

ARETE

The University of Southern Mississippi

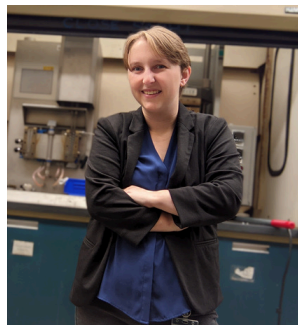


SUMMER 2025

Graduate
School
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Arete



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- 1**
A Message from the Dean
- 2**
Where Coaching Meets Character
- 4**
Three Minute Thesis Grand Champion
- 6**
Hydrographer on a Mission
- 8**
Charting the Past to Prepare for the Future
- 11**
From Chef's Kiss to Chalkboard
- 13**
Success Fueled by Feedback
- 15**
Editor. Educator. Storyteller.
- 17**
Small Town, Big Voice
- 19**
STEM Powered
- 21**
Hall of Fame Portrait Unveiling
- 25**
A Legacy of Service and Leadership
- 27**
Mentor, TA, RA of the Year Awards
- 30**
Mapping Graduate School Enrollment



A Message from the Dean

In the increasingly competitive job market, applicants must differentiate themselves from other qualified applicants. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers are looking for candidates who exhibit problem-solving skills and who can work well in teams with others. Furthermore, proficiency in verbal and written communication, as well as strong analytical skills, are highly desired. Given the need for candidates to be dynamic and well-rounded, professional development and career preparation training are essential.

Consistent with President Joseph Paul's mantra to make our students "Ready for Life," the Southern Miss Graduate School works diligently to prepare our students through professional development opportunities to "ready" them for their future careers. Because Southern Miss' focus on student preparation for their careers and professional endeavors, it is only fitting that "Ready for Life" be the theme of the current *Arete* issue. Our graduates truly can go anywhere and do anything with a Southern Miss education.

In this issue, readers will encounter stories of Southern Miss students who point to their Southern Miss experiences as preparing them to be "Ready for Life." You'll learn the story of a McNair Scholars student who directly credits her time at Southern Miss as preparing her well for her graduate and professional career. You'll read about the track and field graduate assistant who moved from Minnesota to Mississippi to pursue his graduate degree, which ultimately prepared him to become the director of strength and conditioning for the Columbia, Mississippi, school district; you will be introduced to a student who, after completing her Ph.D. in English at Southern Miss, rose through the ranks to become the associate editor, executive director, and ultimately, the editor of the *Oxford American*. You'll meet a sushi chef who, after many years in the restaurant industry, decided to return to school to become a full-time math teacher. These are just a few of the stories included in this issue that highlight the hard work and determined spirit of many incredible graduate students.

I am extremely grateful to Raven Payne for her efforts in compiling the lead stories. She is working on a master's degree in communication. I am also beyond grateful for Mackenzie Brown, who oversaw the design and organization of this publication. She is also pursuing a master's degree in communication.

I hope you enjoy this issue, featuring some of our best and brightest students and most exceptional graduate alumni, who have fearlessly pursued their dreams. They have clearly left their indelible mark on this institution.

Katie Anthony, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School



WHERE COACHING MEETS CHARACTER: WITH DAVID QUECK

From his beginnings as a track and field coach to leading strength and conditioning initiatives for student-athletes across an entire school district, David Queck, director of strength and conditioning at the Columbia School District in Columbia, Mississippi, has been focused on building the next generation of athletes. According to Queck, his job is more than just physical training; it's about seeing students develop confidence, self-control, and leadership during their athletic journey. He states, "I get to watch these kids grow and fulfill things they never would imagine. I strive to be like the coaches who changed my life for these kids."

Queck began his graduate education at Southern Miss in 2010 in the sport coaching program. While living in Minnesota, he received an offer to be a graduate assistant at Southern Miss. Queck reflects, "In my mind, I was thinking, 'You're telling me I get to learn about coaching for school?' Coach Kevin Stephen, a track coach, offered me an assistantship, and I drove 18 hours to Hattiesburg. It was a divine plan."

Following the completion of his graduate degree, Queck began his coaching career at the University of Memphis in 2012, where he worked in track and field. While at Memphis, he began to feel a greater interest and pull toward strength and conditioning coaching. In 2018, he joined Jones College as the Director of Strength and Conditioning in Jones County, Mississippi.

"I can inspire that change, and it can create a legacy through the ripples of my work."

After spending seven years in that role, Queck recently accepted the Director of Strength & Conditioning position at the Columbia School District. In his new position, Queck is focused on building a comprehensive strength and conditioning program. "My five-year goal is to motivate as many kids as possible to take care of their bodies and to understand how to stay healthy," he says. "I can inspire that change, and it can create a legacy through the ripples of my work."



Queck has a challenging daily routine. He starts at 5:30 a.m. and works with athletes from several athletic programs until late in the afternoon. He states, "I like to plan my schedule minute by minute. That used to stress me out bad, but now I've learned to roll with it."

For Queck, getting students to "buy in" to the training program, and particularly early morning training sessions, is one of his biggest challenges. However, he works hard to gain their trust through his leadership and consistency. He states, "In the beginning, it's slow. The students feel me out. But once that comfort level sets in, they ask, 'Can we lift it again?' They are excited because they can see and feel the difference." Building a strong foundation is Queck's philosophy, especially for student athletes who arrive with only one to two years of training experience. His main goal is to help them master basic movements and instill the values of hard work and perseverance.

Queck's graduate student experience at Southern Miss had a significant impact on him. When asked about faculty members in the program, Queck credits Dr. Brian Gearity and Dr. Melissa Thompson for helping him develop his coaching philosophy and helping him better understand athlete development. He stated that their influence undoubtedly improved his capabilities.

According to Queck, the field of strength and conditioning is evolving rapidly as strength coaches are becoming more prominent positions. For aspiring graduate students pursuing strength and conditioning as a career path, he offers straightforward advice. Primarily, he advises students not to chase money or fame. Instead, he encourages them to prioritize building important professional relationships and focus on personal growth and gaining hands-on experience. He also advises students to find meaningful internships that will advance their professional pursuits. "That will put you ahead of the curve," he states.



For more information about graduate programs in the School of Kinesiology and Nutrition, visit usm.edu/kinesiology-nutrition.



THREE MINUTE THESIS GRAND CHAMPION **ALYSSA SHAW**

The University of Southern Mississippi Graduate School hosted the 12th annual Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition on November 1, 2024. The event enables graduate students to refine their oral communication skills by explaining their thesis or dissertation research to a non-specialized audience in three minutes or less.

Students must craft engaging and enjoyable presentations with only the assistance of a single PowerPoint slide. The participants competed in one of four categories: Life, Health, and Environmental Sciences; Arts and Humanities; Physical Sciences and Mathematics; and Social and Educational Sciences and Business.

Alyssa Shaw, a Ph.D. student in polymer science, clinched the title of Grand Champion of the 2024 3MT competition. Amy Coronado, another polymer science PhD student, was named runner up, and Madeline Klubertanz, a master's student in kinesiology, secured the "People's Choice" award for the competition. Shaw, originally from Wiggins, Mississippi, studies under the advisement of Dr. Xiaodan Gu, an associate professor in the School of Polymer Science and Engineering. Shaw's thesis was "Doped Polymer Thin Films: A Pathway to Tune Properties for Flexible Electronics."

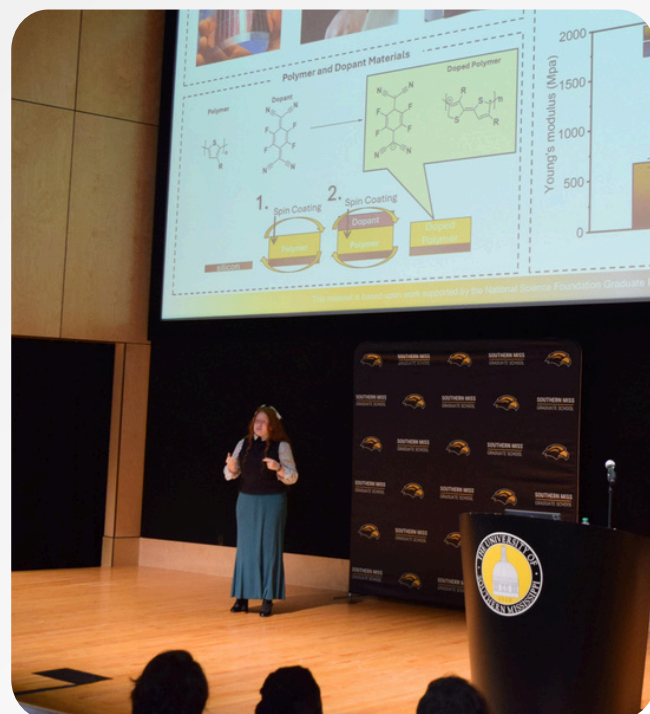
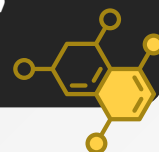
Shaw's research focuses on the essential advantages of conjugated polymers that challenge established ideas

of conductivity. Unlike traditional insulators, conjugated polymers can conduct electrons because of their unique bond structures, making them extremely useful in various modern electronic applications. "Whenever you can change the polymers to where they can be either semiconductors or conductors, you're eliminating high-weight material and putting in something lightweight, easy to use, and arguably less expensive," Shaw expressed.

When compared to traditional conductors like metal, polymers have several advantages, including being flexible and lightweight, which are vital for wearable technologies, such as heart monitors and other skin-contact devices.

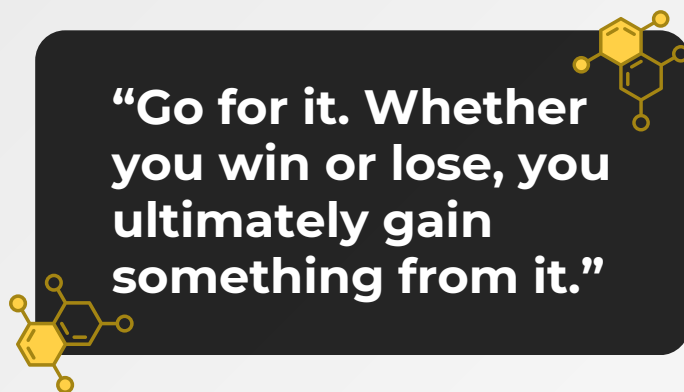
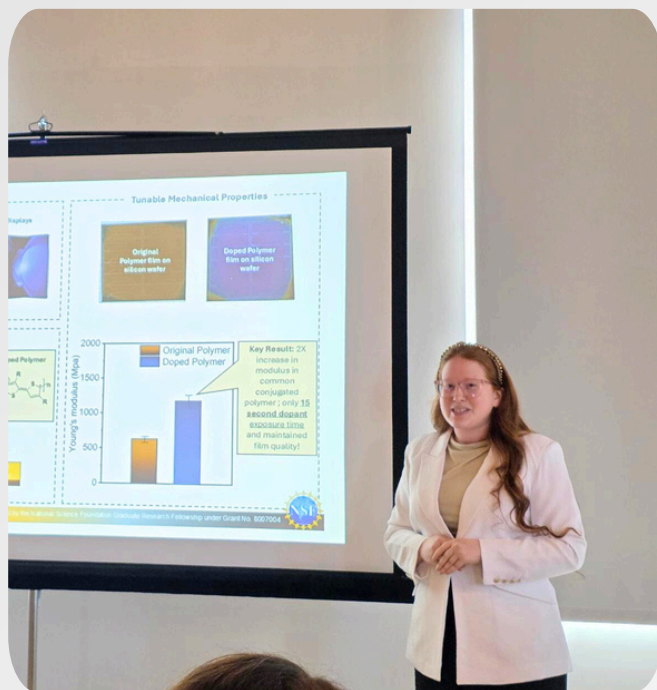


"I combined those fundamentals with what I believed to be an easy way to carry out the message."



In preparing for the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition, Shaw sought input and guidance from her support system through consistent practice with those closest to her. "I did a lot of practice with my family and friends and booked multiple sessions with my research group members," she reveals. "I would ask them, 'Does this make sense to you? What does and what doesn't make sense?'" She continued, "I also watched videos of regional and national winners. I combined those fundamentals with what I believed to be an easy way to carry out the message."

Shaw thanks her advisor and study group members who encouraged her to overcome her initial hesitations to enter the competition. She claims that her research group, her closest lab colleague, and her husband provided her with so much support. When Shaw reflects on her 3MT experience, she admits that the competition improved her communication skills and self-confidence. Shaw encourages other students to utilize opportunities like the 3MT competition, emphasizing that regardless of the outcome, the experience is extremely valuable. She states, "Go for it. Whether you win or lose, you ultimately gain something from it, just like everyone who presented." Shaw adds, "If you don't do well one year, come back and try again."



Shaw represented Southern Miss at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, on March 19-25 at the 2025 Conference of Southern Graduate Schools (CSGS).





HYDROGRAPHER

ON A MISSION

Deputy Matt Borbash spent his entire career traveling through uncharted waters. He has played a major role in understanding the world below the surface, from commanding Navy survey missions to shaping the future of ocean mapping. Serving as the Deputy Hydrographer for the U.S. Navy, he is also an alumnus of The University of Southern Mississippi, where hydrography kickstarted his professional journey.

Borbash retired from the Navy in 2013 as a Commander. He then served as a Lieutenant Commander of the Navy's Fleet Survey Team. Following that position, he worked at Fugro, a global hydrographic surveying company, where he led a survey of the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia. In 2016, he returned as a civil servant to the Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, bringing many years of field experience and leadership with him.

Borbash's connection to Southern Miss and Hattiesburg goes back to 2006 when he enrolled in Southern Miss' Hydrographic Science Program. "Southern Miss played a major role in where I am today," Borbash said.

Matt Borbash has served as the Navy's Deputy Hydrographer since 2019, where he assists Navy operations by managing the collection and practice

of oceanographic data. To produce navigation charts that direct ships around the world, Borbash must ensure accurate and updated information that is passed on to important agencies, for instance, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Naturally, his job has challenges. Borbash states there are three major obstacles in the region under his command: lack of resources, the need to update outdated systems, and complicated interagency collaborations. "We haven't updated how we work in over 50 years," he said. "There are different ways that we release sound in the water, and we listen to what comes back."



Upgrading the volume and capability of data collection, the field of hydrography is shifting from ship-based sonar to autonomous systems. Hydrographers can process vast amounts of data more rapidly with the help of emerging technologies, such as edge computing and artificial intelligence, making it possible to create accurate maps and models with limited resources. The last 20 years have brought significant changes in how data is collected.

His motivation to become a hydrographer was influenced by the Indian Ocean tsunami, a challenging moment in 2004. As Borbash's Navy team steered through dangerous waters with unreliable depth information, he realized the risk of outdated charts and the need for accurate data. That experience led him to Southern Miss and the Fleet Survey Team.

The Hydrographic Science Program at Southern Miss is intense, a 12-month curriculum that combines theoretical learning with real-world fieldwork, such as surveys on the Pearl River. Combined with the practical experience, the relationships that students build with classmates and professors can be instrumental for their careers. The professors who had a lasting impact on Borbash were Dr. Stephan Howden, director of the Hydrographic Science Research Center, Dr. David Dodd, assistant professor at the Hydrographic Science Research Center, and the late Dr. David E. Wells, who was an affiliate-researcher in the Division of Marine Science at Southern Miss.

"Professor Wells was a genius with Excel," Borbash recalled. "He made abstract subjects like geodesy easy to understand."

Borbash is, understandably, very interested in the future of hydrography. He currently works on the concept of "crowdsourced bathymetry" through the Seabed 2030 project, which envisages the mapping of the entire ocean by 2030 by relying on data from civilian ships' sonars. He also promotes the "hydropatial" data concept, adding layers of information such as currents, tides, safety, and weather onto a programmed navigation system to improve mariner efficiency and safety.

Borbash has motivating words for students who are considering his field. "Don't be scared off by the name 'hydrographic science.' It is not only about making maps; it's about maritime safety, understanding the oceans and how to protect them sustainably. The more we understand the ocean, the better we can protect it."

With its 100% job placement rate, Southern Miss' Hydrographic Science Program continues to offer various career opportunities, including map-making, acoustics, vessel aspects, and industry work.

For more information concerning the Hydrographic Science Program in the School of Ocean Science and Engineering, visit usm.edu/ocean-science-engineering.

"The more we understand the ocean, the better we can protect it."



CHARTING THE PAST TO PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout the course of the fall 2024 semester, a critical international research expedition led by Dr. Davin Wallace, an associate professor at Southern Miss, studied how coastal systems respond to sea level rise, storms, and climate change. This month-long research brought 20 scientists and 15 crew members, which was funded by the National Science Foundation, on a research cruise that traveled from Guam to Micronesian atolls.

EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN

The main goal of the trip was to understand the lasting impact of changes in the ocean by gathering sediment cores from beneath the seafloor to reconstruct typhoon activity over the last 2,000 years.

The researchers gathered sediment cores from reef lagoons lifting a sizable piston core that can reach 13 meters in length. Paleo-tempestology, the study of past cyclone activities, drafts a lasting outlook through these cores that consists of essential data about storm activity over the last 2,000 to 3,000 years. Additionally, the researchers compiled core samples, multi-beam bathymetry, grain size, X-ray fluorescence (XRF), and seismic data.

From free diving and collecting sediment cores to operating CT and X-ray scans, the students played a key role in every research stage. The cruise established

teamwork, problem solving, groundwork, and collaboration, making it a studious training ground for the students.

STUDENTS IN THE FIELD

Alongside the student participants was Carrie Miller, a marine science Ph.D. candidate whose research focuses on sea level rise and sediment fluxes in the Gulf of Mexico. She focused on geophysical surveys, assisting with core collection, and free diving activities. Noting that the cruise expanded her technical skills and supported her with networking opportunities, Miller emphasizes the value of the hands-on experience and a cooperative environment onboard. Her favorite memory of the trip was on field stops making connections with local island communities. "Stay open-minded and positive," she advises future students who are planning to go on a research cruise. "Also bring personal items that will make the experience more enjoyable."



Sarah Monica, a marine science Ph.D. candidate at Southern Miss' Stennis Space Center, primarily focuses on paleotempestology for her research. Monica devoted her time to the research cruise diving in reef habitats to collect sediment samples for paleotempestology studies. She highlights the challenge of working long hours and maintaining morale at sea. Nevertheless, she praises Dr. Wallace's mentoring that she recognized for her motivation to gather a core that would serve as the foundation for postdoctoral research. What helped Monica shed light on her career path was her interest in fieldwork that expanded as a result of the research experience. Her favorite memory on the cruise was exploring the coral reef environment, seeing sharks, and swimming with sea turtles for the first time. She advises future students on expeditions like this to keep expectations realistic, as research cruises can be both incredible and challenging.



CHALLENGES AND DISCOVERIES

Erin A. Culver-Miller, Ph.D. candidate, focuses on sea-level changes from the Holocene to the present in the northern Gulf of Mexico for her research. Her role on the cruise was focused on multi-logger X-Ray and CT scanning of sediment cores to study sea level changes and coastal hazards. With regard to challenges, she discussed working night shifts alone in the CT van and enduring the emotional strain of being far away from her children.

Despite everything, she did commend Dr. Wallace's cooperative leadership and the program's immense resources, which include a fleet of support vessels.

Her favorite memory on the cruise

was the arrival of a red-footed booby that "guided" the crew members on their travels. Future students who wish to have these experiences are advised to "ask others about what to pack." She stresses, "Some items, like a coat and bug spray, are essential, while other items are nonessential."

MAPPING THE FUTURE

Navigating through shallow reefs, enduring intense weather, losing costly supplies, and working with generator failures and storage issues in Micronesia were all obstacles that were a test during the team's journey. Those challenges, however, emphasized how important collaboration and working together are in field-based research. Dr. Wallace recalled an event that took place in 2007,



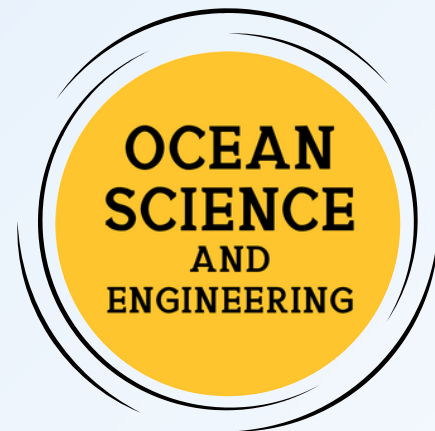
on his early research voyage to Antarctica. According to him, these hands-on experiences are informative, as well as important, for engaging and inspiring future graduate students in marine science.

These stories are usually shared in the School of Ocean Science and Engineering to serve as an understanding of the impact that these kinds of voyages may have.

Wallace states, "Students should look at these opportunities as a way to gain valuable experience and consider a career in marine science."

It is important to understand how coastlines respond to the extreme impacts of constantly changing climate over the millennium. Because of the efforts of Dr. Wallace, his colleagues and his students, we are one step closer to understanding the past and planning better for the future.

Learn more about these programs at usm.edu/ocean-science-engineering



FROM CHEF'S KISS TO CHALKBOARD

FROM SUSHI ROLLS TO STUDENT ROLES

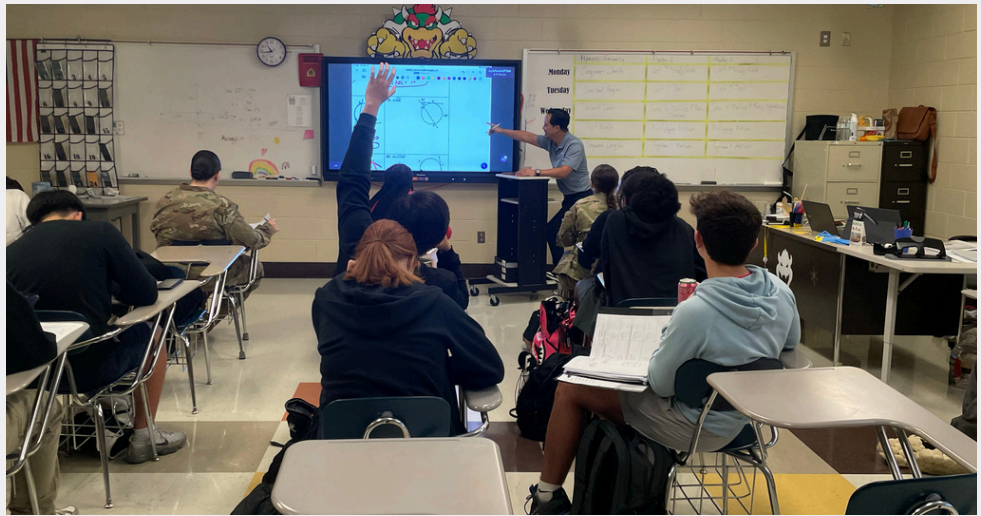
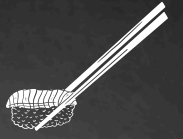
Hoang Nguyen's route of becoming a high school mathematics teacher was far from conventional. Nguyen, a proud graduate of The University of Southern Mississippi, found himself in front of a classroom in Biloxi, Mississippi, after a path that combines personal development, continents, and career change.

In 1985, Nguyen and his family immigrated from Vietnam to the United States and settled briefly in Dallas, Texas, before relocating to Morgan City, Louisiana. He currently resides in Biloxi, where he teaches honors geometry and Algebra II at Saint Martin High School. Strength, transitions, and maintaining diligence was his path to get where he is today.

Nguyen's academic career began with a business degree. In Lafayette, Louisiana. He acquired his bachelor's and master's degree in business administration with a focus in finance. In addition, he worked a part-time job at a sushi restaurant that ignited a long-lasting feeling. His motto, "If I start something, I will finish it," carried him through college as he studied sushi making.



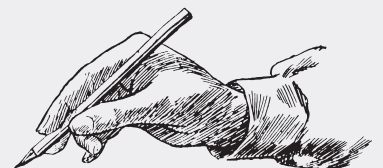
"If I start something, I will finish it."



Nguyen turned his newfound love into a profession in 2007 when he opened his sushi bar and restaurant, Uni, in Slidell, Louisiana. His business was a milestone in his career: he met his wife, had a family, and followed his vision to work for himself. However, life had an unexpected plot twist. In 2011, Nguyen was forced to sell his restaurant because of the devastating 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

A NEW LESSON PLAN

After moving to Biloxi with his family, Nguyen worked at his in-law's sushi restaurant, Saki, for 11 years. Realizing it was time for a change, he and his wife discussed their ambitions. When his wife went back to school for her master's degree in nursing, Nguyen began planning for his career change. Education was his choice.





"The plan was always for her to go back to school, get her master's, and possibly for me to make a career change," Nguyen clarifies. Ten days before the entrance exam in April 2023, he applied to Southern Miss' online master's program in Secondary Education Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT). Southern Miss provided Nguyen with the ability to stay close to home, cost-effectiveness, and adaptability. Above all, Southern Miss' MAT program enabled him to offer his children an example of determination and perseverance.

FINDING HIS FORMULA

Nguyen acquired a three-year nonrenewable teaching license and started teaching at Saint Martin High School halfway through the program. In the summer of 2024, he earned his second master's degree, in a different area.

Regardless of his background in sushi and business, teaching has always been his expertise. His devotion to teaching allows him to facilitate a student-centered classroom, where he changes his technique to suit various student groups. While his Algebra II classes need more patience and fundamental help, his honors geometry students are ambitious to learn. Nonetheless, Nguyen views it as a fulfilling challenge.

He believes that the Southern Miss online program helped him focus on his family while developing time management and communication skills. Nguyen respects professors like Dr. Jay Howell, associate director, associate professor and program coordinator of the School of Education, and Dr. Bridgette Davis, assistant teaching professor under the School of Education, which were instrumental in his educational journey. Dr. Davis, in particular

became a mentor for him, helped him develop the balance of understanding and teaching he now brings to his own classroom. He aspires to teach a college level course, and he is already making plans for the future due to Dr. Davis' inspiration.

Nguyen envisions staying at Saint Martin High School for the next five to 10 years. He treasures the suitable location, understanding environment, and outstanding community. His long-term plans are to retire by the age of 60 and to go on a world tour with his wife after 18 years of teaching.

His advice for future graduate students in his field is to focus on time management and a strong work ethic. Procrastination will be the biggest challenge for graduate students. He commends the program's curriculum and faculty, stating how well the program prepared him for his teaching journey.

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

The USM School of Education in the College of Education and Human Services offers an M.Ed., Ed.S., Ph.D., and Ed.D. in educational administration and supervision for individuals interested in careers in K-12 education as entry-level or district-level administrators.

For more information on these programs visit usm.edu/education.



SUCCESS FUELED BY FEEDBACK

WITH CORAI JACKSON

Hailing from Clinton, Mississippi, and growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, Corai Jackson made her collegiate debut at The University of Southern Mississippi in 2015.

As a motivated high school senior, Jackson began her college career a few months early by participating in the Southern Miss Jump Scholars Program. "I participated in that program for the summer before I officially started that August. It was an amazing program, and if I hadn't participated, I probably wouldn't have been as prepared for college," said Jackson.

Once the fall semester began, Jackson quickly made Southern Miss her home by getting involved in many student organizations. She participated in the Student Government Association, became a member of Greek Life, and joined the Psychology Scholars program and the Kennard Scholars Program.

One of the most pivotal moments of her undergraduate career occurred when she ran across a flier advertising the McNair Scholars program on a campus bulletin board.

After she attended an information session about the program, she decided to apply. The McNair Scholars program prepares underrepresented students to pursue a Ph.D. following their undergraduate career.

Jackson is adamant that the McNair Scholars Program prepared her well for success in graduate school. She reflected on the importance of receiving mentorship from her faculty thesis advisor on her research project, preparation for the Graduate Record Examination

(GRE), assistance for application fees to graduate schools, and the opportunity to tour graduate institutions throughout the country.

She stated, "Participating in the McNair Scholars program and the Kennard Scholars Program was important to my development as a student. I don't think I would have gotten as far in my career or graduate school had I not participated in those programs where I got one-on-one guidance and mentorship." She continued, "I learned what's expected of a





graduate student at the graduate level, including how to apply for graduate school, how to write, and how to interview. All of those things are highlights of my undergraduate career."

After completing her Southern Miss degree, including her final McNair Scholars Program research project, Jackson attended Louisiana State University for her master's and doctoral degrees in leadership & resource development. Toward the end of her doctoral program, and thanks to the training she received in her graduate programs and the connections she made at LSU, Jackson landed her dream job as a senior consultant in human capital and organizational development at Booz Allen Hamilton in Washington, D.C.

In her current role at Booz Allen Hamilton, Jackson works with a team to facilitate military contracts. She states, "Much of my work is centered around human capital development, including employee engagement, training and development, employee recognition, recruiting and hiring strategies, onboarding,

and talent development and acquisition." She relocated to Washington, D.C. for the job and expressed that she could not be more elated to live there.

Jackson's advice for other McNair students is to be open to constructive criticism because it will make you a better student and individual in the long run.

She states, "A lot of what I experienced was feedback from the McNair staff on things we were doing with my faculty advisor at the time, and it was hard because I thought I was doing great. But it's meant to help and prepare you for the next stage of your life or career. So, I would tell people to be open-minded. Give it all you have. Do not give up. Be open to feedback."

"I would tell people to be open-minded. Give it all you have. Do not give up. Be open to feedback."

McNair SCHOLARS PROGRAM

A legacy of Activism in the Academy

The McNair Scholars Program helps scholars to achieve individualized goals through mentorship, financial support, and graduate school preparation.

To learn more visit usm.edu/mcnair-scholars-program/.



EDITOR. EDUCATOR. STORYTELLER.



"I got the best of both worlds, which is why I chose Southern Miss."

For Sara A. Lewis, Southern Miss alumna and editor of the *Oxford American*, storytelling is more than a profession; it's a calling. "Stories are how we connect," she says. "They can change people." A native of Deer Park, Texas, Lewis completed her undergraduate degree in print journalism and mass communication at Texas State University. She later earned a Master of Fine Arts in creative and professional writing and a Master of Arts in English literature from Western Connecticut State University.

When Lewis decided to pursue her Ph.D. in 2013, she chose The University of Southern Mississippi to specialize in creative writing. In reflecting on that decision, Lewis expresses that she wanted a balance of theory and real-world application, and the Southern Miss program was a perfect fit. "I got the best of both worlds, which is why I chose Southern Miss," she recalls.

Lewis was a very engaged student and campus citizen while at Southern Miss. She was president of the graduate student organization in the Center for

Writers, a contributor to the *Mississippi Review*, and a recipient of the Jean Rhys Scholarship, all while maintaining a busy teaching and research schedule. Dr. Maureen Ryan, former faculty member and university dean, described Lewis as "the gal about town" for her constant engagement on campus. Lewis stated, "I just took every opportunity I could. I knew my time there was limited, and I wanted to be a part of as many things as possible."

After completing her Ph.D., Lewis planned to find an academic position immediately; instead, she accepted the role of assistant editor of the *Oxford American* and moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. Initially, she saw the position as a path back to the academy. However, the position afforded Lewis the freedom and autonomy to expand her storytelling abilities into other channels. She oversaw event planning, podcast production, narrative nonfiction, and editorial projects, and she realized that the position was an excellent fit with her skill set. "I've been able to teach and do everything I love," she says. "This job lets me work on podcasts, write, host events, and is incredibly fulfilling."



Gradually, Lewis' role expanded to include larger responsibilities, and she learned more about the complexities of operating a nonprofit magazine. The experience she gleaned and the expertise she developed led to her promotion to executive director of the *Oxford American* and chairman of the Board in 2021, making her the first woman to serve in that capacity.

Following her multi-year stint as executive director, she was promoted to editor of the *Oxford American* following the departure of her colleague, Danielle Jackson. As editor, she supervised the digital imprint, the *Point South* podcast, the print publication, and the organization's programming. With each day focused on new tasks and priorities, Lewis' position is deadline-driven and fast-paced. Lewis' work requires clarity and ethical storytelling when addressing sensitive subjects like race and politics. "It's important to stay productive," she says. "This work requires emotional labor, and you must be mindful of that for yourself and your team."

For students hopeful to pursue a future in writing or publishing, Lewis emphasizes the value of critical thinking and communication skills, neither of which is easy to teach but are required in many professions. From academia to mainstream publishing, she has made a career by embracing new opportunities, asking questions, and staying open to wherever her passions took her. Lewis also highlights the importance of building genuine relationships with mentors and peers, something she says she learned while at Southern Miss. She advises students, especially those with underrepresented voices, to be wise in building their academic and professional networks. "Don't be passive," she advises. "Reach out to the faculty. Express interest. Start building those relationships even before you graduate."

The English graduate program in the School of Humanities offers both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, with an emphasis in literature or creative writing.

For more information about the School of Humanities visit usm.edu/humanities.

Small Town, BIG VOICE

Hometown Beginnings

Camryn Mitchell is a small-town girl from Gallman, Mississippi, in Copiah County. The city of Hattiesburg and the university environment appealed to her, allowing her to balance a small-town feel with a whole college experience as Mitchell fell in love with Hattiesburg.

"At the end of the day, I value that. I value already being comfortable and having those connections instead of feeling like I'm starting over somewhere," said Camryn Mitchell, an alumnus of Southern Miss.

Mitchell attended a small school from kindergarten to 12th grade and then moved to Southern Miss to pursue a degree in speech pathology. She worked as a speech pathologist in public schools and worked for three years in Nicaragua. She recently married and is happy to return to the greater Hattiesburg area.



along the way. "In high school, I had done some things with some other universities in the state, just some leadership and academic things. So, I thought, 'Okay, those would probably be the wisest options because I already have connections.'"

During her undergraduate and graduate studies at Southern Miss, Mitchell majored in speech pathology. She was introduced to speech pathology through her cousin, who has special needs and underwent speech therapy. Her speech pathologist sister also inspired her and saw the field combining her interests in education and medicine. During her time at Southern Miss, she felt confident in her choice and was supported by faculty members such as Dr. Cloud and Dr. Laverne, significant mentors who shaped her as a clinician.

"I'd never heard of speech pathology until he [her cousin] was born and was going to speech therapy. My sister, a speech pathologist, also heard me correct her, but I saw her doing it, and I was like, 'You know, I think that's something that I could be interested in.' Our dad is in education, so I grew up in a school. So, I said, 'I would love to be in a school setting.' I don't want to be a teacher, but I'm also interested in the medical side. The speech pathology sounds like the perfect combination of all of it."

Clarifying her career path from the beginning helped her succeed in the program. "It's a super broad field, a very well-rounded field. So, like I was saying, I work at a school, but I have the same degree as speech pathologists who work in hospitals, nursing homes, and early intervention settings, so you have to have a broad range of skills to be a speech pathologist."



Discovering Speech Pathology

Mitchell attended Southern Miss for her undergraduate and graduate studies, from August 2011 to May 2015 for her bachelor's and from May 2015 to December 2016 for her graduate degree. Her choice to attend Southern Miss was influenced by her older sister, her high school experiences, and the connections she made



She highlights the importance of communication and flexibility in speech pathology. Mitchell works with various professionals and must adapt to constant changes in the education field. Her graduate program at Southern Miss provided valuable skills and connections.

Missions in Nicaragua

While pursuing speech pathology, Mitchell felt that she had a calling for international missions. After completing her undergraduate and graduate studies, she sought opportunities abroad through Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). She found a position at Nicaragua Christian Academy International, where she worked as a speech pathologist and collaborated with a nonprofit serving families with disabilities. Her role in Nicaragua was unique as no other American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA-certified) speech language pathology (SLPs) were in the country, making her work highly valuable.

She also explains the importance of educating parents in Nicaragua on how to communicate with their children. Mitchell notes that parents in Nicaragua are often too busy providing for their families to spend time with their children. Educating parents on simple ways to engage their children in play and mealtimes is necessary. She also acknowledges the importance of the work done in Nicaragua, especially one story that impacted her. She shares a story about a family in Nicaragua who lost their home to a hurricane and the impact of their work on the family's communication and hope.

"I have a Spanish translator who speaks their native language there in Miskito. So talking through the translators I asked her [mom], and I said, 'How do you like it? How do you talk to her? How do you interact with her?' And the mom, I'll never forget said, 'I don't. I didn't know I could,' and my heart just sank; she was a great mom. I saw what her children were—well cared for. Her other two kids she interacted with, but she didn't know. She thought, 'My daughter couldn't talk to me. She doesn't make sounds when I talk to her...'"

"Talking to her child, she got beside me, and I made sounds and babbled back and forth. The little girl and the mom were going back and forth, and then the little girl made a sound, and the mom just got so excited. So, if you ask the fruits of the most rewarding, the fruits of my labor weren't huge or significant. She didn't say a word. She didn't ask for anything, but giving the mom the hope that you can communicate and engage with your child in that way was so rewarding."

While she enjoyed her international missions, Mitchell felt homesick. She returned to the U.S. after completing a three-year contract in Nicaragua, feeling it was time to come home. She stays connected with people and organizations in Nicaragua and had her wedding there.



She works in Perry County Schools, serving two elementary schools and working with preschool through fifth-grade students. Her day involves therapy sessions, meetings with parents, teachers, and administrators, and managing paperwork.

"That is the beauty of being a speech pathologist; there is always a demand. I always try to convince people to speak about it because of job security. So, I went to Perry County, and it's just a lot of fun to be an SLP in schools in general. I like it. I like elementary school." Mitchell plans to work in school and university settings in the United States and continue international work if the opportunity arises.

Mitchell's career advice is for students to consider a graduate degree in speech pathology. She states that the rewarding nature of her work is helping children with communication issues. She mentions a story about a child who progressed from single words to complete sentences, highlighting the joy of witnessing such progress.

For more information concerning the Master of Science in Education Program in speech-language pathology visit usm.edu/graduate-programs/speech-language-pathology.php.

STEM *Powered*

Several graduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi have found academic achievement and a successful career rate through the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program (NSF GRFP). The program offers financial stability and research opportunities to motivate students to mentor others and contribute greatly to their fields.

Ph.D. student in polymer science, Alyssa Shaw, began her GRFP journey during her senior year of college. The fellowship gave her the financial capability to travel and to pursue graduate studies. Shaw's current work focuses on conjugated polymer thin films for electronic applications, building on earlier research in nanoparticle-filled polymers for EMI shielding. She chose USM for its distinguished Polymer Science and Engineering program and received guidance from mentors like Dr. Jeffrey Wiggins, professor at the School of Polymer Science and Engineering, and Dr. Heather Broadhead, associate teaching professor at the School of Polymer Science and Engineering. Dedicated to mentoring underrepresented students, Shaw highlights the value of persistence, effective communication, and a supportive networking system. "Start early," she advises, "and find a good support system... you would be surprised at the people who will help you if you ask. "

Fifth-year Ph.D. student at Southern Miss' Stennis Space Center, Sarah Monica, uses sediment samples to study paleoclimate, focusing on paleo storm patterns in Central Texas. After receiving the GRFP in 2022, Monica benefits from increased research assistance, up-to-date equipment, and access to international conferences. She chose Southern Miss for its closeness to the Gulf and its marine fieldwork opportunities. Monica also praises her advisor, Dr. Maria Wallace, assistant professor in the Center for STEM Education, who plays a key role in her success in what Monica hopes will become a career as a STEM professor. "Start as early as you can...", she suggests, "take your time, and don't be afraid to reach out to advisors or other students."



Fourth-year Ph.D. student, Clayton Ziemke, studies the impact of hurricanes on ant biodiversity in Puerto Rico. More than financial assistance, the fellowship grants him the opportunity to focus on field research and a way to reduce teaching duties while supporting his work. Dr. Julie Cwikla, director of the Center for STEM Education, a grant writing workshop, and peer mentoring shaped Ziemke on his path to a successful application. He chose Southern Miss for its diverse fieldwork opportunities and a cooperative community which also includes his advisor, Jake Schaefer, a professor at the School of Biological, Environmental and Earth Sciences. He inspires future applicants to study previously awarded applicants. "Read other successful applications. That was the most helpful thing for me."

For a third-year Ph.D. student in polymer science, Carmen Byerly Dunn, the GRFP was a path to improve her scientific communication and professional writing skills. Her research mainly focuses on recycling mixed polyolefins using dynamic graft blend compatibilizers, motivated by a strong interest in sustainability. Mentored by her advisor and supportive lab environment, Dunn flourished at Southern Miss, which she chose for its polymer program and welcoming society. The fellowship heightened her perspective of networking and mentoring opportunities. Inspired by her grandfather's legacy, she plans to give back by mentoring future scientists. "Have as many people read your writing as possible," she advises, emphasizing the importance of clear communication across audiences.

Ph.D. student in biological sciences, Kayla McCulloch's, research focuses on using environmental DNA (eDNA) to monitor critically

endangered rhino rays, including wedge fish, guitarfish, and sawfish. NSF GRFP will provide McCulloch with financial support, which will allow her to focus on her research without the balance of teaching duties. She praises her advisors, mentors, and Southern Miss' welcoming environment for helping her succeed. "Read the NSF GRFP guidelines carefully," she cautions, highlighting what they look for in applicants. "Develop a clear research proposal with an advisor and seek feedback from other people."

Ph.D. student in polymer science and engineering, Zoe Gunter, is researching ways to improve 3D printed materials for efficiency and environmental impact. With the support of the NSF GRFP, she will be able to focus on her research without financial stress, and she credits her advisors and lab mates for their guidance through the application. Gunter also credits Southern Miss with helping build essential skills like critical thinking, time management, and leadership. "Try your best and use the resources available to you," she advises, "Don't feel ashamed to reach out to people to read your essays."

Regardless of their different fields of study, from climate science to ant life, to polymer engineering, these four students have a common line: the GRFP supported them academically and helped them grow as mentors, leaders, and communicators. Their excellence in their research highlights the power of community, mentorship and development in shaping careers in STEM.

Ensuring the strength, vibrancy, and quality of the U.S. scientific and engineering workforce is the goal of the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program.

To learn more about the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program visit www.nsfgrfp.org.



HALL OF FAME



The University of Southern Mississippi Graduate School recently hosted its annual Graduate Student Hall of Fame Portrait Unveiling Ceremony at the Joe Paul Student Theater on the Hattiesburg campus. The special event honored outstanding graduate students from each of the university's four academic colleges. Twelve students, selected by their academic deans, were recognized for exceptional academic achievement and meaningful contributions to their fields.

Each honoree's portrait—capturing their unique research and creative endeavors through the lens of Southern Miss photographer Paul Lijewski—will be displayed in the Graduate School Dean's Suite in the J.B. George Building for one year. Graduate School Dean Katie Anthony and Southern Miss President Joe Paul unveiled the portraits during the ceremony, with closing remarks delivered by Provost Lance Nail. The Graduate School extends sincere thanks to the family members, friends, faculty and staff who attended and helped celebrate the accomplishments of these remarkable students.





AZADEH RAZAVI ARAB

Azadeh Razavi Arab, from Tehran, Iran, is pursuing a doctorate in marine science in the School of Ocean Science and Engineering. Her research focuses on simulating the strong winds and powerful waves generated by hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. Improving the accuracy of these simulations significantly enhances hurricane impact predictions, aiding in the protection of coastal communities through safer evacuations and the timely shutdown of offshore operations. Her major professor is Dr. Diana Bernstein.



ABBY COMPTON

Abby Compton, from Forest, Mississippi, recently completed her master's in nutrition and food systems in the School of Kinesiology and Nutrition. She works with novel technologies to determine their accuracy and whether they are truly equipped to provide meaningful health metrics in clinical practice. Specifically, these data not only provide accurate health assessments, but also improve the ability to detect disease by leveraging the advanced technologies embedded within modern smartphones. Dr. Austin Graybeal is her major professor.



ANTHONY GRIFFIN

Anthony Griffin, from Los Angeles, California, is currently pursuing a doctorate in polymer science and engineering from the School of Polymer Science and Engineering. His research explores chemical stabilization in commodity polymers to guide innovative upcycling strategies. This approach enables the conversion of plastic waste into functional materials for additive manufacturing, water remediation, and catalyst supports in electrified chemical synthesis. His major professor is Dr. Zhe Qiang.



LILLIAN HAMMER

Lillian Hammer, from Austin, Texas, is pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology from the School of Psychology. Her research focuses on schizophrenia-spectrum disorders and their subclinical manifestations, particularly in sexual and gender minority groups. She studies disparities in schizophrenia-like experiences and the impact of minority stress, aiming to uncover underlying mechanisms with a focus on inflammation. Her methods include ecological momentary assessment and blood spot collection. Her major professor is Dr. Kelsey Bonfils.



PENELOPE JANKOSKI

Penelope Jankoski, from Louisville, Kentucky, is pursuing a doctorate in polymer science and engineering. Her research focuses on peptide amphiphiles—supramolecular polymers that self-assemble into nanofibers tailored for biological environments. These materials aid tissue regeneration by capturing harmful reactive oxygen species (ROS) released during heart attacks, burns, and strokes. She is also developing a sprayable tissue scaffold for deep dermal burns using ReCell Spray-On Skin technology. Her major professor is Dr. Tristan Clemons.



PETER OLUWADARE KALEJAIYE

Peter Oluwadare Kalejaiye, a native of Ijebu-Ikija in Ogun State, Nigeria, recently completed his doctorate in human capital development through the School of Leadership. His research focuses on human behavior, diversity, equity and inclusion, and workforce development, emphasizing sociology, labor relations, and human resource management. He examines how workplace relationships, engagement, and inclusion shape environments to support productive practices and foster diverse, inclusive, resilient workplaces. His major professor is Dr. Quincy Brown.



UJUNWA MADUBUBA MBACHU

Ujunwa Madububa Mbachu, from Imo State, Nigeria, completed her doctorate in computer science through the School of Computing Sciences and Computer Engineering. Her research focuses on enhancing traffic management systems by securely handling data from self-driving cars to protect driver privacy and ensure data security. The system collects data through a secure verification process and aggregates it while keeping it encrypted. Using advanced techniques, her work supports safer, more efficient transportation systems. Her major professor was Dr. Ahmed Sherif.



OWEN NORDAN

Owen Nordan, from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, is pursuing a master's in economic development in the School of Finance. His research evaluates and recommends improvements to workforce development programs supporting Mississippi's defense shipbuilding industry. He also analyzes tax incentive programs nationwide for Biggins Lacy Shapiro & Company, a site selection firm that assists businesses in location strategy, securing incentives, and optimizing development. His work supports strategic economic growth. His major professor is Dr. Chad Miller.



SHIZA SHAHID

Shiza Shahid, from Lahore, Pakistan, recently completed her doctorate in experimental psychology in the School of Psychology. Her research aims to examine the roots of inequality, focusing on gender equity and social class stereotypes. Through cross-cultural studies in Pakistan, India, Japan, Germany, and the U.S., she explores how cultural contexts shape perceptions of equality. Her work seeks to inform policies and practices that promote equity and understanding. Her major professor was Dr. Elena Stepanova.



SAM SHERRILL III

Sam Sherrill III, from Brandon, Mississippi, is pursuing a Doctor of Nursing Practice in nurse anesthesia in the School of Leadership and Advanced Nursing Practice. His research focuses on point-of-care ultrasound airway assessments for adult trauma patients and improving ultrasound proficiency. His doctoral project develops an objective structured clinical exam to provide targeted training for anesthesia colleagues, enhancing clinical skills, and outcomes through ultrasound-guided airway assessment. His major professor is Dr. Mary Jane Collins.



HAYDEN SLATER

Hayden Slater, from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, recently completed her master's in speech-language pathology in the School of Speech and Hearing Sciences. Her research focuses on communication and swallowing disorders in adult and geriatric populations caused by stroke, brain injury, and other neurological issues. She aims to use evidence-based practices to assess, diagnose, and treat disorders involving speech, cognition, language, voice, fluency, and swallowing. Her motivation is helping patients feel seen, valued, and loved. Her professor is Dr. Steve Cloud.



SYDNEY SWAFFORD

Sydney Swafford, from Petal, Mississippi, recently completed her master's in nutrition and food systems in the School of Kinesiology and Nutrition. Her research focuses on dual X-ray absorptiometry and innovative technologies that bridge gaps between patients and healthcare providers. She explores how accessible tools like iPhones and smartwatches can deliver valuable health information to those lacking proper healthcare access. She uses everyday technology to advance equity and improve outcomes. Her major professor is Dr. Austin Graybeal.

A LEGACY OF SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

Dr. Larry Webster is unquestionably passionate about workforce development. A native of Greenville, Mississippi, Dr. Webster boasts nearly two decades of experience in higher education in Mississippi, including positions at Delta State, Holmes Community College, and Coahoma Community College. Dr. Webster, who completed his Ph.D. in human capital development at The University of Southern Mississippi, serves as the chief technical officer and dean of career and technical education at Coahoma Community College, overseeing curriculum development, apprenticeship programs, and workforce partnerships.

When describing his decision to pursue his doctoral degree at Southern Miss, he states, "Everything we do in any sector comes down to developing people to maximize their potential. Southern Miss' program spoke directly to that purpose." However, Webster freely admits that he was hesitant to begin the doctoral program initially because, at the time, he was experiencing "impostor syndrome" at the mere thought of applying to a Ph.D. program. However, seasoned faculty members like Dr. Cyndi Gaudet and Dr. Heather Annulis helped him overcome those feelings and recognize that he belonged in a doctoral program at Southern Miss. "I almost quit after the first semester," he admits. "But Dr. Gaudet explained my feelings and gave it a name. That changed everything."

The coursework and class projects in the Human Capital Development program helped Webster grow in his knowledge of the content and improve his professional



relationships with others. He claims, "It helped dismantle stereotypes and taught me to listen, learn, and respectfully disagree. Those lessons were as valuable as any textbook."

He now applies those lessons in his leadership position at Coahoma Community College. From the groundwork laid at Southern Miss, Webster has expanded his talents concerning team-building, strategic thinking, and resource allocation. He highlights the importance of legacy, informing future leaders to choose their paths for the right reasons. "Do it because you're passionate," he advises. "The money will come. Focus on helping others and making a difference."

Higher education wasn't Webster's primary career plan. He originally worked in brick masonry, a trade that later inspired his passion for helping others with career and technical education (CTE). "Even though I always knew I wanted to be in education, I appreciated having another skill to fall back on," he reflects. "It helped me realize the importance of having multiple career paths, and that's where I felt I could be most effective."

Webster is committed to CTE programs with real-world industry needs. Students receive technical training and professional development, soft skills, and conflict resolution training through advisory boards comprised of business and community leaders. "We're not just training for jobs," he says. "We're preparing students to flourish in the workforce."

Pushed by industry needs and a growing focus on learning progression, Coahoma's commercial truck driving program grew significantly under Webster's leadership. It also opened doors to dual enrollment for high school students.

Webster leans on a student-first mindset, communication, and cooperation, whether it's dealing with shifting priorities or resolving student conflicts. "Challenges arise daily; you have to pivot," he explains. That mentality has not gone unnoticed. Webster was awarded the Phi Theta Kappa Distinguished College Administrator Award, a recognition given by students and advisors for outstanding support of student success. He stated that the privilege is both personal and professional. "God placed me in this space for a reason," he says. "Helping students become self-sufficient, employable, and engaged citizens is my calling. It's not just my job; it's my mission."

In his position at Coahoma, Webster promotes Phi Theta Kappa, develops learning materials, encourages student involvement, and builds partnerships between PTK and CTE programs. "Whenever PTK is working on a project, I look for ways our welding or carpentry students can contribute," he says. "It's about showcasing the best of both worlds."

He trusts in clarity, compatibility, and leadership. "The people around you matter," he says. "You need individuals who complement your skills and share your student-centered vision. And as a leader, you don't stand above your team; you stand with them."

Webster's advice for graduate students is to pray through your decisions, to listen, communicate, and work hard. Those traits make a great leader and have a lasting impact.



GRADUATE MENTOR OF THE YEAR

Spring 2025



DR. DONALD SACCO

“

From the start, he recognized my potential beyond academics, encouraging leadership, networking, and personal growth as an academic.

Saba Shahid, Dr. Sacco's Student

”

The 2025 Graduate Mentor of the Year is Dr. Donald Sacco, associate professor of Experimental Psychology in the School of Psychology. This award recognizes a faculty member, nominated by a current graduate student, who has been at Southern Miss for at least five years and who provides outstanding mentorship to graduate students by fostering their intellectual, scholarly, personal, and professional development.

The mentor of the year holds the student to high standards of excellence and develops the student's reputation in the field by supporting their travel to professional conferences to give presentations and

encouraging them to publish their research. This individual is known to be accessible to their students and to help them navigate their degree program while holding them accountable for their academic and research progress.

The Graduate Mentor of the Year makes the job of the Graduate School staff much easier because their students are meeting deadlines, taking care of their responsibilities, and are on track to graduate in a timely manner. The following are insights from students and colleagues who have worked closely with Dr. Sacco.

Doctoral student Olajuwon Olagbegi said, “Despite his demanding roles as IRB chair, associate professor, and now interim director in the Office of Research Integrity, Dr. Sacco consistently prioritizes his students. He makes himself available—through office hours, impromptu chats, or virtual meetings—ensuring each student feels valued, heard, and supported.”

Doctoral student Saba Shahid added, “Dr. Sacco's mentorship has been life-changing, shaping my professional development in ways I never expected. From the start, he recognized my potential beyond academics, encouraging leadership, networking, and personal growth as an academic.”

His colleague, Dr. Mark Huff, noted, “Dr. Sacco's mentorship has played a key role in recruiting strong graduate students to our Experimental Psychology PhD program. He models ethical scholarship, maintains high standards, and involves students in externally funded research, giving them valuable hands-on experience with data collection and reporting.”

He continued, “I'm enthusiastic about Dr. Sacco's nomination for Graduate Mentor of the Year. Over the past nine years, he has provided consistently high-quality mentorship, and his students reflect the excellence of his guidance within our program and across the university.”

The 2025 TA of the year is Meshari Alotaibi. Meshari recently completed his doctorate in communication in the School of Media and Communication. He has already been recognized by his faculty for his excellence by receiving the Arthur J. Kaul Memorial Scholarship in the School of Media and Communication in 2024.

Meshari's teaching portfolio is both diverse and impressive. He has instructed 14 sections of courses across the School of Media and Communication—ranging from professional communication and small group communication to multiple sections of public speaking (both in-person and online).

Over the past four years at Southern Miss, Meshari's research has focused on media representation, digital communication, and the evolving landscape of journalism and political discourse. Beyond his time in the classroom, he has contributed to seven peer-reviewed publications, a book chapter, and over 20 conference presentations, all of which demonstrate his commitment to advancing scholarship in the communication discipline.

According to Meshari, "My classroom is a space where students grow into critical thinkers and confident communicators. I integrate real-world applications of communication theories, ensuring students leave with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Seeing students evolve—from hesitant speakers to articulate professionals, from passive learners to engaged participants—is one of the most rewarding aspects of my work."

TEACHING ASSISTANT OF THE YEAR

Spring 2025



MESHARI ALOTAIBI

“

Not only has he grown into an excellent instructor, but he has developed a successful track record in rising scholarship and campus citizenship.

Dr. Ed Simpson, Meshari's Professor

”

According to Dr. Dave Davies, professor in the School of Media and Communication, "Meshari has consistently mentored students, refining curricula and developing innovative teaching materials that transform theoretical concepts into engaging, practical experiences."

Dr. Ed Simpson, professor and director of the School of Media and Communication wrote, "Meshari is the type of Ph.D. candidate Southern Miss seeks to support. He is open and friendly to students and is well-prepared for the courses he teaches. He also is a good university citizen, being willing to help when needed and serving as a key organizer for student groups. Not only has he grown into an excellent instructor, but he has developed a successful track record in rising scholarship and campus citizenship."

RESEARCH ASSISTANT OF THE YEAR

Spring 2025



CASSI SPRINGFIELD

The 2025 RA of the Year is Cassi Springfield. Cassi is a fourth-year doctoral student in clinical psychology.

Cassi began her Ph.D. degree program at Southern Miss in August 2021, and she already has published an astonishing 17 peer-reviewed publications, five of which are first-author publications, peer-reviewed articles, in high-impact journals in the field.

During her time at Southern Miss, Cassi has been honored with various awards, including the 2024 College of Education and Human Sciences Outstanding Graduate Research Award and a \$5,000 grant from the Sleep Research Society Foundation to assist with her dissertation research.

Cassi states, "Since joining the Social Cognition and Recovery in Schizophrenia (SCORS) Lab, I have assisted with protocol development, recruitment, data collection, and management for multiple grant-funded projects examining sleep disturbance, inflammation, and social cognition in people with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders (SSDs). I have also conducted independent projects and collaborated with graduate and undergraduate students in my lab on their independent work." She continued, "My long-term goal is to become an independent investigator examining social impairment across the psychosis spectrum, mechanisms underlying these deficits, and associated outcomes. Ultimately, I aim to conduct meaningful

research that can inform intervention efforts and improve day-to-day functioning and quality of life for people with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders. My training and experience at Southern Miss have equipped me with the comprehensive skillset to pursue these goals."

Dr. Kelsey Bonfils, assistant professor of clinical psychology and Cassi's research mentor, states, "Cassi has been integral to the development and success of my lab. The SCORS Lab focuses on identifying determinants of social cognition with an eye toward developing research-informed interventions to improve social deficits in those with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders. Cassi has taken a lead role in building infrastructure for and helping to run three funded studies in the lab, all of which examine the impact of sleep disturbance on social cognition in those with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders using intensive longitudinal methods. In all stages of her research training and in her conduct as a research assistant, Cassi has functioned at an extremely high level, using complex and varied methodologies across multiple study protocols.

“

I have every confidence that she will excel in her goal to develop an independent, federally-funded research career.”

Dr. Kelsey Bonfils, Cassi's Research Mentor

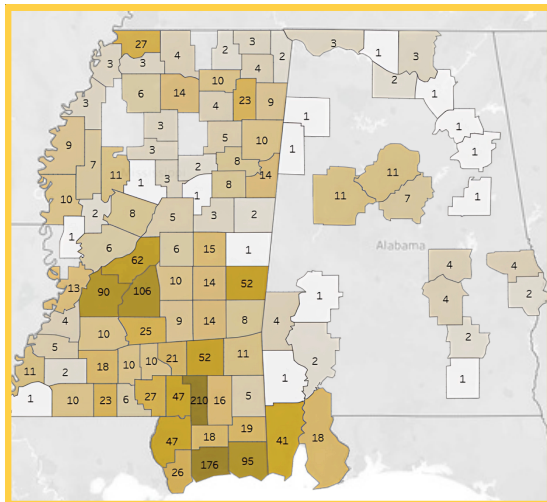
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Dr. Stephanie Smith, associate professor and director of clinical training in the School of Psychology, stated, "Cassi is destined to be a strong and thoughtful independent researcher. She is bright, diligent, and enthusiastic about the work that she does. I know Dr. Bonfils depends on Cassi's advanced skillset to support her grant-funded studies. Indeed, Cassi was integral in developing protocols for several active studies that I would consider to have a high degree of complexity. Cassi has consistently received stellar reviews every semester as Dr. Bonfils' research assistant, and Cassi has also proven herself to be an exceptionally strong student in the Clinical Psychology PhD program, excelling both in coursework and in her interactions with faculty and peers."

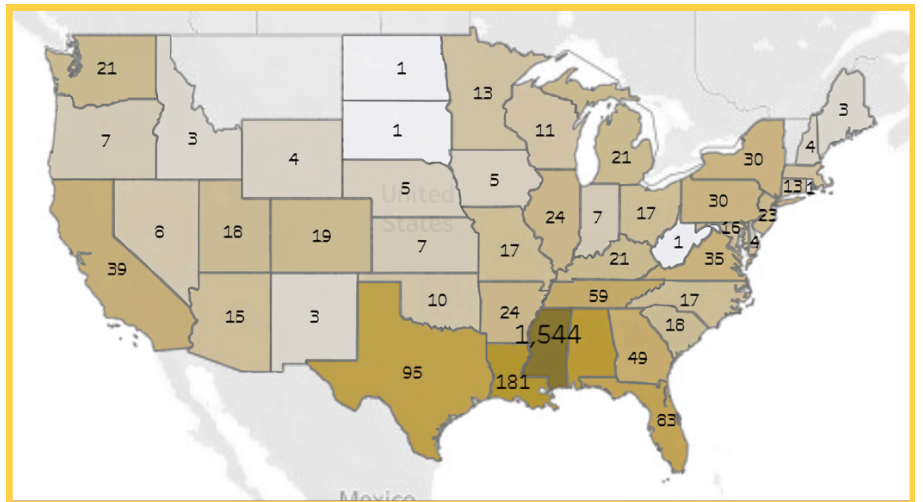
MAPPING GRADUATE STUDENT ENROLLMENT

FALL
2024

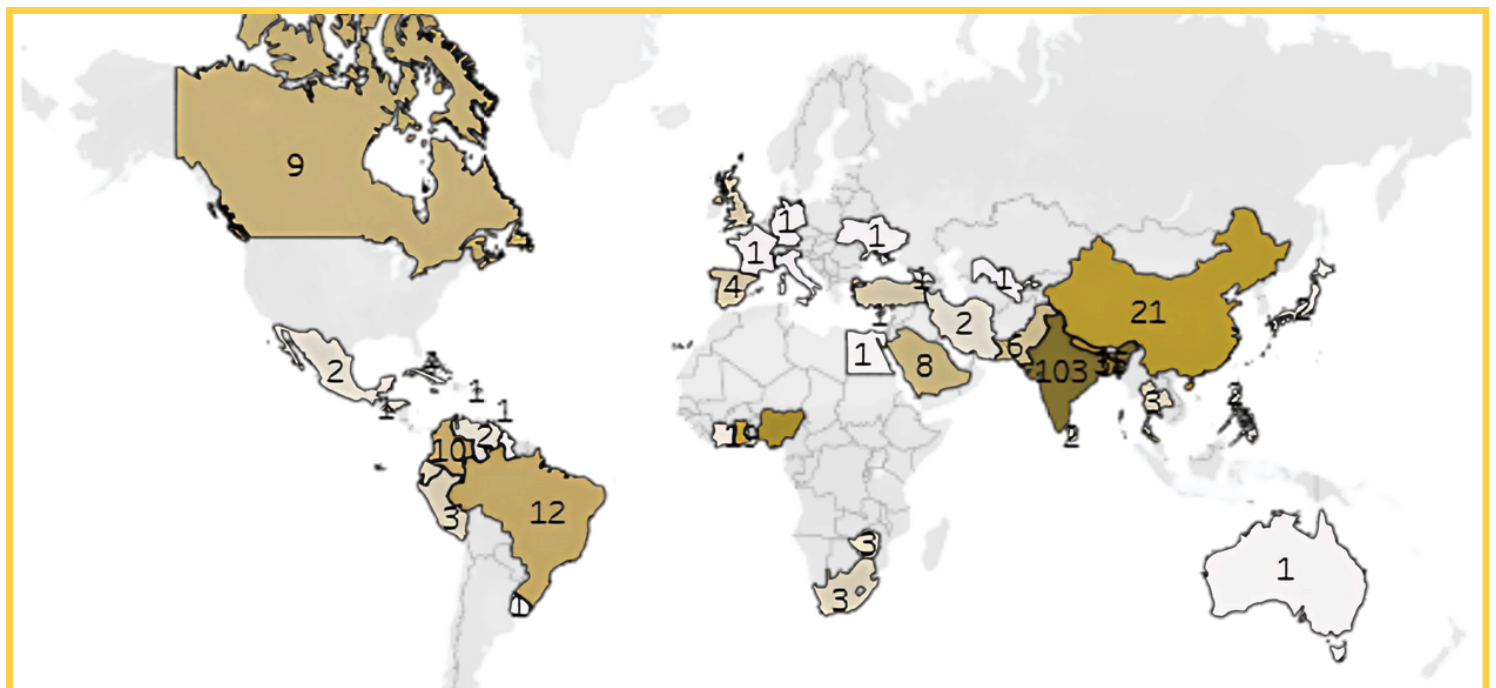
Graduate Student Enrollment by County



Graduate Student Enrollment by State



Graduate Student Enrollment by Country

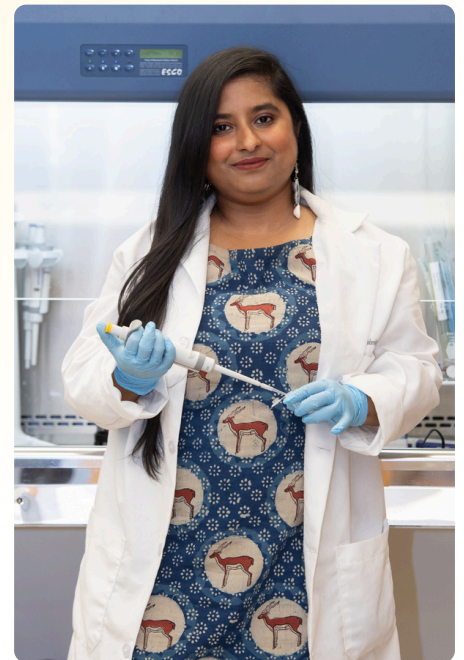


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