ARTIST RESIDENCY GIVES ALUMNA PLACE TO CREATE

INCREASING DIVERSITY IN STEM FIELDS

UNI, NASA COLLABORATE ON CAVE RESEARCH

ON THE HUNT FOR A HISTORIC MANUSCRIPT
IN THIS ISSUE

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Drones give computer science students experience in emerging technologies; Attendees at last winter’s INSPIRE LSAMP conference tour the UNI Botanical Center; An image from the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences’ new petrographic microscopes reveals granite in a kaleidoscope of color; Maria Alverio works on a metal casting project.

Clockwise from upper left: Drones give computer science students experience in emerging technologies; Attendees at last winter’s INSPIRE LSAMP conference tour the UNI Botanical Center; An image from the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences’ new petrographic microscopes reveals granite in a kaleidoscope of color; Maria Alverio works on a metal casting project.
MESSAGE from the DEAN

To say that 2020 has been a year like no other would be an understatement. As nearly every aspect of our lives has been upended, I have considered those things that have not changed. I have found that it is more important than ever to uphold the set of guiding principles I strive towards as Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences.

These principles are simple—be kind, provide support for our faculty and staff and ensure student success. These are core values that our college has always emphasized, but they are even more important as we navigate new challenges. You can see these values at work for yourself in this edition of Communiqué. We are featuring the work that our faculty and leadership are doing to promote success of students from under-represented groups in STEM fields—ensuring that all of our students have what they need to be successful. There are stories of how our students, faculty and alumni are helping others, through their research or their work in serving their communities. And there are stories that demonstrate how our college is going above and beyond to support our students in reaching their full potential—giving them the opportunities to become leaders in their own right.

These are the experiences and the stories that embody what it means to be a part of this UNI community, and the common thread that connects our alumni around the country, and even the world.

Over the last nine months, I have seen our Panther family come together in new, unexpected ways, and I am incredibly proud of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors for being strong examples of the values by which CHAS chooses to live.

Despite its challenges, there is still much to celebrate this year. The first year class is larger than last year’s, out-state entering students increased by 38 percent, and our retention rate is 85 percent, which is 15 percent higher than the national average and higher than our retention rate at any time in recent years. We are finding new ways to connect and engage with each other, we continue to seek unexpected ways, and I am incredibly proud of our students, faculty, staff, alumni and donors for being strong examples of the values by which CHAS chooses to live.

Nearly ten years ago the late Cliff Chancey, head of the UNI Department of Physics, proposed an idea to Richard Jourdan for a unique program that would identify new majors who, despite strong potential, might be at higher risk to struggle with the demands of college and a challenging major. From that conversation, the Jourdan Mentor-Scholar award was born.

Richard, 90, is the grandson of Dr. Louis Begeman, after whom UNI’s physics building is named. Begeman, an internationally recognized researcher, came to Iowa State Teacher’s College in 1899. During his nearly 58-year tenure he was head of physics and chemistry and was a noted campus leader.

Richard has a long and rich relationship with the Department of Physics, as did his late sister Mary Frances and their parents before them. Together they created the Begeman Scholarship and the Begeman Fund for Excellence. The idea of establishing a new fund that would also recognize the Jourdan branch of the family appealed to Richard.

For the last several years, three to five students annually have received support from the Jourdan Mentor-Scholar fund. Freshmen are paired with upperschlassmen; in turn, the mentors have the opportunity to apply to be mentors when they are juniors and seniors. Recently, Richard spoke with Paul Shand, head of the UNI Department of Physics, about endowing the fund to ensure significant, permanent support during Richard’s lifetime. At the same time Richard had been considering selling the bulk of his medieval coin collection.

At its height, Richard’s collection included more than 800 rare coins covering 600 AD to 1718 from nearly 30 European countries and was regarded as an important collection in the international numismatic world. Richard is something of an amateur historian, his interest growing into a passion following three years of work and travel in Western Europe in the early ’70s. Richard quickly discovered that coins mirror a country’s ruling lineage and, therefore, a country’s history.

Shand says the newly endowed program will be a significant asset to the department for generations to come, particularly given the growing twin problems of student debt and college affordability. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the program is early intervention. If a student is struggling, the mentor is likely to be the first to notice and offer assistance. “This is a wonderful program for both mentors and first-year students,” Shand says. “Richard should be proud of his brainchild.”

For his part, Richard admits to feeling some relief that his collection at long last has been sold. “They were in the bank all the time, so they were not readily accessible. My knowledge of European history from building the collection was my reward. The catalogues from my sales are what I love and where I can always revisit my passion. And I feel good about being able to set the Jourdan fund up substantially; I can see it working while I’m still alive.”

Richard did keep four British coins from the 9th century and hopes to purchase a couple more at auction. He’ll keep his hand in the game.

Sincerely,

John Fritch, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Alum’s hobby coin collection leads to science mentor program endowment
Doug Mupasiri has a voice that seems ideal for a professor. It’s booming and resonant, the type that can fill every corner of a lecture hall. The UNI mathematics department head is putting it to use advocating for the inclusion of more minorities in STEM fields, where Black and Hispanic persons have been woefully underrepresented. Here, Mupasiri talks about why minorities are underrepresented in STEM and what UNI is doing to address the issue.

Why is there a lack of minorities in STEM fields?

Part of it has to do with accessibility of STEM to minority groups. One way many people get into STEM is because they know somebody, or they went to a school where they had an introduction to STEM courses, which set them up to do STEM disciplines in college.

When minorities come to college, most have gone to schools where STEM wasn’t emphasized, so they don’t have access to it. By the time they get to a place like UNI, it’s not something that is within their range of possibilities to even consider. If you’re going to pursue a STEM degree at UNI and you come in here as a freshman and haven’t had a serious lab, it’s a real shock. They haven’t seen anything like that.

The other thing is a lack of role models. There aren’t many role models for minorities in STEM that will enable them to visualize themselves as someone who can contribute to the discipline. That’s something many minorities report. In many STEM classes they take, they’re often the only minority student there. That puts people off. They don’t have people they feel they can naturally form groups with. It feels lonely for them.

UNI takes action to increase minority representation in STEM fields.

UNI promotes diversity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
It seems many barriers for minority students in STEM fields exist before they get to college. What are some ways to address these issues early on?

One of the things UNI can do is be visible in the schools. But maybe even simpler than that is inviting kids to UNI and have them visit labs where professors are doing experiments. That’s a great way to introduce kids to STEM.

One of the things we do is our summer camps. Young students participate in these and are introduced to real science. These are the sorts of things UNI can do in a big way, because a lot of the things we do are focused around education. We have professors here who are trained on how to communicate with kids. We are a natural place to do these sorts of activities. That won’t solve the national problem, but it can solve the local problem.

Why are you so passionate about this issue?

Because I know it makes a difference. Part of it’s my own upbringing. My grandfather was a pastor and he built his school. He thoroughly believed in education and how it can change lives by opening up opportunities for people. My mother was an educator. To me, the satisfaction is seeing these students leave this place and going out there and leading productive lives doing something they might not have imagined before. The great thing is that the kids really appreciate it. Once they realize that you really, really care about their success, they give you back more than you could imagine. This is something I totally believe in.

Why is it so important to encourage minority participation in STEM fields?

In this global economy we now face, the country cannot afford to have people with talent who are just wasting away. Every talent should be tapped and put to good use. The other thing is that there are employers in Iowa who have a real issue finding people to fill the jobs they have, and it’s worse in STEM. These companies have to go overseas to find people to work for them.

There is also a benefit to bringing in a diversity of opinions. People coming in from the outside bring in perspective that people on the inside might not have. Opening up these opportunities to groups who are not generally represented brings fresh ideas, things that people may not have thought of.

The problems that we will be facing are challenging. We’ll need all the manpower we can marshal to solve these problems. Bringing in as many people as possible is something everybody should be interested in doing.
Working their way through miles of passageways several hundred feet underground, the air is thick, musty and completely still. Inside the caverns, the dense walls stifle any sound, and seem to absorb the light, leading to an eerie, silent darkness throughout. It feels like exploring a different planet — one that’s completely devoid of any signs of life.

But in this space, the students make a surprising discovery. Here, below the surface, a thriving ecosystem of microbial life exists, somehow managing to survive in the desolation of the cave. Exactly how the microorganisms got there, and how they survive, is what the group hopes to find out.

The trip to Wind Cave National Park is part of an ongoing research project at UNI, led by Josh Sebree, associate professor in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. For the last several years, Sebree has brought students from his classes to the cave to study and sample the cave water and minerals in search of microbial life. This year, Sebree brought a group of 11 students from his department to the caves. There, the team used UV light and spectrometers to study the fluorescence and composition of the cave water and minerals, with the goal of determining what trace metals and organic materials are present.

“The cave has a really unique story to tell, and this work is redefining our view of extreme life,” Sebree said. “For a long time, scientists thought they knew a limit to how small a cell could be to have all of the things it needs to be alive. One of the first researchers to go in the cave took some samples, and found that the size is much, much smaller than initially thought. The work that’s been done already has only scratched the surface, and now, we need to piece together the rest of the puzzle. We want to learn more about these microorganisms, their ecosystem, and how they live down there.”

Led by nothing more than the soft glow of their lanterns, a crew of students from the University of Northern Iowa trek into the winding depths of Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota.
Currently, the student researchers are analyzing samples collected from the cave, and initial results confirm rich organic content in both the water and minerals. Another set of samples will be sent to NASA’s Jet Propulsion Lab for further evaluation, as part of a unique partnership between researchers at UNI and NASA.

“This is a huge deal for the students who got to participate in this trip and this research,” Sebree said. “It really is one of the culminating experiences in their undergraduate career. At any other university, these types of experiences are reserved for grad and post-grad students. Undergrad students are not generally afforded this type of opportunity, so we have a lot of pride being able to bring these experiences to students. They get the chance to do something nobody else in the world has done, and really contribute to the field of science.”

Casper and her fellow students spent months planning and preparing for the trip, but couldn’t have imagined what it would really be like. “Being in the cave for the first time was awe-inspiring,” she said. “Until then, I’d only ever seen pictures or heard about it, so to finally step foot in the cave, it got me a little emotional. It was physically exhausting at some points, because we had to walk about a million steps, and there was one point I got caught on a rock and ruined a pair of jeans, but it was so worth it. I’d ruin a hundred pairs of jeans to do that again.”

In addition to the 11 chemistry and biochemistry students, two UNI digital media students joined the team on the trip, with aspirations of creating a series of documentary-style videos in order to share the experience and research with a wider audience. “This is just another layer of the project that showcases researchers at UNI’s talent,” Sebree said. “The Department of Communication and Media has an amazing talent pool, and this not only gives them a chance to have something really cool on their resume, but it also helps tell the story of the cave in a unique way.”

Megan Studer, one of the digital media majors, says this was a once-in-a-lifetime trip for her. “The experience was hands down one of the most amazing things I’ve encountered to this date,” she said. “It was definitely a challenge and something I had to step up for. I had to have faith in myself and go in with a plan and the utmost confidence. I definitely learned a lot about my own filmmaking skills, and about what I plan to do for future documentaries and projects.”

But the challenge paid off for Studer, who says the experience empowered her to believe in herself and her filmmaking skills. “For me personally, the best part was getting to visit parts of the cave where almost nobody had ever been before, and to be the first person in the world to have video documentation of it,” she said. “That is probably the coolest thing I can say about myself, and I think that moment in the caves is what hit me the hardest. It really opened my eyes to the fact that this is exactly what I want to do with my life. I love storytelling, and being able to showcase unique things to those around me. I am so happy and blessed to have been granted an opportunity like this, which allowed me to see things differently, and for that, I will be forever grateful.”

Even though the trip is over, the work continues for Sebree and the students involved. “There’s so much work left to be done before we can fully understand everything down there;” he said. Luckily, the research has received an additional four years of funding from NASA, through the Iowa Space Grant Consortium, to continue their research. The project has also received funding from the UNI Foundation and the UNI College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences. Sebree hopes to get another team of students out to the caves next year to do a more detailed scientific survey. He’s assembled a team of experts from UNI, including professors in the Department of Biology and the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, who will further investigate the caves from top to bottom.

“I’m really grateful for the support and funding we’ve received, and I’m looking forward to digging deeper,” he said. “We’ve got a great group of experts and students here at the university, and I’m excited to push the boundaries of what we know about life, and to figure out the rest of the cave’s story!”

Above: Chemistry, biochemistry, and digital media students get unique field experience underground.

Opposite page, top: Students gather samples of cave water as part of this research project.

Opposite page, bottom: Handheld spectrometers, purchased using grant funding, help student researchers study microbial life in the cave system.
IT’S NOT HARD TO SEE WHY ALISON ALTSTATT’S FRIENDS CALL HER “THE INDIANA JONES OF MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS.”

Though Alison Altstatt may not be fighting Hollywood villains while sporting a fedora, her adventures have taken her around the globe – discovering long lost artifacts of the past.

Her mission: to recover and reassemble the pages of a precious 13th-century musical manuscript – all while balancing a full teaching schedule at the UNI School of Music.

The first piece of the puzzle

Growing up, Altstatt always had an appreciation for the intersection of history and music. She wanted to know more about the people who created the music she sang in church, or the meaning behind some of the Catholic musical traditions she’d been raised with.

Eventually, that curiosity led Altstatt to get a Ph.D. in Musicology, with a second field in Historical Performance Practice. Her research focuses on the music and rituals of Benedictine convents, along with medieval manuscripts and their twentieth-century reception – something she integrates into the music history classes she teaches at UNI.

Through her teaching and research, she’s crafted a vast network of connections in the music history, art history, and liturgy fields, and carved out a name for herself as an expert in her area.

Colleagues often call on her for help identifying or examining historical musical pieces. So when a friend at University of Iowa Special Collections asked Altstatt to look at several old manuscript pages, it didn’t seem like a big deal at the time. Until it was.

While inspecting the pages from the U of I Special Collections, one in particular stood out to Altstatt.
During this time in history, women were very rarely represented.

“I was looking at this one leaf, which was a fragment of a dramatic play, where the only known examples are from England, but this was in Latin and written much earlier than expected,” she said. “It got me excited. Reflecting on it later that night, I realized I had seen a page like that before.”

During her time at Indiana University, Altstatt researched pages from an old manuscript called “The Wilton Processional.” It was a collection containing poetry, drama, music and liturgy from the famed Wilton Abbey in Wiltshire, England.

The original manuscript has been missing since 1860, after a book dealer disassembled it and sold it piece by piece to buyers around the globe.

Altstatt realized she wasn’t studying just any manuscript — she was studying a page of the infamous “Wilton Processional.”

“During this time in history, women were very rarely represented,” Altstatt said. “If they were represented at all, it was by a male historian or witness who wrote about them through his own account. Now, through this manuscript, we have an inside look at what life was like for women, and the rituals, customs and traditions that they created and performed.”

This idea of the people behind music – particularly underrepresented populations, is a driving force not only in her quest to reassemble the “Wilton Processional,” but also in Altstatt’s teaching.

Reframing the picture

Over the next several years, it became Altstatt’s personal mission to recover and reassemble the missing pages of the manuscript. On several occasions, she flew to England to perform field research – visiting the site of the abbey, where only fragments remain now, and walking the hills where the nuns once walked in processions. She also continued her research at home, pouring over information she found online, and following each trail of clues to the next page.

So far, Altstatt has managed to track down around 50 pages of the manuscript — but there’s still much work to be done, with more than 100 pages still missing.

With all of the effort that Altstatt has put into this project, some may ask ‘Why? What’s so special about this manuscript?’

Aside from being one of the oldest surviving processions, it also gives a rare glimpse into the lives, history and traditions of women in medieval England.

“During this time in history, women were very rarely represented,” Altstatt said. “What is its origin? What drove its composition? What is the context in which it was performed? My hope is that by studying this manuscript, we have an inside look at what life was like for women, and the rituals, customs and traditions that they created and performed.”

This idea of the people behind music – particularly underrepresented populations, is a driving force not only in her quest to reassemble the “Wilton Processional,” but also in Altstatt’s teaching.

“The history of a piece of music, and the context of it, is just one more layer to really understand a musical composition,” Altstatt said. “What is its origin? What drove its composition? What is the context in which it was performed? My hope is that by studying music history, my students will be better prepared to understand the meaning in all of their musical pieces.

Understanding the history makes the music mean so much more, and you can really appreciate what it meant to the people who created it.”

In specific, Altstatt tries to share different musical narratives with her students. “Often, women’s musical lives are left out of the narrative, and it’s important for me to represent diversity of that kind in my classes,” she said. “We studied a medieval music composer Hildegard of Bingen in one of my music history classes. She’s a fascinating figure, and you could see part of the room light up. The women in the room are excited to see themselves represented, when so often, you only hear about male composers.”

Part of the fun of music history, Altstatt says, is discovery. While she pursues discovery in the form of a medieval manuscript, she encourages her students to pursue discovery in the classroom.

“I try to find different modes of teaching that allows students to discover things themselves,” she said. “By performing read-alouds and movement/dance, we figure out ways to make the study of history experiential. It’s always fulfilling for me to watch students mature over the course of the class. By the end, they’re doing their own research and making their own discoveries.”

Sharing the story

All of Altstatt’s work recovering the “Wilton Processional” will be compiled in her new book “Wilton Abbey in Procession,” which she hopes to publish by 2022. She’s already secured a deal to have the work published in Exeter Studies in Medieval Europe, published by Liverpool University Press.

Her hope is that by sharing this piece of musical history with the world, it will help shine a new light on a different aspect of musical history that isn’t as visible.

“Ultimately, it would be a dream come true to compile every page of the original manuscript into a digital reconstruction of the book that users can leaf through, and to share that publicly,” she said. “There’s still a lot of work to be done, but this project is very collaborative, with more and more people turning up pages around the globe.”
Tucked away in the corner of an old, ranch-style home turned art studio, Abby Hedley found her personal oasis – a place to explore and create alongside other local artists.

Hedley, who graduated from the UNI Department of Art last winter, was recently awarded an artist residency at the newly-established Red House Studios – owned and operated by the Hearst Center for the Arts in Cedar Falls. Through a collaborative partnership between the Hearst and the UNI Department of Art, Hedley was awarded a one-year residency at the studio space.

Jeff Byrd, head of the art department, says the partnership is aimed at fostering the local art community, and providing opportunity to young artists. “We really want to build an art community here in Cedar Falls, and especially with young artists, we want to keep them and their talent around here,” he said. “We’ve partnered with the Hearst on different projects in the past, and that’s something we really value. We’re glad to be a part of this, and especially with Abby. She’s very talented, and I think she’s a great fit for this.”

For Hedley, it’s a unique opportunity she never expected. “It’s like one last little gift from the department,” she said. “It shows they still support me and believe in me, even though I’m no longer a student. I don’t know what I was expecting when I graduated, but I wasn’t expecting for them to care this much, and to give me this opportunity. It sounds so simple, to have a place to work, but it’s huge for me and I’m so grateful.”

Since the spring, Hedley has been working in the space alongside three other area artists. "Two of the other artists are actually professors in the department of art," Hedley said. "I knew them previously from my time in the department, and I absolutely adore their work. It’s definitely a change in dynamic going from being a student in the department to now working alongside them as a peer, but it’s been great.”

For Hedley, the collaborative aspect is what makes the studio space so unique. "It’s so easy to hole yourself up as an artist, but it’s not beneficial to do that," she said. “You need constant communication and feedback to improve yourself and your art, and that’s one great thing about this place – everyone is willing to help if I ever need anything. COVID has made it a little difficult, but it’s still an incredibly friendly and cooperative environment. It really is a unique opportunity, and something you don’t come across often. Having this space allows me to challenge myself while continuing to push my boundaries. It’s also helped me gain a lot of confidence in myself and my career as an artist.”

Hedley’s background is in sculpture, and as a student at UNI, she was heavily involved in the Public Art Incubator program – something she says was a defining experience in her college career. "I worked with the program for four years, and it really helped broaden my perspective of what sculpture can be. I ended up finding a huge appreciation for public art and deepening my passion for sculpture. I also formed some great relationships..."
with two of my biggest mentors [current director Dan Perry] and [former director Tom Stancliffe] through the program. Dan is actually the one that told me about this studio space opportunity."

Now, Hedley is using her studio space to explore the softer side of her art, through needle felting and creating sculptures out of wool. "It’s funny because I went from working with thousands of pounds of steel [in the Public Art Incubator], to working with a few ounces of wool," she said. "This space allows me to fully embrace the softer and more delicate side of my art. The environment I’m used to working in is a full-on metal shop, and I love it there, but this is the opposite side of it. It’s my safe haven, and my own cozy little nook where I can experiment with different things."

Hedley says she counts herself extremely lucky to have the support of UNI, the art department and the Hearst behind her. "Graduating from college in the middle of a pandemic was a little crazy to say the least," she said. "It seemed like my plans fell apart, but when this opportunity [to have a sponsored studio space] came up, they fell together again in an even better way. Now I can take a while to focus on my art and figure out the next steps. It’s given me a lot of security, and I’m so grateful for that."

Heather Skeens, cultural program supervisor at the Hearst, says the center is happy to partner with UNI to provide this opportunity to a young artist like Hedley. "Recent graduates need a landing pad, and time to develop their work when they’re not able to access studios on campus anymore," she said. "We want them to stay in town, and it helps to give them a place to work. UNI and the art department have been great partners on different projects over the years. This is just one more way we can work together to support the arts in our community, and to keep young talent here in the Cedar Valley."
Theatre is meant to be a reflection of society, but how can we truly represent the mosaic of humankind without sharing diverse voices? Well, we can’t. It’s an issue that’s plagued the theatre and entertainment industry for ages, and a problem that oftentimes, we just can’t seem to get right. So how can we create theatre that is diverse, equitable, inclusive and an accurate representation of society? It starts by creating a platform for all voices to be heard, and here in the University of Northern Iowa Department of Theatre, that’s exactly what faculty and students are working to do.

At the heart of this work is the Multicultural Theatrical Society (MTS) – somewhat of a rising star on campus. One year ago, it started as a group of theatre students looking for a place to call their own, and over a short span of time, the group has evolved into a powerhouse for change. Partnering with faculty and leadership in the department, the MTS has organized discussions and workshops aimed at ensuring a more equitable environment for persons of color in the department, while actively working to elevate marginalized voices through unique performance and outreach events.

It’s a collaboration that gives students a chance to use their voices, and to be leaders in their own right. “Theatre is so collaborative, and that’s why it’s important to work collaboratively to solve problems,” says MTS co-treasurer Ray Nelson. “By educating people on different cultures, we can collaborate better, build trust, and a sense of community.”

Jim Bray, MTS advisor and assistant professor in the UNI Department of Theatre, says the group is an excellent example of the power found by working together. “This group was formed through collaboration,” Bray said. “I’m thankful our department head and all of our faculty are so willing to support change like this. MTS is a place for students from all walks of life to gather, and celebrate different voices. We’re growing and expanding very quickly, and having a pretty big impact on the department. The department has supported everything we’re doing, but the students are really the ones who are the leaders here.”

Over the course of their first year, the group’s mission and goals have taken on a life of their own – with far reaching impacts. “It’s really amazing to see the impact we’ve been able to make,” says Tatiana Sandoval, co-president of MTS. “Not only are we encouraging growth in the department, but in the university as a whole. Our work really is to educate people, and to celebrate our differences. Through the work we’ve done as a group, we’ve not only grown as students and performers, but I feel like we’ve really grown as people through this, and that’s very empowering.”

Though several of the founding MTS board members will graduate in the spring, they feel secure in the legacy they’re leaving future TheatreUNI students. “If you look at the theatre industry as a whole, there really is a reckoning, and it’s unlike anything that’s happened before,” says Zoella Sneed, co-president of MTS. “I think our department, and our group, are pioneers in creating change. I don’t know of many other departments that are doing the work we’re doing. It’s absolutely outstanding. I’m thankful that we have a place, and for the support from the department in recognizing the value of MTS and our mission. This group has taught us how to create change, stand up for ourselves and the people around us, and to be actively involved. That’s one of the biggest lessons I’ve learned here.”

Devin Yarkosky, secretary of MTS, says the group is solidifying a platform to be used by future students. “The work we’ve done is so important, because now we feel like we can use our voices, we have a platform where we can speak our truths,” she said. “It’s helping to make sure the learning environment and performing environment is comfortable, safe and inclusive for all students.”
Presently, drones are used for everything from topographical mapping, search and rescue efforts, traffic and safety studies, and even package delivery. As businesses and agencies find creative new ways to utilize drones, so too must developers find creative ways to build and program these drones to meet a variety of needs – and students in the UNI Department of Computer Science are doing just that.

For the past several years, students in the department have been heavily focused on drone programming. Andy Berns, assistant professor of computer science, says drones are a key part of his teaching process at the university. “I teach a software engineering class – real-time embedded systems – and it’s unique and helpful as a computer science student to get exposure to working with things like drones,” he said. “You get experience in hardware programming, which is a great skill to have, especially in terms of employability. A lot of the things we do are common in avionics and aeronautics, and there are quite a few of our students who have gone on to work at places like Collins Aerospace.”

After building and programming the drones, though, being able to test fly them was tricky due to regulations on UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles). So, the department had to get creative. With the help of a generous donation from former math professor Stan Walljasper, the department was able to purchase a drone flying cage. Now, students are able to safely fly and troubleshoot their drones outdoors using the cage, and they benefit from courses that focus on emerging technologies, thanks to support from Collins Aerospace, which awarded the department funds for drone materials and a course redesign.

The drone cage itself, Berns says, is relatively unique to UNI. “As far as I’m aware, we’re one of very few universities to have something like this,” Berns said. “It’s pretty exciting for a smaller institution like us.” The cage will be used by students to test out the drones they’ve built and programmed, as well as for student research projects involving drones and other UAVs.

As an undergraduate, each student in the department is required to have at least one semester of research, and it’s no surprise that many students choose to focus their work on drones. Alan McKay, a computer science major who worked with Berns on drone research over the summer, says that drones are a great way to build creative problem solving skills for students such as himself. “I wanted to do lower level stuff, closer to the circuit boards,” McKay said. “I like solving problems, and this is a new way of thinking about algorithms. The practical application of the work we’re doing is to take limited resources and be able to compute as much as you can with those resources. [Doing it in a hands-on way like this] allows you to gain a little more insight into what you’re studying, but also to further the field.”

“Building and programming these drones is a great opportunity for students to implement the concepts they’ve learned in class, and to take up something a little more complicated,” Berns said. “Embedded systems are a big part of the kind of work you might find as a computer science graduate, so it’s nice to give students exposure to that. These systems can do incredibly complicated things, but at the end of the day, there really are only a few functions, so it’s up to the student to design it creatively.”

In the past, students have teamed up with the UNI Department of Geography on research using drones for hyperspectral imaging, which can detect and identify minerals, terrestrial vegetation, and man-made materials and backgrounds.

Above: Computer science student Alan McKay and assistant professor Andy Berns test fly a drone.
Growing up in rural, landlocked Iowa, Catherine Yeoman never expected to find her passion in marine biology.

But as a junior in the UNI Department of Biology, Yeoman has already managed to kick off a unique college experience that’s brought her around the country — studying bottlenose dolphins in Florida, and rehabilitating baby seals in Cape Cod. “I’ve always loved animals, but if you told me two years ago that I’d be working with marine animals, or that I’d have all of these experiences under my belt in the first two years of college, I would have said no way.”
Diving in

It all started her freshman year at UNI, when Yeoman’s academic advisor shared some information with her about a summer research program in Florida. “I saw the research topics were on sharks and dolphins, and that really piqued my interest,” Yeoman said. “I’ve always loved the ocean; I fell in love with it through family vacations; scuba diving with manta rays in Hawaii and swimming with dolphins at Discovery Cove.”

Yeoman decided to apply for the program, and with the support of her professors, she was accepted. That summer, she spent her days buzzing around on a small research boat on the St. Johns River in Jacksonville, Florida, studying the health of the native bottlenose dolphin population.

“We’d go out on the boat once a week and collect water samples, and observe the dolphins to look for lesions, which are visual indicators of their health,” she said. “The juveniles are really curious, and will come right up to the boat to check you out. Looking into the eyes of a dolphin is a really neat experience, and the more you work with animals, the more you realize each one really does have a personality of its own. They’re so much fun.”

Yeoman said the experience confirmed that marine biology was the right path for her. “It was such a great experience, and I loved every minute of it,” she said. “You see some sad things, like how humans impact the ecosystem through pollution – whether it’s industrial runoff or trash in the waterways – but it’s gratifying being able to work so closely with the animals, to help them, and make a difference in their lives.”

Another summer, another adventure

Back at UNI for her sophomore year, it wasn’t long before Yeoman found herself being beckoned to the coast once again. This time, her journey took her to the National Marine Life Center in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where she spent the summer after her sophomore year working as a marine animal rehabilitation and environmental education intern.

Yeoman spent her time rehabilitating sea turtles and baby seal pups, and leading educational programs for the public. Working with the pups, and seeing them grow, were some of the best memories for Yeoman. “We had thirteen baby seals we’d take care of,” Yeoman said. “We’d feed them, administer treatments, and take care of them until they’re ready to go back to the ocean on their own. It was a really great opportunity to be able to work with these animals hands-on, and have that type of experience. By the end, you could line each seal pup up, and I’d be able to tell you who was who.”

Turning the tide

Aside from caring for the animals, another integral focus of Yeoman’s internship at the National Marine Life Center was education and outreach – something she says she’ll continue back home in Iowa.

“Educating people about how their actions affect the environment is a big part of the picture,” she said. “Here in Iowa, we’re a big agricultural state, and since we don’t live near the ocean, many people don’t realize how their actions have impacts across the country, and the world, on so many different ecosystems. Everything is connected, and we need to maintain the balance so everything functions properly. I plan to keep educating friends and family, and staying involved even back home in Iowa. It’s something that’s really important to me.”

Looking back at her experiences so far, Yeoman says she’s grateful to have had all of the opportunities she’s been connected to through UNI, and says she’s excited to see what comes next. “I’m really thankful for all of the support from my professors,” she said. “They’re always there to give me guidance, and say ‘you can do this.’ I really appreciate everything they do, and I couldn’t have started this journey without them.”

After she finishes her undergraduate studies here at UNI, Yeoman plans to attend veterinary school, and eventually work as an aquatic veterinarian. “I don’t know exactly what that’s going to look like yet, whether rehabilitating or taking care of animals at an aquarium, but I know it’ll come together,” she said. “The biggest thing that matters is that I’m doing what I love, and making a difference.”
The first time she stepped inside of the UNI Metal Casting Center, surrounded by the red-hot glow of molten metal, Maria Alverio knew she was hooked. “There are two types of people in this world: the type who see molten metal and run away, and the type who can’t help but go closer. I’m definitely the second type,” Alverio said.

Sparking a passion
Alverio recently graduated from UNI with a degree in manufacturing engineering technology and an emphasis in metal casting, and she’s now in her first year of grad school at UNI, where she’s continuing her metal casting studies. Coming into college, Alverio never dreamed of doing this type of work. She had always been interested in history and intended to major in it, but fate had a different plan.

"During my visit to UNI, there was a breakout session to tour the Department of Technology, and the Metal Casting Center," she said. "When they called that group, it felt as if I was being called to follow. I stood up, and my parents looked at me like, ‘what are you doing?’ But after that tour, and the first introductory course, I knew I had found what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

Forging unique experiences
From day one, Alverio threw herself into the world of metal casting, and has never looked back. Over the course of her undergraduate career at UNI, she spent four years working at the UNI Metal Casting Center – one of the top institutions in the world focused on foundry research, with expertise in the specialty process of sand casting.

At the center, Alverio had the opportunity to work with organizations around the world to design, build and test metal casting materials, processes and molds, which were used by everyone from private companies to the U.S. military.

She’s melted iron, steel, aluminum, brass – and even a meteorite, which holds the spot as her most memorable casting experience so far. "There was a meteor that had crashed in Russia, and a customer sent us parts of the meteor to melt down because they wanted to forge it into damascus knives," she said. "It was a pretty unique experience. The forging process can’t be used until all of the non-metal portions are removed, and the meteorite is cast into blocks. When you melt a material like that, all of the chunks of earth that were embedded in the metal from the crash float to the surface as slag. Slag is the impurities in the melt that you wouldn’t want in your final product. I actually kept some of the meteor slag, and still have it displayed on my bookshelf as a reminder of that experience."

Off campus, Alverio’s time at UNI led her to other unique experiences. She completed two internships with top-rated foundries in the Midwest. Through the internships, she experienced what it was like to work both on the crowded floor of a foundry, and behind the scenes in the engineering offices.

Breaking the mold
When asked what it’s like to be a female in a largely male-dominated field, Alverio says it doesn’t really faze her. “When I walk into a room, it wouldn’t be unusual for me to be one of a few women, or even the only woman,” she said. “But I choose not to think about that. I just focus on the skills and knowledge of the craft.”

Alverio says she’s found connections with other women in the metal casting industry – including Shelly Dutler, a UNI Department of Technology alumna who now works as an engineer for a metal casting solutions company. “I really look up to [Shelly]. She’s highly respected in the industry,” Alverio said. “I see her as sort of a mentor, and if I have questions, I ask her. I’ve also found ways to connect with other women in metal casting through LinkedIn and social media. There are plenty of women out there that I look up to.”

Alverio says she’s thankful to UNI and to her professors and supervisor for giving her the experiences she’s had, and a place to find her passion. “UNI gave me a place to explore, and to ask questions, and to try new things,” she said. “I’ve met some of my best friends here, and found amazing mentors. I’m so thankful for all of it.”
A TAKE ON SLANG

UNI linguistics professor talks about the evolution of language

In the age of memes, social media and text-message-speak, language is evolving faster than ever. New words seem to pop up overnight, and can disappear just as quickly. As a professor and linguist in the UNI Department of Languages and Literatures, Juan Carlos Castillo has a front row seat witnessing the evolution of language. Here, we talk with Castillo about words — how they’ve been, the ever-evolving nature of language and how he keeps up with it all in the classroom.

How do new words take root and spread?
Well, these days it’s really easy to do that. One example is how young people have always created new words, maybe to distinguish themselves from their parents and to be cool. But, of course, the way that those words spread in the past worked much more slowly. New words might have started in one group, and then little by little would spread across a city, and then maybe a singer would use them in a song. And that’s how they became mainstream. But these days, with the internet and social media, all you need is to get one person who has 3 million followers on Twitter to use this word and that’s it. It’s out there and now you can’t stop it. So we’re seeing that language is always changing, always moving, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it.

Do these new words change the way you communicate with students?
As far as me using those words, it simply doesn’t work. [Slang] serves more as an identity marker for each generation. That’s why my kids and my students laugh when I try to appear ‘woke,’ and use their slang. It sounds funny when I use it. I guess that’s good for a bit of humor, but it’s best if I stick to the slang from my generation.

Why is it important to study new words and their usage?
To me, exploring those new words has a dual purpose. On one hand, it allows me to gather new data and examples that I can then use in classes. On the other hand, it lets students realize how they themselves are changing the language, and in a sense being part of the history of English as it unfolds.

As a linguist and professor, how do all of these new words come to play in your teaching?
When I’m teaching, the most important thing is to make the subject relatable to students. In my linguistics class, I always ask my students to tell me a word that I probably don’t know. Every year, they have a list of new words that I’ve never heard of, and they always surprise me.

It’s very interesting to me, being able to see the language change at work. I’m always learning new things, and as a descriptive linguist, it’s not my job to tell people whether they’re wrong or right about a word or how they’re using it. I simply observe and describe what’s happening. Language is always changing, always moving, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it.

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Every day, Katie Hund wakes up ready for the next adventure at her dream job. Some days, she might be getting her hands dirty as she removes fallen trees, and other days, she might be giving a tour to a group of schoolchildren. The best part of working at a state park is that no two days are the same.

Hund, who graduated from the UNI Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences in 2007, has worked for the Iowa DNR the past 14 years, and currently manages Cedar Rock State Park near Quasqueton, Iowa. The park is home to hundreds of acres of forest, trails and riverfront public land, along with the famous Walter House – one of only two Frank Lloyd Wright-designed structures in the state that’s open to the public. Each year, the park and the house draw around 20,000 visitors from across the nation, and the globe.

This year, the Iowa State Parks system is celebrating 100 years, and Hund is taking this time as an opportunity to reflect on the importance of state parks, her role as a public servant, and how UNI helped prepare her for it all.

Growing up, Hund had always found herself drawn to the great outdoors – with a particular interest in the cross-sections of nature, history and storytelling. But she never realized her passions could be a career until she found her way to UNI – where she joined the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, and majored in earth science with a natural history interpretation emphasis. "I was always interested in environmental education, but more so informal education; I didn’t want to be stuck inside a classroom. I wanted to be outside," she said. "The program I studied at UNI aligned really well with my interests and strengths, and I knew straight away it was the right fit for what I wanted to do."
Hund worked her way through the program, taking on side jobs working with the UNI Museum and interning at Cedar Rock State Park as a student. Before she even graduated, Hund had secured herself a coveted position with the DNR, working at Cedar Rock, where she’s been ever since.

“Iowa DNR positions are pretty competitive, especially positions at state parks,” she said. “It really is a dream job for so many people; it’s a dream job for me. You can see why so many people want to do this type of work, which can make it difficult to stand out in the field. I truly believe my experiences and education at UNI is what helped me stand out, and get the job. Plus, I had so much support from professors, who really took a vested interest in me and my future, and really pushed for me to pursue my dreams.”

With the historic Walter House as the focal point of the park, Hund’s work is a little different than most state park positions. Sure, she’s outside helping maintain the park grounds, but she spends much of her time tending to partnerships with support groups like the non-profit Friends of Cedar Rock, local colleges and other organizations that are involved in the educational, planning, promotion and restoration aspects of the site. Interacting with the public is a big part of Hund’s job, whether it’s giving tours of the house or leading educational programs. “With most parks you just go in, experience the park by yourself, and never interact with any staff,” she said. “Because of the historic house we have here, the level of interpretation we share with the public is higher than most parks. We give guided tours of the house, and tell them about the history of it, the architecture, the grounds and the park itself. We meet people from all over the world who come to see the house. A big part of what I do is dealing with the public, and it’s really fun to be able to educate everyone about the site, and share some of our history with them.”

This year was meant to be full of celebrations at state parks across Iowa – including Cedar Rock State Park – but like everything, the COVID-19 pandemic foiled many of those planned activities. In a somewhat ironic turn of events, though, 2020 ended up being a record year for attendance in state parks across the state, as people turned to nature to find joy in tough times.

From her perspective, Hund says this is a testament to the importance of public lands – and why we need spaces where people can go to relax, get outside and enjoy nature. “The pandemic showed us that people want to get outside, and need to get outside,” she said. “Parks have been filled to the brim, and that goes to show how people seek out these experiences when times are tough; so many find nature rejuvenating and re-energizing. With so much land privately held in Iowa, parks are important spaces for the community to use and enjoy, and it’s important to conserve them for future generations.”
Quick campus stories with big impact

$40 million ITC renovation project wins state approval

UNI’s request for a major renovation and expansion of the Industrial Technology Center was fully funded over the next four years, after Governor Kim Reynolds signed the new budget into law earlier this year. Housed within the Industrial Technology Center is UNI’s Department of Technology, which educates students for work in Iowa’s manufacturing, electrical/electronics, print and construction fields – all growing industries within the state. There is a 95% placement rate across the department’s programs and 90% of those graduates are placed in Iowa. Expanded facilities will support an anticipated 40% enrollment increase.

UNI Physics professor awarded National Science Foundation grant

UNI physics professor Pavel Lukashev recently received a National Science Foundation Award grant of more than $240,000. The grant will support research in the emerging field of spintronics – which joins magnetism and electronics to expand the capacity of electronic devices, making them run faster and more efficiently. Lukashev and his team will use the funding to continue their investigation of new materials that may possess the necessary magnetic and electronic properties for large scale development of new spintronic devices. Several undergraduate students in the department have been involved in the ongoing research project over the last few years.

A new name for the UNI Department of Communication Studies

The Department of Communication Studies has a new name: The Department of Communication and Media. The name change marks the department’s increasing focus on media programs, which include: digital media (with emphases in digital journalism, digital media leadership, and digital production), and interactive digital studies. Both programs have nationally acclaimed faculty and high placement rates for graduates.

Honoring this year’s Yager Teaching Award recipients

This year’s Yager Teaching Award winners are Elizabeth Mastalio, who teaches math at Mid City High School in Davenport, and Ashley Cardamone, who teaches art at Holmes Junior High School in Cedar Falls. The Dr. Robert E. and Phyllis M. Yager Exemplary Teaching Recognition Award is sponsored by the family of Bob Yager, an internationally recognized science educator and UNI alumnus. The award is designed to highlight UNI graduates who have gone on to excellence as K-12 teachers in Iowa, and to identify a UNI faculty member’s contribution to their success and the success of the teachers’ students.

UNI Physics student earns NSF Research Fellowship Award

Joseph Tibbs, a physics and biochemistry double major at the University of Northern Iowa, recently received a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Award – a highly competitive program that will fully pay for his tuition and provide additional stipend to allow him to pursue his doctoral studies in bioengineering. Tibbs will attend the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he will work and study in the lab of Dr. Brian Cunningham, whose work with medical sensors and cancer detection now includes research into COVID-19, as he develops detection methods that would allow diagnostic facilities at the point of care to count each virus directly using a new form of ultrasensitive biosensor microscopy.

New musical, created by retired UNI professor, secures Tony-nominated actress as star

The tale of the U.S. women’s suffrage movement inspired retired UNI School of Music professor Nancy Hill Cobb to create her very own musical, called “The Suffragist.” The musical will tell the story of the women who fought to push the 19th amendment to the finish line, and will feature Tony-nominated actress Nancy Opel as the star of the show. Opel was nominated for Best Actress in a Musical in 2002 for her role as Penelope Pennywise in “Urinetown.” Other Broadway credits are “Evita,” “Teddy and Alice,” “Sunday in the Park with George,” “Anything Goes,” “Memphis” and “Cinderella. The world premiere of “The Suffragist” will be held at the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center in July of 2021.

UNI announces $14.5 million Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center renovation project

The University of Northern Iowa recently announced a campaign to help fund a $14.5 million renovation and expansion of the Gallagher Bluedorn. Originally built to host 140 events and serve up to 14,000 guests annually, the Gallagher Bluedorn currently hosts nearly 600 events, and more than 150,000 guests each year – operating at ten times above expected capacity. With no major updates having been done since the Gallagher Bluedorn was built, the facility is in need of modernization and updates. The renovation plan includes the addition of much-needed facilities, including additional restrooms, a secured coat room, modern box office and service counters, a new patron lounge, a multi-purpose event space for private dinners, rehearsals, small performances and more, as well as seating improvements in the Great Hall, a new dynamic entry plaza, and an added drive lane for drop-off.

Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences receives $150,000 Carver Grant

The UNI Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences received $150,000 in funding from The Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust, and the UNI Foundation, to purchase and install 28 new petrographic microscopes in two of their labs. The new equipment will allow students to study rocks and minerals in incredible detail, using polarized light to help identify different minerals.

UNI Communication and Media professor’s book earns multiple awards

A UNI professor’s book earned multiple awards and recognitions over the last year. Christopher R. Martin’s “No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class” made the prestigious list of the best in scholarly titles reviewed by Choice Magazine – a publishing unit of the Association of College and Research Libraries. “No Longer Newsworthy” charts the decline of labor reporting from the late 1960s onwards and reveals why and how the media lost sight of the American working class and the effects of it doing so. Martin’s book also won the 2020 C.L.R. James Award (for Published Books for Academic or General Audiences) from the Working Class Studies Association.

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Philosophy major wins Fulbright Scholarship to study in Slovenia

Cade Olmstead, a philosophy major at the University of Northern Iowa, recently received a Fulbright U.S. Student Program award to study and conduct research in Slovenia for the 2020-2021 academic year. Olmstead will conduct his research at the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts and the University of Ljubljana as part of a project to study modern subjectivity and its relation to contemporary political discourse.
Students team up with industry leaders to research Parkinson’s disease treatments

Speech and communication are some of the most basic functions in our everyday lives — and they come so naturally to most, it’s easy to take them for granted. But what if you weren’t able to communicate, or express your thoughts and ideas effectively? It would be frustrating, and even frightening — and that’s an everyday reality for the millions of people living with neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s.

Over the years, researchers have made breakthrough discoveries in the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, but one of the most effective treatments remains the same: early intervention. Recently, two students in the UNI Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders — Raelynn Meade and Clara Petersen — teamed up with industry leaders on a collaborative research project at the forefront of early intervention treatment. “The more I’ve learned about [speech-language pathology], the more I realize how important it is for people to have a voice, and to help them regain control of their own communication,” Meade said.

Under the mentorship of Dr. Laura Pitts, associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at UNI, and in collaboration with Dr. Miriam Rafferty at the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab (SRALab) and Northwestern University in Chicago, Petersen and Meade are assisting with a quality improvement study of an early intervention program for persons with Parkinson’s disease at the SRALab. This research project connects UNI students with the industry leading SRALab, which has been ranked as the best rehabilitation hospital in the nation by U.S. News and World Report every year since 1991.

“Both Raelynn and Clara were enthusiastic about joining our ongoing collaboration with the SRALab,” Pitts said. “It’s an extraordinary opportunity to contribute to innovative clinical research with larger patient populations and to interact with globally respected experts in the field of rehabilitation. In addition, our students often advance to complete clinical practicums with the institution.”

Meade says having the opportunity to work side-by-side with top experts in the field is a huge boost for her future dream of becoming a speech-language pathologist. “It’s humbling, and an incredible opportunity to connect with people at such a high level — especially as an undergraduate,” Meade said. “I’m really thankful for the opportunity just to make connections and help people. We’re playing a relatively small role, but this research is so impactful, and just knowing something we do here in Iowa may help someone around the country is great to be a part of.”

For their role in the research, Meade and Petersen are working with data from the SRALab’s early intervention program, with the goal of optimizing current therapy models. After analyzing the data, the pair will provide suggestions for how to improve the program. By better understanding how the early intervention program is reaching and assisting people with Parkinson’s Disease, the students’ work will help improve the current program and address any barriers to participation.

Pitts says by participating in undergraduate research, students develop a love of discovery — something that UNI, and the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, emphasizes strongly. “When our students unlock that love of discovery, we see them ultimately improving therapy techniques and the overall patient experience,” she said. “Our department is widely recognized as an outstanding program, especially for providing hands-on clinical and research experiences for both our undergraduate and master’s students. It’s something that our department emphasizes.”

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COMMUNIQUÉ
As a secondary teaching major, each student takes part in three structured field experiences, gaining teaching experience in the classroom starting their sophomore year. Outside of the classroom, programs focus heavily on community outreach and building partnerships with local schools and organizations – teaching students to be leaders not only in the classroom, but in their communities as well.

In the Department of Technology, Tech Education students partner with local school districts on engaging and interactive building projects. In the Department of Art, Art Education majors routinely work with local school districts to create murals, build sculptures and provide unique programming to youngsters. Science Education students help operate the Science Education Resource Center, which collaborates with K-12 science teachers to provide science kits and learning materials to local school districts. In the Department of Theatre, students have the chance to work directly with youth from the community to provide unique programming and learning experiences centered around theatre and drama for youth.

Throughout the other secondary teaching programs in CHAS, students are just as involved – leading to astoundingly high placement rates for graduates. Each year, the Department of Technology at UNI produces more Tech Ed teachers than any other institution in the state, and the Department of Languages and Literatures produces more Language Arts teachers than any other institution – with thousands of graduates teaching around the state and the nation.

John Fritch, Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences, says he’s proud of the UNI secondary teaching graduates, and the impact they’re making around the state and the country. “Every day, our graduates are shaping their communities and students’ lives in great ways,” Fritch said. “Teachers are the backbone of society, and we are proud of our graduates and the great work they are doing in our schools.”
RELIGIOUS LITERACY

Grant allows religion professor to develop curriculum for public schools

When local public school teachers started emailing Michael Graziano, UNI professor of religions, for advice on how to handle religion in the classroom, he saw an unmet need. Now, a new $10,000 grant from the Whiting Foundation will allow Graziano to develop a seminar on religion for public school teachers. From how to be inclusive of religious diversity, to how to discuss religion in school curriculum, Graziano has the expertise to help teachers navigate these situations — and a vision for an inclusive future. Here, he discusses his research interests and how they led to this latest grant project.

You teach in UNI’s Department of Philosophy and World Religions. What exactly does education in this area entail in a university setting, and what aspects do you focus on?

My area of specialty is the history of religion, particularly in the U.S. I’m interested in how religious organizations have interacted with the law, how they make their claims and how they get people to follow them; how the U.S. government interacts with, manipulates and influences ideas about religion, and how religious groups and institutions interact with the government. The kind of applied research that I do, especially since coming to UNI, is dealing with public schools and how teaching about religion and religious diversity play out in the classroom.

You received a grant to create a seminar on religion curriculum in public school classrooms. Where did the idea come from?

A number of teachers who I’d never met before at various Iowa public schools had found me online and would send me emails with questions. They’d ask things like, ‘Is this thing that we’re doing legal?’ ‘Can our tenth grade choir class perform at a church?’ All these things about religion and law that they weren’t quite sure about. The first thing I’d always tell them is that I’m not a lawyer and I can’t give legal advice, but I can talk broadly about what the guidelines are today. I kept getting these emails and I thought, ‘Let’s formalize this. Let’s make something out of this.’ So, we pitched the Whiting Foundation.

They’re interested in supporting projects that demonstrate the value of the humanities in the public square. This was a great fit for UNI, because UNI is very interested in public engagement and service learning. So, the idea was to get funds to establish a summer workshop where teachers could come and get some help on the specific challenges they were facing in the classroom.

What are some examples of struggles facing teachers with religion in the classroom?

That would probably boil down into two main areas. One of them is how to think about religion as a kind of diversity in the classroom. So, that might be how you interact with religiously diverse students, parents or community members. The other area would be actually teaching about religion. So, you know, if you’re in high school world history class, and you’re scared to talk about the Crusades because it involves religion, that’s not a good situation to be in, because it’s kind of hard to talk about that without talking about religion. So, actually thinking about how this shows up in the curriculum, and what are some good best practices for teaching about it in school?

What would you say is the goal of the project?

I want the project to promote diversity and inclusion in the classroom. I also want the project to help best prepare kids for being people in a global society, as we’re increasingly interconnected. The other one is just to help out teachers. Those are my three big practical goals, and I think all three of those demonstrate the value that UNI can bring to the community. But also the community has a lot of knowledge and expertise that it can share with us. This is not academics parachuting into public school teachers’ classrooms to tell them how to do their job, because they’re already very good at the job. What we want to do is respond to the challenges that are organically emerging for them. In that kind of working together, I think it’ll be a really excellent model of engaged learning.
Alumni updates from across the nation

1950s

’52 Eli (Stetter) Leslie, BA, San Diego, CA, sang jazz tunes at the Bernardo Heights Country Club Sept. 14, 2019, and plays piano concerts monthly at Oakmount of Escondido Hills.

’58 John Focht, BA, Cedar Falls, was named one of the Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier’s 8 Over 80 for 2020.

’59 Paul Lundberg, BA, Indianapolis, was a vocal music teacher in Hartley, Dyersville, Southeast Warren Center-Mills and Lacona. He was a member of the Pride of Iowa Barbershop, started a barbershop chorus in Sheldon, formed a gospel quartet, won first prize singing at the state fair and plans to continue thrill seeking.

1960s

’68 Connie (Worl) Verti, BA, Aagsaga, CA, is semi-retired teaching voice and piano lessons three days a week. She also stays busy with grandchildren and hobbies, such as music-classes with granddaughters. She is very proud to be a graduate of the UNI music department.

1970s

’70 Dwight Bachman, BA, Williamston, CT, was named Valedictorian for the 100 Men Class Notes of 1970. Dwight, BA, Willimantic, CT, decided to move to Hawaii after 28 years of winters in Minnesota. She and her husband were able to work from home until retirement July 5, 2009.

’70 Barbara (Norris) Corson, BA, Waterloo, was named Valedictorian for the 100 Men Class Notes of 1970. Dwight, BA, Willimantic, CT, decided to move to Hawaii after 28 years of winters in Minnesota. She and her husband were able to work from home until retirement July 5, 2009.

1980s

’80 Laura Leibenthal, BM, Walkalia, HI, won first prize singing at the state fair and plans to continue thrill seeking.

’85 Pauline Atkinson, BA, Waterloo, was named one of the Waterloo/Cedar Falls 8 Over 80 for 2020.

1990s

’93 Saul Farber, MA, Waterloo, received the 2000 Gold Star Award for Outstanding Teaching. She is an English language development specialist at Waterloo Lincoln Elementary.

’94 Tyrone (Sheldon) Rowe, BA, Cedar Falls, had a story titled “Looking for the Sale Sign” published in the book “Chicken Soup for the Soul: Angels all Around.”


2000s


’00 Tamar Sankidzze, MM, Austin, TX, is head of voice division at the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin.

’02 Dwight Bachman, BA, Cedar Falls, was selected as the artist of the 2000s. Dwight, BA, Willimantic, CT, decided to move to Hawaii after 28 years of winters in Minnesota. She and her husband were able to work from home until retirement July 5, 2009.

’02 Michael Green, BA, Huntington- Beach, CA, was admitted to the partnership at PwC.

’03 Kate (Melloy) Goettel, BA, Oak Park, IL, was named the assistant professor of flute at the University of Kansas.

2010s

’10 Amy (Costlow) McKinney, BA, MA ’12, Fort Mill, SC, is the program development manager with Novant Health Presbyterian Medical Center Foundation.

’10 Tamar Sankidzze, MM, Austin, TX, was featured on the partnership at PwC.

’10 Michael Green, BA, Huntington- Beach, CA, was admitted to the partnership at PwC.

’10 Tamar Sankidzze, MM, Austin, TX, was featured on the partnership at PwC.
Futures are built here

We know that it takes more than knowledge to go far in the world. It takes hard work, determination, and even sometimes, support from others. That’s where UNI comes in. Our dedication to each of our students creates one of the most unique college experiences in the Midwest. We’re at the apex of hands-on learning, direct faculty partnership, and experiences that teach you to think. If you’ve got a little bit of grit and you’re ready to start, join us today.

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