

CHANGING MINDS



SMU Simmons welcomes four new faculty researchers

Dr. Willis A. Jones is an Associate Professor of higher education in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership. In 2023, Dr. Jones was awarded the Distinguished Senior Scholar Award from the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Research Focus on Education and Sport SIG. His research uses quantitative data to examine the antecedents and outcomes of college/university behavior, strategy, structures, and policies. His primary interest is how intercollegiate athletics influence organizational and student outcomes. Other interests include college student retention, Historically Black Colleges and Universities and faculty governance.

SMU has greatly strengthened its investment in Technology Enhanced Immersive Learning (TEIL) by adding three new professors to the existing group of Simmons' TEIL researchers.

Dr. Corey Brady is an Associate Professor specializing in mathematics education and the learning sciences. He studies mathematical and computational modeling to better understand and support the collective, embodied learning of classroom groups in innovative, immersive environments. He has been PI or co-PI on ten NSF projects totaling over \$15 million and is a participant in the NSF AI Institute for Engaged Learning. He and collaborators received the Outstanding Paper Award at the International Conference of Learning Sciences in 2020 and 2023.

Dr. Prajakt Pande is an Assistant Professor working at the intersections between Cognitive Science, Technology-enhanced Learning, and STEM Education. His research focuses on the design and evaluation of innovative technology interfaces such as VR for embodied learning of scientific concepts and phenomena. He uses eye-tracking, interaction analysis, and qualitative interviewing techniques to characterize embodied learning in terms of mechanisms of action and cognition.

Dr. Kelsey Schenck is an Assistant Professor whose research deals with spatial reasoning and

STEM education. She uses a grounded and embodied frame to understand the influence of the cognitive and affective aspects of spatial reasoning on students' learning and in the design of interventions with immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality. She currently investigates the role of spatial ability and spatial anxiety in embodied mathematics.

Message from the Dean

The Fall 2023 semester is well underway at Simmons with new faces and fresh ideas. We are very happy to welcome the cooler weather and our new and returning students. We are also extremely excited to welcome new faculty members and celebrate the exciting new research projects they have brought with them.

We were thrilled to have broken into the top 50 of Best Graduate Schools in *U.S. News & World Report's* national rankings. **Simmons is now number 11 among top private education grad schools in the country and first in Texas** We realize that now we need to work harder than ever to continue Simmons' upward trajectory in the national arena.



In support of that effort, I'm grateful to have incredible faculty who continue with research that discovers new and better methods of teaching and learning while mentoring and imparting evidence-based knowledge to our students. As I have said before, both research and teaching are critical to building success. In stating that, I would like to highlight some of the new and ongoing research being done at the Simmons School of Education and Human Development.

Stephanie L. Knight
Leon Simmons Endowed Dean



Playful Learning

SMU Simmons' Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE) will join Temple University in conducting a "Learning through Play" national study. The LEGO Foundation has awarded a \$19.98 million grant to fund the longitudinal study. SMU's **Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE)** at Simmons will be the Dallas site lead for the national study and will receive \$2.8 million over 5 years to conduct the work locally.

In partnership with Dallas Independent School District, a one-year pilot study is being implemented with Pre-K through 1st graders. CORE Executive Director, Dr. Annie Wright, will serve as the Principal Investigator, with CORE Assistant Director Dylan Farmer and Dr. Toni Harrison-Kelly, Executive Director at the SMU Budd Center, serving as Co-PIs. The researchers will study how creating active, engaged, socially interactive classrooms can bring about deeper learning and joyful teaching.

A pilot study will take place in the 2023-2024 academic year with the full study beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. According to Wright, SMU CORE will coordinate all research activities for the project and will consult the national team on school partnerships, parent engagement, and community engagement. "We are honored to be selected to be part of this important work; we believe it will strengthen our research-practice partnerships with Dallas ISD." The study will hire a local research coordinator as well as coaches to work with the national Active Playful Learning team.

Leon Simmons Endowed Dean Stephanie Knight says, "SMU CORE's involvement in this study speaks to the caliber of work being done by Annie Wright and her staff. Their reputation in education research and evaluation is well-earned. I know they will add valuable data to this equation that could ultimately lead to a way to re-imagine education in and out of the classroom."

The study, which will prioritize under-resourced schools around the country, convened top scientists in the United States to develop an infrastructure that will support long-term sustainability in the participating school districts. Read more [here](#).

Onward. Upward. Always.

The Simmons School of Education and Human Development is changing minds – and challenging the way we think. As a transformative leader, our commitment to rigorous, research-driven programs promotes evidence-based, effective practices and policy. Fresh thinking and breakthrough research will drive meaningful change in the fields of education and human development.

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