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Newsletters of the Graduate School

Graduate School

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Winter 2022

## Newsletter Winter 2022

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Margaret Savoie

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## Graduate School

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### Newsletter Winter 2022



Season's Greetings to the Alumni, Students, Colleagues, and Friends of the Graduate School!

It is difficult to believe that we have reached the end of 2022. The year is one that brought many changes to the Graduate School. With great excitement, we share some of those changes in our Fall/Winter 2022 issue of the newsletter. First, however, I begin by sharing news that you may have come to expect.

You will have the chance to read about our winners and other outstanding performances from the University of Mississippi's 2022 Three Minute Thesis (3MT®) competition this fall. We were fortunate to have four accomplished professionals from the Oxford area serve as our judges. I am pleased to introduce you to the individuals who helped select this year's winners.

- Dr. Germain McConnell, a former Assistant Dean and a three-time graduate of the University with a doctorate in K-12 Educational Leadership, recently returned to Oxford as the Chief of Staff on the Oxford School District's Superintendent's Cabinet after leading the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science for several years.
- Mr. Neil White, of Oxford, is known for his literary work and publishing. In particular, his memoir, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, was a New York Times bestseller and garnered critical acclaim. In addition to running a small publishing company, White writes plays and essays and teaches memoir writing.
- Dr. Erwin Dawkins, originally from Sardis, attended the University for his bachelor's degree. After graduating from dental school, Dawkins returned to Oxford and purchased a local practice, now known as the Dawkins Family Dental Clinic. The clinic offers preventive dental care and treatments for members of the community.
- Ms. Angela Moore Atkins, originally from North Carolina, earned her master of Arts in Southern Studies at the University. In addition to publications in major outlets such as ESPN, Atkins has taught journalism

courses and now serves as the Associate Director of Annual Giving and Digital Giving Officer for University Development on campus.

The judges had a difficult task because we had a phenomenal group of finalists. We are grateful for their time and discernment in helping us select our *overall* winner. In the new year, be on the lookout for details about how you can join us in sending our winner to the 3MT® regional competition.

Next, several stories introduce you to other exceptional students in the Graduate School. In this issue, you will read about a student whose artistic work debuted in Las Vegas. You will also learn about our graduate student-athletes who excel on and off the field/court. We provide an overview of the SEC Emerging Scholars program and introduce this year's scholars. You will also find stories about our four newest Southern Regional Education Board Doctoral and Dissertation Scholars and the 2022 recipient of our Advancing STEM scholarship (**give to the Advancing STEM scholarship fund** at <https://umfoundation.givingfuel.com/nowandever?selectFund=Graduate%20School%20Support%20Fund>; select the "Advancing STEM Scholarship").

Finally, learn about some of those changes in the Graduate House I mentioned earlier. Meet our new Assistant Dean of Professional Development and Communication, Dr. Sandra Spiroff, and our graduate assistants who help ensure the Graduate School runs smoothly while they complete their own degree requirements. Finally, the Graduate School is working to increase support for postdoctoral fellows on the campus and we invite you to learn more about this endeavor, led by Dr. Spiroff this fall, to uplift and advance these individuals who are essential to the research mission at the University.

Before I conclude, I will share one additional exciting change from this past year. Although not a story in this issue, one key accomplishment was the implementation of raises to the minimum stipends for graduate assistants across campus. Several years have passed since the last increase in the minimum stipend, and the commitment from the Chancellor and Provost to our graduate students ensured that this was a priority for the current academic year. We are grateful for their investment in and valuing of our graduate students. In addition, our Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance, Steven Holley, and members of his staff provided essential support to bring the increase across our campus to fruition. We look forward to building on this momentum as we continue to elevate graduate education at The University of Mississippi in 2023.

As we close, I invite you to connect with us (via email at [gschool@olemiss.edu](mailto:gschool@olemiss.edu) or via our **Grad Notes form**) or to stop by and visit the Graduate House. We wish you a blessed holiday season with all the things that make this time of year special.

Happy holidays and best wishes for 2023!

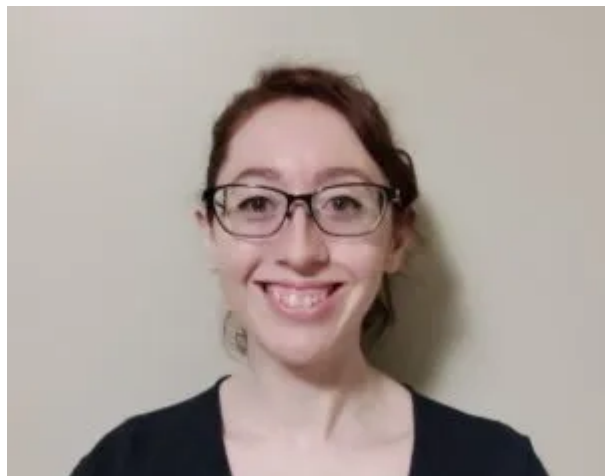
**Annette S. Kluck, Ph.D.**

*Dean of the Graduate School*

## And the winner is...Meet this Year's Three Minute Thesis winner and other top performers

*By: Margaret Savoie*

Drum roll please... this year's Three Minute Thesis (3MT®) overall winner is Kendall Wontor, a **doctoral chemistry student!** Wontor's research focuses on microplastics in oysters.



The 2022 UM 3MT Winner Kendall Wontor

Wontor spent most of her childhood in Texas but most recently lived in Hawaii before relocating to Mississippi. Her time in Hawaii sparked her interest in microplastics.

"I loved going to the beach," said Wontor. "As a chemist, seeing all the plastics wash up on the shore made me curious about the breakdown pathway of plastics and the characteristics of microplastics in the environment."

"Microplastics are a diverse suite of contaminants with different polymers, additives, sizes, and morphologies. Microplastics can also attract other pollutants, such as heavy metals, potentially introducing them into the food chain as the plastic is caught on gills or mistaken for prey," explained Wontor's advisor, Dr. James V. Cizdziel, professor of chemistry and biochemistry and coordinator of forensic chemistry.

Specifically, Wontor's research uses analytical chemistry to answer questions about microplastics in the environment. Wontor has multiple current research projects in both Mississippi Gulf Coast oysters and the Mississippi River system. Some of the questions include: (1) how many microplastics are present, (2) what type of plastics are they made of, (3) what size and shape are they, and (4) can we find a potential source of some of these microplastics. Answers to these questions play an essential role in understanding the risk microplastics pose to both humans and the environment, as well as the ability to target clean-up efforts.

"Microplastics are abundant in the Mississippi River and Mississippi Sound. Oysters are exposed to these small plastic particles. This is a concern because oysters are filter-feeders and the microplastics may interfere with oyster biology. Oysters are a foundational species in the Gulf and an economic resource to the region," explained Cizdziel.

"I would love to be able to continue my research on microplastics as a professor at the university level," said Wontor. Such a position would not only allow her to continue learning and discovering but would also allow her to share her knowledge with the next generation of scientists.

Wontor is no stranger to presenting her research. She presented "Microplastics in Oysters from the Mississippi Sound" at the National Environmental Monitoring Conference in a special session on "Analyzing Microplastics in the Environment: Striving to Better Assess Occurrence, Fate and Effects." She will represent UM this year at the regional competition in Tampa in March 2023.

The Graduate School is happy to also announce our 3MT® winners for specific categories. They are as follows:

## People's Choice



Emily Gravelle, 2022 People's Choice Winner

This year's People Choice Award Winner is Emily Gravelle, a **pharmaceutical administration** doctoral student from Prattville, Alabama.

Gravelle's research centers on Naloxone, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose, which was made available without a prescription at Mississippi pharmacies using a state standing order. However, just because Naloxone is lawfully available does not mean that patients necessarily have access to it. Local pharmacies may not stock the medication or may not be willing to dispense Naloxone under this standing order. Gravelle examined the effectiveness of

Mississippi's state standing order for Naloxone by conducting a secret shopper survey of Naloxone availability across all Mississippi community pharmacies. The team found that around 37% of all Mississippi pharmacies had Naloxone available under state standing order and that almost 1/5 of all Mississippi counties lacked a pharmacy where patients could get Naloxone. This research provides evidence that further work is needed to implement the Naloxone standing order in Mississippi effectively.

"In the future, I hope to continue to serve my community as an advocate for improved healthcare policy, implementation, and practice," said Gravelle.

## Tied for First Place Doctoral



Baharul Islam, Tied for first place Doctoral

Two students, both from Bangladesh, tied for first place in the Doctoral category of this year's competition. They were Baharul Islam, a doctoral candidate in **pharmaceutical sciences emphasizing medicinal chemistry**, and Maisha Sadia, a doctoral candidate in **electrical engineering**.

Islam presented his research on the discovery of a new class of painkillers. Due to the growing severity of the opioid epidemic, Islam's research seeks to discover new therapeutics for pain management without the addiction liability.

chaos theory, which focuses study on unique and unpredictable behavior in systems, to design circuits that are secure and can protect hardware from hackers. Each circuit can perform all the basic logic operations without causing any variation in the power consumption or speed of the device's cooling fan.

"The future is unpredictable, just like chaos, and I'd like to stick with it to design even smaller circuits that take up less area but [are] able to perform more operations," said Sadia. "It would be my dream to see my design fabricated into a chip someday."

Sadia has utilized



Maisha Sadia, tied for first place doctoral

## First Place Master's



Sumeet Kulkarni, first place masters

Sumeet Kulkarni, **secondary education** master's student from Pune, India, won first place in the Master's division of this year's 3MT® competition.

Kulkarni's presentation explored the question of the best way for experts to communicate information about their field with the lay audience. His message was that communication which assumes that the general public has a deficit of knowledge—that the

sole role of the expert is to fill in this gap—limits public engagement.

According to Kulkarni, “The correct way to communicate science is to shun discourse and encourage dialogue that lends the audience a voice as well and encourages an exchange of ideas.”

“I feel very excited and honored to win this competition [category] among a very talented field of finalists,” said Kulkarni.

## Tied for Second Place Master’s



Mitchell Roberts, tied for second place masters

Mitchell Roberts, **a philosophy master’s student** from Florida, and Preethi Lakkala, a **masters student in pharmaceuticals** from India tied for second place in the Master’s category in this year’s 3MT®.

Roberts presented his research, which is concerned with the philosophical question of how one can know whether technology can embody moral values independent of its use. For example, how do we know whether guns are “bad” or medicine is “good.” Roberts argues that to answer this question accurately, one should attend to how technology is normally used, but also attend to how it is abnormally used.

“I am interested in getting my Ph.D. beyond this and furthering my research on the philosophy of technology,” said Roberts, “I’m really interested in working with students and getting other people excited about questions they didn’t even know they had about the world.”

Lakkala’s research is on developing a hollow vaginal device using stereolithography 3D printing technology for treating recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis. The goal of the research is to create a drug-delivering device to deliver the drug to vaginal tissue for several days, avoiding the need for multiple drug administrations and reducing adverse effects associated with the drugs.

“My passion for creating innovative drug delivery systems to address the drawback associated with conventional drugs is what first sparked my interest,” said Lakkala.

In the future she hopes to be a formalization development scientist after the completion of a doctoral degree.



The Graduate School is proud of all the 3MT® participants in both the preliminary and final rounds. Thank you to everyone who has supported these students in their endeavors.

Preethi Lakkala, tied for second place  
masters



THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

## Graduate School

## Modern languages, health and kinesiology, and English...oh my!

*By: Margaret Savoie*

The 3 Minute Thesis (3MT®) competition provides an opportunity for our research-driven graduate students to present their work to an educated audience outside their own discipline. This past semester, 70 students presented their research in the first round of The University of Mississippi's 3MT® competition. Of these 70 students, 26 advanced to the final round. Among these finalists were three doctoral students: Timur Akishev from the department of modern languages; Daphney Stanford from the department of health, exercise science, and recreation management; and Sarah Margaret Pittman from the department of English. Their presentations provided audience members insight into the fascinating research conducted by graduate students at the institution.



Timur Akishev

Akishev, originally from Kazakhstan, studied English to become an instructor of English and linguistics in Kazakhstan. He later came to The University of Mississippi in 2018 to help further develop his professional skills.

For his 3MT presentation, Akishev presented on borrowing words from English for use in Russian and Kazakh. His work investigates the specificities of language contact between these three languages commonly spoken in his native home of North Kazakhstan.

“Linguistics is a fascinating research field,” explained Akishev. “You can learn about languages, their history

and structure, and so many other things.”

Akishev's personal experience back home in Kazakhstan and the ongoing changes in the linguistic situation sparked this interest.

Daphney Stanford, who is pursuing a doctoral degree in health and kinesiology, also presented innovative work with real world applications.

Stanford, originally from Colleyville, TX, received her undergraduate degree in biological sciences at the University of Southern Mississippi while running *cross country/track*. She then decided to stay in the state and continue her studies to pursue a master's degree in exercise science at The University of Mississippi. While pursuing her master's, Stanford completed a thesis about the cardiovascular and muscular response to blood flow restriction exercise under Dr. Matthew Jessee. After that, Stanford opted to continue her studies further, leading her to enroll in the doctoral program.



Daphney Stanford

“My research involves the application of blood flow restriction, which is where you put a cuff that is similar to a blood pressure cuff on the upper part of the limb and inflate it until blood flow is reduced,” said Stanford. The idea behind this research is that restricting blood flow might reduce recovery time after an injury.

She continued, “In the Applied Human Health and Physical Function lab we have looked at the variability of the change in blood flow and compared the cardiovascular and exercise response to different blood flow restriction devices and for my dissertation we are investigating whether inflating and deflating a cuff on the upper arm impacts the circulatory system.”

If Stanford's research uncovers changes in the circulatory system caused by such practices, her findings will provide valuable information to physical therapists considering the use of blood flow restriction to treat injuries.



Sarah Margaret Pittman's performance merged seemingly distinct fields into an engaging way to understand literature. Pittman is enrolled in the combined M.A. and Ph.D. program in English.

Pittman who is originally from Coppell, TX, is a former honors business student at the University of Arkansas with a finance major and double minors in economics and English. Before joining The University of Mississippi, she studied abroad at the London School of Economics.

“My dissertation project ‘Capitalism's Vampiric Kiss: Bankruptcy, Competition, and Extraction in Victorian Literature’ uses realist and Gothic works of Victorian literature in conjunction with economic

Sarah Margaret Pittman

and scientific theories of the nineteenth century to better understand the relationship between financial bankruptcy and the exhaustion of environmental resources,” explained Pittman.

She continued, “This project argues that mid- and late-Victorian literature not only points out how humans are entangled with and dependent on the environment but also warns of the consequences of depleting finite resources such as fossil fuels and money.”

Prior to her doctoral studies, Pittman worked as a corporate debt restricting analyst in Texas. Many of her clients were in the oil and gas industry and her last major client made pressure pumps for oil extraction. Pittman knew she wanted to write about bankruptcy and Gothic literature but only considered depictions of extraction in literature once she took a seminar on Victorian environmentalists.

These three 3MT® presentations provide just a glimpse into the range of academic work and research studies pursued by our students in different graduate programs. The Graduate School is proud to showcase these students and their educational endeavors and looks forward to seeing what the future holds for them and all our students.

## Lights, Camera, Action on the Las Vegas Opera Stage!

By: Margaret Savoie

This fall, Las Vegas enjoyed a taste of the creative talent within The University of Mississippi's **Master of Music (M.M.)** program, and what it has to offer. *Letters to Lily*, written by M.M. student, Emily Clements, hit the Opera Las Vegas stage from September 30<sup>th</sup> through October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

*Letters to Lily* is an Opera Las Vegas production, solely produced by women. Opera Las Vegas selected *Letters to Lily* for the Women Composers Festival season to celebrate women's power and shine a light on LGBTQ themes.

"This LGBTQ coming-of-age story is dramatically crafted to be bookended by a flashback and then a real-time recollection of the watershed Stonewall riots. Lily has a secret from her narrow-minded parents, one that explodes musically into expressive song," said the Opera Las Vegas.



Emily Clements

Clements's love for music began during her youth, growing up with a father who worked as a composer and pianist. Much of her inspiration is from Broadway shows, operas, and the storytelling of music through theater. Before finding her passion for voice and opera, Clements was a violinist for eight years. Prior to attending The University of Mississippi, Clements began her academic career at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) with Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and Intensive Compositional Studies.

"Emily is a hard-working musician who is clearly passionate about her art," said Dr. Joseph Milton, associate professor of music, "She is a joy to teach, and I am so glad that she decided to pursue a graduate study at The University of Mississippi."

*Letters to Lily* was a slow progression over four years. After Clements attended her first young artist program, she left inspired by the singers, new music, and shows. During that same time, one of her mentors, Dr. Linda Lister, saw the world premiere of her own opera *State of Grace*. Witnessing this event was impactful for Clements because she saw how Lister shaped her story through music. Clements says this was a turning point for her.

“I wanted a show that everyone can relate to, [both] opera people to non-opera people,” said Clements, “the idea of having two leading ladies was important as well, and I wanted to celebrate Lily and Sam’s love story as well as bring awareness to the 1969 Stonewall Riots/LGBTQ movement and today’s social justice issues.”

After a discussion of preliminary ideas with Lister, Clements had the opportunity to workshop a few scenes of her music in the Opera Scenes show. The following year, Clements was accepted to the composition program to take private lessons with Dr. Jennifer Bellor. The two worked together for two years, and Bellor mentored Clements through writing the entire opera. Clements took the chance and proposed the opera to the Las Vegas companies. As the production started casting, Bellor and Lister were asked to produce it.

“It was full circle for me to not only be taught by these amazing mentors but to have them bring my story to life on stage and through the music with Opera Las Vegas,” said Clements.

The University does not have a degree track in music composition, and students are not required to have their work performed. Milton said that this is both exciting and rare to have a student’s original work featured in the realm of a public performance.

“I continue to hope and work to pull more advanced singers, like Emily, into our masters of music/performance program, so that the level of artistry continues to rise within the department of music,” said Milton.

This professional engagement from student musicians in the program reflects highly on the music program, and such engagement shows evidence of tangible success and productivity in the incredibly competitive realm of classical music.

Clements’s resume does not stop with *Letters to Lily*. She was Cupid in *Orpheus in the Underworld*, Second Lady in *Dido and Aeneas*, and Constance (cover) in *Dialogues of the Carmelites* at UNLV. Clements also performed in *Pirates of Penzance* with Vegas City Opera and Summer Super Theatre. Before that, Clements originated the role of Felicity in Lister’s world premiere of *State of Grace* in the fall of 2018, and she performed in Cynthia Wong’s workshop premiere of *No Guarantees*. Additionally,



Dr. Joseph Milton, Associate Professor of Music

Clements performed at the National Opera Association conference in Salt Lake City for *State of Grace*, played Elizabeth Tabor in *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, and was in the chorus in *Little Women* at Harrower's Young Artist Program in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Excelling on and off the field/court: 19 Graduate and Professional Student Athletes

By: Margaret Savoie



Dr. Bob Baker, Senior Associate Athletic Director for Student Athlete Development.

The University of Mississippi is home to 16 sports teams, 417 student athletes, and 19 graduate and professional student athletes enrolled in 13 different graduate and professional programs. In addition to the typical student athlete responsibilities such as training and game day schedules, these graduate student athletes have scholastic responsibilities at the graduate education level. However, these fantastic athletes excel on the track, court, or field and in the classroom.

“A lot of our athletes are high profile. Look at Tim Elko; he could have left but came back to pursue a master’s degree and is a prime example that you can be an elite student athlete and pursue a graduate degree. Both are possible,” said Dr. Bob Baker, Senior Associate Athletic Director for Student Athlete Development.

According to Baker, three main factors have contributed to the increase in the number of graduate school athletes. The first is remaining eligibility; students could have taken a summer course and still have a year or more of eligibility to play, so they continue their education with a graduate degree. The second factor is COVID-19. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) granted everybody another year of eligibility due to the shutdown caused by the pandemic. The third factor is the diversity of options within the graduate degree programs at The University of Mississippi.

“There have been some online graduate programs developed and residential ones that are only a year, so that is very attractive to a student athlete who has one year left of eligibility,” said Baker.

Ben Savino, a Ph.D. student in engineering science and a member of *men’s track and field outdoor*, echoed Baker’s sentiments. “I was intrigued by the combination of top tier athletics and top tier academics.” Savino continued, “after graduating here, I was presented a great opportunity to follow my

passions in school while continuing to represent the University through athletics...being able to advance my career while doing what I love made me want to stay.”

For the student athletes it is important to stress that they need a plan for after their time on the field or court. Baker and his team of student athlete development professionals encourage these athletes to plan for the future and obtain degrees that will help them to be just as successful in the career world as they are in their sport.

“I chose The University of Mississippi for my graduate career because they offered the exact program I wanted to pursue for my master’s degree,” said Marykate McGuire, a master’s student in higher education and member of the *women’s soccer* team. “There are not many higher education programs with an emphasis in athletic administration in the country, so it was the correct program and the exact time frame I needed to complete it.”

With a heavy workload for both school and their sport, graduate student athletes face challenges. However, they have a support system throughout the University. From advisors, professors, peers, teammates, and coaches to the FedEx Student-Athlete Academic Support Center, people across campus want to see them succeed.

“It’s really hard to do what is the equivalent of having a full-time job with the 40-45 hours your sport demands out of you on top of a master’s or doctorate degree, but our graduate student athletes have all the resources that our other student athletes have, from the structure, to study hall and support and mentoring if they need it,” said Baker.

Oluwasheyi (Shey) Taiwo, a first-year integrated marketing communications master’s student and member of *women’s track and field outdoor*, shared important advice for student athletes considering a graduate degree, “If you find something that you’re passionate about, and that lights a spark, don’t hesitate to pursue it! Graduate school takes education to another level and knowledge is power.”

Amani Johnson, a master’s in accountancy and data analytics student and member of the *football* team, stressed the importance of education. “In this environment, education should come first and if you have the opportunity to further it, do it, because this will only help your future more.”

Below is a current list of our graduate and professional student athletes:

Chijioke Akwuba, **Graduate Certificate in Intercollegiate Athletic Administration**, *Men’s Basketball*

Robert Allen, **M.S. in Hospitality Management**, *Men’s Basketball*

Anthony Camerieri, **M.S. in Athletic Training**, *Men’s Track-Outdoor*

Lucie Devier, **M.S. in Sport and Recreation Administration**, *Women’s Tennis*

Savannah Diederich, **M.A. in Higher Education/Student Personnel**, *Women’s Softball*



Baylor Franklin, **M.B.A. in Business Administration**, *Men's Track-Outdoor*

Ellen Hume, **M.S.E.S in Exercise Science**, *Women's Golf*

Amani Johnson, **M.A.D.A. in in Accountancy & Data Analytics**, *Men's Football*

Simon Junk, **M.A.D.A. in Accountancy & Data Analytics**, *Men's Tennis*

Makenna Kliethermes, **M.A in Higher Education/Student Personnel**, *Women's Softball*

Jocelyn Long, **J.D.**, *Women's Cross Country/Track-Outdoor*

Christopher Maxon, **M.S. in Sport and Recreation Administration**, *Men's Cross country/Track-Outdoor*

Marykate McGuire, **M.A. in Higher Education/Student Personnel**, *Women's Soccer*

Laura de Jesus Mendes Taborda, **M.S. in Integrated Marketing Communication**, *Women's Track-Outdoor*

Sydney Michalak, **M.S. in Food and Nutrition Services**, *Women's Soccer*

Keith Robinson, **M.S. in Sport and Recreation Administration**, *Men's Track-Outdoor*

Ben Savino, **Ph.D. in Engineering Science**, *Men's Track-Outdoor*

Oluwasheyi (Shey) Taiwo, **M.S. in Integrated Marketing Communication**, *Women's Track-Outdoor*

Kristel van den Berg, **M.S.E.S in Exercise Science**, *Women's Cross Country/Track-Outdoor*

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

Graduate School

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## NEW SEC Emerging Scholars Program at UM Graduate School

*By: Margaret Savoie*

In 2021, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) schools created a new program to promote the success of current doctoral students and postdoctoral associates, with attention to those from historically underrepresented groups, in their professional development as they work towards becoming future faculty members at an SEC member institution. The initiative grew from discussions among the provosts at the 14 institutions and began with an annual workshop. Now, in its second year, the institutions agreed to minimum stipends for the scholars, financial support to attend the annual seminar, and provision of funds to pursue other professional development opportunities that align with their unique scholarly needs.

At The University of Mississippi, the SEC Emerging Scholars program is funded by the Office of the Provost. This year, each SEC Institution selected up to five scholars. Selection criteria included advanced standing in their graduate work or postdoctoral status, demonstrated exceptional research and/or teaching skills, and established interest in a career in higher education. Below, we introduce you to our five SEC Emerging Scholars for 2022-2023.



**Sheerah Neal Keith**, originally from Wilson, NC, is a doctoral candidate in **counselor education and supervision**. Her research focuses on early childhood adversity, toxic stress among newborns to children five years of age, and the social determinants of mental health. Keith also studies interventions designed to reduce the impact of early childhood adversity and toxic stress, which can significantly affect an individual's life trajectory.

"My favorite part of being an Emerging Scholar has been the professional development activities, the greatest example being the 3-day workshop we attended this fall at the University of Missouri," said Keith. At the workshop, scholars had the opportunity to work and speak

Sheerah Neal Keith

with faculty and administrators from all 14 of the SEC institutions and they received feedback on elevator pitches and written materials for future faculty position applications.

**Dr. Ashley White Jones**, originally from Lambert, MS, is a postdoctoral research associate for in health promotion. Jones's academic research focuses on health equity and disparities in the Black community. Her current research focus explores culturally responsive mental health teletherapy for Black and other minority communities.

"The Emerging Scholars program is an excellent opportunity to secure a future career in academia," said Jones. "The program is designed to help amazing doctoral students and postdocs stay in the academy. It is a great way to help grow on your own and actively support others throughout their journey."



Dr. Ashley White Jones



Alicia L. Arrington – Thomas

**Alicia L. Arrington-Thomas**, originally

from Los Angeles, CA, is a **biology graduate student** studying fire ecology. Arrington-Thomas hopes to use fire as a source of restoration to repair forested ecosystems.

"When Dr. Murrell Godfrey informed me that I was accepted as an Emerging Scholar, I was overjoyed with excitement," said Arrington-Thomas. "I've never experienced being called a scholar; there was this feeling of humility, allowing me to become comfortable in my place of purpose, vision, power, and knowledge."

**Rashun Miles**, originally from

Philadelphia, PA, is a **doctoral candidate in social welfare** studying social work. Miles's work centers on thinking through and implementing interventions that help mitigate compassion fatigue among nurses who treat clients with infectious diseases.

"I enjoy being an Emerging Scholar because it is a new initiative full of fresh potential," said Miles. "My favorite part is actually looking toward the future and seeing future Emerging Scholars' contributions to the world."





Dr. Krishna Chaturvedi

**Dr. Krishna** [Rashun Miles](#)

**Chaturvedi**, originally from India, is a postdoctoral research associate with the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. Chaturvedi has long considered a career in academia and has always been passionate about engaging students in new and developing pathways. Chaturvedi hopes to start the next phase of her career as an independent researcher with academic responsibilities such as an Assistant Professorship.

“It has been a great honor and privilege to receive this prestigious fellowship and become an Emerging Scholar,” said Chaturvedi. She continued, “In doing

so, I have gained the necessary resources to sharpen my professional skills and form a platform to obtain my dream job.”

The University of Mississippi will continue to support the SEC Emerging Scholars Program with its promotion of success for current doctoral students and postdoctoral associates from underrepresented groups working towards becoming future faculty members at an SEC member institution.

Individuals interested in learning more about the SEC Emerging Scholars program at The University of Mississippi, which requires nomination and participation in a competitive selection process, should contact the Graduate School.

## Graduate School

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# Meet Our 2022 SREB Scholars!

*By: Margaret Savoie*

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Doctoral and Dissertation Scholars Program is a program whose primary aim is to encourage more minority Ph.D. students to seek careers as faculty on college campuses. More than one-third of college students in America are people of color. But this representation is not mirrored in college faculty. To change this, the SREB Doctoral and Dissertation Scholars are recruited through benefits such as financial support, career counseling, networking, and opportunities for research funding.

The University of Mississippi's Graduate School is pleased to have four new SREB Scholars this year. These new scholars are Donovan Gordon, Akia Sherrod, Janita Springfield, and Joshua Hieu-Trung Nguyen. Learn about our new SREB scholars below!



Donovan Gordon

**Donovan Gordon**, of Olive Branch, MS, is a **doctoral student in business administration with a focus on marketing**.

Specifically, Gordon is studying concepts like consumer behavior, strategic branding/marketing, sales management, entrepreneurship, and social media marketing. "My desire to pursue a Ph.D. in marketing is rooted in the fact that marketing is an ever-developing and interdisciplinary field of study," said Gordon. To Gordon, being an SREB Scholar means being part of a loving and dedicated community of current, past, and future minority faculty.

**Akia Sherrod**, of Moss Point, MS, is a **doctoral student in clinical psychology**. Her research focuses on child and

adolescent anxiety as well as parent-child relationships. One of Sherrod's favorite parts of being an SREB Scholar is the Graduate Diversity Seminars. "These seminars are filled with immense knowledge from individuals who have once been in my shoes," said Sherrod, "I have gained so much useful advice on navigating through graduate school as a minority and how to

utilize my resources so I can reach my goals.” In the future, Sherrod plans to practice as a clinical psychologist developing new treatment plans for all those facing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders.



Akia Sherrod



Janita Springfield

**Janita Springfield**, of Oakland, TN, is a **doctoral student in counselor education**. Springfield is currently studying counselor education and supervision, which includes gaining knowledge and expertise in counseling, supervision, teaching, research and scholarship, and leadership and advocacy. In the future, Springfield hopes to become a professional faculty member at a college or university who is a skillful educator, an expert clinical supervisor, an advocate for social justice changes on

the local, state, and national levels, and a competitive researcher in the counseling practice. “One thing I would like other people to know about the SREB [Scholars] is that this program is one of a kind,” said Springfield. She noted, “it [works] to address the long-standing national shortage of underrepresented minority faculty by providing individualized support, mentorship, and resources that [are] needed to ensure that change and progress occurs.”

**Joshua Hieu-Trung Nguyen**, of Houston, TX, is a **doctoral student in creative writing**. The areas of focus for Nguyen are Asian-American Poetics, counter publics, and ecopoetics. Nguyen described that being an SREB Scholar, “means to be part of a group of scholars who are interested in preparing ourselves for our uncertain future—which is comforting!” In the future, Nguyen hopes to teach creative writing while also writing his own books.



Joshua Hieu – Trung Nguyen

We are excited to continue to fund several doctoral students to participate in the SREB Doctoral and Dissertation Scholars program. The students who participate in this program demonstrate great success. As is true across SREB participating states and institutions, our SREB Scholars graduate at a rate exceeding the national average. Our SREB Scholar graduates have positions in higher education,

working in 10 states including the state of Mississippi. If you are interested in supporting The University of Mississippi's sponsorship of SREB Doctoral and Dissertation Scholars, please contact Dean Kluck at [askluck@olemiss.edu](mailto:askluck@olemiss.edu) to learn more.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

## Graduate School

## 2022 Advancing STEM Scholarship Recipient

By: *Margaret Savoie*

In fall of 2021, the Graduate School launched a new scholarship opportunity, the Advancing STEM Scholarship. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. This scholarship focuses on students whose background, achievements, and expertise demonstrate a commitment to contributing to the advancement of women in STEM, regardless of the recipient's gender identity.

Lorena Magaña Zertuche, a Ph.D. student in physics, has been selected as the 2022 Advancing STEM Scholarship recipient.



Lorena Magaña Zertuche, 2022 Advancing STEM Scholarship Recipient

“I am extremely grateful for the support of the Graduate School in awarding me this scholarship,” said Magaña Zertuche. “The fact that an Advancing STEM Scholarship exists shows that the university and the graduate school are making a serious effort to address the lack of representation of women in STEM fields and it feels rewarding to know that as a graduate student, I can make a difference.”

Dr. Cecille Labuda, an associate professor in the department of physics and astronomy nominated Magaña Zertuche.

“Lorena has demonstrated a clear commitment to advancing and promoting women in STEM for many years,” said Labuda, “she cares about this deeply and the efforts she has made to promote women in STEM are commendable.”

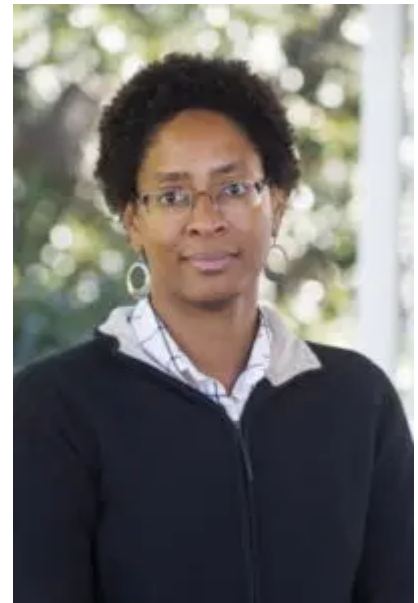
Regarding research, Magaña Zertuche works on gravitational wave physics. In the past year, she visited UCLA for a three-month-long program. Some of the research she conducted there resulted in a recent publication in the journal *Physical Review D*. The title of the paper is High Precision Ringdown Modeling: Multimode Fits and BMS Frames.



For the 2022-2023 year, Magaña Zertuche was especially excited about two further projects. One of these involves building a ringdown surrogate model for binary black holes systems. The other aims to decrease the errors in parameter estimation for binaries which include black holes and neutron stars.

Magaña Zertuche said she always looks for ways to increase diversity in STEM, especially in physics. Physics, according to the American Physics Society, is one of the fields that awards the least number of degrees to women.

“I hope to continue promoting women in STEM by shining a spotlight on them—it is important to discuss the greater contributions women have made in the science, as they are often ignored or underappreciated,” said Magaña Zertuche.



Dr. Cecille Labuda, Associate Professor in the department of physics and astronomy

A hope for Labuda is that there will come a time when efforts are no longer necessary, meaning a time when women who would like to enter STEM professions do so as easily as they would any other profession.

As an undergraduate, Magaña Zertuche remembers looking up to the few women graduate students and tries to make herself visible in the research community because it makes a difference for others to see someone like them, particularly higher up in academia.

Another significant focus for Magaña Zertuche is outreach. The first aspect of her outreach is the Oxford Science Café, where a UM faculty member is invited to Heartbreak Coffee on the Square once a month to speak with the community about their research. The Oxford Science Café aims to bring science to everyone in the community. Another component of Magaña Zertuche’s outreach is creating information booklets on physics lessons to better prepare high school teachers in the classroom. These booklets include hands-on activities that the teachers may use to help guide their students toward a better understanding of key concepts in physics. The NASA/Mississippi Space Grant Consortium (MSSGC) Fellowship provides support for the booklet outreach project.

“Apart from enjoying the interactions I have during outreach events, I hope that my presence demonstrates to young kids that women, too, can aspire to be scientists,” Magaña Zertuche continued, “I didn’t have a female role model in physics until I was an undergraduate, and I hope that in the next few years representation of women in STEM is high enough that incoming students can say they always had one.”

Promoting the advancement of women in STEM is a never-ending endeavor. The UM Graduate School launched a Graduate Women in STEM affinity group, which has now become the Association of Graduate Women in STEM (AGWiS). AGWiS is a registered student organization whose purpose is to

promote networking and mentoring among graduate women and members of LBGTQIA+ community across all STEM disciplines. Their events and programming aim to foster a sense of community between these graduate students where discussions about career choices, school life, grant and fellowship opportunities, and much more can occur.

## Introducing the NEW Assistant Dean of Professional Development and Communications

*By: Margaret Savoie*



Dr. Sandra Spiroff, Assistant Dean of Professional Development and Communications

Last year the Graduate School began a search for a new position: the Assistant Dean of Professional Development and Communications. After a thorough search, Dr. Sandra Spiroff was hired for the position.

“Universities have done a great job building a team of support for undergraduate students, attending to academic, career, and wellness needs. You might describe it by thinking about each undergraduate student as a quarterback with many coaches and teammates. Graduate students need a team of people supporting their success as well. At the same time, it is a lot to ask that the academic mentor/major professor be able to be an expert in all areas of professional development,” said Dr. Annette Kluck, Dean of the Graduate School.

Kluck said when asked about decision to create a new position, “the Assistant Dean of Professional Development and Communication helps bring the model of teammates and multiple coaches to graduate study. The position was developed to enable the Graduate School to better pull together and communicate opportunities for graduate students, connecting them to resources on campus and off, and building out a portfolio of professional development offerings that meet the unique needs of graduate students.”

Spiroff, originally from the St. Louis area, earned a B.S. in mathematics with a minor in education from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. A few years later, Spiroff returned to school to earn a master’s degree in mathematics from Saint Louis University. Her studies did not stop there; after Saint Louis University, Spiroff attended the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, eventually earning a Ph.D. in

mathematics with a concentration in algebra. She then accepted a three-year postdoctoral position at the University of Utah before transitioning into a tenure track faculty position.

“I found a preference for collegiate education, not only the level of student and instruction, but also the growth expectation of faculty in terms of research and professional endeavors,” said Spiroff.

While serving at the National Science Foundation as a rotating program officer in the District of Columbia and Alexandria region, a colleague brought this new position to Spiroff’s attention. Spiroff had some professional development experience while in the department of mathematics at the university. The idea of this new position would help to augment this role and experience.

“In this position, Dr. Spiroff is working to create and implement a vision for professional development for graduate students and help enhance our communications to various stakeholders,” said Kluck.

Kluck also stated that Spiroff had broad experiences managing communications related to an academic association and facilitating the creation of professional development opportunities within her discipline, including supporting graduate students at crucial transitions.

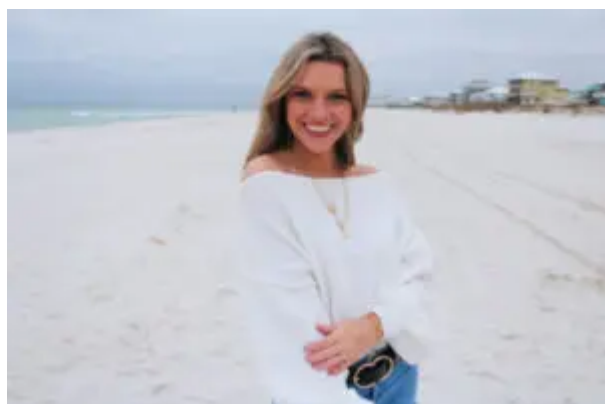
For Spiroff, key ideas for this new position are connectivity and communication. “I think it is important that graduate students know of the many resources available, including the great staff at every level who are eager to assist, and how they can ease or augment a student’s journey on campus and beyond,” said Spiroff. She also stated it is important that connections are made with others on campus including visitors and outreach contacts.

Spiroff hopes to improve on the initiatives and progress that has already been achieved by the staff of the Graduate School and their partners. Spiroff has extended some of these efforts to the postdoctoral population across campus—a demographic that is crucial to a university’s Carnegie Research 1 status, which The University of Mississippi earned in 2016.

“By strengthening and enhancing the graduate and postdoctoral experience on campus, the University can solidify its standing as a competitive research institute—one with the very unique flavors of UM traditions and history,” said Spiroff.

## Five Graduate Assistants, One Graduate House

By: Margaret Savoie



Anna Abel

**mental health counseling** master's student from Oxford, MS.

For Abel's assistantship position, she works directly under Dean Kluck. She helps with research on projects for the Graduate School, supports various committees, and executes behind-the-scenes administrative activities.



Ty Wallace

The Graduate House is home to faculty and staff who are eager to help all our graduate and professional students. The Graduate house is also home to five graduate assistants (GAs) who assist with many day-to-day tasks and other key responsibilities such as research, recruiting, and marketing.

"I love working for the Grad School because it is a very interactive place, and the people I work with are super supportive," said Anna Abel, a first-year **clinical**

When first entering the Graduate House this fall, you were immediately greeted by one of two smiling and friendly faces – Ty Wallace and Jemiah Johnson.

Both of these students are from Mississippi. Wallace, of Oxford, is an **elementary education** master's student graduating in December, and Johnson, from Byhalia, is a **communication sciences and disorders** master's student.

As graduate students pursuing human service degrees, Wallace and Johnson help with externally facing operations, regularly interacting with individuals seeking support and assistance. They also work with

the admissions process, which accounts for the majority of contacts to the Graduate School. Applying to graduate study can be stressful and sometimes a bit difficult to navigate. Having GAs who understand educational structures, how to communicate well with individuals, and who can empathize with stressed applicants is an asset.

“Working for the Graduate school is great because it is such a positive and diverse work environment,” said Wallace. “Getting to work with such great people every day made working for the Graduate School a wonderful time.”

Michelle Cole-Dickson, Administrative Coordinator at the Graduate School, said, “We are very appreciative of our graduate assistants¾ not only are they hardworking, but they also keep the office fun and energetic.”

“Everyone in the Grad School is so welcoming and all of the graduate assistants get along really well,” said Johnson.



Jemiah Johnson



Margaret Savoie

Marketing for the Graduate School Ambassadors and Graduate School is the purview of Eli Howland and Margaret Savoie, respectively.

Howland, a **computer science** master’s student from Madison, MS, is responsible for helping with recruiting efforts for the Graduate School. He assists with different recruiting events, works directly with the Graduate School Ambassadors, and runs the



Eli Howland

social media accounts for Graduate School Ambassadors. Because recruiting relies increasingly upon digital outreach and positive impressions, his background in computer science is especially beneficial.

“I’ve loved my time in graduate school and working with the Graduate School so far; it has let me connect with many other graduate students and learn about different programs,” said Howland.

Savoie, a second-year **integrated marketing communications** master's student from Baton Rouge, LA, is the marketing graduate assistant. She helps with professional development events, social media accounts, marketing tactics, and the semester newsletters (like this one).

“My time at the graduate school has given me so much real-world experience,” said Savoie. “I feel confident in my skills and have learned how to take what I learn in the classroom into an office/career setting.”

Graduate assistants typically serve one or two years in the Graduate House, and individuals rotate in and out each semester. These graduate assistants provide a crucial link between the administrative staff who work to improve graduate education and the population of nearly 2,500 graduate students across campus.

## Celebrating Our Postdoctoral Researchers

*By: Margaret Savoie*

The University of Mississippi is home to a community of about fifty postdoctoral researchers. Over the past few years, the Graduate School has undertaken efforts to provide outreach to these individuals—with a long-term vision to create a more centralized office to support the advancement of this unique group. A postdoctoral researcher or associate, more commonly known as a “postdoc,” is someone with a Ph.D. who is employed for a limited time, typically between one and three years. The position involves working closely with a senior researcher on a project of mutual interest. Such a position helps the postdoc firm up their experience and qualifications, augmenting their resume before applying for more permanent and senior positions.

This past fall the Graduate School celebrated Postdoctoral Appreciation Week, a national annual celebration of postdocs. “The postdoctoral community is a demographic that is crucial to an institution’s Carnegie Research 1 status; the research they conduct and the activities they direct often lie on the cutting edge of advancing knowledge and progress for society,” said Dr. Sandra Spiroff, Assistant Dean of Professional Development & Communication for the Graduate School. The University of Mississippi became a Carnegie Research 1 institution in 2016, a status that requires meeting various research productivity benchmarks, Ph.D. graduates, and more. The Graduate School was excited to augment its involvement in the national postdoctoral appreciation events, continuing the University’s forward momentum and dedication to research endeavors and its practitioners.

Kritika Gupta, 2022 Doctoral Class Marshal and recent postdoc at the Center for Research Evaluation from May to December of 2022, said her transition to postdoc at UM was smoother than some since she had been on campus as a graduate student. Gupta said, “A full-time research position may not always be the easiest, but having the opportunity to teach was a great [addition] for me because I was able to spread the word about what I do and how my career choices helped me get here.”

The University of Mississippi’s postdoc appreciation week started on Monday, September 19, with a zoom session for “Mindful Monday,” a morning gathering designed to provide focus and balance to the work week, and continued with the opportunity for free professional headshots by UM Communications





Kritika Gupta

photographers. On Tuesday, we encouraged postdocs to attend an afternoon meeting focusing on the 7 habits of highly effective employees and the evening presentation of the Oxford Science Café at Heartbreak Coffee. Wednesday's schedule offered two seminars, namely "Inclusive Teaching Includes You Too" and "Meaningful Meetings," as well as a Mississippi Postdoctoral Association (MSPDA) lunch and discussion. Akin to the Graduate Student Council, the MSPDA is an organization *of* postdocs, *for* postdocs. Thursday's event was a Pastries-on-the-Porch event, a sweeter installment of the popular Pizza-on-the-Porch, which offered a morning coffee klatch with the grad school deans. On Friday, a limited number of football tickets to the Tulsa game were made available to postdocs, a generous donation obtained from the Athletics Department, and each postdoc received a certificate of appreciation from the Graduate School signed by Dean Kluck and Provost Noel Wilkin. Finally, the week culminated in the game day tailgate hosted by the Graduate School in the Circle, and the football team showed its appreciation by delivering a victory.

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Gagandeep Singh

I was very excited about the project I would get to work on, in which I get to apply my previous research in oyster reef ecology to help understand the effects of environmental stressors on early oyster life in order to better inform oyster reef restoration efforts in the Gulf of Mexico," she said.

"National Postdoc Appreciation Week was a great way of interacting with the diverse community of postdocs here at the University of Mississippi," said Gagandeep Singh, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and the current president of MSPDA. He continued, "such events help foster a sense of community and camaraderie among postdocs who otherwise would rarely have the chance to interact with each other."

Jessica Pruet, a postdoc for the National Center for Natural Product Research, spoke about her experience at the University. "I decided to join UM as a postdoc because



The Graduate School looks forward to future postdoctoral appreciation weeks and finding ways to continue to bolster support for this community on our campus.