Thoughts from the Head

Given the schedule with which the department has released a newsletter, we should start calling the departmental newsletter the “Variable Interval” (that’s a Psychology joke – 10 extra credit points if you got it). Or perhaps the newsletter can be considered a nonperiodical. Our last newsletter focused exclusively on the research in the department. This one is more eclectic, reflecting all of the activities that we do: educating undergraduates, training graduate students, advising and mentoring students, reaching out to the community – locally in North Carolina, nationally, internationally, and in our disciplines, as well as our research. The focus is on awards that our faculty, staff, students, and alumni have won for their outstanding work.

We are a department with nearly 800 undergraduate majors and 120 doctoral students. With recent retirements and the loss of two other faculty members to great opportunities at other universities, we now have 25 full-time faculty members who teach all of these students, do the outreach activities, and conduct and publish the research. In addition, our work is made possible by an outstanding staff, which was recently reduced from six to four. I believe that, even with this recent reduction, we have the best staff of any department, anywhere. Finally, let me point out that NC State has only a handful of departments with more than 600 undergraduate majors and over 100 doctoral students, with most of those departments in the College of Engineering. The Psychology Department is the only such large department outside of the traditional STEM colleges for which NC State is best known. This issue of the “Variable Interval” tells some of our stories.

Doug Gillan
Department Head

Reading Fluently

Here is a summary of the awards that Dr. John Begeny has received in recent years:

(1) Alumni Association Outstanding Extension and Outreach Award, North Carolina State University

- Each year, the Alumni Association honors 18 faculty members who have excelled in teaching, research and extension. Three faculty were awarded the Extension and Outreach honor this year.

(2) Ernest A. Lynton Citation for Distinguished Engaged Scholarship

- This nationally competitive award recognizes an early-career faculty member (across all academic disciplines) who demonstrates outstanding integration of community-engaged teaching, research, and service; the award is sponsored by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE)

(3) Opal Mann Green Award for Community Partnerships, North Carolina State University

(4) Inducted into the Academy of Outstanding Faculty Engaged in Extension, North Carolina State University
What has he done that has led to so many awards? When John Begeny saw that an aspect of literacy education was getting scant attention in schools, he decided to research it. Begeny, an associate professor of psychology at NC State, has used that research to develop an effective new tool for teachers. And he’s making sure anyone who needs it can have it – for free.

When he arrived at NC State in 2005, Begeny was interested in “reading fluency.” That’s a child’s ability to read with sufficient speed and accuracy, while also reading with good expression (for example, pausing at commas when reading out loud). He knew reading fluency was a skill that was commonly neglected in reading instruction, and he wanted to do something about it.

But rather than trying to develop solutions based on his preconceived notions, Begeny wanted to base any potential solutions on solid science. “I wanted to take a research-driven approach to addressing a very real need in literacy education,” Begeny says. “Fluency is important. Kids who aren’t fluent readers are not going to understand what they’re reading as well as fluent readers are, and they probably aren’t going to read as much. People generally don’t choose to do things they aren’t good at. Also, reading fluently helps give kids confidence in their reading ability.”

Ultimately, Begeny created a literacy program called Helping Early Literacy with Practice Strategies (HELPs), rolling it out to the public in January 2010. Recent research shows that the HELPS program not only boosts student reading fluency, but also helps kids develop other reading skills, such as reading comprehension and so-called “basic reading skills” (such as sounding out words). But developing the program was only the starting point – Begeny wanted to make sure the program was available to every teacher or parent who wanted to use it.

To support that idea, Begeny also launched the HELPS Education Fund in January 2010. The nonprofit organization gives teachers free access to HELPS program materials, including teacher’s manuals, training videos and online support. Through the fund, the HELPS program has now been disseminated to over 7,000 teachers and is used in classrooms in all 50 states.

As part of the HELPS Education Fund, Begeny also plans to release a Spanish-language version of the HELPS program later this year, and a suite of early-literacy tools for parents by 2012. In addition, he hopes to have online educational consulting services available some time next year. Again – it’s all free to those who need it. That’s research in action.

Psych Alum Leads $15M Grant to Study Autism

By Lauren Kirkpatrick, Director of CHASS Communications

Psychology alumnus Dr. Kevin Pelphrey (’96) is principal investigator on a newly-awarded $15 million grant from the National Institutes of Health that will investigate why autism spectrum disorders are almost five times more common among boys than among girls.

Psychology Department alum, Dr. Kevin Pelphrey

Pelphrey is now the Harris Associate Professor in Yale’s Child Study Center, associate professor of psychology, and director of the Child Neuroscience Laboratory. He will collaborate with a team of researchers from Yale, UCLA, Harvard, and the University of Washington, as part of a $100 million National Institutes of Health grant to nine institutions investigating sex differences in autism spectrum disorders, as well as studying ASD and limited speech.
Pelphrey’s former undergraduate honors thesis adviser Lynne Baker-Ward always had high hopes for him. "Kevin Pelphrey's ongoing work embodies the same passion for improving children's lives through psychological research that he demonstrated as an undergraduate," says Professor of Psychology Baker-Ward, who directs the Psychology Department's graduate programs. "I always expected that this commitment, in conjunction with his talent, intellectual generativity, and interpersonal skills, would take him far. It was a rare privilege to participate in Kevin's early training, and it's a continuing joy to watch his extraordinary career develop." Baker-Ward served on Pelphrey's dissertation committee at UNC-CH.

Read the full release about Pelphrey's grant on the NIH News site, and more about his research on News-Medical.Net.

Nacoste’s Teaching Excellence Wins Recognition

By Alyssa Putt, CHASS Communication Intern

“You are not going to like this class.”

That’s what Rupert Nacoste says on day one to his Intro to Social Psych students every semester. But it isn’t accurate — students love his courses. Many recommend the psychology professor’s classes to their friends. The overwhelming consensus is that his courses are life-changing.

The UNC Board of Governors has weighed in too: Nacoste has earned the 2013 Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching. A member of the Academy of Outstanding teachers since 1994, Nacoste was honored as an Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor in 1999, with the NCSU Panhellenic Association’s Outstanding Educator award in 2005, and as a Student Government Distinguished Professor in 2011.

The Award for Excellence in Teaching is given to one teacher at each of the 17 UNC system institutions to “underscore the importance of teaching and to encourage, identify, recognize, reward, and support good teaching within the University.” The University’s roster of teaching faculty from which Nacoste was selected exceeds 2,200 members. On winning the highly prestigious award, Nacoste — a Navy veteran who stands more than 6-feet tall — had but one word to describe his sentiments: giddy.

Peer evaluations and student letters submitted on his behalf for the award all commend Nacoste's creative uses of media and “real-life examples” to lead well-choreographed and thoughtful lectures. One colleague noted the way in which Nacoste was capable of filling a 200 pupil lecture hall after 4:00 p.m. on the last day of class before Thanksgiving. Another commented on the way in which Nacoste’s exceptional classroom management skills "removed unwanted ambiguity, freeing students from the uncertainty of ‘what to do when,’ thereby allowing them to focus on the content of the lecture.” Douglas J Gillan, Head of the Psychology Department, wrote that Nacoste "is more than an excellent classroom teacher — he is a thoughtful scholar of teaching and an outstanding mentor for other teachers.”

Nacoste’s impact on his students, his peers, and the university is well-documented. He regularly lectures at student-organized events and recently lectured on neo-diversity at the TEDxNCSU event, which can be viewed on YouTube. His experiences at NC State have led him to publish two books, “Making Gumbo In the University,” and most recently, “Howl of the Wolf.”

Beyond NC State, Nacoste is a highly sought-after guest lecturer for an array of organizations ranging from other colleges to the Department of Defense. While his first audience members were Naval cadets, Nacoste has impacted students from all walks of life in his nearly 40 years of lecturing and teaching.

The official website for the UNC Board of Governors Award for Teaching Excellence can be viewed here.

NC State lit its iconic Belltower red on Tuesday, April 30, 2013, in celebration of Rupert Nacoste receiving this award.
Humanitarian Work Psychology

A group of volunteers travels to a foreign country to provide aid. But as so often happens, unforeseen problems arise. Maybe the volunteers aren’t a good fit or their skill levels aren’t sufficient for the task at hand. Perhaps there’s a clash of cultural values between those helping and those being helped.

When such problems arise, they can greatly impede progress. Humanitarian Work Psychology (HWP) is an emerging area of industrial-organizational psychology specifically designed to address work-related issues in just such humanitarian arenas. NC State’s Department of Psychology is helping lead the global development of the field.

Two years ago Professor of Psychology Lori Foster Thompson taught the world’s first HWP graduate courses at the Universities of Bologna and Barcelona. Her students represented a true global community. “My students came from Peru, Brazil, Africa, Italy—all over the globe,” said Thompson in a call from Ireland, where she is conducting work this summer. “We discussed how to apply Work and Organizational Psychology to the humanitarian effort. We covered issues like women’s work opportunities in developing countries, micro-credit enterprises, online volunteerism, and sex slavery, in addition to other topics.”

Soon after the seminars concluded, Thompson headed to Melbourne, Australia, to attend the 27th International Congress of Applied Psychology, sponsored by the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP). There, a division of the IAAP voted unanimously to establish a four-year work group devoted to HWP, which Thompson will lead.

“I’m absolutely excited,” Thompson said. “People are ready to help and want to see our profession expand in this way. We’ve given talks about HWP around the world and we have witnessed a lot of enthusiasm from members of our field—both senior members and newer student members. We’re very encouraged by the reception this is getting.”

Thompson hopes the four-year effort she’s leading can be a workhorse for the Global Task Force for Humanitarian Work Psychology, formally established in 2009 at University College London. Thompson was one of about a dozen who attended that summit.

Her team’s task is to lay the groundwork for progress globally. “Our first challenge is to build a network with the most economically and geographically diverse members we can find,” Thompson said. “We want to hear from representatives of many different countries about how industrial-organizational psychology is best applied in aid situations.” “We have colleagues who have been doing this independently for decades,” Thompson added, “but we didn’t have a common name or language for it. Now that it’s becoming organized and strategic, we think it can become a more powerful force for good.”

Word is getting out that NC State University is a leader in the field. Applications and inquiries into HWP have increased in the past year. “I think our involvement has the potential to draw new members into industrial-organizational psychology who may not otherwise have pursued this field,” said Thompson. “I’m proud that NC State has been so supportive and encouraging of our work.”

During the past two years, Thompson’s work has been recognized as she was elected to be a Fellow in the Association for Psychological Science, the American Psychology Association, and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. In other words, she has won the academic trifecta. North Carolina State University also recognized her when she was named one of 24 members of the inaugural class of University Faculty Scholars.
Marissa Kastanek, Psychology major, named to Women's Academic All-American team

Marissa Kastanek, a 2013 graduate from the Psychology department had a great career as a student and an athlete. Marissa, originally from Lincoln, Nebraska, graduated with a 4.00 grade-point-average. She did research with Dr. Lynne Baker-Ward in the Memory and Narrative Development Laboratory. Marissa finished her collegiate basketball career with the following statistics for NC State: first in games played (133), eighth in scoring (1,655 points) and second in school history with 240 made three-pointers ... Third in free throw percentage at 80.3 percent, and fourth in three-point percentage at 35.9%. Her ACC career ranks are 11th in three-point field goals (240) and tied for 22nd in free throw shooting at 80.3 percent. She is currently playing professional basketball in Sweden.

Marissa
- was selected a 2013 First Team Academic All-American and a 2012 Second Team Academic All-American

- was named the ACC Women's Basketball Scholar Athlete of the Year in both 2012 and 2013

- earned post-graduate scholarships from both the NCAA and the ACC

- was named to the first team All-ACC as a senior

- and perhaps most important, she scored a career-high 30 points at North Carolina as a sophomore

Helping Homeless Children

Mary Haskett received the CHASS Outstanding Extension Service Award in 2012. She has been doing research on childhood development for over 20 years, and her experiences in that field ultimately highlighted a real and growing mental-health crisis facing homeless children around the country. Now she’s calling on her research expertise to do something about it.

Haskett, a professor at NC State, is working with eight homeless shelters in central North Carolina to develop a system that will provide mental-health services to children in homeless families. The system should provide new data on effective strategies for addressing mental-health concerns in homeless kids – and may serve as a model for similar efforts nationally. Dubbed Project CATCH (Community Action Targeting Children who are Homeless), the initiative is funded by the John Rex Endowment and will be overseen by the Salvation Army.

“The circumstances that lead to homelessness, such as substance abuse and domestic violence, also put kids at risk of mental-health problems – including depression and anxiety,” Haskett says. “And there are myriad challenges in recognizing and providing treatment for homeless children with mental-health problems: the families are moving frequently, they don’t have health insurance, there’s often a lack of transportation. Hopefully, Project CATCH can help these kids from slipping through the cracks.”

This is not an insignificant problem. In 2005-06, it was estimated that 1 in 50 U.S. children was homeless.
Haskett explains that providing mental-health treatment is particularly problematic for children under the age of five. Federal law provides some resources that support the mental health of homeless children once those children are enrolled in school, but younger kids aren’t covered by the law.

This leaves those younger kids at higher risk for long-term mental-health problems, because research indicates that the first five years of life are a critical period for social and emotional development.

Project CATCH incorporates a number of steps designed to help address this problem. The initiative will include system-wide training for shelter staff to increase awareness of children’s mental health. The project will identify mental-health professionals in the community who will prioritize treatment for homeless children, and provide transportation so that the kids can attend treatment sessions. Parents will be offered in-shelter support to help them foster safe, stable and nurturing relationships with their children.

The project will also create a computerized network that will allow the participating shelters to share information on the children’s specific needs and treatment plans, so there will be continuity of care for these kids as they move from shelter to shelter and into transitional housing.

Ultimately, the project will also generate data to help our understanding of how best to meet the mental-health needs of homeless children. “We will be evaluating outcomes in terms of improved mental-health functioning in the children,” Haskett says, “as well as evaluating stress levels in parents and improvements in parenting skills.”

Ideally, the project will also serve as a blueprint that can be replicated elsewhere. Project CATCH is already working with the National Center for Family Homelessness (NCFH), which will help the project with shelter staff training and program evaluation. If the project is successful, NCFH can help share the program with communities nationwide.

Graduate Students Stand Out

Alex Gloss, a graduate student in the Industrial/Organizational Psychology program in the Psychology Department, was awarded a Graduate Research Fellowship from the National Science Foundation. These fellowships are extremely competitive, with awards being given to between 10 - 17% of a highly selective group of applicants. Winners receive three years of support that consists of both an annual stipend and payments of the cost of education, international research and professional development opportunities, and supercomputer access. The Graduate Research Fellowship Program has been giving awards since 1952 -- previous recipients include 30 Nobel Prize winners and 440 members of the National Academy of Sciences.

Alex Gloss, NSF Graduate Research Fellow

Avril Smart, a graduate student in Psychology in the Public Interest, and co-author Brandi Parker, a graduate student in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, received the award for the Best Poster at the 2013 American Education Research Association (AERA) conference for the Research, Evaluation & Assessments in Schools Division (Division H). The poster was titled, "An Evaluation of North Carolina’s Race to the Top: Teachers’ Perspectives on State-Administered Professional Development Training." Dr. Jeni Corn, a senior research associate at the Friday Institute, was also a co-author.

Avril Smart, co-winner for AREA Best Poster, 2013