

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND
PROFESSIONAL STUDIES
VOLUME 16
SPRING 2025

PILLARS



PILLARS

VOLUME 16 | SPRING 2025

PILLARS MAGAZINE is published once a year by the University of South Alabama College of Education and Professional Studies and distributed to alumni and friends.

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

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Joshua Jones works with USA Health on building trust to create a better future for Mobile youths and young adults.



Dear colleagues and friends,

Welcome to the Spring 2025 edition of Pillars magazine! Not only does this issue celebrate the work of the students, faculty, staff and alumni of the College of Education and Professional Studies, but it also marks the one-year anniversary of my arrival here at South. As I reflect on my first year, there are three key moments that I wish to highlight.

Key Moment No. 1: CEPS Faculty and Staff Awards

Banquet. This event occurred in April 2024 and offered an opportunity to recognize a few of our faculty and staff for their outstanding work. We also honored the family of alumna Caryn Hyatt-Suthoff with the Dean's Award, recognizing their efforts to honor Caryn's memory. You can read more about these award recipients in this issue of Pillars.

The Faculty and Staff Awards Banquet was the first opportunity for me to interact with the CEPS extended family — not only the faculty and staff of the college but also their guests. It was truly a delight to speak with everyone and enjoy each other's company. The CEPS family is a wonderful group, and their warmth and spirit shone brightly on this night!

Key Moment No. 2: MEGA. If you are a K-12 teacher or other school staff member, I am confident that you know exactly what this word represents. But in case you do not, each summer the city of Mobile hosts the MEGA Conference, a weeklong conference organized by the Alabama State Department of Education. Thousands of teachers descend on our city, determined to engage in professional learning and enjoy all that the MEGA Conference has to offer. Prior to last summer, I had never experienced the conference, and let me just say it did not disappoint. But why does it represent one of my key moments? Well, that's simple: The College of Education and Professional Studies was not only present at the conference, but we were also seen and remembered! Throughout the week, alumni and potential students visited our exhibit booth to learn about the college happenings and enter to win one of our phenomenal prizes. We also held an alumni social and a MEGA dinner, two events you can read more about in this issue. Folks left the conference talking about the wonderful work of the college, which was definitely a key moment for us!



Key Moment No. 3: Building connections beyond my discipline of mathematics education.

In this one year, I have learned so much about reading education, recreational therapy, hospitality and tourism management, mental health counseling, and organizational leadership, just to name a few fields. I am in awe of the work of the students, faculty, alumni and community partners from all the different disciplines in our college. Many of these individuals are featured in this issue. It is truly an honor to learn from and represent them in all the different spaces.

Thank you for being part of our journey. I hope you enjoy this issue and find inspiration in the incredible stories within. And more than anything, I hope that you can easily see how we are: **Leading today. Impacting tomorrow.**

Warm regards,

Angela T. Barlow, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Education and Professional Studies



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by the



NUMBERS

OUR STUDENTS
ARE FROM

33

STATES
AND

27

COUNTRIES

\$4.7

MILLION
IN EXTERNAL
FUNDING

Fiscal Year 2023-24

College of Education and Professional Studies programs are accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, Alabama State Department of Education, American Psychological Association, and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.



EXCELLENCE IN
EDUCATOR PREPARATION
ACCREDITATION

72

ENDOWED
SCHOLARSHIPS

Academic Year 2023-24
Total \$152,683

236

EDUCATOR
EXCELLENCE
SCHOLARSHIP
RECIPIENTS

Academic Year 2023-24

NUMBER OF
STUDENTS
ENROLLED

1,696
SPRING 2024

941
SUMMER 2024

1,731
FALL 2024



PROGRAMS OF
STUDY

20

UNDERGRADUATE
MAJORS

5

UNDERGRADUATE
MINORS

49

GRADUATE
PROGRAMS

84

PEER-REVIEWED
JOURNAL ARTICLES
PUBLISHED IN 2024

CEPS FACULTY
PUBLISHED
EIGHT BOOK
CHAPTERS
AND FOUR BOOKS

Academic Year 2023-24



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

444

INTERNSHIPS
COMPLETED

Academic Year 2023-24

60

NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL
SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

STUDENT
ORGANIZATIONS

- Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Honor Society
- Instructional Design & Development Graduate Association
- Clinical and Counseling Psychology Graduate Student Organization
- Eta Sigma Delta International Hospitality Management Honor Society
- Hospitality Club
- Alpha Sigma Lambda Honor Society
- Recreational Therapy Association
- Jaguar Sport Management and Administration Club
- Exercise Science Club
- Health and Physical Education Majors Club



Pillars of Pro

**Recognizing Outstanding
Student Contributions in
Education, Leadership and
International Studies**

>> LEARN MORE

SouthAlabama.edu/CEPSNews

A Beacon of Leadership and Scholarship in Education

Abigail Allen has been awarded the prestigious 2024-2025 Dr. Lillian M. Lowery Scholarship. Named in honor of the late Dr. Lillian M. Lowery, a passionate educator and advocate for education reform, this \$15,000 scholarship recognizes individuals who embody leadership and a dedication to community service. A student in the Alternative Master of Education program specializing in secondary school science, Allen has maintained a 4.0 GPA and is set to graduate in fall 2025. Administered by Educational Testing Service, this scholarship supports master's degree candidates in education who are committed to expanding opportunities for all students. Allen's achievement not only highlights her hard work and dedication but also reflects the University's commitment to nurturing future educators who will make a positive impact in their communities.

Progress



Jaguar Excellence: Allison Dollus Awarded Top University Honor

Allison Dollus, a 2024 graduate in exercise science, was honored with the prestigious Jaguar Senior Medallion. The Jaguar Senior Medallion Society recognizes outstanding student leaders for their achievements and contributions to the University of South Alabama

community. This award signifies the highest level of achievement in student engagement and leadership, celebrating Dollus' dedication to both academic excellence and impactful involvement throughout her time at the University.



Gilman Scholarship Takes Elaina Melerine on Five-Week Hospitality Deep Dive in Italy

Elaina Melerine became the first hospitality and tourism management student to win the U.S. State Department's prestigious Gilman Scholarship. Melerine spent five weeks in Perugia, Italy, taking international hospitality and management and international culture courses. Students deepened their understanding of hospitality and tourism by touring five-star hotels and historic sites and meeting with general managers. Participants explored various regions of Italy, immersing themselves in each unique culinary culture and visiting museums and cathedrals. They gained hands-on experience during cooking, chocolate making and ceramics painting classes.



Left to right: Dean Dr. Angela Barlow, Nathaniel Luis Blackmon, Chloé Knippers, Holly Ann Seabridge, Bella Esposito, Amiaya Ross, Lenzie Richardson, Adrian Brantley, Senior Instructor Amanda Donaldson and Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management Chair Dr. Khal Nusair.

Tourism Triumphs: South Alabama Scholars Shine at Governor's Conference

On July 29, 2024, at the Alabama Governor's Conference on Tourism in Tuscaloosa, six College of Education and Professional Studies students and one alumnus were awarded \$29,000 in scholarships supported by Alabama's

hospitality and tourism industry. This support highlights the strong partnership between academia and the industry, recognizing the academic and leadership excellence of students.

Awards

Dominique Garcia

From Gadsden, Alabama, Garcia was drawn to South's welcoming community and opportunities. A proud alumna of Chi Omega women's fraternal organization, she served as marketing director and director of programming. She plans to begin her teaching career in Mobile County Public Schools while pursuing a master's and later a doctorate in educational leadership at South.

The 47th Annual College of Education and Professional Studies Student Honors and Awards Ceremony celebrated outstanding students on March 20, 2024, in the University of South Alabama Student Center Ballroom. This event recognizes academic excellence, leadership, and dedication to education and professional studies across various programs and disciplines.



Counseling and Instructional Sciences

David Woolverton

Dr. Chandru Hiremath Memorial Award — Instructional Design and Development Ph.D. Student of the Year

Tamika B. Wright

Dr. John E. Morrow Sr. Memorial Award — Instructional Design and Development Master's Student of the Year

Kathryn Brazil

Outstanding Clinical Mental Health Counseling (M.S.) Graduate Student

Keilonda Taylor

Outstanding School Counseling (M.Ed.) Graduate Student

Beth Kovash

Outstanding Educational Media — Library (M.Ed.) Graduate Student

Nathan Evans

Outstanding Educational Media and Technology (M.S.) Graduate Student

Health, Kinesiology and Sport

Matthew Bailey

Outstanding Exercise Science Graduate Student

Mary Wilkenson

Outstanding Exercise Science Undergraduate Student

Joshua Estes

Outstanding Health and Physical Education Undergraduate Student

Olivia Mills

Outstanding Health Promotion Graduate Student

Cody Wyatt

Outstanding Sport and Recreation Management Undergraduate Student

Megan Hall

Outstanding Recreational Therapy Undergraduate Student

Austin Thrasher

Outstanding Sport Management Graduate Student

Hospitality and Tourism Management

Dareck Harris

Outstanding Undergraduate Student

Integrative Studies

Patricia Socorro

Outstanding Interdisciplinary Studies Student

Shannon Mackey

Outstanding Research Award

Kyle Babb

Outstanding Internship Award

Leadership and Teacher Education

Knostasia Morales

Outstanding K-6 Teacher Education Student Teacher

Bobbie Ducksworth

Outstanding Graduate Student — Elementary/ Early Childhood Education

Railyn Rolin

Outstanding Graduate Intern — Elementary/ Early Childhood Education

Mason Fahy

Outstanding Graduate Student — Special Education

Jakobe Crusoe

Outstanding PASSAGE USA Student

Janelle "Chelé" Rigney

Outstanding Higher Education Leadership Master's Student

Carly Brooks

Outstanding Student — Secondary Education

Dominique Garcia

Outstanding Undergraduate Student K-6 — Teacher Education

Gina Mejia

Outstanding Undergraduate Student — Early Childhood Studies

First Degree

Wayne Biggs, a Saraland businessman and city councilman, became a South pioneer in December when he graduated from the new Organizational Leadership Program.

BY THOMAS BECNEL

After more than 35 years in business and a decade on the Saraland City Council, Wayne Biggs decided to go back to school.

He started off at community college and went on to the University of South Alabama. Then he heard about South's new Organizational Leadership Program in the College of Education and Professional Studies. The online curriculum is designed for the needs of working professionals.

In December, he became the first Organizational Leadership student to graduate with a bachelor's degree.

"I don't know that I've ever been first in anything," Biggs joked. "This is a big deal for me."

The 68-year-old grandfather said the easiest parts of his education were self-motivation and the freedom to choose his own path. "I didn't have any preconceived notions or pressure on me," he said.

The hardest part? Calculus.

"I made one C, and that was in calculus class," he said. "It was serious stuff. I had a Saraland teacher tutor me once a week for six months."

"It's been exhilarating on one side and humbling on the other."

—WAYNE BIGGS



Biggs said he'd always wanted to go to college and earn a degree. He wanted academic training to go along with his business experience. He wanted to become a better leader for Saraland.

"I love my community," he said. "I want us to thrive and grow in an intelligent way."

For his final semester at South, Biggs took four courses. One was an internship with the City of Saraland, where he remains a councilman. The city clerk was his supervisor.

"I had to get the state ethics commission to sign off on that, but they did," Biggs said. "I checked in with her every Monday. She helped me reach out to other city clerks across the state. I was basically a policy analyst. We evaluated how other cities are doing things and how that might work for us."

At South, he savored his educational experience. He got to learn new things and then test the knowledge he'd gained. Most of his courses were online, though a few were on campus.

"I was always the old guy in the class, but I made a lot of friends," Biggs said. "I learned a lot from those young people, and I hope they learned from me."

His final courses at South covered legal ethics, criminal justice and financial management. Studying leadership philosophies and management practices was rewarding. He's become more aware of all the things he could have done better.

"It's been exhilarating on one side and humbling on the other," he said. "It's interesting to go back and look over my years in business and government. It's always about the personalities of the people you're dealing with, and what works for them."

"I was not always the best, early in my life, at bringing out the best in people. I wish I had done different things or tried different things. I've had some time for retrospection."

Biggs grew up in Saraland, where his father was a union sheet metal worker and his mother was an office manager for an insurance company. He was an indifferent student at Satsuma High School. After graduating in 1974, he went to work in the wholesale grocery industry and then the coffee service business.

He lived and worked in Mobile, Birmingham and Montgomery, along with Panama City, Florida, and Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1987, he returned to the Mobile area and opened Azalea Coffee Service, which provides more than 300 local businesses with coffee supplies and soda and snack vending.

Azalea is a family business with three employees — Biggs, his wife, Martha, and a great-nephew. Biggs has an easy sense of humor that helps with client relations.

"I've been doing it for 37 years," he joked. "I'm about to get the hang of it."

In 2012, Biggs entered local politics with a race for the Saraland City Council. The timing seemed right. He saw an opportunity.

"I would never have gone against an incumbent, but there was an open seat, so I ran and won," he said. "In the last three elections, I've been unopposed."

Three years ago, Biggs told his wife that he wanted to go back to school, on top of business and government responsibilities. He made time in his work schedule for college coursework. He did a lot of online assignments in the evenings and on weekends.

Mentors at South included Dr. Paige Vitulli, chair of the Department of Integrative Studies, Bob Charlebois, director of the Office of Adult Learner Services, and Sally Morris, director of the CEPS Advising Center.

"They were a tremendous help, guiding and encouraging me along the way," he said. "Without them, my academic life here at South would not have progressed as smoothly and seamlessly as it did. The classes and instructors in the program have been great, and both have been very helpful to me in the pursuit of my life goals."

Vitulli remembers first meeting Biggs when he was with Charlebois discussing how the program might be a good fit.

"It was clear Wayne had the intrinsic motivation and determination to complete this degree," Vitulli said. "I think we even predicted — and he agreed — he'd be our first graduate! I'm proud of how Wayne has paved the way for nontraditional students in this new program."

The Organizational Leadership Program targets people who have talent and experience — in business, nonprofits or the military — but lack a college degree. It helps these students sharpen their management skills and prepare for new career opportunities.

Later this year, Biggs plans on running for mayor of Saraland. That's his long-term goal. An important step was his bachelor's degree in organizational leadership.

"When I looked at it, I thought it would help me in business, but also in leadership with the city," he said. "It's been a blast, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

CAREER KICKOFF

Taking initiative on an internship search, Amiaya Ross discovered her dream career path in sports and events management.

Internships provide opportunities to gain experience, explore career paths and, in Amiaya Ross' case, discover a dream career.

A hospitality and tourism management major, Ross sought internships that combined her field of study with her passion for sports.

At South, she had already developed a deep interest in athletics and events management while working as a student assistant in the Athletics Department under Antonio Birch, assistant athletics director for facilities and event operations, and as an equipment manager for the South football team.

"The growth that Amiaya has had over the years with me as an employee has been remarkable," Birch said. "She has navigated through the athletics and events management areas with a level of understanding that you just don't get with everyone. A true definition of someone who is going places. I can see her moving through this industry with ease because of experiences that she has had up to this point."

Desiring further experience through an internship, Ross reached out to the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation, which works to attract, plan and host major sporting events. There, she found the intersection of sports and events management she had been searching for — and more.

"Seeing how events bring people together and create unforgettable moments is inspiring," she said. "In sports, it's about making every fan feel part of something big, and that motivates me to be part of the industry."

Ross' experience has spanned both college and professional sports. She has worked on the past three New Orleans Bowl college football games and, most recently, Super Bowl LIX.

"Planning and executing events has been a great learning experience and has taught me how much detail goes into planning small and large-scale events," she said.

In addition to gaining hands-on experience in planning, logistics and game-day operations, Ross has taken full advantage of opportunities to make connections with others.

"My favorite part has been meeting and networking with professionals across multiple industries, not just sports. I've loved meeting really cool people," she said.

For Ross, her internship has confirmed that she belongs in the sports and events management industry.

"Interning with the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation and the Super Bowl Host Committee has been invaluable in helping me understand the sports industry on a deeper level," Ross said. "It's given me confidence in my career direction, solidified my interest in working in professional sports and has exposed me to other opportunities in the sports industry."

After graduation, Ross is considering pursuing a master's degree in sports management and hopes to continue working with a sports foundation or the NFL. Whatever path she chooses, she has found a clear passion that will guide her career.



Why I Chose South



From Campus Visits to Scholarships: See What Attracts Students to South Alabama

Michael Joyce

Hospitality and Tourism Management

Why did you choose South?

I initially applied to South as a default; however, connecting with my recruiter and navigating the application process made me realize how personal the experience would be. Knowing a few people from Chicago, Illinois, who were already here encouraged me to visit South. When I arrived on campus, I received a warm welcome and immediately felt it was the right place for me. Everyone I spoke with, from students to staff, had wonderful things to say and was eager to help. With the strong sense of community I experienced and the enticing financial offers, including in-state tuition despite my distance, I knew I had to enroll!

What's your favorite part about being a student at South?

So far, my favorite part of being a student at South is the strong sense of involvement that we all share. The number of students here at South, as well as the strong sense of community, creates the sweet spot for being able to meet new people, see those you know around campus and really feel like you're a part of the school on a personal level.

I appreciate how accessible clubs, organizations and sports teams are, allowing anyone to get involved and feel valued as a student. This sense of belonging is something that larger universities often struggle to provide, but that South excels at fostering.

What would you say to someone considering South?

If I could offer one piece of advice to anyone considering South, it would be to visit! For those from out of state or the Chicago area like me, it might seem challenging, but once you're on campus and take a tour, you'll be instantly convinced. I also recommend exploring the many scholarships available through South's scholarship portal. There are countless benefits to attending, ranging from the pleasant weather to the close relationships you'll build with those around you.



Emma Bryson
Health, Kinesiology
and Sport

Why did you choose South?

I grew up with three older sisters who graduated from the University of South Alabama, along with my parents. One of my older sisters was a part of South's cheer team, so almost every afternoon while I was in grade school, we would go to whatever sporting event that was taking place that night where my sister would be cheering. Growing up in Mobile and around South Alabama since I was young, I knew I wanted to attend because it had always felt like home, and it still does after three years of being a student here.

What's your favorite part about being a student at South?

My favorite part about being a South Alabama student has been my professors. I have loved learning from and getting to know each of my professors. They truly care about their students and want to help them achieve their goals.

What would you say to someone considering South?

Choose the university that you feel will both help you achieve your career goals and encourage you to grow as an individual. For me, that was South Alabama. South emanates appreciation and care for the faculty, staff and students.



Kennedi Smith
Leadership and Teacher
Education

Why did you choose South?

I chose South because the environment and people made me feel welcome and at home. I wanted to go to a school with an urban environment that wasn't overwhelming, and I felt South was the perfect fit. I had so much fun during my campus tours and orientation that I knew I would be happy here.

What's your favorite part about being a student at South?

My favorite part about being a student at South is the energy on campus. Everyone has school spirit, which makes game days and campus events so fun and energetic. I also love all the adorable Jag swag we get for free for attending various campus events.

What would you say to someone considering South?

To anyone considering South, I'd let them know that it's a great school. There's a place for everyone to fit in and discover their interests, and many opportunities for professional growth.



Zethlan "Zeth" Voss
PASSAGE USA

Why did you choose South?

I wanted the opportunity to further my education. When I talked to my high school teacher, she provided information about various programs. South was closer, and I preferred the atmosphere better than other programs.

What's your favorite part about being a student at South?

My favorite part of being a student is the access to sporting events. It's nice that we get free access to every game, especially Jags football. South's sporting events are great activities to attend with my friends.

What would you say to someone considering South?

Since being a student at South, I have visited my former high school in Prattville to share my experience as a PASSAGE USA student. I relayed the great opportunities and support the program offers. For me, it has been a great way to learn how to be independent and live on my own. PASSAGE USA is a great way to make new friends in a bigger space.

RISING THROUGH RESILIENCE

Laith Marjan's relentless pursuit of excellence — on and off the field — led the kicker to South Alabama and continues to fuel his success.



Laith Marjan relentlessly pursues excellence. His dedication landed him a full scholarship at South Alabama as the starting kicker for the football team and the ability to pursue his dream of obtaining a Master of Business Administration, but the journey here wasn't linear.

"Coming out of high school, I was pretty highly recruited for a kicker," Marjan said. "I had 14 Division I offers, and they all varied."

With a tough decision ahead, Marjan wasn't just focused on the field; academic scholarship support helped him make his initial decision. "When I stacked all of the offers up at the time, East Carolina University offered me academic aid."

Once there, it was a battle to earn and keep a spot on the field. "I was quickly hit with the realities of college football," Marjan said. "I didn't touch the field my freshman year."

He went on to start as the kicker for 15 games at ECU but realized, "Something was missing." Following a postseason conversation with his coach, he realized he wasn't going to receive the athletic scholarship support he was looking for. Knowing it was time to move on, he entered the transfer portal.

Marjan quickly gained the attention of the South Alabama football program, in particular Special Teams Coordinator Tre' Williams.

"Coach booked a flight, took me out to lunch, and we chatted," said Marjan. "Right there, he offered me a full scholarship!"

For the North Carolina native, it was a huge opportunity that would also require a leap of faith.

"Before he reached out to me, I had no idea what Mobile was. ... I had never been to Alabama. It was a shock! This was an opportunity I didn't expect: to get a full scholarship from a school of this magnitude. ... Immediately, I knew I was going, even not knowing a thing about Mobile, Alabama."

Marjan was all in.

"As I was taking my first visit, I brought my mom's minivan with all of my belongings to move in because it was a 13-hour drive. I knew I was coming here and that I wasn't going back. I decided, 'Let's just dive right into it!'"

Since arriving at South Alabama, Marjan has excelled both academically and athletically. During the 2024 season, the kicker boasted near-perfect field goal completion, making 16 of 17 attempts. He graduated in December 2024 with a degree in interdisciplinary studies. He completed his undergraduate program in just three and a half years.



"Being a college graduate isn't something that everyone can say that they are, let alone accomplish that in three and a half years while a college athlete."

—LAITH MARJAN

"I had to have a full schedule, 18 or 19 credits in the spring. Then I took nine credits in the summer, on top of an internship and early morning football workouts. In the fall, I had another 18-19 credits. I did it because I'm set on getting an MBA before I leave."

As Marjan looks forward to another football season and the start of his MBA studies, making his family proud continues to be one of his biggest motivations.

"There are a lot of people who have taught and helped me along the road," he said. "I wouldn't be here without them. If I had to name one person, it would be my little brother. He's even more disciplined and motivated than I am. ... I'm also officially at my mom's level of education. I joke with her that, once I get my MBA, I will be smarter and more qualified."

For Marjan, the close of his undergraduate career means a moment to pause, reflect and look forward to the next opportunity at South.

"Being a college graduate isn't something that everyone can say that they are, let alone accomplish that in three and a half years while a college athlete," he said. "It feels really good. It's validating. I'm excited to get back and start my MBA and meet people in that niche program. And as far as football goes, I'm looking forward to every game. One game at a time, one week at a time!"

Pillars of Community Impact

Advancing Education Through Engagement, Collaboration and Support



National Boards

The University of South Alabama Research and Inservice Center supports educators pursuing National Board Certification through monthly cohort meetings, mentoring, resource provision and writing retreats. These initiatives provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on their instructional practices and explore how to better meet the needs of all students.

Over the past three years, 70 teachers in our region have achieved National Board Certification, several of them USA graduates. Our alumni's commitment to professional growth is exemplified by Stephanie Pettis, a National Board-certified teacher who has won the Alabama State Department of Education's Chiquita Marbury Technology Innovation Award.



MEGA

On July 8-12, 2024, the Alabama State Department of Education's MEGA Conference marked its 25th anniversary. The event, at the Mobile Convention Center, offered attendees the chance to engage in meaningful discussions, participate in in-depth training sessions and learn from leading experts in education.

The College of Education and Professional Studies supported the conference through various events and presentations. Highlights included a dinner at the USA Faculty Club that brought together thought leaders, innovators, and representatives from the Department of Education, K-12 schools and the University community to collaborate on shared goals. An Alumni Social at the Renaissance Mobile Riverview Plaza Hotel celebrated college alumni who are teaching and leading in schools across Alabama.

During the conference, Dr. Abigail Baxter, a professor in the Department of Leadership and Teacher Education, and Dr. Linda Reeves, an associate professor in the department, presented a session titled "Preparing Students with Disabilities for Transition: Explicitly Addressing Transportation Needs and Supports." Dr. Stephanie Hulon, director of the South Alabama Research and Inservice Center and assistant professor in the same department, also led sessions on support for instructional coaches, national board certification and engagement strategies.

Extra Yard for Teachers

For the 2024 Extra Yard for Teachers Week, the University of South Alabama's College of Education and Professional Studies and South Alabama Athletics partnered with the College Football Playoff Foundation to give back to local K-12 teachers.

On Sept. 12, Extra Yard Week festivities kicked off in Hancock Whitney Stadium with an 87-10 win for the Jaguars (setting a record for most points in a game) and 27 teachers being chosen to have their Amazon classroom wish lists fulfilled. Two game-time winners were awarded \$500. After the game, an additional 25 teachers won \$200.

The celebration continued on Sept. 17 at the Extra Yard for Teachers Big Reveal Day at W.H. Leinkauf Elementary School in Mobile. With Jaguar cheerleaders, football players and Marching Band members joining the fun, Leinkauf students and faculty gathered to witness Madeline Lester Price, a first-grade teacher and USA College of Education and Professional Studies alumna, receive a \$100 gift certificate from DonorsChoose.org. Additionally, Leinkauf Principal Hope Belle-Payne accepted a \$1,000 donation from DonorsChoose.org while faculty and staff enjoyed USA Jag swag and school supplies.

Education and Empowerment: Community Impact

Inside the Specialized Centers Advancing
Literacy, STEM and Wellness

USA Literacy Center

University of South Alabama Literacy Center

The University of South Alabama Literacy Center, a community engagement initiative within the College of Education and Professional Studies, fosters literacy among local children and adolescents. Located at University Commons, the center offers individual and small group tutoring, a first grade camp at Fonde Elementary School, and engaging and interactive summer camps for rising second through sixth graders. Because of the generosity of AT&T, the Literacy Center now offers dyslexia therapy provided by a certified academic language therapist.

school teachers, principals and superintendents across southern Alabama. The center is guided by state and district objectives to design, develop and implement a variety of professional learning programs and activities. It also collaborates with state initiatives to support impactful efforts like the Alabama Reading Initiative, whose goal is to improve reading instruction and achieve 100% literacy among public school students. The center supports educators in achieving National Board Certification, which is recognized as the leading professional credential in education.



Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative

The Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative, funded by the Alabama State Department of Education, is dedicated to enhancing science, technology, engineering and mathematics education by providing K-12 teachers with professional coaching in high-impact teaching methods for mathematics and science. In addition to offering hands-on training, the center supplies educators with materials for lab

Specialized centers and organizations within the College of Education and Professional Studies make significant contributions to education, community engagement and wellness. They serve both the University and the broader community through innovative programs and research. The centers focus on improving literacy, supporting public school educators, enhancing STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education, promoting postsecondary success, and assessing human performance and wellness.

activities and demonstrations, promoting interactive learning. Its mission is to help Alabama educators and students learn STEM through active engagement, driving improvements in both individual and integrated STEM subjects across the state.



Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education

The Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education collaborates with community colleges, universities, employers and other partners to enhance graduation rates and workforce outcomes, particularly for first-generation, underrepresented and low-income students. By unifying the efforts of its partners, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, the center maximizes the benefits for participating institutions and the students they serve. The center drives change in higher education by focusing on student-centered initiatives, advancing digital teaching and learning,

redesigning student advising, developing educational pathways, and fostering capacity building.



Center for Performance Assessment and Wellness at South

The Center for Performance Assessment and Wellness at South provides human physiology testing for community members and researchers. Testing services encompass many areas of human performance and wellness, including body composition, aerobic fitness, resting energy expenditure and strength. Tests for body composition (fat mass and lean mass) include dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry, air displacement plethysmography and digital anthropometry. The center gauges aerobic capacity via maximal volume of oxygen consumption testing, and it assesses basal metabolic rate. The center is committed to applying advanced scientific methods to support health, wellness and human performance.



University of South Alabama Research and Inservice Center

Funded by the Alabama State Department of Education, the University of South Alabama Research and Inservice Center provides year-round comprehensive professional learning to more than 8,000 public



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College of Education and Professional Studies**

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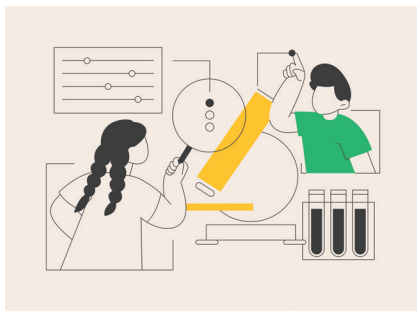
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Enhancing Hands-On Learning: AM/NS Calvert Funds STEAM Lab Renovation

Thanks to a generous donation from the AM/NS Calvert steel plant, the undergraduate and graduate STEAM laboratory is getting a \$10,000 upgrade of equipment and software. Science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics are critical education components within the College of Education and Professional Studies. The lab's new design will model labs in elementary and high school settings. Working in laboratory settings gives both current and aspiring teachers hands-on experience with technology, allowing them to link theory with practice.

Dean Dr. Angela T. Barlow, right, with the 2024 faculty and staff award recipients.

Faculty and Staff Awards

Leaders in Education: 2024 Awards Spotlight Excellence in Teaching, Research and Service

Each year, the College of Education and Professional Studies recognizes outstanding faculty and staff who have played a key role in advancing the college's mission. The awards were presented at the 2024 Faculty and Staff Awards Banquet on April 18. The winners have demonstrated exceptional dedication, positively impacting both students and the community. Their hard work and commitment continue to shape the college and its success.

Gerry Jean Clark Exemplary Staff Award

The Gerry Jean Clark Exemplary Staff Award honors a full-time staff member who has provided exceptional service to the College of Education and Professional Studies. The award recognizes individuals who demonstrate professionalism, sound judgment, commitment and teamwork, and who make a lasting impact on the college.

Recipient: Stephanie Darst, academic records supervisor, Office of Student Services

Faculty Excellence Award

The Faculty Excellence Award recognizes faculty members who have made exceptional contributions to teaching, research and service. This award honors individuals whose commitment to academic excellence, innovative teaching methods and/or impactful research has enriched students and the broader academic community. Recipients embody the highest standards of faculty achievement and play a vital role in advancing the college's mission.

Recipient: Dr. Yvette Getch, professor, Department of Counseling and Instructional Sciences

Recipient: Dr. Karen Morrison, assistant professor, Department of Leadership and Teacher Education

Recipient: Dr. Eunmin Hwang, assistant professor, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management

Dean's Award of Excellence

The Dean's Award honors individuals or families who have positively impacted the College of Education and Professional Studies. In line with the college's mission of "leading today, impacting tomorrow," this award recognizes those who demonstrate leadership, perseverance and dedication to making a difference in the lives of others.

Recipient: The family of Caryn Hyatt-Suthoff (see page 37)





UTeach South: Bridging the Gap and Expanding Outreach in STEM Education

Enrollment in the UTeach South program at the University of South Alabama has surged, reaching 53 students across 12 disciplines in fall 2024 — a 47% increase since its inception in fall 2023. The program makes it easier for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) undergraduates to earn teacher certification. Its growth reflects success in attracting students who had not previously considered teaching careers. This semester alone, the program has placed student teachers in 16 public schools across three districts, impacting nearly 700 students with its innovative STEM curriculum. Fostering collaboration between the colleges of Education and Professional Studies and Arts and Sciences, the UTeach program addresses the shortage of qualified STEM teachers, enhances education quality and builds community relationships.

South Strengthens Faculty with New Health and Integrative Studies Professors



Dr. Matthew Barenie
Assistant Professor,
Department of
Health, Kinesiology
and Sport

Dr. Matthew Barenie
is a native of Indiana

who earned his Ph.D. in human performance-exercise physiology from Indiana University. Barenie researches optimizing human physiology and accelerating muscle recovery and performance through nutraceuticals. As a registered dietitian and former postdoctoral fellow who studied childhood obesity and physical activity, he is interested in any research project related to health, human performance or nutrition. Barenie teaches Fitness Assessment and Exercise Prescription as well as Applications in Sports Conditioning. He lives with his fiancée and two young dachshunds in the Mobile area.



Dr. Amma Adusei
Assistant Professor,
Department of
Integrative Studies

Dr. Gifty Amma
Adusei comes to the
College of Education
and Professional Studies

from the University of Louisville, where she earned her Ph.D. in Urban and Public Affairs in May 2024. Adusei's research focuses on community development, leadership, neighborhood self-governance, public policy and sustainability. A current research study applies the state-reinforced self-governance framework to critique community development policies from the 1930s Great Depression to the present, including the HOPE VI program and the Choice Neighborhoods initiative. She leads the online bachelor's degree program in Organizational Leadership.



Leaders in the Making

Meet the ambitious students at South who are transforming their fields through dedicated research and leadership.

The College of Education and Professional Studies' graduate programs offer a platform for ambitious individuals seeking to advance their careers and make significant contributions in their fields. These postgraduate students illustrate the diverse academic pursuits available at South and the real-world impact of their research and professional commitments. In fields from healthcare to mental health counseling, each student's journey underscores the value and transformative potential of higher education.

Alani Rodgers

While working as a secretary in developmental pediatrics for USA Health, Alani Rodgers decided to go back to school. Rodgers enrolled as an adult learner, pursuing a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies with a focus in administration. Aiming to be more competitive in the workforce, she continued to graduate school. Her master's courses in educational leadership inspired her to pursue a Doctor of Education in education leadership focusing on higher education.

Rodgers focuses her Ed.D. research on the growing population of adult learners, like herself, who face unique challenges in balancing school with work, family and community responsibilities. She explores how institutions of higher education can understand the needs of this population. Set to graduate in spring 2025, she hopes her research will benefit the adult learners at South. She wants them to feel that their voice is heard and that they are a crucial part of our University.



Brandy Rhodes

Before pursuing her first degree in instructional design, Brandy Rhodes spent 13 years in the healthcare sector. While she enjoyed the challenge, she always felt something was missing. In 2016, while teaching clinical students through USA's simulation program, Rhodes discovered her passion for teaching. That led her to instructional design.

"Finding the Instructional Design and Development Program at South changed my life," Rhodes said. "It's where everything came together for me — personally and professionally." She earned a Master of Science in Instructional Design and Development in 2019 and a Ph.D. in the same field in 2024. Her doctoral research examined collaboration between subject matter experts (faculty) and instructional designers in higher education. From her findings, Rhodes developed a model to facilitate those collaborations.

After her 2024 graduation, Rhodes continues as an adjunct faculty member, teaching Training Interventions for the Department of Integrative Studies. She looks forward to more research, teaching and course design projects, and shares her passion for learning and designing effective educational experiences.



Alissa Dearman

Coming to the University of South Alabama initially for her bachelor's in psychology, Alissa Dearman took a research assistantship in the Trauma Reactions & Interpersonal Loss Lab. This role led to a position at Vets Recover, a certified community behavioral health clinic in Mobile. After graduating in 2021, Dearman worked as a data analyst at Vets Recover, where she discovered her passion for the clinical mental health setting.

Having navigated her own mental health journey, Dearman was motivated to help others facing similar challenges. This led her back to South to pursue a master's in clinical mental health counseling. Currently in the internship phase of her studies, she is assisting at the Child Advocacy Center in Mobile, working with children referred by the Alabama Department of Human Resources due to abuse.

Set to graduate in spring 2025, Dearman plans to obtain her license as a professional counselor and work in a mental health group setting. Whatever type of counseling she focuses on following graduation, Dearman knows that her studies will enable her to fulfill her lifelong goal of helping others.



Victoria Dixon

Victoria Dixon came to the University of South Alabama as a nontraditional student, initially for her bachelor's in psychology and master's in clinical mental health counseling. After three years of clinical experience during her master's internship, she was inspired to continue her education for her Ph.D.

Currently a student in South's Clinical and Counseling Psychology Ph.D. Program, Dixon is passionate about victim advocacy and loves to explore the intersection between law and psychology. She plans to focus on child welfare systems and reform efforts. Dixon works extensively with NEST of Mobile, which stands for Nurturing Children, Equipping Parents, Strengthening Families and Transforming Communities. It provides a team of mentors for children in juvenile court.

After her Ph.D., Dixon hopes to remain in academia but maintain a hands-on role in combating child maltreatment while contributing to broader initiatives. She remains committed to advocacy in the Mobile community and providing services and resources to those in need.



Baron Thompson

Hailing from Los Angeles by way of Tampa, Baron Thompson came to the University of South Alabama for the research opportunities. After meeting his current advisor, Dr. Neil Schwarz, chair of the Department of Health, Kinesiology and Sport, at a conference, Thompson decided to enroll in South's Exercise Science and Performance Nutrition Ph.D. program.

As a nontraditional student, Thompson credits his 10 years of working in clinical research coaching recreational runners as his inspiration to return to school. He hopes to stay in academia and work in a lab to improve endurance runners. His research focuses on how general strength training improves endurance performance in athletes such as marathon runners, triathletes and hybrid athletes. Thompson hopes his work will not only benefit the recreational runner but also inspire other nontraditional students to pursue education at any age.

What about You?

These students exemplify the significant personal and professional growth that higher education enables. The College of Education and Professional Studies supports such advancements with a diverse array of degree programs, including doctoral and master's degrees in fields like Instructional Design and Development, Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and Educational Leadership. Available both online and on campus, these programs are designed to meet various needs and prepare students for impactful careers.

If you're considering further education, the College offers over 50 programs that cater to diverse professional goals and provide the tools necessary for making a substantial difference in your field.

Master's Degrees

Clinical Mental Health Counseling, M.S.
 Early Childhood Education, M.Ed. (online)
 Early Childhood Education, M.Ed. with Reading Certification (online)
 Educational Leadership for P-12 Administrators, M.Ed. (online)
 Educational Leadership, Certification Only
 Educational Leadership for Higher Education Administration, M.Ed. (online)
 Educational Media-Library Media, M.Ed. (online)
 Educational Media, Certification Only
 Educational Media and Technology, M.S. (online)
 Elementary Education, M.Ed. (online)
 Elementary Education, M.Ed. with Reading Certification (online)
 Exercise Science, M.S.
 Health Education (6-12), M.Ed.
 Health Promotion, M.S.
 Instructional Design and Development, M.S. (online)
 Instructional Design and Development, Pre-Doctoral Program
 Physical Education (P-12), M.Ed.
 Reading Specialist, Certification Only (online)
 School Counseling, M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, M.Ed. (online)
 Secondary Education, English Language Arts, M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, General Science, M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Mathematics, M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Social Studies, M.Ed.
 Special Education (Collaborative Teacher) K-6 or 6-12, M.Ed. (online)
 Sport Management, M.S. (online)

Alternative Master's Degrees

Early Childhood Education, Alt. M.Ed.
 Elementary Education, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Art Education, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, English Language Arts, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Alt. M.Ed. (online)
 Secondary Education, French, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, General Science, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, German, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Mathematics, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Social Studies, Alt. M.Ed.
 Secondary Education, Spanish, Alt. M.Ed.
 Special Education (Collaborative Teacher) K-6 or 6-12, Alt. M.Ed. (online)

Education Specialist Degrees

Early Childhood Education, Ed.S.
 Educational Leadership/Instructional Leadership, Ed.S.
 Elementary Education, Ed.S.
 Reading Specialist, Ed.S.
 Secondary Education, General Science, Ed.S.
 Secondary Education, English Language Arts, Ed.S.
 Secondary Education, Mathematics, Ed.S.
 Secondary Education, Social Sciences, Ed.S.
 Special Education (Collaborative Teacher) K-6 or 6-12, Ed.S.
 Teacher Leader, Ed.S. (online)

Doctoral Degrees

Clinical and Counseling Psychology, Ph.D.
 Educational Leadership in P-12, Ed.D.
 Educational Leadership in Higher Education, Ed.D.
 Exercise Science and Performance Nutrition, Ph.D.
 Instructional Design and Development, Ph.D.

COOL SUPPLIES

A South-trained elementary school teacher promotes her Care Closet program in People magazine and on 'The Drew Barrymore Show.'

BY THOMAS BECNEL





Carey Arensberg, a district Teacher of the Year at George Hall Elementary School, became famous outside Mobile County for a Care Closet program that offers needy students everything from free shampoo and toothpaste to feminine products and shoelaces.

Teachers around the world follow her Facebook and TikTok accounts, which have more than 400,000 followers. In September, she was featured in People magazine. In October, she traveled to New York City for an appearance on "The Drew Barrymore Show."

Arensberg, a 37-year-old education graduate from the University of South Alabama, is a behavior specialist with certification as a trauma and resilience practitioner. None of this made her less nervous about appearing on national TV.

"I was starstruck," she said, laughing. "At first, I didn't know I was going to be on the actual show, but I had given permission for them to use my videos, and then they said Drew wanted to talk to me on-air. On a Friday, they said we're going to put you on a plane next Wednesday. So I did the segment on Thursday, and I was back in school on Friday."

"When I got to New York, everyone was so helpful. They gave me some sample questions, so I knew what to expect, but I tried not to prepare too much. It feels more authentic when you're just talking about something you're passionate about."

"It was nerve-racking, but such an awesome experience. Drew was everything you'd expect, just bubbly and kind and down to earth."

"People think you don't have the same level of need at a private school, which is not the case."

—CAREY ARENSBERG

On the talk show, Arensberg told how the Care Closet got started in 2020. One of her fifth-grade students was acting up and refusing to take off his hoodie jacket. When she sat down to talk with him, she learned that he was afraid students would make fun of his messy hair if he took off the hood.

That's when Arensberg bought some hair-care products and opened a closet in the back of her classroom. Social media spread the word. Parents and teachers appreciated what she had to say.

This fall, after 13 years at George Hall Elementary, Arensberg joined the faculty at St. Mary's Catholic School in Mobile. Her title is social emotional behavior specialist. She brought a Care Closet along with her.

"People think you don't have the same level of need at a private school, which is not the case," she said. "We don't have the kind of support public

schools have, so we do all kinds of fundraising.” After her talk show appearance in New York, Barrymore and one of her co-hosts donated money to the elementary school.

Corinne Cuffle, principal of St. Mary’s, knows Arensberg as a parent as well as an educator. Their sons play in the same youth sports leagues, so they have time to talk shop in the stands.

“At halftime, I get a chance to pick her brain about things like trauma-informed teaching,” Cuffle said. “I knew that we needed her at our school, but I never thought in a million years we could get her. Then a position opened up, and it’s been great.”

Arensberg’s television appearances, along with her social media presence, help promote St. Mary’s and recruit Mobile students.

“For her, it’s an added benefit, to have that platform,” Cuffle said. “But she’s very grounded, very solid in her faith, and it makes her relatable to the kids. That’s how she shares her gift. We want what she does to become practice in all schools.”

Arensberg works with kindergarten through eighth-grade students. One of her duties is teaching weekly classes in social and emotional learning. Character-building subjects include respect and responsibility, along with compassion and gratitude.

Teaching at a Catholic school gives her more freedom to talk about her own faith.

“The first time we prayed together over morning announcements, I cried,” she said. “It was such a relief.”

Arensberg grew up in Mobile and Daphne. She graduated from McGill-Toolen Catholic High School and chose to attend the University of South Alabama. She thought about studying meteorology or social work, but found a home in elementary education. One of the things that confirmed her career choice was doing after-school care at St. Mary’s.

“Now I’ve kind of come full circle,” she said. “It was a tough decision because I loved working in the public school system, but after 13 years, I was ready to make a change.”

At George Hall Elementary, she mentored a pair of students and kept working with them in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. They’re in college now but still keep in touch with their Big Sister.

“I thought these big football-playing boys would get too cool to hang around with their fifth-grade teacher,” she said, “but that hasn’t happened yet.”

As a student at South, Arensberg enjoyed the camaraderie of future teachers in the College of Education and Professional Studies. It reminded her of the school spirit at McGill-Toolen. She did her student teaching at George Hall and stepped right into a full-time position.

Her part-time jobs in college included singing and playing piano with a local band called Color the Coast. They did cover songs — “A lot of Jewel,” she said — along with a few original tunes.

She wound up marrying her drummer, Matthew Arensberg, who is now a homebuilder in Mobile. They have two sons who attend St. Mary’s. When school lets out, it’s time for sports and extracurricular activities.

“It can be a challenge sometimes, but my boys make it easy,” she said. “They’re not ashamed to come up in the classroom and give me a hug. And this is all I know. I don’t know what it’s like to be a teacher without being a mom.”

Arensberg still sings, when she gets a chance, and records videos for TikTok. A recent video featured the old John Denver song “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” Her repertoire includes Catholic standards such as “Ave Maria.”

“I’ve done a ton of weddings,” she said. “You never know what people are going to request.”

In education, Arensberg became a science department chair and worked on school curricula. She always wanted to teach elementary school students. She always enjoyed working with fourth- and fifth-graders.

“It’s such a good age,” she said. “They still have that innocence. They want to please their teachers. But they’re old enough to talk to in a meaningful way.”

A few years ago, Arensberg began focusing on social media to promote Care Closets and trauma education. Things took off. She was named Mobile County Public Schools Elementary Teacher of the Year and was featured on AL.com and in Mobile Bay Magazine.

Students got a kick out of seeing their teacher online. Educators appreciated her message.

Now her audience stretches across the country and around the world.

“I just got an email from a teacher in Australia,” Arensberg said. “She said, ‘I use your videos all the time. Can you make one with library books?’”



Community Champion

Joshua Jones works with USA Health on building trust to create a better future for Mobile youths and young adults.



Youth violence deeply affects communities throughout the United States, including Mobile, Alabama. According to the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, offenders 17 years old or younger represented 10% — nearly 500,000 — of all reported violent incidents in the U.S. in 2023.

For College of Education and Professional Studies alumnus Joshua Jones, breaking this cycle of violence by restoring social cohesion and connecting youths to vital resources is his life's mission, a purpose that became vividly clear during his tenure with the U.S. Secret Service.

"During that time, I had some amazing experiences," Jones said. "But I realized that I was miserable. It was an existential crisis. I was doing everything that I could have dreamed of doing, but I wasn't happy. I realized that service, for me, is not about just protecting dignitaries. Service for me is ensuring that the people and the places I come into contact with are better than they were before when I leave."

Jones received a call from a former colleague in Mobile about a position with the city as youth violence prevention coordinator. "It was an answer to prayer," he said. In early 2022, he returned to Mobile. His first step: building a thorough understanding of the problems facing affected youths.

"What we see as violence is the result of so many other things going wrong," explained Jones. "This cycle starts with social disorganization. There's no true tie to relationships.

"From social disorganization, we get into incidents of violence. If I don't care about the people I'm living next to and don't have any social connection when incidents of violence occur, I don't care. When these incidents of violence occur, now you have trauma and fear of retaliation ... and that leads to hypervigilance."

The last and most critical aspect of this cycle, Jones said, is a deep-rooted lack of trust in institutions.

"These are people who say, 'When I used to call the police, they didn't help us. When I went to the hospital, they didn't help because we didn't have insurance.' You end up with people trying to solve problems on their own without the proper tools, knowledge and resources."

With an understanding of the complex underlying issues, Jones formed strong relationships across the community as he searched for solutions. When he met Dr. Ashley Williams Hogue, a trauma acute care surgeon at USA Health and founder of Project Inspire, a program designed to curb youth violence through a partnership between USA Health and the Strickland Youth Center, the two instantly connected.

Together, they envisioned an intervention program. After three years of work by Jones, Williams Hogue, USA Health, community members and other supporters, the Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program (HVIP) is set to launch in collaboration with USA Health and the City of Mobile in Spring 2025. Jones directs the program.

"We both understood that this work could not be done in silos," Williams Hogue said. "It was crucial for us to partner and work together to address such a complex issue. When victims of violence present to the hospital during one of the most vulnerable times of their lives, we have the responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure restoration, and that's what the HVIP is all about."

The program aims to connect affected and at-risk youths and young adults with local resources that address root causes of youth violence.

"What we see as violence is the result of so many other things going wrong. This cycle starts with social disorganization."

—JOSHUA JONES

"When individuals come into the hospital, we identify their top needs just to get back ... to their baseline, so they can think clearly," Jones said. "Then they can take advantage of the opportunities that are available to them, (such as) job development, a safe place to live, personal development, parenting skills. We have individuals who are violence intervention specialists. They are trained individuals who have direct knowledge of the resources available and the partners that provide those resources."

The care provided by the program will extend well beyond hospital discharge.

"The violence intervention specialist will build out a case plan with goals and objectives with the individual, and after discharge, they will continue to follow up," Jones said.

He plans to leverage the program to rebuild institutional trust and community cohesion.

"The goal is that when a person completes their plan, that individual then becomes a 'peer provider,'" Jones said.

"We're taking the individuals who successfully complete their program, and we transform them into credible messengers for the next individual, the next family.

"We're building social connectedness among victims within the city, and, by establishing this program, we re-establish the trust in this institution at USA Health, so they can say, 'These people genuinely care about the work they're doing, and they genuinely care about me.'"

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Discover where
our graduates are
making their mark.



Alona Thompson

Recreational Therapist | Disabled
Outdoorsmen Alabama President

Alona Thompson, a proud native of Mobile, is the PTSD Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program recreational therapist at the VA Gulf Coast Veterans Healthcare System in Biloxi, Mississippi. She enhances veterans' lives through tailored therapeutic recreation programs aimed at promoting physical, emotional and social well-being. Thompson's work benefits veterans facing such challenges as post-traumatic stress disorder and physical disabilities, reminding her daily of the transformative power of recreation.

Thompson earned her bachelor's degree in leisure studies with a concentration in therapeutic recreation in 2018 and is a certified therapeutic recreation specialist. She expanded her qualifications in 2024 with an adaptive sports and recreation specialization, alongside licensure from the North Carolina Board of Recreational Therapy and certification from the Adaptive Training Academy.

Beyond her clinical work, Thompson advocates for accessibility in recreation. She is deeply involved in her community and founded Girlfriends in Grace, a women's Bible study group. She holds leadership roles within the Mobile Jaycees and assists with the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo. She is the first female president of Disabled Outdoorsmen Alabama, a nonprofit organization that provides hunting and fishing opportunities to individuals of all disabilities.

She attributes her commitment to inclusivity and passion for the outdoors to her own experiences with hunting and fishing, and views recreation as a means to transform lives. Thompson's advice to students is to dream big, keep going and always stay true to yourself, emphasizing perseverance and authenticity.



Dr. Kim Pusey

Assistant Professor | Tennessee State

Dr. Kim Pusey, an assistant professor of psychological sciences and counseling and general psychology coordinator at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee, cherishes her path through academia and the substantial role South Alabama played in shaping her career.

After earning a master's in psychology and a doctorate in clinical and counseling psychology at South and completing her clinical internship at Arkansas State Hospital in Little Rock, Pusey enhanced her expertise with a postdoctoral fellowship at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. She focused on the mental health needs of children in state custody.

Regarding her current position, Pusey said, "I LOVE TEACHING!!! I am having so much fun, and finding so much meaning and fulfillment passing along the mentorship and guidance that I was afforded at South!" She plans to eventually return to clinical work with vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Pusey credits South with pivotal career guidance, practical help (such as editing of personal statements) and unique professional development opportunities. "South didn't just impact my career; it completely shaped and helped me cultivate a deeply meaningful and rich profession that beautifully accentuates my life," she said. She remains connected with her mentor, Dr. Trés Stefurak, professor of counseling psychology, and other faculty, maintaining access to a wealth of resources and support.

Pusey advised current students: "Find a mentor; go to your professor's office hours; tell your professors your professional goals, hopes and dreams. And finally, take them up on the opportunities that they inevitably put in front of you — you might just uncover some of your passions."



Photo Credit: Candice Freeberg

Maj. Zachary Kane Jones

Director of Psychological Health | NATO Air Base Geilenkirchen

Stationed at NATO Air Base Geilenkirchen in Germany, Maj. Zachary Kane Jones plays a pivotal role as the director of psychological health for U.S. assets. He oversees the mental wellness of 2,300 joint service members and their families across multiple units in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. His work is vital in maintaining the readiness and resilience of NATO's airborne surveillance missions, which are crucial for protecting allied airspace.

Jones earned his Ph.D. from the University of South Alabama, where he was trained under a program combining clinical and counseling psychology — preparing him for leadership in military mental health. He leads the mental health flight (unit) within the 852nd Medical Squadron, managing substance abuse programs and domestic violence treatment and providing psychological testing.

He credits his alma mater with providing the foundation for his leadership skills and clinical expertise, essential in his role at one of NATO's strategic bases. His advice to current students is to seize every opportunity provided by the faculty and staff at South Alabama, emphasizing the growth that comes from engaging fully with the community.



Giovana Maymon

Head Women's Golf Coach | University of Arizona

Giovana Maymon recently took on her first head-coaching role as the head women's golf coach at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She dedicates her days to developing players, organizing team events, managing finances and orchestrating travel. Near the end of this season, her team has claimed two tournament wins and a second-place finish out of eight and ranks 16th nationally.

Maymon attributes the foundation of her coaching career to her time as a graduate assistant at South from 2019 to 2021. "South was the beginning of my coaching career," she said, praising the supportive community and the real-world applicability of her sports management and health classes.

She also credits her mentors, including then-Head Coach Matt Luther and advisor Dr. Shelley Holden, professor of health, kinesiology and sport. "Matt Luther taught me to be a technical head coach, and Dr. Holden crafted a career plan that prepared me for today," Maymon said.

She advises current students to value their college experience deeply: "Enjoy every moment. Learn about yourself, make bold decisions, and embrace mistakes — they're part of growth."



Drs. Chalandra Gooden and Felicia Smith

Assistant Professors | Minnesota State University, Mankato

Drs. Chalandra Gooden and Felicia Smith, assistant professors in the College of Education's K-12 and Secondary Programs Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, exemplify the profound impact of educational mentorship.

Gooden focuses on teaching future educators and developing equitable assessment strategies. "Our goal is to bridge the gap between the university and K-12 schools by keeping teachers and their perspectives at the forefront," she said. Her passion for mathematics education led her to collaborate with Smith in establishing a mathematics education affinity group aimed at fostering a supportive teacher community.

Smith teaches Systemic Issues in Education and is deeply involved in supporting students of color and providing professional development for local mathematics teachers. "This initiative aims to provide ongoing support and training for educators in the area," she said.

Their journey to these roles started at the University of South Alabama, where both were influenced by the Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program (which encourages students to become K-12 mathematics and science teachers) and mentors like Drs. Susan Ferguson and André Green of the College of Education and Professional Studies. Gooden and Smith, who met through their sorority, earned their bachelor's and master's degrees at South and their Ph.D.s in secondary mathematics education at the University of Alabama, encouraging each other along the way.

"It's always great to reconnect with my South people at conferences or South events I attend because it serves as a reminder of how important a strong community is to my personal and professional growth," Smith said. Together, she and Gooden emphasize the importance of mentorship and community in nurturing future educators.



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The Caryn Hyatt-Suthoff Memorial Scholarship in Education

A Realized Dream and Honored Legacy

When she graduated from South Alabama with a teaching degree, Caryn Hyatt-Suthoff eagerly looked forward to a bright future pursuing her dream of educating and enriching the lives of children.

"She loved children. (Pursuing a career in education) was a natural step for her," said Hyatt-Suthoff's sister-in-law Rosalie Hyatt. "She got a position as a kindergarten teacher. She was so excited! My mother-in-law would host dinner every Monday night, and we were over at dinner after the first day of school. Caryn couldn't stop talking about the first day and her kids!"

Just two weeks later, Hyatt-Suthoff received a tragic cancer diagnosis.

"August 31 was the day we found out," Hyatt said. "Caryn was at my house for my son's fourth birthday party. I have pictures with her in the background. You can see her feeding one of her nephews cupcakes and taking care of him. That's who she was. It didn't matter that she was sick. She was going to be there for her family. It was everything to her."

Beloved by all who knew her, Hyatt-Suthoff saw her family, friends and community lean in and rally to provide support.

"There were people from other schools across Mobile County that were donating (paid time off) days to her," Hyatt said. "Her church, community and her family were there the whole way. Meighan Masterson, one of her fellow teachers, wanted to do a fundraiser for Caryn. So she and the Polka Dots Mardi Gras organization started a 5K run program that first year. A portion of the proceeds were set to go to Caryn to help offset medical costs."

Sadly, Hyatt-Suthoff never made it back to her classroom, passing in December 2014, just months after her diagnosis. With the 5K race planned, her family and friends turned their attention to ensuring that her legacy would live on.

"Caryn was a Wonder Woman," Masterson said, "and it reminded me to be one myself. ... I was in denial and couldn't believe such an amazing person, one who shared so much joy with others, was not going to be back in kindergarten with her first ever class or at school making our school days brighter. It did not seem fair, and I knew our school would be mourning this loss, especially her little kindergarteners. ... I had the idea to make a scholarship fund out of the proceeds we raised instead."

Money from the annual Caring for Caryn's Kids 5K and Fun Run is earmarked for Hyatt-Suthoff's kindergarten class. In 2027, they will graduate from high school with scholarship dollars available for them to pursue further education and training. And her family has created another lasting tribute to her vision.

"Meighan and I were talking one day, and apparently her father had created an endowment at South in her mother's name," Hyatt said. "We reached out to the development officer at South, and our family started talking about how to do that. After a few years we had the money and the funds from the race, and we resumed that discussion at South. Now, it makes us so happy that her name will always be there. Even after we are all long gone, her name will be at South Alabama."

The Caryn Hyatt-Suthoff Memorial Scholarship in Education will provide USA students pursuing a career in education with support as they follow the same passion as Hyatt-Suthoff.

"This scholarship is doing exactly what Caryn wanted," said Hyatt. "She wanted to educate youngsters — to push them out into society as well-groomed, amazing humans. This scholarship gives others that opportunity. When they receive this endowment, they will become young adults who then educate more children. This allows her dream to live on."

Creating such an endowment doesn't require millions of dollars.

"Even though we donated \$10,000, that \$10,000 is going to multiply over the next 100 years and impact so many people," Hyatt said. "If it's a kid like Caryn, if it helps someone not take out more student loans, it's so worth it. We want this scholarship to alleviate a burden for young adults who want the same thing that Caryn did."

Thanks to the generosity of Abraham Mitchell, the scholarship has doubled its impact through matching funds from the Mitchell-Moulton Scholarship Initiative.

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—ROSALIE HYATT

This year's Caring for Caryn's Kids 5K took place at noon on March 8, 2025, at The Grounds in Mobile.

To get involved with the race, contact Rosalie Hyatt at carynskids2027@aol.com.



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

The University of South Alabama National Alumni Association proudly recognizes a distinguished group of University of South Alabama alumni and friends of the University who have gone above and beyond in their commitment to service and leadership.

As alumni and ardent supporters of the University and our College of Education and Professional Studies, they embody the highest ideals of our college community — dedication, innovation and compassion. These honorees have not only achieved remarkable success in their respective fields, but have also contributed significantly to the enrichment and advancement of our community. Their stories are a testament to the transformative power of education and the enduring bonds of our college family. Join us in celebrating these exemplary figures, whose legacies continue to inspire and shape the future of our institution.



Alexis Atkins '97
Distinguished Service Award

Alexis Atkins enrolled at South while working full time at her family's business, Budweiser-Busch Distributing Co. She is vice chair of South's Board of Trustees, a former president of the USA National Alumni Association and a tireless volunteer in the Mobile community.



Chandra Brown Stewart '99
Distinguished Service Award

Chandra Brown Stewart speaks out on behalf of those who have been overlooked or marginalized — as executive director of Lifelines Counseling Services in Mobile and as a community leader and devoted volunteer. Her donation of a friendship bench at the Africatown Heritage House encourages visitors to sit together in conversation.



Susan and Travis Bedsole Jr.
V. Gordon Moulton Distinguished Service Award

Travis and Susan Bedsole deeply value education. They have championed literacy programs and facilitated numerous scholarships at South. One of these scholarships reflects two of their passions: learning and Jaguar athletics. It goes to an education major who plays a NCAA sport.



Prioritized Giving

Financial support dramatically impacts the lives of students in the College of Education and Professional Studies. Your support allows us to transform our community and expand our outreach through a commitment to excellence in education and human services. Two areas of priority for the college are:

STUDENT SCHOLARSHIPS

The enrollment, education and graduation of outstanding students is of paramount importance to the College of Education and Professional Studies. Employers and other external constituents benefit from inspired graduates entering the workforce. In order to attract these students, the college must offer competitive scholarships.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Studies have shown that community engagement improves learning outcomes, improves critical thinking and increases the ability to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems. The College of Education and Professional Studies provides multiple community engagement opportunities for students, faculty and staff, including work with the USA Literacy Center, Williamson Middle Grades Preparatory Academy, local court systems and many other organizations. Support from donors allows the college to continue to provide meaningful service to the local community.

Your investment makes a difference for current and future University of South Alabama students. However you choose to give, Aimee Meyers, senior associate director of University development, is here to assist you in making a lasting impact. Please visit USALegacy.org for more information, or contact Meyers at ameyers@SouthAlabama.edu or (251) 414-8276.



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A smiling man with glasses, wearing a blue blazer over a checkered shirt, stands outdoors with his hands in his pockets. The background is a blurred campus scene with trees and a building.

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