

COLLEGIAN

SUMMER 2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES MAGAZINE



A FINAL FAREWELL

Looking back on two decades as dean

Nineteen years—it's almost hard to believe I've been at the helm of this ship that long.

Since announcing my retirement in November, my thoughts have turned to everything that's changed—and all that we've accomplished—over the last two decades.

As alumni and students, you don't often get to see what deans do, so I'd like to take you behind-the-scenes in my last dean's message.

My staff will tell you that I often refer to the College of Arts and Sciences as a giant ship—one that never stops moving and is kept afloat and steered in the right direction by my staff and me.

On any given day, you'll find me advocating for the needs of students and faculty; meeting with alumni and friends to generate financial support for the College; celebrating student and faculty success; reading dossiers to determine our next great hire and promote achieving faculty; and everything in between—all while keeping my eyes and ears open to new and exciting opportunities for our students.

When I arrived on campus in 2000, Shelby Hall was just a field. Enrollment was 19,000. Becoming a top R1 research institution and building a performing arts center were just dreams. Our Cuba, musical theatre, and McCollough Scholars programs didn't exist, nor did any organized effort involving undergraduate research.

My, how things have changed!

Not only have we built an entire Science and Engineering Complex, but we have renovated almost every building in the College to meet the demands of 21st-century education.

The Blount and McCollough programs have grown to attract some of the highest-achieving students at our university. The Blount Scholars Program will celebrate its 20th anniversary this fall, and the McCollough Pre-medical Scholars Institute, an outgrowth of the successful McCollough Forum, will enroll its first class of students, the best-of-the-best of aspiring doctors.

We celebrated joining the ranks of top-tier research institutions in December, thanks in large measure to our hard-working and innovative faculty. I know and thank each of them in my mind by name...as I should—I hired almost 90% of them!

And undergraduate research? Nearly 1,000 students in the College conduct independent research projects every year, and we dedicate \$40,000 annually to help bring their ideas to life. To top it off—we just celebrated our 15th Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Conference.

We've grown our footprint to 38,000 students from all walks of life, and they compete for and routinely win the nation's top awards—Goldwater, Truman, and Fulbright.

Our musical theatre program is thriving, as are our other programs,



and we're well on our way to raising \$15 million to build a Performing Arts Academic Center that will be a centerpiece of campus.

The horizon for the College is extremely bright. As I turn this ship over to a new captain, I know that I am turning over a well-oiled machine.

I am so thankful for all of the friends I've made as dean of this great college—faculty, staff, donors, and alumni.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your continued support. As I say often, this is how college is meant to be. ■

Dean Robert Olin



College of
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THEATRE FOR AUTISM INTERVENTION

Local teens with autism are getting an inventive form of help by taking the stage through the SENSE Theatre Intervention Program

UA researchers are investigating the effectiveness of a novel intervention for autism—theatre.

Funded by the National Institute of Health and partnered with Vanderbilt and Stony Brook University, the 10-week program, called SENSE, pairs local Tuscaloosa children with autism spectrum disorder between the ages of 10 and 16 with non-autistic peers to rehearse and perform a theatrical stage production. This is the first Alabama-based trial of the SENSE Theatre Intervention Program.

Dr. Susan White, director of UA's Center for Youth Development and Intervention and the Doddridge Saxon Chair of Psychology, is spearheading the program as the

and voice exercises that draw on volume and intonation.

"As a clinical psychologist who's been doing intervention work for many years, this is the first time I've been in a trial where none of the kids know they are part of a treatment," White said. "I think one of the hardest parts about working with teenagers is getting their emotional involvement and investment, so it's exciting to see that nobody is looking at their phone to check when it's time to go, and they're truly just enjoying themselves and having fun."

With only one round of the program completed, the SENSE intervention has already yielded promising results on both clinical and personal levels for the students involved. The first session's students put on an

insightful October show called *Hats*. The thoughtful performance required students in the program to create and develop their own characters who must find a hat that outwardly represents their personality to wear for the rest of their lives.

"We had kids in the audience for the October

performance who weren't even in the SENSE program who were so blown away by how well everyone did," said White. "There is a real depth in the relationships that develop in this program, and the interpersonal impact I have seen translates to the kids and their parents seeing what they are truly capable of."

As for the future of the trials, White is looking to expand its reach into the greater Tuscaloosa area and enroll about 45 more children with autism over the next year and a half for future performances.

"The challenge is recruiting and getting the word out to people in the Tuscaloosa area about the program," White said. "I hope to keep SENSE alive at UA as long as there is an interest from the community for a program like this. It has scientifically proven benefits as well as a large social benefit, and I think the program itself is well on its way to being a curriculum that can be readily disseminated to other clinical practices and institutions." ■

This is the first time I've been in a trial where none of the kids know they are part of a treatment.

site principal investigator for the UA trial along with the assistance of psychologists, doctoral students, and the Tuscaloosa Academy theatre department.

"What we're doing is conducting a multi-site trial between Stony Brook, Vanderbilt, and The University of Alabama to enroll a total of 240 students across these sites over a four-year period," White said. "The theatre teacher at Tuscaloosa Academy, Sarah Margaret Kates, serves as the theatre director for SENSE, so she works closely with the program. Every Saturday we have parents drop off their kids around noon, and we work with the kids until about 5 p.m."

Through the practice of collaborative, behavioral, and theatrical techniques, SENSE seeks to improve emotional and communal functioning, facial expression recognition, and verbal queues of children with ASD while providing a space beyond therapy to put these skills into practice. Some of the most popular theatrical techniques students learn include facial mimicry exercises, miming and mirroring exercises,



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TEACHING IN PRISONS

I believe the single best predictor of whether or not a person will go back to prison is whether they get a job once they're released, and the more we can educate people in prison, the more prepared they will be to get jobs afterwards.

Alexa Tullett is used to large, full lecture halls on the first day of her “Introduction to Psychology” classes. Dozens of students fill the seats and flip through paper syllabi, where lectures, readings, and assignments take up most of the text on the pages. However, her first day of her “Science of the Brain” class last fall looked quite different— she traded a lecture hall for a prison.

Tullett, an associate professor of psychology, was the first Arts and Sciences' Prison Teaching Fellow, a position that allowed her to forfeit one of her on-campus classes in exchange for the opportunity to teach at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama. The program, run by the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project at Auburn University, has worked in partnership with UA's College of Arts and Sciences for several years. Previously only MFA students received fellowships to teach in prisons, but the partnership has grown to allow faculty to do the same.

“I've been on the lookout for an opportunity to teach communities who don't always have access to educational resources,” Tullett said. When she learned about the fellowship, Tullett knew it was the perfect opportunity to give back to her community.

Tullett, who also taught in a prison in fall 2017, took the opportunity to teach a revamped “Introduction to Psychology” class, to place emphasis on students' interests. This time around,



she found that her students wanted to learn about things that affected them before and during their time in prison, such as drug addiction or stress.

“In one of the classes, we talked about relaxation exercises because they were talking about how much stress they face,” Tullett said. “So we literally just sat there and clenched our muscles together and then relaxed them. To be able to teach them about things that are useful is really cool.”

In another class, Tullett’s successor, religious studies assistant professor Michael Altman, teaches a class called “American Religious History.” The class allows students to have conversations about religion in American society by discussing historical documents pertaining to the subject. In one session, Altman recalls a discussion focused on the

revivals of the early 19th century.

“Students pointed out that the prayer meetings served as a social function by bringing together people who might not otherwise have had connections, and this built a sense of unity in the communities that had revivals,” Altman said. “Thus, revivals were less about some religious experience and more about experiences of belonging to these new communities on the frontiers of America.”

Altman explained that, while the material learned in his class at Donaldson Correctional Facility in Bessemer is relatively similar to the material he teaches at UA, other aspects are quite different. Instead of using traditional tests, assignments, and grading systems (which the Prison Arts program does not allow for non-credit classes like Tullett and



Altman's), he has focused on discussions and feedback. This has been as rewarding for him as it has been for his students.

"As a teacher, taking the grading out has made me enjoy the teaching a lot more, because I can just focus on the conversation with the students, on the discussions in the course," Altman said.

Both Altman and Tullett said that, while their classes were smaller, the enthusiasm and hard work they received from their students made it feel like they were teaching a class at UA. Each class has only about 15 students, but many more sign up to participate.

"I think that the prison community, specifically, is very underserved and very marginalized, and there are a lot of prisoners who really want to take classes," Tullett said. "It's a


group of people who don't have access to those resources often, and they are very happy to have it."

The two also say they will always value having taught in a prison, and it's something they wish all academics could do.

"I believe the single best predictor of whether or not a person will go back to prison is whether they get a job once they're released," Tullett said. "And the more we can educate people in prison, the more prepared they will be to get jobs afterwards."

"We are in one of the most—if not the most—incarcerated states per capita, in the most incarcerated country in the world," Altman said. "We are state-paid educators in that context. I think that puts a little bit of responsibility on us to serve the students in these prisons." ■



A person wearing a teal shirt is seen from the side, looking at a blurred screen that displays text and images. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

SPEAKING ONLINE

How old are you in online years? In 2019, social media use has become a facet of everyday life for many, but how do years of use impact how we collectively conduct our personal and professional identities online?

Dr. Amber Buck of the Department of English specializes in rhetoric and composition studies, which consists of analyzing how people write in different contexts and how people utilize technology to communicate. Given today's digital landscape, this has lead Buck to over five years of digital literacy-related research focusing on social media, privacy, and online identity.

"I first got really interested in identity representation online," Buck said. "During my research I interviewed people about how they conceptualize identity on different social media platforms, how they think about audience, and how they think about different audiences on various social media platforms. People make a

I'm most interested
in how people work
with the constraints
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lot of rhetorical decisions when they present themselves on different social media platforms."

For many social media users today, it is second nature to portray an image of oneself on Instagram or Snapchat that is much different than their image on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. After years of observation and interviews, Buck's research for her upcoming book seeks to illuminate why these behaviors vary across social media platforms, and highlight the longitudinal changes

in our relationship to social media. After conducting initial research with her case study participants in 2011, Buck followed up in 2016 with participants regarding their online rhetoric across platforms.

"Between 2011 and 2016 a lot has changed, and the book I'm finishing is essentially about that change, and creating a trajectory," Buck said. "Social media has been around for long enough that we can start to have retrospectives and think about periods of time that represent trends of interfaces, policies, and of how we use social media and what is considered acceptable to post on certain platforms."

A key detail to consider is that in 2011 most of Buck's participants did not yet carry smartphones. At the start of the research, the three graduate students and five undergraduate students participating in the project primarily used desktop computers to access all social media platforms. As our access to social media and digital information evolved from nightly visits on a home desktop computer to inescapable momentary updates in our pockets, the conversation about sharing our lives online has come to the forefront of social media use.

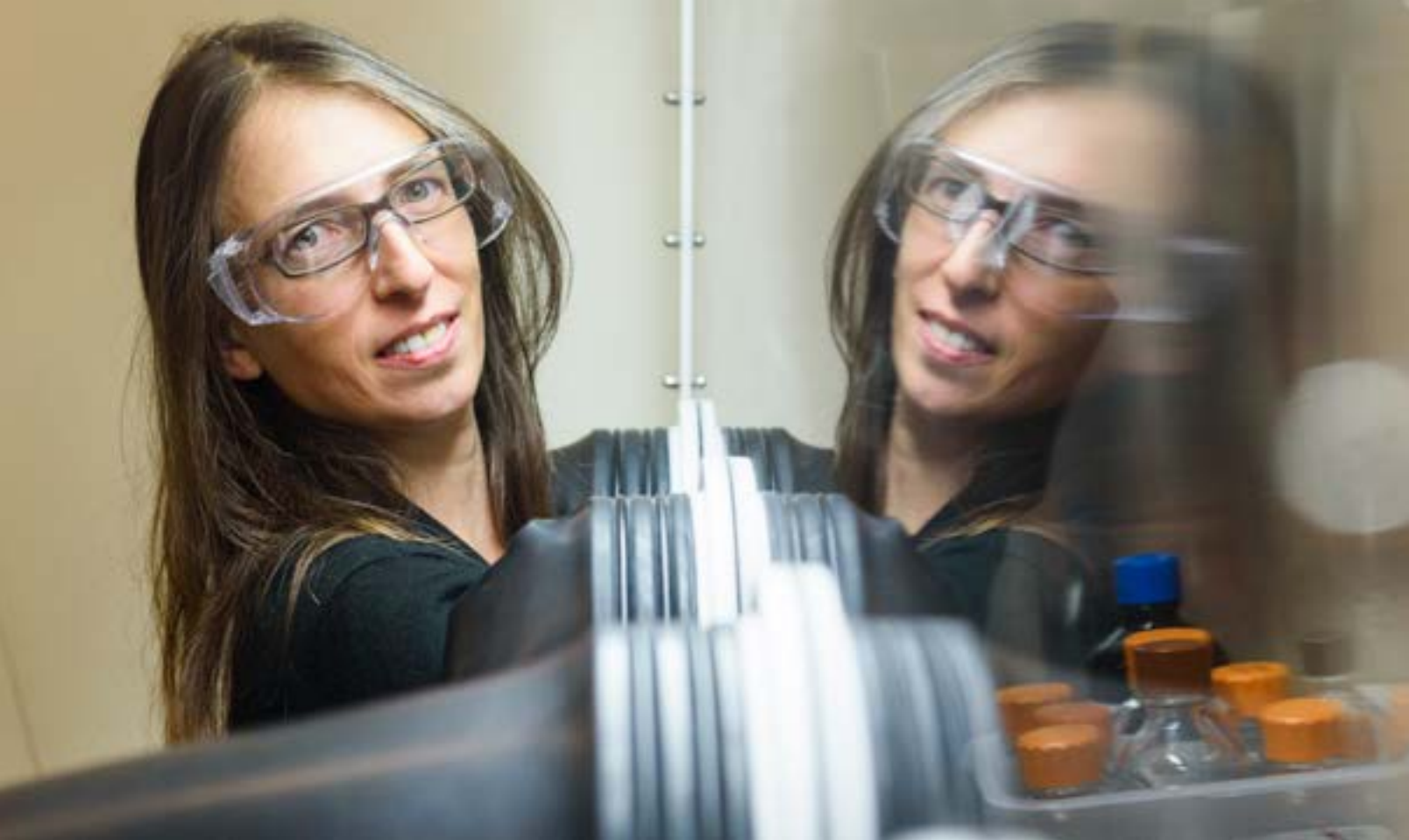
"I think I approached this topic initially with more of a technological determinist lens and asking what these platforms make people do, but what I found in my study—and what I'm most interested in—is how people work with these constraints of sharing personal information and how they subvert that information."

As an example, Buck points to a student who chose to withhold personal information on his Facebook profile in 2011 while the conversation of privacy on social media was still in its infancy. Instead of sharing his university and employer, he opted for faux-details like enrollment at "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." While this comedic choice preceded Facebook's eventual privacy scandal, it speaks to the rhetorical implications of Buck's research.

"He was irritated by the ways people would take the information about others online at face value, so he did that to both prevent the platform from collecting his information and to send a message to his friends that you don't necessarily always want to trust internet platforms with personal information," Buck said.

While it may be difficult at first to remember what a 2011 Facebook interface looked like compared to today's, it is no secret that our society has evolved in our use of social media in tandem with the rise of new platforms on which to share our lives. ■





HARNESSING THE SUN

We're making
catalysts that
speed up
turning carbon
dioxide into
monoxide, and
use sunlight.

UA chemists are learning how to use the sun to convert greenhouse gases into useful products.

In today's society, greenhouse gas emissions are one of the biggest concerns of scientists around the globe. Their accumulation in the Earth's atmosphere can damage our climate in devastating ways. But one UA professor is developing cutting-edge technology to slow these emissions while creating a product helpful for society.

Dr. Elizabeth Papish, an associate professor in UA's chemistry department, recently received a National Science Foundation grant for her work revolutionizing the world of green chemistry by creating a more efficient catalyst to convert greenhouse gases into useful products.

The project aims to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by converting it and eventually using it to make petroleum-based products.

"Almost every single product we use comes from petroleum," Papish said. "Pharmaceuticals, plastics, and everything that makes our society modern. They're all basically made from petroleum. If you can take carbon dioxide and make carbon monoxide, that's a building block that you can use to make fuels or other products."

This process of converting carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide is not new. However, the current methods for this reaction use lots of energy from fossil fuels. Papish's goal is to make a catalyst that produces

Almost every single product we use comes from petroleum—pharmaceuticals, plastics, and everything that makes our society modern. They're all basically made from petroleum.

the same product, while still being environmentally friendly and cheap to manufacture.

“There are already methods in existence to make carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide,” Papish said. “But as soon as you say, ‘I want to be low cost, and I don't want to use any fossil fuels,’ there's nothing in existence.”

In order to eliminate the use of fossil fuels, Papish's team is attempting to use a more efficient energy source to power the catalyst: the sun.

“The challenge is just using sunlight,” Papish said. “We're making catalysts that speed up turning carbon dioxide into monoxide, and use sunlight.”

Papish, in collaboration with Jared Delcamp of the University of Mississippi and Edwin Webster of Mississippi State University, is currently designing, building, and testing catalysts. The catalysts are made at UA, then tested at the University of Mississippi. Once testing is completed, researchers at Mississippi State perform computations to better model the catalysts and help predict other potentially useful combinations of catalysts.

The three-year, \$624,000 grant will be divided among the three universities involved. UA will receive the bulk of the grant, amounting to almost \$358,000. This amount will go towards paying undergraduate and graduate researchers assisting Papish on the project. It will also go towards supplies and chemicals to build and tests the catalysts.

In addition to paid student research assistants, students in Papish's inorganic chemistry class also have the opportunity to participate in her groundbreaking research. Throughout the class, students learn elements of inorganic chemistry by testing the catalysts in a lab setting.

The grant will last until 2021, and Papish hopes that the team will have made significant progress by then. Her hope is that the catalyst will create a greener, more efficient world for all. ■



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