Neal and Amanda King encourage students to donate swipes from their meal plan guest swipes. Their first tabling event of the 2021 year collected 240 guest swipes. Equally helpful is the partnership of Eagle Dining and Aramark to match the number of swipes donated.

Dr. Hurst notes that the program provides hundreds of meals and has been "very successful" to the USM community. Catherine Neal states, "I have greatly enjoyed being able to give back directly to others within the USM community that need additional support. It has been very rewarding to get to network, build rapport, serve those in need, implement supportive measures, and expand my professional experiences so that I can continue this type of practice after I receive my MSW licensure and graduate." The Eagle's Nest Food Pantry allows the opportunity to assist or receive goods donated by other students

and workers all on campus. All pantry operations rely on donations and volunteers. Staples such as peanut butter, jelly, grits, oatmeal, microwaveable meals, fruits, vegetables, soups, crackers and cooking spices are always needed. Utility items such as hygiene products, cleaning supplies and school supplies are valued as well.

Dr. Hurst emphasizes, "There are always donations needed at the pantry." She reminds us that "donations can be shelf-stable food items or monetary. The monetary donations are used to fill the gaps by purchasing what has not been donated." Donations provide an opportunity to relieve someone else's financial stress during hard times and aid in that person's overall well-being. Keep your eyes peeled to bulletin boards, the USM website (specifically sections on Student Success and Hattiesburg Campus Resources) and signs. There are many resources around campus designed specifically to help enrich the prosperity of the entire USM community!



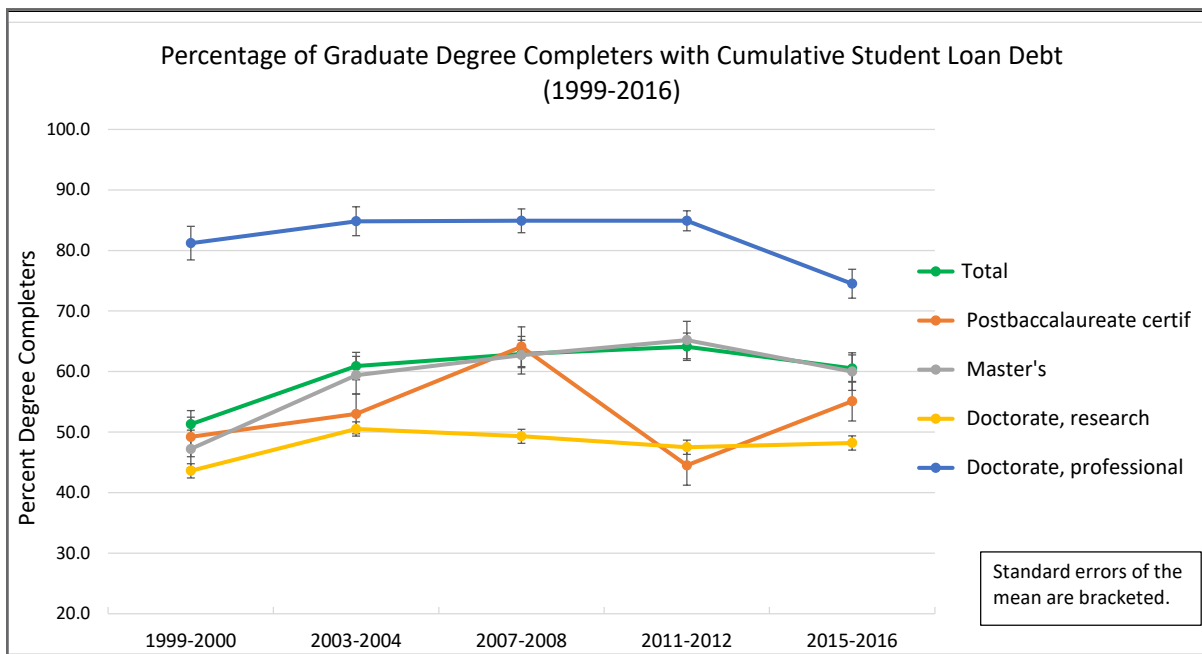
# A Guide to Financial Literacy and Future Prosperity: *iGrad*

Concern about financial resources is a stress-inducing fact of life for most students. Melanie Hanson, researcher for the Education Data Initiative, reports findings that in the U.S., 32.25% of graduate students took out student loans in 2020, and that number increased to 42.38% in 2021, creating an aggregate amount of \$99,174,661 in graduate student loan debt. Undergraduate student loan debt, coupled with current and future debt, looms over many graduate students. The most recent data released by the National Center for Education Statistics, collected from 1999-2016, show the percentage of graduate students who completed degrees with cumulative student loan debt, combining debt from undergraduate and graduate school loans. In total, the percentage increased from 51.3% to 64.1% from 1999 to

2012, before declining to 60% by 2015-16, and master's graduates followed that trend closely. Post-baccalaureate certificate graduates peaked at 64.1% in 2008, then dropped to 44.5% by 2011-12 before increasing to 55.1% by 2015-16. The percentage of indebted research doctoral graduates was the lowest at 48.2% by 2015-16, while nearly 75% of professional doctoral graduates had student loan debt, down from a high of 84.9% in 2011-12.

Many graduate programs provide assistantships with tuition waivers for some full-time students, which may reduce dependence on student loans, but assistantships are rarely sufficient to meet all living expenses of students who are financially independent. At USM, the average student loan for a graduate student this academic year is \$16,890. However, some assistance

navigating financial stressors and monetary pitfalls is available. Also according to Hason recent data, "Graduate students are three times more likely to borrow for school than graduate students in 1995." Moreover, half to two-thirds of graduate degree holders age 59 and below have some student loan debt. USM recently upgraded its financial literacy emphasis with the implementation of a new tool, iGrad ([southernmiss.igrad.com](http://southernmiss.igrad.com)). Jasmine Coleman-Miller, assistant director of operations and development for undergraduate scholarships and financial literacy ([usm.edu/scholarships](http://usm.edu/scholarships)), states the financial difference between undergraduate students and graduate students is nonexistent. "Everyone's financial journey is unique. That is the great thing about our program. It is designed to meet students exactly where they are in their financial journeys



**SOURCES:**  
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"Student Loan Debt  
by Educational  
Attainment."  
EducationData.org,  
March 1, 2022.

U.S. Department of  
Education, National  
Center for Education  
Statistics, 1999-  
2000, 2003-04, 2007-  
08, 2011-12 and  
2015-16 National  
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(NPSAS:2000,  
NPSAS:04, NPSAS:08,  
NPSAS:12 and  
NPSAS:16).

and provide financial education to continuously assist students as they navigate their future financial decisions.” There is a recognizable deficiency in financial literacy before college, and even during college, that results in personal stress about general finances. Coleman-Miller cited a USM student survey that revealed significant financial stress in 78% of students. So, what can be done to combat this pervasive financial concern?

As with other aspects of self-care, desire and effort starts the change. iGrad is a free, user-friendly tool for a new financial mindset. Coleman-Miller describes iGrad as “an interactive, online platform that offers a suite of tools designed to provide Southern Miss students with knowledge on financial topics including budgeting, financial aid, banking, investing and more.” Keeping in mind the general lack of financial literacy education, iGrad features tools for savings, building credit, and a variety of other short-term and long-term financial wellness goals. You can even check your credit score with iGrad! A few short minutes exploring iGrad shows how robust and advantageous the tool can be. Coleman-Miller elaborates on a useful component of iGrad that “allows students to sync to the Department of Education to view and stay on top of their student loans. There is also an external scholarship feature that provides credible and vetted additional scholarship opportunities for our students to help them make college affordable.” A personal favorite of this interviewer is the recommended “money personality quiz,” which personalizes iGrad to help reveal the what and why of your relationship with money.



*Jasmine Coleman-Miller*

Once the root of the problem is discovered, progress can follow. Financial wellness does not start with being hired at a financially stable job. Financial wellness begins with acquiring the knowledge to make wise financial decisions. Aside from iGrad, there is an elective course available called Personal Finance 200 with information provided by the School of Finance, and there is the option to join the Office of Undergraduate Scholarship’s FLIGHT (financial literacy insight, growth, help and teachings) Program.

The USM community has taken a proactive role in raising awareness of the need for financial literacy and in normalizing the discussion of finances. Coleman-Miller states that besides participating in the financial literacy resources, one can incorporate “financial planning into goal setting conversations across campus, [so that] students are able to better understand the breadth and depth of financial literacy. For example, if a student wants to move to a larger city and own a house one day, they need to begin building credit, exploring job markets, housing rates, etc.,

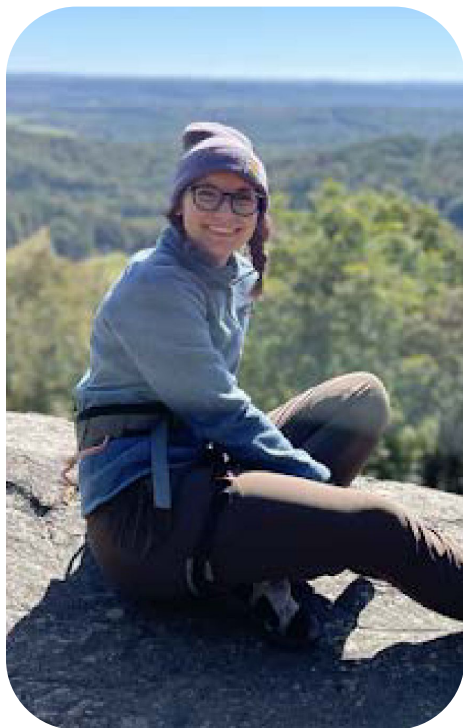
proactively. Generalizing and personalizing financial topics allows students to connect the dots between their short-term financial decisions and their long-term financial decisions.” One graduate assistant in the Office of Undergraduate Scholarships, MS student, Lee Roush, states, “One of my favorite parts about working in our office has been how determined everyone is in making sure students are informed and capable of succeeding. I’ve been given so many great opportunities to both learn how financial literacy can impact students and to be a part of providing that information to others.” Together staff and students can work hard to set new priorities for a collective financial wellness.



# Taking the Next Step Outdoors

*Sammy Ahlrichs, Sport Management, MS Student*

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*Sammy Ahlrichs atop the peak at Palisades Park, Alabama*

Sammy Ahlrichs, a second year student in the Sport Management MS program, is a graduate assistant with Aquatics and Outdoor Adventures at the University of Southern Mississippi's Payne Center on the Hattiesburg campus. Sammy completed her undergraduate degree in leisure, youth and human services at the University of Northern Iowa. She knew that she wanted to pursue an outdoor-related career: "It seemed perfect for me and my interests! I want to provide students, who may never have the opportunities otherwise, to take part in adventures!" Sammy's current area of expertise in outdoor activities pairs well with her supervisor's extensive aquatics knowledge. Together, they oversee the Outdoor Adventures and Aquatics areas of the Payne

Center. She states, "We work together in collaboration and teach each other different things every day. I have been given more control over the outdoor adventures while he guides me in the right direction, and for aquatics, I learn more about pool operation than I had ever known in the past. We work hard at maintaining our areas, and without one another, it would be an extremely difficult job." This part of her assistantship is preparing her with practical tools for her future career. Another important area of Sammy's assistantship is "student cultivation." It includes fostering the professional development of the student workers she supervises by performing "semester evaluations of their job performance, talking about what a professional staff could do better, and our expectations of the staff. Then we move into learning more about them and their classes for the semester. We talk about what has been going well and what they could be doing better. We fix their résumés and help search for potential jobs or internships. We push them into the future career paths they wish to take."

While at USM, she has also achieved many certifications in the field of recreation. Currently she is certified in CPR, lifeguarding, automated external defibrillator (AED) and first aid. She is also certified as both a CPR and lifeguard instructor, a water safety instructor, wilderness first aid, and lead and belay climbing. Sammy has also worked hard to achieve an official Occupational

Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certification, awarded to leaders in hazardous industries to maintain a safe and healthy work environment. Each of these certifications enhances Sammy's ability to perform at the highest level possible in her graduate assistantship and be the lead coordinator of many university-sponsored outdoor activities. Her practical knowledge from the Payne Center pairs nicely to help her succeed in her graduate program.

USM's Sports Management graduate program has provided a great opportunity for Sammy to network for future jobs, such as by attending National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) conferences. Sammy notes this conference "used to only be recognized for intramurals in campus recreation, but since has grown to the overall look of campus recreation as a whole. It is a great organization to be a part of if you want to plan to work within the campus recreation field." Her next goal is to complete the intense Wilderness First Responder course, which requires "30+ hours of self-directed, pre-course review prior to 40+ hours of in-person learning over the course of five days." Sammy continues, "This course is recognized as an industry standard for those who work as backcountry trip leaders, camp counselors, mountaineers, adventure guides or outdoor educators. So, wanting to pursue a career within the outdoor field, it is necessary for me to receive this certification." Ultimately, Sammy



(left) Okatoma kayaking trip. Pictured, Amanda Walsh, Tim Leonhardt, and Clayton Ziemke;  
(right) Fall break Palisades Park excursion. Pictured, Joseph Reosti.



know. Getting outdoors and just enjoying the sounds of nature or watching my dog run around outside are some of my favorite ways to get away from the 'real world' for a moment and just appreciate life. Do not stretch yourself

hopes "that one day [she] could travel teaching Wilderness First Responder courses or leading intense outdoor trips." Group activities and outdoor adventures were severely restricted during Sammy's first year as Aquatics and Outdoor Adventures graduate assistant due to COVID-19 health concerns. However, Sammy excitedly recounts the numerous fall 2021 trips she was able to help coordinate. Sammy led trips for kayaking on the Okatoma Creek in Seminary, Miss., rock-climbing trips to Horse Pens-40 and Palisades Park in Alabama, and exploring Red Bluff in Foxworth, Miss. She happily relayed continued plans for outdoor group activities this spring, including Sunrise Breakfast at the Bluff and a "swimming with the manatees trip, which we are most excited about." All of these activities and more are available to both undergraduate and graduate students.

Sammy is also the recipient of the 2021 Graduate Sport Management Leadership Award presented by the School of Marketing. assistant professor of sport management, Dr. Chris Croft, offers his praises. "Sammy Ahlrichs

has been a tremendous asset to our graduate Sport Management program. Sammy brings an unbelievable work ethic, a high level of commitment to success, and strong leadership qualities to class and raises the standards of her peers. In addition to her academic success, she has excelled as a graduate assistant, which is why she won the Graduate Sport Management Leadership Award."

Sammy prizes time management in her graduate program. She says, "I have to create a schedule for myself. I set specific times for work, class, and my own personal time. I wake up early in the mornings to allow myself that time...I take more time for myself. I will run, meditate or journal. I have found these practices to help my mental health tremendously and have been doing it regularly through my last year." Her field has taught her that taking time for yourself is crucial for mental health, physical health and overall well-being! Not surprisingly, she enjoys spending time outdoors. "Although it may seem there are no spaces to go on safe walks or spaces to enjoy yourself outdoors, there are more than you may

too thin to please others. This is your life; take control and start appreciating all the little things that come in it. Focus on your well-being and create a positive atmosphere around yourself." Practicing what she preaches is a key reason for her success in her graduate program. It is clear that Sammy's future in aquatics and outdoor adventures is as bright as the sunny days she spends outside watching her dog play and enjoying a quiet moment in nature.

For more information on the Sport Management program, visit [usm.edu/graduate-programs/sport-management.php](http://usm.edu/graduate-programs/sport-management.php).



# Mastering Matriculation and Motherhood

*Christina Crowther, MS, Child and Family Sciences*

Christina Crowther, a 2021 graduate of the Child and Family Sciences Master of Science program and mother of seven, knows what it means to seek family-work-life balance. Growing up as the second of five children with an extended family totaling 32 cousins, Christina was taught at an early age the importance of making time for family and personal connections. She always knew she wanted a big family, but that was not her only goal. “I graduated with my Bachelor of Science in education nine years ago while pregnant with my second son,” she says with a smile. “I have never taught, choosing instead to stay home with my kids. It has its highs and lows, but truly, it’s my calling. God has blessed us with four boys and three girls.”

Christina started in the Child and Family Sciences MS program when her sixth child was eight months old and her fifth child was almost three years old. Even though a typical full-time load is



at least nine hours, sometimes, as in Christina’s case, knowing your limit is crucial to success. “I knew that I didn’t want it to be a burden on my family. I knew I couldn’t let it take over my time so much that I wasn’t able to be Mom.”

While she was in the beginning of her program of study, her family sold their house. She said she remembered the realtor saying, “Oh, you don’t have to clean, it’s fine! People don’t mind!” But have you ever seen a house with six kids under the age of 11? I most definitely did have to clean it before people showed up to look.” Handling this stressful time called for a “splurge” of “me-time.” She shared her personal way to relieve stress at that time. “I bought some stress relief lotion from Bath and Body Works. Every day, more than once, I would go up to my bathroom (isn’t that where all

moms hide?) and rub this lotion into my hands and sit there and smell it and breathe deep! I did that until the thing was gone!” It was a small amount of time and an inexpensive solution, but she did what worked for her in her present circumstance.

Christina understood that her busy life called for an introspective balance, and one way she achieved this was by tying her scholarly interests to her own life. For example, one of the projects Christina created was a parental instruction unit. The course was titled “Stressed Out: How Our Stress Affects Our Kids, and What We Can Do About It!” While describing the course, Christina cited this key quote from her research stating, “Parental stress, anxiety and depression” have been shown to affect children’s behavior in health, emotional-capacity and education. Her course centered around the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACEs). ACEs displays the correlation of childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect, parental separation, parental mental health issues, etc., plus their adulthood adverse outcomes. “The original research project, which interviewed adults, found that ‘at least 64% of the 17,000 participants had experienced at least 1 ACE.’” Consequently, her course emphasized that “adults’ behavior really has a big impact on children’s lives—and even their brain development.” The course also featured a section of Family Conflict theory, coping strategies, and the ABC-X model



*Christina created and outlined a 10-week parent education course as a “Family Support through Primary Prevention (FSPP)” course.*



of family stress. The theory and model outlined the influence that the perspective of the stressor has on the outcome of the stress. Christina explains, "If a family faces something stressful, like a layoff due to COVID-19, whether it becomes a crisis or a minor inconvenience depends a lot on their resources, such as a savings account, or another income, and their perspective of it." Christina's course participants responded well to the instructional content. The participants also provided stress relief feedback with each other, and she recounted that the group consensus was to "do what works for you, but make sure you do it!" This stress relieving advice became a mantra that Christina would live by.

Scholarly work aside, Christina has a strong personal testimony to multi-tasking graduate students. Graduate students undeniably have a large

workload and responsibility. Christina knew she wanted to take on that responsibility of being a mom to many children, but she also made time for her other goals. Whether children or

many students. She shares some advice, "I have trained myself, as a mother of many who has at times been busy with research papers and PowerPoint presentations, to pick my battles. That really is how

I maintain my well-being. I am okay with a messy house. I am okay with kids jumping on the couch, or playing in the mud, or whatever it may be."

As students, picking which battles need to be fought can be important to managing stress.

Christina discusses a wise suggestion to take a step back from the stress to relax, talk to your supervisor, and assess your workload. Taking an honest look at her time, resources and priorities, Christina chose to take one class at a time at first to better manage her responsibilities and stress-

load. Another coping strategy she utilized for her work-life balance, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, was taking a few



**"It doesn't matter what you do for yourself, it just matters that you do it."**

family play a role in long-term life plans or not, Christina's message carries wisdom that applies to



minutes to herself every day. “I bought a new ukulele [...] and I sat outside and strummed little songs while my littlest kids colored with chalk.”

One of Christina’s accomplishments during her graduate education is maintaining a grade point average of 4.0. You may find yourself asking, like others have, how she manages to achieve that triumph atop fulfilling her other roles. “I approached my education how I approach parenting—I’m going to give it everything I’ve got and do my best.” She also attributed a large part of her satisfying achievement to her trust in God. She attests that her personal well-being, encompassing everything from mental, physical and spiritual inner peace would not be possible without her faith. For her, reliance on God is the top approach to stress management amidst the

chaos of the world. Christina notes that more than once she has been asked, “How do you do it all?” Her response is simply that she doesn’t do it all. “First, I pick my battles; next, I have a very supportive, very involved husband; and finally, God makes up the difference where I fall short. And that happens a lot.” She has a lot to be proud of and thanks God for directing her and helping her along the way.

While raising seven kids alongside her husband, Christina relies on the advice she offers other students. “It goes back to the lesson we discussed in my parental stress course I taught—it doesn’t matter what you do; it just matters that you do it.” Maybe it is time to be *okay* with unfolded laundry or be *okay* with a messy room, and instead pick up the metaphorical ukulele and sing like Christina.

For more information on the Child and Family Sciences program, visit: [usm.edu/graduate-programs/child-family-sciences.php](https://usm.edu/graduate-programs/child-family-sciences.php). They offer a fully online, part-time master’s degree.

# Heart for Creativity and Teaching

*Rachael Fowler, PhD, Teaching Assistant of the Year*

There is no denying the impression an influential teacher can leave on students. Students entrust teachers with their minds—to imbue them with new knowledge. Rachael Fowler understands both roles: teacher and student. As

a graduate teaching assistant, she taught a variety of classes at USM, including Basic Writing, Composition, Research Writing, World Literature and Creative Writing, all with glowing student feedback on her ability to engage with students. She also held the position of associate editor of *Mississippi Review* and served as president of Center for Writers (C4W).

She won the Stanley Hauer Teaching Award at USM, which is her program's top award for instruction. She attributes much of her success to the significant influences in her life. She kept an open mind and allowed herself to be molded into a success-oriented individual. For Rachael, that started as early as high school. She specifically remembers English class in her Mobile, Alabama, high school. Her English teacher, Mrs. Robinson, taught a class centered around literature rhetoric, and Rachael remembers that class

sparking her passion for creative writing. She recalls, "I think English was always my strongest subject. I don't think I consciously realized it until the end of high school... [Mrs. Robinson] was a really good teacher. She had what I felt was a

University of South Alabama, she was a pre-med student. Rachael laughed while recalling, "I changed my major almost immediately because I hated science lab classes. I hated them, and I didn't want to do them anymore, ever! I was thinking

this is probably not right."

Her interest eventually led to a double major in creative writing and anthropology. She also gained her first editing experience on South Alabama's publication of *Oracle*, which is a student-run journal that publishes their students' work. That experience influenced her career path as her drive to teach seems born from her

enthusiasm for her own and other's writings.

At USM, Rachael has focused the majority of her creative writing efforts on her dissertation, a short story collection titled *The Constant Unfamiliar*. Even her fellow classmates had a hand in shaping Rachael's writings. The title of her collection stemmed from a fellow student's statement in a workshop. The student claimed that Rachael's stories "make the familiar unfamiliar." Each story varies in length, but the entire collection



lot of respect for her students. She wanted us to know that. I remember her really respecting our space and our work. Plus, I could tell she always read our work, because she always wrote something at the end of it which doesn't always happen." From that time on, Rachael has been surrounded by teachers, peers and mentors who have made her into the inspiring influence she is today.

However, despite her knowledge of her own joy in literature and writing, when Rachael entered her undergraduate education at



currently amounts to roughly 100 pages of original work. When asked if the collection's theme was purposeful, Rachael mused, "I often heard in workshop class that the things that consume you or that you are consumed with are going to come out in your writing whether you want them to or not, so a lot of the things that I realized tied my stories together were not things I originally noticed." Rachael states that her collection has two defining attributes. One is the content, which revolves primarily on subjects like memory, childhood, trauma and fractured families. The other attribute of her work is the fragmented narrative form of storytelling. She declared, "I am more comfortable writing stories that are fractured, a small moment instead of a straight-through 20-page narrative. I was told it reads as a collage—juxtaposed against each other."

Her major professor, Dr. Joshua Bernstein, noted, "Rachael's vision as a writer is all-encompassing; she tackles everything from the mysteries of art and artistic creation to the loneliness and fervor lurking at the heart of the human soul. Her stories have appeared in some of the most selective publications in the country [...] and will continue to resonate in the years ahead." Rachael shared the content of one of her stories. It is about "a girl whose mother has left. She's searching for sounds and smells that remind her of her mother, but you don't realize that until the end." One of Rachael's mentors, Dr. Monika Gehlawat, praised her, describing Rachael as "willing to take risks with her craft, an uncommon characteristic for an emerging writer that will undoubtedly deepen her artistic talent." Referring to other faculty who inspired her, Rachael exclaims, "Dr. Olivia Clare and Dr. Joshua Bernstein have both been invaluable influences on my creative work. There was a point during my PhD when I thought seriously about

whether or not I could actually be a writer. If I hadn't met them, I'm not sure I would've continued writing fiction." With encouragement from her professors, Rachael persevered and has many publications in nationally known magazines and journals, including *Prime Number Magazine*, *The Literary Review*, *Deep South Magazine* and *Apeiron Review*. She was also a notable finalist for a contest with *Glimmer Train Magazine*.

Rachael expressed gratitude for her school. "Everyone cares about how you're doing as a person even outside the program." Learning from that model, Rachael utilized that mentality with her English 101 students over the difficult spring semester of 2021. Aware that her students faced many extra challenges, she gave them time to free-write. Rachael exclaimed, "That was the most they wrote. I responded to each one, and then the next class period they seemed happier. As a teacher, I am working with students from diverse backgrounds. It takes a lot of empathy and emotional labor to meet them where they are." She felt the importance of giving specific credit to Dr. Joyce Inman. She states, "When I came to USM, I didn't plan on being a teacher. Then, I was introduced to her, her pedagogy, and her generous work as a professor, mentor and administrator. I know I want to be a teacher now, and Dr. Inman was a major part of this realization for me." Her students recognize a difference in Rachael's teaching as well. School director, Dr. Matt Casey, made the following comment: "Rachael Fowler's student evaluations show an instructor who engages with students without compromising her standards." He shares the following student comment: "My favorite among student comments explained that she was the perfect fit for this course. She would take her time and give us lots of context and cultural lessons about stories my class was

about to read. She was extremely helpful and willing to work with students who don't seem engaged with school. This professor is a force to be reckoned with." Rachael humbly attributes a great deal of her teaching success to the quality of her students. Overall, she possesses an admirable transparency about how many influences at USM contributed to her heart for teaching.

Since graduating, Rachael has been working on adding to and editing her collection of short stories. Two of her recent additions were inspired by her students' free writing. The stories are centered around the "storm of everything falling apart." Like her students, she sat down and wanted to give form to her feelings. Rachael aspires, "I would like those stories to be a part of what I am sure will be a very large group of stories from this time period. You know, we're still reading stories from events that happened a long time ago today in literature. In that way, I guess I would like to be, at least a small bit of that." In addition, Rachael is continuing to apply to multiple residencies and university faculty positions. Dr. Casey also noted, "Rachael has so many intangible great qualities that allow her to be high-functioning in the academy. The university that hires her will essentially have won the lottery in terms of drama-free competence and excellent research."

For more information about the English program, visit: [usm.edu/graduate-programs/english.php](https://usm.edu/graduate-programs/english.php).

# A First-Generation Road to Success

*Lacey Wallace, MBA, Research Assistant of the Year*



The University of Southern Mississippi fosters the truth that each student's journey is as unique as the individual. Everyone loves a quality back story, right? Lacey Wallace, MBA student, graduated in May 2021 with an impressive record and habit of being the "first to." On top of many honors she has received, Lacey also served as the graduate research lead in the School of Marketing. She coordinated six other graduate assistants to give research aid to 10 faculty members. Lacey's road to success is most certainly a great accomplishment.

From small-town Jayess, Mississippi, Lacey Wallace's graduation from Southwest Mississippi Community College made her the first in her family to graduate from college. Lacey dedicates a portion of her success

to seeing her parents own their own business, inherently teaching her what can be accomplished with hard work and dedication. It was that same hard work and dedication that landed her a full scholarship to her community college. After community college, she traveled to Europe and picked up diverse hobbies like graphic design and photography and even becoming a coffee aficionado.

Lacey gladly chose USM to continue her education. She recalls Dr. Joanne Cao noticing her and saying, "You're going to do great things one day. What are your future plans?" Dr. Cao's encouragement was a boost to her confidence. It seems only fitting that when Lacey was selected for the Honors Keystone Program, Dr. Cao became her thesis advisor. Under her direction, Lacey's passion for research marketing was sparked.

When Lacey chose her Keystone project, she applied her marketing education and sought inspiration from her life's observations. "My interest in research emerged from my collective experiences. I grew up in a small community where neighbors care for each other, often sharing meals and hosting many family members and friends in their homes for local events. As I began to travel and see more of the world during college, I realized that these same societal bonds could be replicated through sharing communities (i.e., Airbnb), which use technology to connect people who have a home with those who need a place to stay. This discovery inspired my independent study, where I, with guidance from my research advisor, investigated how an individual's cultural orientation impacts value perceptions of sharing. The findings

reveal that cultural values impact consumers' beliefs and judgments, and value perceptions mediate the relationship between culture and satisfaction."

When Lacey first started her research, there was not a lot of pre-existing literature on her topic of sharing economy services, especially how culture affects those services. The lack of literature on her project identified an existing gap and confirmed Lacey's original intrigue. She began researching by "utilizing a survey created in Qualtrics with an MTurk consumer panel of recent Airbnb guests." Her findings determined "through multiple regression analysis that not all cultural values are significantly important when considering how consumers think and feel when it comes to sharing." She also cites "Hofstede's newest cultural dimensions" of "long-term orientation and indulgence" as being insightful to her research, which delved deeper into those two cultural dimensions. Her interest and passion for research led her to be credited as the College of Business and Economic Development's *first* student to gain recognition on the national level with the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR). Eventually, this research culminated in her graduate work titled, "A Side of Thrift or Luxury? Exploring Cultural Orientations and Value Perceptions in Airbnb," which she also presented at the 26th Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism in January 2021.

Being the go-getter that Lacey is, she took matters into her own



hands and went to the director of the School of Marketing, Dr. Jamye Foster, to express her interest in being a research-focused graduate assistant. Dr. Foster replied that they “never really had a graduate assistant who is interested in doing something like that.” But again, Lacey seemed to project both her energy and potential, and just like that, Lacey became another *first*. Dr. Foster noted,

“Finding an MBA student who understands and can be trusted with research is not easy, but we have complete trust in Lacey. She is by far the most effective assistant we’ve had since I joined the marketing faculty in 2009.” Lacey’s role as graduate research lead focused on providing any aid in research that the professors of the School of Marketing required. Lacey said, “Some of the professors thought that I did such significant work that they made

me co-author on their papers.” She continued, “Once I had a couple of professors read my work and trust me enough to add me to their papers, I ended up getting five working papers.” One of those papers, co-authored with marketing professors Dr. Jamye Foster and Dr. Melinda McLelland, was published in the *Journal of Research in Interactive*

#### *Marketing.*

Currently, Lacey is continuing to ready her thesis and four other collaboration projects for publication. Professor Gallayane Yaoyuneyong declared the following about Lacey as a research student, “Ms. Wallace has steadily grown in her passion and ability in research. She is a true gem...Her devotion to the tasks placed in front of her



is remarkable. She undertakes her work with a smile and determination.” That determination gained Lacey the title 2020 Three-Minute Thesis Grand Champion with her graduate research titled, “The Sharing Economy: Why Culture Matters.” Lacey was recognized as the *first* business student to win the competition and continue to the

regional competition at the 2021 virtual Conference of Southern Graduate Schools. Lacey also presented her research in the School of Marketing’s 2nd Annual Student Research Showcase and walked away with a *first* place and People’s Choice award. All of her hard work has paid off and, in the fall of 2021, Lacey began pursuing her doctorate in marketing at the University of Alabama.

Lacey praises USM for cultivating her research and expanding her worldview by “leaps and bounds.” All Lacey’s hard work at USM shows in Dr. Cao’s praise. “She is a rising scholar and the type of candidate who has represented our university beyond measure.” She is now on her way to be the *first* from her rural community to earn a PhD in marketing, and she hopes to inspire other success-driven *first-generation* college students. Lacey admits

that her long-time goal is to eventually make her way back to the University of Southern Mississippi to serve as a research professor. She says, “I would love to retire here, honestly. This place feels like home.”

For more information about the Master of Business Administration program, visit: [usm.edu/graduate-programs/business-administration.php](https://usm.edu/graduate-programs/business-administration.php).

# More Than A Mentor

*Dr. Frank Heitmuller, 2021 Graduate Mentor of the Year*

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Many attribute Benjamin Franklin with the famous words, “Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will learn.” Dr. Frank Heitmuller has spent his faculty career involving students to promote learning, and that dedication has earned him the title 2021 Graduate Mentor of the Year.

As a young graduate student, Dr. Heitmuller moved from Pensacola, Florida, to Austin, Texas, believing that, for himself, moving presented a great opportunity to grow personally and professionally. While he was still in Austin finishing his master’s degree in geography, he was hired by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) as a student worker. Austin, and the mentorship he received there, became pivotal toward setting Dr. Heitmuller’s career on its current track. His own experience of achieving a doctorate while remaining a full-time USGS employee helps him mentor his students at USM. He now specializes in geomorphology, hydrology and sedimentology. In layman’s terms, he “looks at rivers, how much they flood, how much sediment they deposit

elsewhere, how high the waters get, and all those factors will help us predict floods and changes to the environment near where those rivers flow.”

His first teaching opportunity happened during his time as a doctoral student. Dr. Heitmuller agreed to teach one

out to be a career turning point. He says, “That’s where it all began. It took a while to create, but it was extremely fulfilling to take what I learned and what I was doing at work and bring it into the classroom. I enjoyed it. I was exhausted, but I got a lot of enjoyment out of teaching that

class and even taking them on a field trip. That’s what I do now, and I kind of thought—okay this is an option!”

Dr. Heitmuller has made a name for himself as a result of his stellar field work, and his proximity to the Mississippi River offers opportune projects for his geology studies, including one near Natchez that is sponsored by The Nature Conservancy. The Mississippi River is the commercial lane for a large portion of the nation’s shipping. The river’s erosion, flooding and elemental output from riverside



of his professor’s classes while the professor was traveling internationally. Though he took charge of the class, he declined to use the original professor’s teaching materials, instead choosing to create his own teaching plan and instructional approach. The decision turned

agricultural states must be monitored, and that is where Dr. Heitmuller’s expertise becomes invaluable. He explains, “The Nature Conservancy is concerned with fertilizer, pesticides or herbicides which filter down and get into that river. It’ll flood and get into the Gulf of Mexico.”





(left) Mississippi Sound, instruction on bottom sampler, (right) Guadalupe Mountains National Park, field geology

what you're doing will not be a danger to their livelihood and what they own." Jansen also commented on his advisor's support in the classroom. "He was of utmost help during my first year, especially with my thesis, providing me with

Dr. Heitmuller collaborated on a project to sample sediment and water to track the flow of elements in the river. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers in Vicksburg also partners with Dr. Heitmuller for his geology and geography research knowledge pertaining to the Mississippi River. He aids in assessing the quality of the river's eroding and displaced sediment to help maintain the nation's flood infrastructure. This project highlights Dr. Heitmuller's environmental geology interests. His passion for his research is clear as he discussed solutions to the river's sediment problem: "There are ways of getting the sediment out of there. [Depending on its] quality, could it be shipped back up to Iowa where there's good agricultural topsoil that's being eroded right now? Could you take it and use it as aggregate material, as concrete or asphalt? Could you use it for rivers that are eroding by taking some and putting it there to restore pseudo-natural function?"

His student Jansen Costello,

who nominated him for this award, remarked, "Altruistic and passionate about teaching and learning is how I would describe Dr. Heitmuller. He is always pleasant, very well prepared and a true leader in geologic endeavors." Dr. Heitmuller credits his own mentor's influence for his efficient leadership in his field, claiming, "I was brought up where we were encouraged to get out in the field, to go and analyze. My mentor in Texas did that. It's hard to get away from." Another quality his students admire is Dr. Heitmuller's invested engagement with the students' learning, both in the field and the traditional classroom. Again, his own education plays a role in his current approach to mentorship. "Many of us [graduate students]," he says, "lacked that background from undergrad. It's an intense relationship between mentor and mentee. There's so many unpredictable variables in the field to adapt to. Some are as simple as talking to a landowner for property permission, assuring them that

support, expertise and technical information in the subject area... Even through the many obstacles that my thesis presented itself with, Dr. Heitmuller always had an answer and provided me with the necessary knowledge and skills that made it possible to obtain and a desired job weeks out of school." Another one of Dr. Heitmuller's former students, Jennifer Simpson, acknowledged his exemplary mentorship. "I became more confident with my research capabilities, sharpened my critical thinking skills, developed leadership qualities, and nurtured creativity as I had seen modeled by Frank. I always felt it was a kind of partnership with him, and we both had a duty to keep up our end of the bargain."

Dr. Heitmuller's students know he is always open to conversations about workload, helpful with finding solutions on a thesis, and encouraging when it comes to achieving academic goals. He is described as "always having an answer" or that he can "always

find a solution.” Dr. Heitmuller’s field of study is demanding, and he views his role with his students as crucial. The master’s students have a large learning curve to fill with field work, proper organization in the lab with performing various lab tests, postulating questions, formulating relevant hypotheses, and finalizing analyses of projects. Dr. Heitmuller claims that is part of what he enjoys as a mentor. He has a unique opportunity to watch

students is when we’re out and a problem presents itself and they beat me to the correct solution to make the most out of what we’re up against. That means that they’re ready. We’re problem solvers, and they are taking what’s presented and using different techniques to solve it. I get giddy whenever I see one of those big steps in problem solving and independence take shape.”

When asked about a specific

“I will never forget one field trip we went on. The mud at one part of the ‘road’ was halfway up the wheels, and we thought we might get stuck. We did some creative driving and made it through. We celebrated the success afterward with Frank as grill master making everyone hamburgers. I think we all learned some life skills and geology on that trip.” James seemed he could continue on with

### ***“Students don’t just need a teacher; they need a mentor.”***

his students’ exponential growth in the program. His students’ tenacity and creativity have propelled him forward in his own career. He states that his motivations all go back to his first year of teaching, and it still remains the same. “The most fun and rewarding time with

mentee that made an impact on his teaching career, Dr. Heitmuller named a recent student, James Thompson, who received his master’s degree in geology in 2021.

“Frank encouraged me not to give up on my academic goals and the science I love,” remarked James. “I am on the autism spectrum, among other things, and most people wouldn’t notice anything different about me than anyone else, thanks to hard work and medicinal intervention. However, maintaining that long term is difficult and expensive. I had to go to Atlanta to access the medical services necessary, and complications from some of the medications really took a toll. I had to take jobs outside USM to afford the medical services, which I needed to continue to be a student. It can be a vicious cycle. Frank was always understanding and supportive through that process. I would always leave his office with a renewed sense of determination that I could achieve my goals.”

James has many fond memories involving Dr. Heitmuller. Recalling,

praise.

When asked about Dr. Heitmuller’s admirable mentor qualities, James says, “It is his contagious enthusiasm and approachable demeanor that makes him such an effective mentor and teacher. He never lets you feel like your questions are dumb, and he gets excited when a concept finally just clicks for you. He’s always willing to explain. He even adds a little humor when you need that little bit of encouragement.”

He continues, “I think Dr. Heitmuller embodies the greatest qualities of an impressive mentor. He takes a genuine interest in both academic and personal growth of every student. He rarely will just tell you the answers you seek but carefully leads you to examine the situation before guiding you to your own understanding. Sometimes, he would simply be there and listen to all the whining, venting, etc. before offering a word of encouragement. That ability to listen was invaluable to us as students. Frank also does an excellent job of speaking to students’ strengths and helping them start their careers. You’ll find many former students in positions at U. S. Army Corps of Engineers,





Naval Oceanographic Command, and private sector jobs around the country. His modesty prevents him from bragging about it.”

The truth of James Thompson’s words rings true when observing Dr. Heitmuller’s own reflection of James and his acknowledgement and pride in all of James’ hard work. He recalls James’ scholarly progress as “inspiring” since James needed to work sometimes part-time and sometimes full-time to

support his schooling. “He had to do a lot of extra lifting to get there. That kind of person undoubtedly deserves a master’s.”

For more information about the geology program, visit: [usm.edu/graduate-programs/geology.php](http://usm.edu/graduate-programs/geology.php).

## 2021-22 Graduate School Staff

The mission of the Graduate School at Southern Miss is to foster a culture of excellence and integrity in graduate education, producing a diverse population of graduates whose competence, conduct and professional presence set them apart in a competitive workforce and bring distinction to our university. Our goal is for students to receive the highest quality educational experience in their specific disciplines, along with opportunities for professional and personal development that will enrich their lives. The Graduate School staff is committed to this mission by serving graduate students and faculty from recruitment through graduation.



*Graduate School staff and administration. From left: Sue Fayard, Shelby Flores, Elisabeth McBride, Maegan Martin, Dr. Rich Mohn (associate dean), Desira Bailey, Dr. Karen S. Coats (dean), Cymon Davis, Shaadi Shoubaki, Dr. Jon Snyder, Tracy Barnhill, Emily Gruzinskas, Daleana Phillips, Dr. Jessica Love. Not pictured, Michael Howell.*



# 2021 Hall of Fame

## **Brian Ward Bauer, Clinical Psychology, PhD**

Brian's research integrates behavioral economics with suicide theory by examining how cognitive biases can impact suicide-related decision making. He used neural measures to investigate the effects of acute stress on emotion and reward processing to better understand suicidal crises.



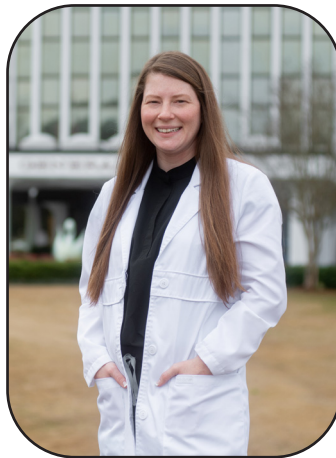
## **Sara Frances Davis, Child and Family Sciences, MS**

Sara worked with Jumpstart and helped to provide language, literacy and social-emotional programming for preschool children in under-resourced communities and promote quality early learning.



## **Emily Caroline Brister, Nursing, DNP**

Emily's research helps to support the positive effects of social determinants of health assessment via the introduction of the PRAPARE tool to the inpatient pediatric setting and assists in aligning healthcare systems with Healthy People 2030 goals.



## **Corinne Dekkers, English-Creative Writing, PhD**

Corinne writes poetry residing at the intersection of elegy, landscape, migration and presence. She critically examines the relationships between land, art and ecology, and how they surface in literary works.



## **Samantha Michelle Coblentz, MPA**

Samantha is preparing for the CPA exam. After graduation, she will relocate to Nashville, Tenn. to attend a tax internship in Public and Middle Market with HORNE.



## **Hayley Michael Hasik, U. S. History, PhD**

Hayley helped develop cultural history of the Vietnam War, examining how helicopters became the sight and sound of the war during the conflict. Her project looks at the social and cultural implications of this new technology to justify the use of helicopters in Vietnam.





# Showcasing Graduate Student Success

## **Gregory Laney, MBA**

Greg Laney is a Civil Engineer Corps Officer in the U. S. Navy. He is currently assigned with Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 8 in Rota, Spain, as the Facilities and Maintenance Officer. He has 20 years of experience in management operations.



## **Sydney Ruzicka, Public Health, MPH**

Sydney's research included conducting a health assessment and implementation of qualitative research methods, including interviewing graduate alumni as a part of reaccreditation for USM's MPH program. She also assisted on a research project examining the effect of COVID-19 on students with disabilities.



## **Mary M. Medlin, Brain and Behavior Psychology, PhD**

Mary researched the factors that predict acceptance of scientific findings by the lay public, such as personality traits or personal belief systems. She hopes her findings help develop interventions aimed at improving understanding of, and engagement with, empirically supported scientific research.



## **Christine Vong, Audiology, AuD**

Christine assisted with projects and presentations on bias in the clinical setting at a national conference held by the American-Speech-Language-Hearing Association. She also initiated a petition to develop resources to aid audiologists in supporting patients with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.



## **Emily Stahly, Criminal Justice, MS**

Emily's research focused on mental health services available in juvenile correctional facilities. She assisted on projects involving gun laws throughout the country, crisis intervention teams, and mental health among juveniles in the criminal justice system.



## **Song Zhang, Polymer Science and Engineering, PhD**

Song's research aims to build rational design guidelines for high-performance semiconducting polymers, which can be applied to fabricate stretchable and wearable electronics that are highly desirable for energy, health and societal needs.



# Graduate Alumni Spotlight



**Maria Venetis, Master of Speech Communication, 2004, Rutgers University, Associate Professor of Communication**

**How did you become interested in this field?** At USM, I taught public speaking; it made me become interested in a career as a professor. I love working with students and having the ability to engage with students, which I have found is my true love.

**What do you like best about your work?** Master's and Doctoral students are the best part of the job. They're bright and motivated. Their excitement makes me excited.

**How did Graduate School at USM help prepare you for your current role?** During my master's at USM, I got some experience presenting and working with professors to become an attractive doctoral candidate. It laid the foundation to prepare me for my PhD education at Rutgers University, where I have a current job as a professor. Now I have many

publications from *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* to *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

**What advice would you give prospective and current students about pursuing a graduate degree while taking care of their well-being?** It's hard to make time for yourself, but you have to find ways to bring yourself joy and take care of yourself or you're not going to be successful in your job. Different people will have their own metrics for success, maybe it's being able to sleep at night or being able to exercise or spend time with family. I always encourage my students to make time, even if it's just laundry.

**Stephen Williams, AuD, 2018, Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care**

**How did you become interested in this field?** As a teenager, I had the frightening experience of suddenly losing a significant portion of my hearing in one ear.

**What do you like best about your work?** My niche in our facility is evaluating and treating dizziness patients and those suffering from tinnitus or "ringing" in the ears. It is very rewarding to advocate and improve a veteran's quality of life by helping my patients hear and communicate with loved ones, or by easing the distress caused by dizziness or tinnitus.

**How did Graduate School at USM help prepare you for your current role?** I had a fantastic experience during graduate school at USM. I learned from some great

professors and instructors, and I experienced audiology both on and off campus through clinical practicums. This laid the foundation that I needed to excel during my clinical externship, which, in turn, helped me land the job I have today.

**What advice would you give prospective and current students about pursuing a graduate degree while taking care of their well-being?** When the demands of graduate school loom large, it can be tempting to let well-being slip to the back-burner and lose that sense of reward. Instead, seek balance. For me that included being active in my faith community and having the support of my friends and family, which helped me keep a balanced perspective and a sense of purpose. Whether it's faith, or physical fitness, or mental and emotional



*"I owe so much to the people that took care of my ears, and it is a great honor to pay that forward each day."*



# Building Future Prosperity

health, keeping that balance is so important. It brings out our best, both in school and in life.

**Donavan L. Johnson,**  
**EdD, 2019, Baton Rouge**  
*Community College, Dean of Students*

**How did you become interested in this field?** I credit my path into higher education to the administrators, faculty and staff at University of West Alabama (UWA), who created an incredible sense of belonging on a college campus for me. My love for higher education and all that comes with it—the exciting buzz of a college campus and college town; a rigorous education; a vibrant student body; campus and civic engagement opportunities; college athletics—originated around my second undergraduate year at the UWA.

**What do you like best about your work?** The best part of my job is the incredible opportunity



to meet students right where they are—during some of their highest moments, as well as some of the lowest. It's the varying audience I get to serve that makes my job as dean of students so rewarding.

**How did Graduate School at USM help prepare you for your current role?** The Graduate School at USM provided me with the necessary research and application

skills needed to stay knowledgeable, data-driven and effective as a scholar practitioner.

**What advice would you give prospective and current students about pursuing a graduate degree while taking care of their well-being?** A terminal degree, while rigorous, could play a significant role in career advancement and increased earnings, should meaningfully contribute and improve one's field. To do so, you must take care of yourself so that those you intend to serve will receive the very best version of you.

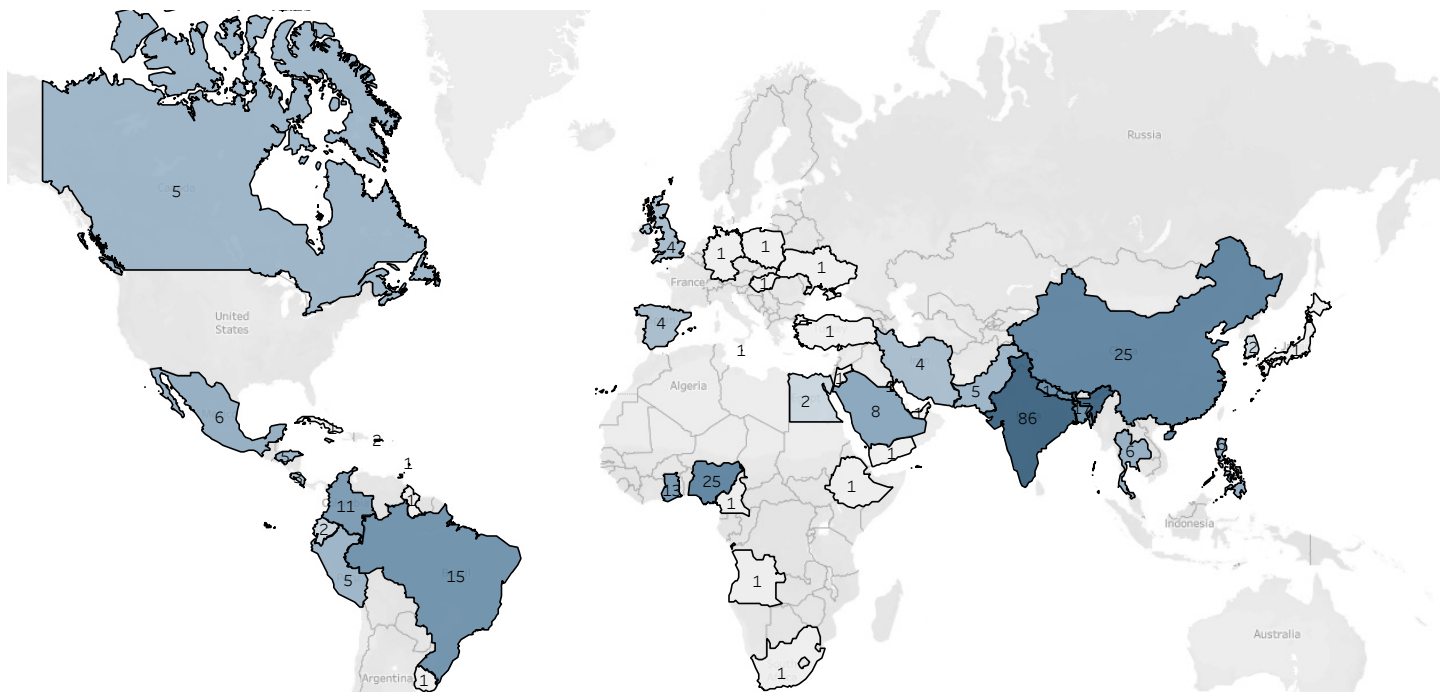
## Southern Miss Connections

Southern Miss Connections is a free, online platform sponsored by the Southern Miss Alumni Association. With Southern Miss Connections, students can find mentors in their chosen career field and/or area of interest, seek career-related advice, and network with successful Southern Miss alumni. Within Southern Miss Connections, alumni can serve their alma mater by mentoring current students and connect with fellow alumni in their industry.

**Visit [southernmissconnections.com](https://southernmissconnections.com)**



# Graduate School Enrollment, *Fall 2021*



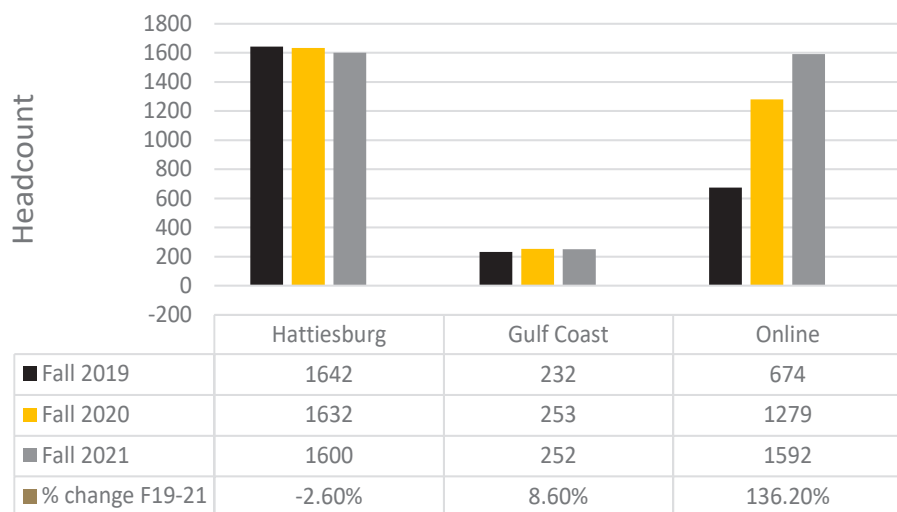
(Above) Heat Map of International Student Enrollment. In Fall 2021, USM welcomed international graduate students from 48 countries and five continents. Students from India comprised the largest number of international students at 86 (28%), followed by students from China and Nigeria at 25 each (8.2%), and Bangladesh and Nepal at 17 each (5.6%).

## Number of Graduate Students Enrolled by Original Home Country

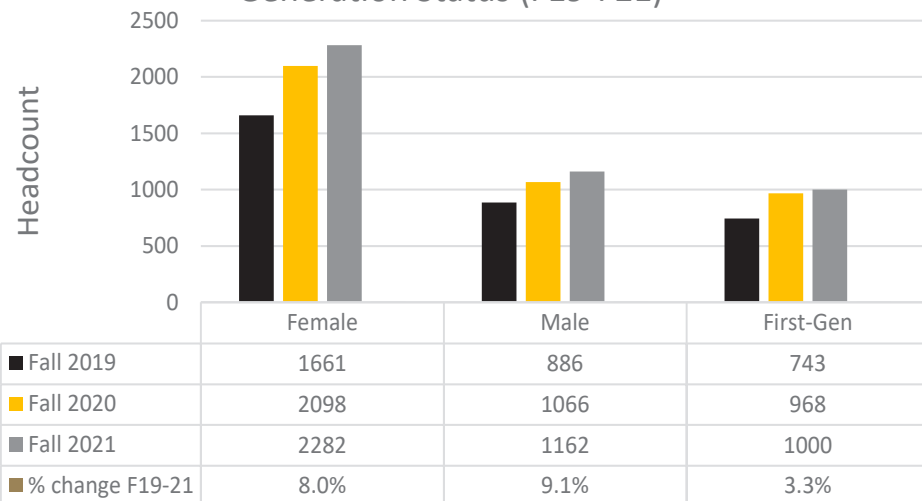
- Angola, 1
- Bangladesh, 17
- Barbados, 1
- Brazil, 15
- Cameroon, 1
- Canada, 5
- China, 25
- Colombia, 11
- Costa Rica, 3
- Cuba, 1
- Ecuador, 2
- Egypt, 2
- Ethiopia, 1
- Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 1
- Germany, 1
- Ghana, 13
- Guyana, 1
- Honduras, 5
- Hungary, 1
- India, 86
- Iran (Islamic Republic of), 4
- Jamaica, 4
- Japan, 1
- Jordan, 1
- Korea, Republic of, 2
- Kuwait, 1
- Malta, 1
- Mexico, 6
- Nepal, 17
- Nigeria, 25
- Pakistan, 5
- Peru, 5
- Philippines, 6
- Poland, 1
- Puerto Rico, 2
- Saudi Arabia, 8
- South Africa, 1
- Spain, 4
- Taiwan, Province of China, 2
- Thailand, 6
- Trinidad and Tobago, 1
- Turkey, 1
- Ukraine, 1
- United Arab Emirates, 1
- United Kingdom, 4
- Uruguay, 1
- Virgin Islands (British), 1
- Yemen, 1



Graduate Enrollment by Campus (F19-21)



Graduate Enrollment by Gender and First-Generation Status (F19-F21)



Growth in graduate student enrollment by campus location and demographic characteristics from fall 2019 through fall 2021 are shown in the data at left. (Top) Graduate Enrollment by Campus. Essentially all growth in graduate enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2021 was in online graduate programs. An increase of more than 918 fully online students occurred over the two-year period, a positive change of more than 136%. (Middle) Graduate Enrollment Growth by Gender and First-Generation Status. By fall 2021, females comprised 66.2% and males 33.7% of graduate students. The population of first-generation students represented nearly a third of graduate students the same year. (Bottom) Graduate Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity. The population of Black/African American; Hispanic/Latino; two or more races; and white students increased from fall 2019 to fall 2021, representing 22.3%, 3.8%, 2.0%, and 60.8% of all graduate students, respectively. The population of domestic Asian students fluctuated over the two-year period, comprising 2.3% of the fall 2021 population. Even with COVID-related restrictions in international student enrollment, the non-resident population grew to more than 7% of all graduate students in fall 2021.

Table 1. Graduate Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (Fall 2019-21)

Graduate Student Race or Ethnicity	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	% Student Pop. (F21)
American Indian/Alaska Native	12	8	9	0.3%
Asian	72	91	79	2.3%
Black/African American	443	699	767	22.3%
Hispanic/Latino	83	102	131	3.8%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0	1	0.0%
White	1769	2061	2095	60.8%
Two or More Races	48	64	70	2.0%
Nonresident Alien	121	124	243	7.1%
Unknown	0	15	30	0.9%

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EOE/F/M/VETS/DISABILITY

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