

Simmons Solutions



SPRING 2026

IGNITING IMPACT

Meet our researchers,
innovators and creators
transforming communities

INSIDE: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROJECTS STRENGTHEN NORTH TEXAS, RESEARCHER SETS SMU AWARD RECORD, AI SPARKS MATH LEARNING, COUNSELORS STEP UP HOPE AND HEALING, SWITCHING ON STREAM DREAMS, NEWSMAKERS AND MORE

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Simmons
Solutions

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ON THE COVER



The dome atop Harold Clark Simmons Hall is a campus landmark and a symbolic reminder of how education and human development serve as beacons illuminating the path to a brighter future.

Simmons in the News

Here's a look at some of the Simmons School faculty contributing their expertise on newsworthy issues covered by local and national media in 2025.

“Prioritize movement even in small amounts – walks, stretches, yoga, dancing or even bouncing on a mini-trampoline – to increase endorphins and dopamine (feel good hormones) in the brain.”

Farnoosh “Faith” Nouri, clinical assistant professor in the Department of Counseling, talked about holiday depression and effective coping strategies in *Next Avenue*, an online publication of Twin Cities PBS. (December 4)

“In a case like this, the optics are not good. I don’t think that’s endemic to small districts – I think that can happen anywhere. ... There’s always a struggle to balance between transparency with respecting confidentiality, validating the concerns of the public and being empathetic.”

Watt Lesley Black, Jr., clinical professor in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership, offered his perspective on the mounting legal issues and public scrutiny of Celina ISD for a report aired by WFAA-TV. (October 31)

“Modern conflict engagement, especially in mediation, has evolved from classical thinking into something more straightforward, embracing awkwardness with the mediation process to building receptiveness to mediate toward constructive solutions for the parties.”

John Potter, clinical professor in dispute resolution and conflict management in Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies, led a study on the evolution of mediation with students in his Mediation and Dispute Resolution class and shared the results in an article published in the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR) Update. (July 3)

“What you have to hope is that by bringing in new leadership with fresh perspectives, you’re able to continue the momentum. You hope you’re able to continue to build upon the preexisting strengths and then look to broaden and expand under new leadership.”



Interim Dean **Michael Harris** was quoted in *The Dallas Morning News* about the impact on the region of changing leadership at SMU and other North Texas universities. (July 3)

“Poetry is important. It helps us process and celebrate and grieve and understand our situation in the context of humanity at large.”



Mag Gabbert, clinical assistant professor in the Department of Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies and Dallas’ poet laureate, provided insights for a *Texas Monthly* article on actor Matthew McConaughey’s book, *Poems and Prayers*. (September 15)

“If presidents don’t have a faculty senate to rely upon for advice and suggestions and new ideas and input, they’re less informed than they were before. ... That hurts students, it hurts education and it ultimately hurts the state.”

Interim Dean **Michael Harris** weighed in on the importance of university faculty senates in a *Dallas Morning News* article about Texas lawmakers’ push to reduce faculty influence at public universities. (September 8)

“Texas House Bill 4 introduces key and positive changes to our statewide accountability system. One addition – a proposal to include student participation in extracurricular activities as one of the factors in a school’s overall grade from the state – is an excellent idea whose time has come.”

Annie Wright, executive director of The Addy Foundation Center on Research and Evaluation, co-authored an editorial, published in the *Austin American-Statesman*, supporting legislation to overhaul public schools’ accountability and assessment systems. (May 14)

“When they look at where do they want to put their advertising dollars and marketing dollars to reach certain demographics, college is much more efficient.”

Peter Carton, director of sport management, offered a business reason why fossil fuel companies advertise so heavily during college games in a story broadcast on *CBS Evening News*. (April 7)



“If you find yourself so distressed, anxious or depressed, or you’re so caught in your thoughts that you’re not functioning in your daily life, I would say that’s a good time to pick up the phone and see a counselor.”

Tara Godhwani, counseling clinic director and clinical assistant professor of counseling, as well as a longtime Dallas Mavericks fan, offered tips for dealing with the emotions roiled by the sudden trade of beloved basketball star Luka Doncic in an article published by *The Dallas Morning News*. (February 5)

“When kids are happy, they dive into play. They’re imaginative, involved and love playing with others in developmentally expected ways. Some kids are more introverted and others more extroverted in their selection of playmates – but both play freely.”



Brandy Schumann, clinical professor in the Department of Counseling, provided her expertise in an article about the signs of a happy child in *Parents* digital magazine. (February 24)

Meet the interim dean

Michael S. Harris officially assumed the role of interim dean of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development on June 1, 2025.

KNOWN FOR ADDRESSING COMPLEX CHALLENGES WITH EVIDENCE-INFORMED SOLUTIONS, he now oversees the school's five departments along with its centers, institutes and academic programs.

Harris joined Simmons in 2012 as a professor of higher education in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership, later serving as department chair from 2020–2024. His research focuses on the culture, strategy and behavior of higher education institutions, and he has taught graduate courses in organization and governance, academic leadership, organizational theory, and the history of American higher education. He is currently writing a book on higher education leadership

under contract with Harvard Education Press.

Throughout his time at SMU, Harris has taken on a range of leadership roles, including director of the Center for Teaching Excellence. He also served as president of the SMU Faculty Senate and as faculty trustee during the 2023–2024 academic year. His recent appointment as a 2024–2025 fellow of the American Council on Education allowed him to further study leadership and strategy at the University of Utah.

A recognized scholar in his field, Harris has published in leading journals such as *The Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Higher Education*, *Innovative Higher Education* and *Higher Education Policy*. He is the author of four

books: *Teaching for Learning* (Routledge, 2021); *The Qualitative Dissertation in Education* (Routledge, 2019); *How to Get Tenure* (Routledge, 2019); and *Understanding Institutional Diversity in American Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).

Harris' expertise is frequently sought by national and regional media outlets, including The Associated Press, *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Texas Tribune*, *ProPublica*, *MarketWatch*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

He holds a B.A. in American history from the University of North Carolina and an M.Ed. and Ed.D. in higher education administration from the University of Pennsylvania. ❖



Simmons Solutions:

Powered by people, guided by purpose

THERE ARE MOMENTS FROM THIS PAST YEAR THAT STAY WITH ME and capture the momentum building across our school: an undergraduate student eager to share her excitement about an internship in the Athletics Department; a faculty member leaving a district meeting with new ideas and renewed purpose; and a staff member quietly fixing a problem before anyone else even notices it. These small, everyday actions reveal something far greater. They reflect the impact, commitment and energy that define the Simmons School of Education and Human Development. They remind me of what makes this community so special – and why the work we do matters so deeply.

Welcome to the first issue of *Simmons Solutions*. We chose this title with intention. Our school doesn't simply study challenges – we work every day to solve them. It is a pleasure to share this moment with you and to reflect on a year that has reminded me, time and again, of the strength, heart and purpose of the Simmons community. Serving as interim dean has been both an honor and a joy, and I am grateful for the opportunity to help highlight the people, partnerships and purpose that define our school.

This is also a moment of real momentum at SMU. With the arrival of President Jay C. Hartzell and Provost Rachel Davis Mersey, the University is charting an ambitious new course that calls us to elevate academic excellence, deepen our engagement with Dallas and expand our national footprint. In many ways, Simmons is already leading in this work through innovation, collaboration, and a deep belief in the transformative power of education and human development.

You can see that purpose everywhere you look.

It's in our classrooms, where students bring curiosity, commitment and an unmistakable desire to serve. They are future teachers, counselors, leaders, sport professionals and policy thinkers. Their work, highlighted throughout this magazine, tells a story of both excellence and heart. They remind us that the work we do matters because of the people it ultimately reaches.

You'll also see this purpose reflected in the achievements of our faculty. This year alone, they have advanced groundbreaking research, secured major grants, strengthened nationally recognized programs, and expanded partnerships across Dallas and beyond. Yet what stands out just as much as their accomplishments is the spirit behind them: a spirit defined by mentorship, creativity and a genuine commitment to students. Their

work continues to raise the profile of Simmons, but more importantly, it changes lives.

And of course, our alumni and supporters remain central to the Simmons story. Your belief in our mission fuels the opportunities we can offer from scholarships that change trajectories, to partnerships that strengthen communities, to the programs that respond to pressing needs. Many of you give your time as mentors and advocates; others support our work through giving; many do both. Whatever the form, your engagement makes a

real, tangible difference in the lives of our students and in the impact we can create together.

This inaugural issue is a celebration of our community: past, present and future. Inside, you'll meet the people and explore the initiatives that reflect our commitment to excellence and service. You'll see the many ways Simmons faculty continue to lead nationally, and you'll hear the voices of students whose energy and talent signal a bright future ahead.

The process of assembling this magazine allowed us to pause and take stock of the accomplishments and spirit that animate our work. But it also invites us to imagine what comes next. As I look ahead, I do so with tremendous optimism. With new leadership at SMU, strong partnerships across Dallas, and an engaged network of alumni and supporters, Simmons is poised to expand its reach and deepen its impact in powerful, lasting ways. We have the talent, the momentum and the shared purpose to shape the next chapter of our school's story.

Thank you for being a part of that story. Thank you for your support, your pride in the Simmons School and your belief in our work. I hope you enjoy this first issue of *Simmons Solutions* and that it leaves you as inspired as we are by the people who make this community so exceptional.

Let's keep growing Mustang Momentum,



Michael S. Harris, Ed.D.
Interim Dean



Simmons is already leading in this work through innovation, collaboration, and a deep belief in the transformative power of education and human development.

A champion for education

Abigail “Abby” Sassenhagen Williams ’94 helped found Uplift Williams Preparatory School.



AS FOUNDER AND FORMER CEO OF UNITED TO LEARN, ABIGAIL “ABBY” SASSENHAGEN WILLIAMS ’94 HAS SPENT HER CAREER DOING WHAT SHE DOES BEST:

bringing people together to solve complex problems in education. Her ability to align public schools, private institutions and community partners around a shared vision has helped accelerate student achievement across Dallas and created a sustainable model for how communities can lift up young learners.

That same combination of strategic thinking, collaborative leadership and deep commitment to students is what Williams brings to the Simmons School of Education and Human Development Executive Board.

“When I reflect on the care, instruction and encouragement teachers showered on me, I can’t help but see how profoundly they shaped my trajectory. School was my place of stability and possibility – where I could thrive despite the challenges my family faced,” she says. “That experience instilled in me a lifelong belief in the power of education. I

hope my efforts repay even a fraction of what was invested in me for the betterment of precious young people gracing the halls of our schools today.”

Williams’ dedication to education is deeply rooted in her own story. Raised by a single mother who worked multiple jobs to support her family, she found both stability and opportunity in the classroom. School was a place where she thrived, and that experience helped shape a lifelong belief in the power of education to change lives. She went on to earn a full academic scholarship to SMU, where she was named a President’s Scholar, and graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Business Administration in finance from the Cox School of Business and a Bachelor of Science in economics from Dedman College.

Today, her connection to SMU remains strong through both service and philanthropy. In addition to serving on the Simmons Executive Board, Williams is a member of the SMU Board of Trustees and previously served on the Cox School of

Business Executive Board. Together with her husband, Todd Williams, she established the Williams Family President’s Scholarship, helping to open doors for future generations of SMU students – an investment that reflects her enduring belief in access, excellence and leadership development.

Before dedicating her full attention to the nonprofit sector, Williams built a successful career at Goldman Sachs & Co., where she rose to vice president and served as director of charitable services worldwide, overseeing the firm’s \$25 million annual global giving program.

In 2007, Williams and her husband helped found Uplift Williams Preparatory School, a K–12, tuition-free public charter school in Dallas that now serves more than 1,600 primarily low-income students. She continued that work through service on the Uplift Education Board of Trustees. In addition, the Williamses were founding chairs of the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Teach For America Advisory Board.

“Serving on the Simmons Executive Board allows me to support the preparation of educators who will shape the next generation,” she says. “Given the rapidly changing workforce demands, students must be equipped with stronger literacy and math skills as well as critical thinking abilities. I am excited by our leadership at SMU and Simmons who are eager to dedicate meaningful research, teaching and community engagement to support our region’s future leaders and problem-solvers.”

Her civic leadership extends across Dallas through service on numerous boards and institutions, including past roles with the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, Dallas CASA, Leadership ISD, and the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum. Across each of these roles, Williams is known for her ability to ask the right questions, build trust among diverse stakeholders, and keep students and communities at the center of decision-making.

The Williamses’ impact has been recognized with several distinguished honors, including the Linz Award in 2021 and the Virginia Chandler Dykes Leadership Award in 2024.

Whether building partnerships, strengthening institutions or mentoring fellow leaders, Williams brings clarity, energy and purpose to every table she joins. At Simmons, her insight and experience continue to help guide the school’s mission to prepare educators and leaders who expand opportunity and shape a brighter future for students and communities alike. ❖

Alumni shaping the future as Dallas ISD principals

Across the Dallas Independent School District, four new principals draw on lessons learned as graduate students in Simmons School of Education and Human Development to lead with vision and purpose. United by a commitment to equity, collaboration and student success, these alumni exemplify the many ways rigorous school leadership training effects positive change in the community.



EMILY BROKAW '24

At Sudie L. Williams Talented and Gifted Academy, Brokaw brings an energetic, student-centered approach to leadership rooted in her own Dallas ISD journey. Growing up in the district informed her appreciation for public education, and her Simmons training sharpened her ability to support both students and teachers.

Brokaw describes Simmons' Aspiring Leaders Program as the spark that pushed her forward. "The program gave me the tools to be an effective instructional leader and to make educational transformation sustainable," she says.

She previously served as an assistant principal at North Lake Early College High School, where she expanded enrichment opportunities and strengthened learning systems. Today, she's focused on maintaining Sudie's tradition of excellence by championing curiosity, building strong relationships and ensuring every student feels both challenged and supported.



MIRIAM RODRIGUEZ '08, '18

For Rodriguez, principal of Felix G. Botello Personalized Learning Elementary, the Simmons M.Ed. program gave her a blend of practical strategies and big-picture thinking that continues to influence her work.

"I learned from professors who were not only experts in research but also seasoned practitioners," she notes.

The program's cohort model continues to serve as a professional support network. Rodriguez leads with a reflective, student-centered approach, fostering partnerships and personalized learning experiences that help every child thrive.



GARVIN WILLIAMS '24

A sense of purpose propels Williams at the helm of Edward Titche Elementary School, where he partners with teachers and families to shape an environment where students gain confidence, discover their strengths and feel proud of what they can achieve.

Before arriving at Titche, Williams served as assistant principal at Lincoln High School and previously taught eighth grade language arts, experiences that shaped his belief that schools thrive when students feel seen, supported and challenged. His trajectory through Dallas ISD is grounded in a focus on curriculum development, classroom management and fostering student engagement.

"Every child deserves a school that fights for their potential. Leading Titche is an honor, and I'm grateful to the Simmons Education Policy and Leadership faculty and mentors who have shown me the way," he says. "They didn't just teach me; they helped me see the kind of leader I could become."



HANNAH WILLIAMS '16, '18, '21

Now principal of John J. Pershing Elementary, Williams credits the Aspiring Leaders Program with forming her leadership path. The mentorship she received, especially from Clinical Associate Professor Roxanne Burleson, assistant department chair of Education Policy and Leadership, helped her build confidence, sharpen her decision-making and view leadership as a collaborative practice.

"The relationships I built at Simmons still shape my work," she says.

Williams loved being part of a tight-knit cohort that traded ideas, shared challenges and celebrated each other's progress. She brings that same spirit to Pershing, where she champions collaboration and innovation to help students succeed.

Leanne Ketterlin Geller and her team aim to help students, teachers and schools improve math outcomes.

Researcher advances major math initiative

When Leanne Ketterlin Geller received a \$14 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to nationally scale a fraction intervention program, she didn't just advance her research. She also set a record by securing the largest single award total in SMU history.

FOR KETTERLIN GELLER, director of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development's Research in Mathematics Education (RME) unit, the moment underscored both the urgency of her mission and the school's broader commitment to creating evidence-based solutions for an increasingly complex world.

"A limited understanding of fractions is a major problem in schools because fractions are the gatekeeper for future success in algebra," says Ketterlin Geller, Texas Instruments Endowed Chair in Education and professor of Education Policy and Leadership. "We're working diligently to support kindergarten through eighth grade students, as well as teachers and schools, to help improve students' math outcomes."

Across the country, educators grapple with what many experts describe as a mathematics crisis. National assessments consistently show large numbers of students performing below grade level, with pandemic-related disruptions widening long-standing gaps. Texas mirrors these national trends. While the state has pockets of strong performance, it continues to face pronounced disparities among districts, student groups and geographies. These gaps have profound implications, not only for students' academic trajectories but for workforce readiness in STEM fields where demand continues to climb.

Ketterlin Geller's new project takes aim at these concerns. As principal investigator for SCALE UP, she works with researchers at six universities to examine how an intervention program called "Fraction Face-Off!" can be used in different settings. Fraction Face-Off! was developed by





researchers at Vanderbilt University. It involves 36 sessions of students working in small groups with a teacher or tutor to learn more about fractions. Previous study found that students who completed the program demonstrated measurable improvement in their understanding of fractions and self-efficacy in mathematics.

“Understanding proportions, ratios, algebra and higher levels of math begins with an understanding of fractions,” Ketterlin Geller says. “Just memorizing procedures is not enough. Students need to understand the ‘why’ of fractions.”

Leanne Ketterlin Geller works with researchers at six universities on the SCALE UP project.

those experiences inform her interaction with teachers and administrators to understand the application of measurement and assessment principles for making decisions in school settings.

She has published numerous articles and book chapters, and presented original research findings at local, national and international conferences (see Page 31).

Over the years, international, national, state and local agencies have repeatedly backed

“A limited understanding of fractions is a major problem in schools because fractions are the gatekeeper for future success in algebra.”

– Leanne Ketterlin Geller

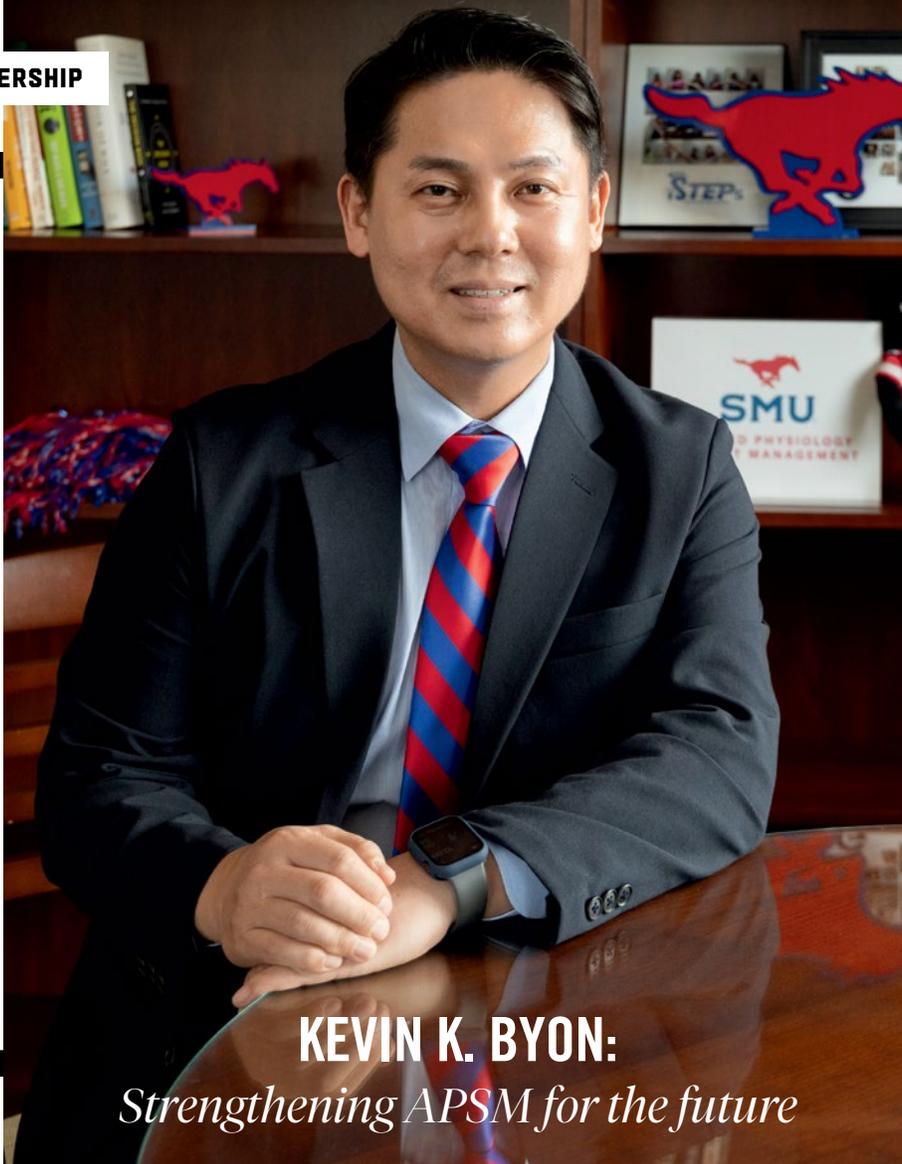
The five-year project targets rural districts and community-based after-school providers because they often have limited access to effective interventions and professional training, Ketterlin Geller says. Resources available to participants include online training and ongoing coaching, which are “key parts of the program’s effectiveness,” she says.

SMU will lead the SCALE UP study with implementation partners including the University of Missouri and The University of Texas at Austin. Collaboration partners include the University of Virginia, the University of Hawaii, Georgia State University and the University of California, Riverside. WestEd is the independent evaluator.

Her passion for finding measurable, replicable ways to help struggling students succeed weaves throughout Ketterlin Geller’s career. A former high school science teacher, she also trained as a K-12 administrator. Lessons learned through

Ketterlin Geller’s research, recognizing its power to transform student outcomes. That confidence reached new heights in 2025, when her history-making \$14 million award not only propelled her work forward but also shattered the previous SMU record – her \$8 million mid-phase grant made under the same competition in 2021.

Ketterlin Geller and other faculty researchers don’t just generate knowledge; they develop and disseminate practical, evidence-based tools that help educators tackle the complex academic challenges shaping students’ futures. At a time when the nation urgently needs stronger mathematics achievement to retain competitiveness on the global stage, the growing investment in projects like SCALE UP signals an endorsement of Simmons’ rigorous research, its collaborative approach and the deep partnerships it builds to drive meaningful, large-scale improvements. ❖



KEVIN K. BYON:
Strengthening APSM for the future

KEVIN K. BYON, an internationally recognized scholar and mentor, serves as the Glenn Simmons Endowed Professor and chair of the Department of Applied Physiology and Sport Management (APSM). His work bridges theory, analytics and human behavior in ways that resonate deeply with the Simmons School's mission to advance knowledge that improves lives through education, research and community engagement.

His primary research examines the intricate interplay of psychological and environmental factors that influence consumer behavior within the domains of sport marketing and sport tourism. His expertise extends to quantitative research methods, where he advances the field of sport management by strengthening research design, measurement and statistical analysis. He is the author of more than 160 publications and has delivered over 260 conference presentations worldwide. His 45 invited lectures at universities and professional organizations reflect his standing as a respected authority in sport consumer behavior. He chaired 13 doctoral dissertations and served on more than 40 committees, mentoring new researchers whose

work continues to advance the field.

His research attracts international funding, including grants from the National Science and Technology Council of Taiwan, the Academy of Korean Studies, and National Cheng Kung University. Recent projects address cross-national differences in spectatorship after COVID-19, adaptive behavior in global sport settings, and how low-carbon events promote sustainable action. In December 2025 Byon and APSM colleague Bo Li received a \$5,320 grant from the Atlantic Coast Conference for a research project with Clemson University exploring the escalating issue of betting-related online abuse of student-athletes.

Byon is a fellow of the National Academy of Kinesiology and the Sport Marketing Association. He is also active in the North American Society for Sport Management and the European Association for Sport Management.

Before joining SMU, he served on the faculties of Indiana University Bloomington, the University of Georgia and the University of Southern Mississippi. He earned his Ph.D. in health and human performance (sport management) from the University of Florida. ❖

A chat with the APSM chair

WHY SIMMONS?

I was most attracted to the Simmons position because it offered the opportunity to serve as both department chair and the Glenn Simmons Endowed Professor, allowing me to contribute to the strategic direction, research profile enhancement and long-term development of the APSM Department. Given my academic leadership and research background, as well as my commitment to building a strong sport management program at my previous institution, Indiana University Bloomington, Simmons' vision, resources and interdisciplinary culture made the position especially appealing. Additionally, the University's location in Dallas provides tremendous opportunities to demonstrate how "theory connects to practice" through my administrative leadership, research, teaching and student training.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I've been impressed by the collaborative and highly engaged academic community. The faculty, staff and students demonstrate a strong commitment to academic excellence and shared governance, and I've appreciated how quickly my colleagues at Simmons have embraced me. The culture here is exceptionally supportive, professional and clearly dedicated to generating knowledge through high-quality research and disseminating it through impactful teaching.

PLANS FOR THE APSM PROGRAM

My plans center on strengthening its academic rigor, enhancing its national visibility and fostering a collegial environment. That will be achieved by expanding research productivity within the department; elevating theoretical, methodological and technical training for students; and building strong partnerships between APSM and relevant industry sectors. Additionally, I hope to further develop our undergraduate (e.g., sport analytics, pre-health) and graduate programs (master's and Ph.D.) and position APSM as a nationally recognized hub for innovative, theory-driven and data-informed approaches to sport management and sport science.

ANNIE WILHELM: *Partnering to build systems for teacher learning*



“I have enjoyed working closely and supporting dear friends and colleagues and having a chance to learn about aspects of the department and the University I never knew the details of before.”

-Annie Wilhelm

Coming back, looking forward

WHAT DREW YOU BACK TO SIMMONS?

The opportunity to step in and lead in a school with so many close friends and colleagues, in a department and University I care deeply about. I saw this as an opportunity to leverage my interests and expertise to co-design the next chapter for the Department of Teaching and Learning.

WHAT HAVE YOU ENJOYED MOST ABOUT BEING BACK?

I have enjoyed working closely and supporting dear friends and colleagues and having a chance to learn about aspects of the department and the University I never knew the details of before.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING?

We have always been committed to supporting teachers, schools and districts. We are excited about opportunities to grow our partnerships and continue to evolve to meet the needs of those partners in a changing education landscape.

ANNIE WILHELM returns to Simmons as a familiar and trusted leader, rejoining a community shaped in part by her decade of work at the school from 2013 to 2023. Before beginning her second chapter at Simmons in August 2025 as chair and professor of education in the Department of Teaching and Learning, she was an associate professor and director of mathematics education in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Washington State University.

In her new role, Wilhelm combines deep expertise in mathematics education with a sustained commitment to studying the everyday realities of teaching as they unfold in real classrooms.

She serves as co-principal investigator on large, multi-institutional research projects supported by national funding, including a \$2.5 million James McDonnell Foundation award and a National Science Foundation Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship. Across these projects, she co-designs professional learning that supports educators at different points in their careers,

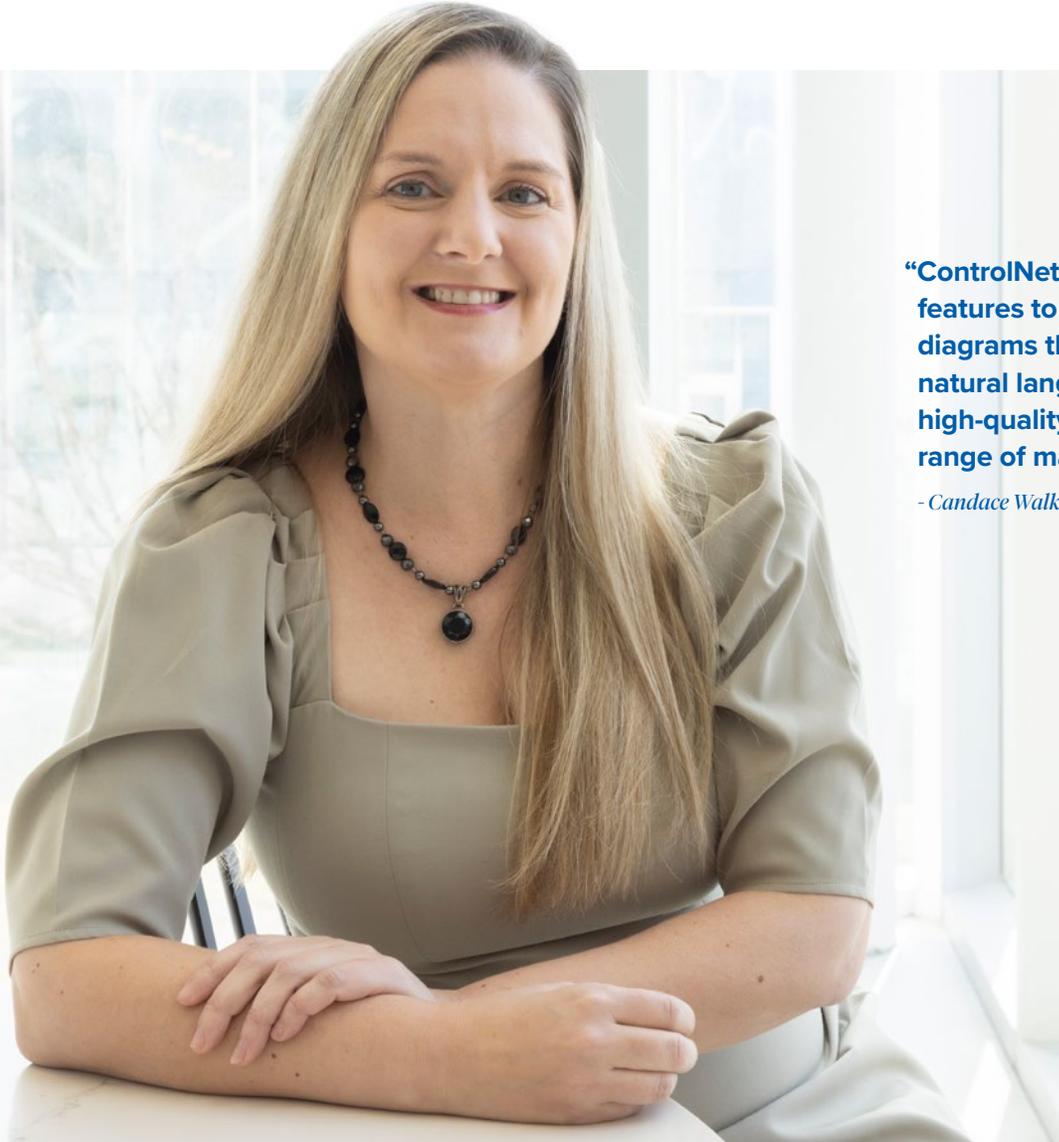
while also developing research tools to measure relevant ideas.

Her writing has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals such as *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, and the *Journal of Teacher Education*. She has also contributed chapters to influential academic volumes, including the *Research Handbook on Classroom Observation*.

Wilhelm received undergraduate degrees in mathematics and computer science from Santa Clara University and a master’s degree in mathematics from the University of Washington. She taught high school mathematics for four years in the Seattle area before earning an M.Ed. in curriculum and instructional leadership and a Ph.D. in mathematics education from Vanderbilt University.

In close collaboration with schools and fellow scholars, Wilhelm examines teaching in ways that directly inform preparation programs and connects research to everyday work in classrooms and communities. ❖

AI sparks new possibilities for math learning



investigator. The project expands on Walkington's past work with the Louisiana-based AI startup Ailectric, a collaborator on the grant, with lead engineer Robert DiBiano.

“ControlNet allows for rich, illustrative features to be layered over mathematical diagrams that the GenAI renders from natural language instructions, creating free, high-quality visuals to accompany a broad range of mathematical learning tasks.”

- Candace Walkington

Math word problems are particularly challenging for many students. The high-quality illustrative diagrams – created through open-source generative AI image-generating models using ControlNet functionality – help students better visualize the problem.

“ControlNet allows for rich, illustrative features to be layered over mathematical diagrams that the GenAI renders from natural language instructions, creating free, high-quality visuals to accompany a broad range of mathematical learning tasks,” Walkington says.

Walkington will initially interview teachers and Open Educational Resource (OER) developers. Co-principal investigator Virginia Clinton-Lisell of the University of North Dakota, a prominent OER researcher, will lead the pilot of AI-generated illustrative diagrams with K–12 and higher education teachers. The researchers will then test the impact of these diagrams on middle school students' mathematical reasoning through an experiment on the ASSISTments online homework platform. Cristina Heffernan of The ASSISTments Foundation also serves as a co-principal investigator and collaborates with the team on related AI projects.

A grant of \$899,988 from the National Science Foundation to Candace Walkington and her team builds on a portfolio of research finding ways to use technology to deepen student engagement, support teachers and render math more relevant and accessible to students from all backgrounds.

The new funding supports a novel approach to teaching math by examining how AI-generated diagrams can help middle schoolers visualize and ultimately understand challenging math tasks. Walkington, Annette and Harold Simmons Centennial Chair and professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning, serves as principal investigator for the study, and Simmons Professor Jiun-Yu “Jerry” Wu is a co-principal

This approach seeks to advance research on how high-quality OER can be delivered in a cost-effective way to better compete with costly commercial curricula.

“More research in AI in education is needed to determine how illustrative math visuals and open educational resources shape students’ mental representations and facilitate their interest and performance in mathematics learning,” Wu says. “It is exciting to know this research can help answer those questions.”

This is just the latest entry in Walkington’s research portfolio to explore the ways AI can support more

personalized, engaging math instruction. In a separate NSF-funded study, her team examines whether generative AI can craft tailored mathematics problems that reflect seventh graders’ interests, like sports and gaming, while still strengthening core algebra knowledge. The project also looks at how teachers can use prompt engineering to shape these problems and how AI might streamline instructional design without diminishing teacher autonomy.

A third long-term initiative reimagines informal math learning through the Mathfinder app (gomathfinder.org), a mobile platform

Walkington’s team is designing with nine

Candace Walkington talked about her team’s artificial intelligence research at a recent conference.

Simmons’ math education researchers shared their work at a Communities Foundation of Texas teachers’ conference.



“More research in AI in education is needed to determine how illustrative math visuals and open educational resources shape students’ mental representations and facilitate their interest and performance in mathematics learning. It is exciting to know this research can help answer those questions.”

-Jiun-Yu “Jerry” Wu

community partners. The app invites learners to explore “math walk” stops at places like the Dallas Arboretum, the Frontiers of Flight Museum and St. Philip’s School and Community Center. Users can watch short videos, examine photos and contribute their own observations about where math appears in the world around them.

Across all three projects, Walkington harnesses the power of technology to open up the world of mathematical thinking and make learning a more personal, relevant and creative experience for young minds. ❖



Shaping strategies for student success

Nearly 75 researchers, educators and nonprofit leaders from across North Texas gathered in October for the second annual Consortium on Educational Research and Improvement (CERI) Conference. A collaboration involving SMU, Dallas Independent School District and several nonprofit partners, the conference created a shared space for examining effective practices and elevating evidence-based solutions that make a measurable difference in classrooms and communities.

Annie Wright, co-lead for CERI and executive director of The Addy Foundation Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE), emphasized that the conference’s goal is to identify which strategies truly work in education. “Some attendees and presenters work in classrooms, some in educational research and others in community-based learning settings,” she says. “This event gives us a chance to learn from each other what works best across all the spaces where students learn and grow.”

The event also marked the first anniversary of a \$3.5 million gift from The Addy Foundation, which led to the renaming of the center, underscoring the shared commitment of the foundation and Simmons to support innovative, evidence-based solutions that drive positive community change.

The conference highlighted critical topics such as college and career readiness, integrating literacy and STEM for early learners, and the impact of after-school programs on student achievement and attendance. SMU and Dallas ISD educators and researchers presented insights across a wide range of subjects, while community nonprofits contributed their findings on the effectiveness of funding high-quality nonprofits serving children and young adults across the DFW area. Participating partners included Big Thought, Read Up, Catch Up and Read, Dallas Afterschool, Jubilee Park and Community Center, and Vickery Meadows Youth Development Foundation.

Larry Featherston, chair of the Dallas ISD Research Review Board, praised the collaborative energy of the attendees. “It’s a great opportunity to bring people from different backgrounds together, build relationships and break down walls – leading to some truly exciting collaborative work.”

Training teachers for the new STEM reality

WITH FOUR CURRENT GRANTS TOTALING OVER \$9.8 MILLION IN FUNDING FROM THE U.S. NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION, JEANNA WIESELMANN LEADS RESEARCH TACKLING SOME OF THE MOST PRESSING CHALLENGES IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING INSTRUCTION.

Her two most recent initiatives – one launching the Texas STEM Teacher Corps and the other focusing on virtual reality-enhanced teacher preparation – form a continuum of innovation that reaches from undergraduate teacher preparation programs to K–8 classrooms where

new science standards are transforming instruction even among veteran teachers.

“What excites me most is that we’re building capacity at every stage of the teaching pipeline, from preservice to master teachers,” says Wieselmann, assistant professor of STEM education in Simmons School of Education and Human Development. “These projects don’t sit in isolation; they collectively strengthen how STEM is taught and experienced by students across Texas and beyond.”

A \$5 million grant creates the Texas STEM Teacher Corps in

“If we want students who are ready to tackle the scientific and engineering challenges of their world, then we must invest in the teachers who guide them.”

- Jeanna Wieselmann

response to a challenge currently felt in school districts across the state. New statewide science standards implemented in 2024–2025 require teachers to integrate engineering more fully into their instruction. Yet most K–8 teachers have never received formal preparation in engineering concepts or design practices. “That gap is enormous,” Wieselmann says. “Teachers are being asked to do something that their own training simply didn’t include. Our project exists to change that.”

As principal investigator, she leads the team, recruiting 20 expert science teachers for the program, as well as 80 additional teachers who will benefit from professional learning opportunities. An estimated 12,000 students will reap the rewards of improved instruction over the course of the study.

“Our goals are ambitious,” Wieselmann notes. “We want to

deepen teachers’ knowledge of how engineering and science differ and intersect, strengthen teacher leadership across the state, and contribute new research on what effective STEM professional development looks like.”

Her co-researchers are Simmons colleague Anthony Petrosino, professor of Teaching and Learning, and Lyle School of Engineering Associate Professor Janille Smith-Colin.

Petrosino, an expert in STEM teacher preparation, will guide the design of teacher capstone projects and leadership development components. Smith-Colin will help shape and lead summer institute professional learning sessions, ensuring that the engineering content is authentic and relevant to teachers and their students.

SMU graduate students and colleagues at Tarleton State University will also be involved.

“This project positions Texas and SMU as national leaders in rethinking how science and engineering are taught in K–8 classrooms,” Petrosino says. “The lessons we learn and the professional development models we create can be scaled and adapted across the country, helping to strengthen STEM teaching and learning well beyond Texas.”

In a separate grant, a \$1.5 million collaborative study involving five universities explores how future STEM teachers learn to guide students through real-world scientific problems. Wieselmann leads SMU’s \$243,000 portion of the work, which compares two cutting-edge approaches: virtual reality (VR) simulations featuring AI-driven avatar students, and traditional scaffolded peer-teaching sessions. A total of 250 undergraduate students will participate at SMU and across the participating institutions: Drake University, Kennesaw State University, Texas A&M University and the University of West Florida.

“Novice science teachers often struggle with facilitating discussions that require students to think deeply and engage with complexity,” Wieselmann explains. “We know from research that these discussions are essential for developing scientific literacy, but they can be intimidating to lead without practice.”

Jeanna Wieselmann leads research finding solutions to the challenges of K–8 science and engineering instruction.





“This project positions Texas and SMU as national leaders in rethinking how science and engineering are taught in K–8 classrooms.”

- Anthony Petrosino

The VR platform offers a unique solution. Preservice teachers can navigate unpredictable student responses, experiment with questioning strategies, and try again within a low-risk environment. “It gives future teachers space to learn through experience, which is one of the most powerful ways to grow as an educator,” she explains.

By grounding the learning in authentic scientific problems, the team expects to boost both instructional skills and student engagement. “When teachers feel confident supporting students through real-world problem-solving, everyone benefits,” she says.

Two additional explorations further advance STEM education strategies. As co-principal investigator on a \$2 million NSF-funded project that is teaching elementary students STEM concepts through summer sports activities, Wieselmann leads curriculum development and engagement with community and youth advisory boards in West Dallas. Through a separate \$1.3 million grant, she heads a collaborative research team examining how over 1,300 elementary teachers across the U.S., each trained in one of 10 different preparation programs, integrate science, technology, engineering and mathematics in their classrooms.

For Wieselmann, the through line across both projects is clear: “If we want students who are ready to tackle the scientific and engineering challenges of their world, then we must invest in the teachers who guide them.” ❖

Prophets at the Margins

Cooper Lecture collaboration explores the housing crisis through faith and justice

By partnering with local leaders, elevating diverse voices and creating opportunities for meaningful action, Simmons School of Education and Human Development demonstrates how education reaches beyond the classroom as a force that strengthens and uplifts everyone.

Collaborations crisscrossing the campus and drawing from allied disciplines bring together students, faculty, staff and other interested participants to confront urgent social issues with clarity and courage. Just one example is the revival of the Cooper Peace and Justice Lecture. This year’s topic – *Prophets at the Margins: Faith, Housing and the Fight for Dignity* – revealed just how deeply Simmons School weaves its mission into the fabric of Dallas.

Laura Robinson-Doyle, clinical associate professor in Simmons Department of Applied Physiology and Sport Management, coordinated and emceed the event. Co-sponsored with SMU’s Office of the Chaplain and Religious Life, the panel discussion gathered four prominent faith-based advocates whose work centers on serving individuals and families experiencing homelessness. In an illuminating conversation, the Rev. Richie Butler ’93 of St. Luke Community United Methodist Church and Project Unity, Bill Holston of the Dallas Eviction Advocacy Center, Heather Mustain of Wilshire Baptist Church and Wayne Walker of OurCalling shared their experiences in dealing with the consequences of the escalating housing crisis in North Texas.

Their stories underscored that homelessness is rarely the result of a single poor decision. For many families, it takes only one economic shock or health crisis to lose stable housing.

“What we heard is that the margins were never as distant as we imagined,” says Robinson-Doyle. “Being a prophet is not about shouting truth from a mountaintop. It’s about standing in the everyday, noticing the unseen and moving toward need with mercy.”

The Rev. Lisa Garvin, SMU chaplain and minister to the University, says the lecture “highlighted the importance of charity and justice – caring for our neighbors and working for systems that support abundant life for all.”

A pop-up art exhibit helped attendees experience the emotional weight of those experiencing homelessness.

It featured WE ARE ALL HOMELESS, the long-running project by Willie Baronet, Stan Richards Professor in Creative Advertising in Meadows School of the Arts. Baronet has been buying and collecting homeless signs since 1993 and uses them to spark conversation about humanity and visibility. Also on view was *Humanizing the Homeless*, a series of black-and-white portraits by photographer Leah den Bok.

For Robinson-Doyle, whose career spans public health, military resiliency research and community advocacy, the Cooper Lecture is part of a larger pattern within Simmons – a commitment to equipping students and faculty to engage compassionately and intelligently with the world’s most pressing issues. “Events like this remind us that universities thrive when they face outward,” she says. “Simmons is at its best when we bring our scholarship, our students and our community partners into the same room and ask, ‘How can we build something better together?’”



That outward-facing mission was equally evident at *Weaving Hope, Inspiring Change*, another Simmons-led initiative held. Co-organized by Robinson-Doyle and colleagues from Simmons and Meadows, the volunteer event connected SMU community members with organizations such as Vogel Alcove and Austin Street Center. Participants assembled nearly 200 “Blessing Bags” filled with hygiene products and snacks, small but meaningful offerings that turn awareness into direct action.

“It gave people a way to respond immediately, with kindness and intention,” Robinson-Doyle notes. “Awareness is essential, but compassion becomes transformative only when it takes shape in our hands.”

From high-profile lectures to grassroots volunteerism, Simmons School exemplifies the power of education rooted in service.



Where poetry meets

THE PAVEMENT

MAG GABBERT, CLINICAL ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN-CENTERED INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES,

doesn't want Dallasites to just read poetry. She wants them to stumble upon it on their way to work and school, notice it while walking their dogs, feel it under their feet.

A belief that poetry should meet people where they are is central to Gabbert's role as Dallas poet laureate. In bringing that ethos to life, she launched the city's first Sidewalk Poetry Project last year, a public art initiative that presses poetry directly into the city's fabric. North Texans with a connection to Dallas had the opportunity to submit their poems for consideration. Selected works will be stamped into sidewalk installations at 28 sites across the city.

"We want the work of people who are writing here, now. We want everyone interested to be part of the project," she says.

Gabbert's talent for literary art that extends beyond the page and into public life earned recognition by the American Academy of Poets when she was among 23 poets nationwide selected to receive one of the academy's 2025 Laureate Fellowships. The academy announced a total of \$1.1 million

in awards to recognize the poet fellows for literary excellence and support their projects to engage communities through the power of poetry.

At the heart of the Sidewalk Poetry Project is a new poetic structure she invented specifically for Dallas.

Gabbert's

"Not every city has their very own poetic form, but now we do," she says.

The Dallas native and graduate of Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts calls her appointment as poet laureate "the thrill of a lifetime."

She's quick to point out that the role, which continues through April, is not ceremonial. "It's my job to bring poetry into public spaces, to bring poetry around people who otherwise may not encounter it or think about it," Gabbert says. "And to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to encounter and be changed by poetry in the way that I was when I was younger."

Gabbert's public-facing work is grounded in formidable academic credentials. She holds a Ph.D. in English with a focus on creative writing from Texas Tech University, an M.F.A. from the University of California, Riverside, and a B.A. in English from Trinity University, where she graduated magna cum laude with honors in English. At SMU, she teaches graduate and doctoral courses such as Transformational Narratives, The Art of Creativity and Expression, and Translations and Interpretations Across Art Forms, which echo her own cross-disciplinary practice.

Her literary reach extends well beyond the city limits. Recent honors include the Pushcart Prize for her poem, *Goat*, and the Writers' League of Texas Book Award in Poetry.

Gabbert's debut collection, *SEX DEPRESSION ANIMALS: Poems*, won the Charles B. Wheeler Prize in Poetry. She is also the author of the award-winning chapbooks *The Breakup* and *Minml Poems*, and her work appears in leading journals including *The American Poetry Review*, *Guernica*, *The Paris Review Daily* and *Poetry Daily*.

As Dallas poet laureate, Gabbert returns to one of poetry's oldest purposes: connection. "Poetry brings people together," she says. "From the beginning of human history, poetry has been a way of grieving together, celebrating together. It reminds us not to have a failure of imagination. Anything is possible, and we should use that power for good."

Now, that expansive vision is taking literal shape across the city. Thanks to Gabbert, poetry's connective power will soon be underfoot throughout Dallas. ❖

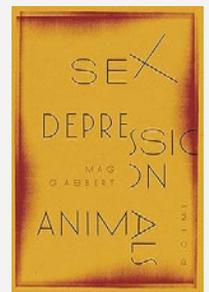
"It's my job to bring poetry into public spaces, to bring poetry around people who otherwise may not encounter it or think about it."

- Mag Gabbert

2-1-Form is a clever play on "214 Day," a celebration of local arts and creators held on February 14. The form is spare and accessible – two four-line stanzas separated by a single line of blank space, each line capped at four words and 30 characters, with no title.



Minml Poems



SEX DEPRESSION ANIMALS: Poems



The Breakup

How Simmons counselors strengthen North Texas communities

When Simone first walked into the counseling clinic, her shoulders carried the weight of grief and the quiet fear that her story might be too much for anyone to hold. From her very first session, she found something unexpected: safety. Her counselor offered empathy, unconditional acceptance and space to move at her own pace. For the first time in months, Simone felt herself exhale.

Each week, she returned to a room where her pain was not minimized, and where her cultural identity and lived experience were centered as essential pieces of her healing. Slowly, the protective walls she had built began to soften, giving way to trust and self-compassion. Today, through guidance and consistent support, Simone continues to use the coping strategies and grounding techniques she learned in those sessions – tools that help her meet each new day with steadier breath and renewed strength.

On weekday afternoons, the SMU Center for Family Counseling hums with quiet purpose as clients like Simone participate in an array of services. Children step into the play therapy room where carefully chosen toys become tools for expression. Adolescents gather in the activity room to explore emotions through movement and creativity. Adults meet with trained counselors to navigate anxiety, depression, relationship struggles and life transitions. Behind a two-way mirror, faculty supervisors observe

emerging clinicians as they put coursework into practice.

This is the heart of the Simmons School's Department of Counseling, a place where rigorous academic training meets the growing mental health needs of the community with professionalism, compassion and empathy.

BRIDGING A CRITICAL CARE GAP

Texas remains one of the most challenging states in the nation for accessing mental health care, ranking 50 out of 51 (states plus the District of Columbia) for access, according to a 2025 analysis by Mental Health America, a national nonprofit focused on mental health and well-being. The same study states that in Texas, "more than 4 in 10 people with frequent mental distress could not afford to see a doctor in 2023."

Against that backdrop, the SMU Center for Family Counseling has become a lifeline for Dallas area residents.

"We serve as a crucial bridge between urgent community needs and the reality that many families simply cannot access affordable services," says Greta Davis, department chair and clinical associate professor. "If our center didn't exist, there would be children and adults navigating anxiety, depression, trauma and relationship conflict entirely on their own."

The counseling center's model is intentionally accessible, offering low-cost and, when possible, free sessions delivered by highly supervised



counselors-in-training. Each year, the center provides 4,500 hours of free or low-cost counseling, serving approximately 165 clients weekly through a combination of in-person and telehealth appointments.

“We are not just another clinical training site,” Davis says. “We are part of the community’s mental health ecosystem. Our presence expands what local nonprofits, schools and agencies can offer. Our interns allow these partners to serve more people than their budgets alone would ever permit.”

FRONT-LINE TRAINING AMPLIFIES EFFECTIVENESS

While the center fills a vital role for the public, it also functions as the launchpad for every SMU counseling student’s professional development.

The Master of Science in counseling program prepares future clinicians with culturally responsive skills to support children, adults and families through psychological growth and healing. From the outset, students build a foundation in education, psychology, human development, learning and social change – disciplines that shape their understanding of the people and communities they will one day serve.

The combination of rigorous academics, clinical depth and real-world application has made SMU one of the most sought-after counseling programs in Texas, with a 45% acceptance rate and approximately 300 to 320 students enrolled at any given time.

The program’s curriculum weaves together theory and application through classroom instruction, role-playing, observation of licensed clinicians at work, and carefully supervised practica and internships.

Each semester, 30 to 36 counselors-in-training complete their practicum at the Center for Family Counseling.

“Not every counseling program offers on-site clinical training,” says Tara Godhwani, counseling clinic director and clinical assistant professor. “But we believe it’s essential. Students need a place to learn, try, reflect and try again – all while knowing they are supported by doctoral-level licensed clinicians who understand the complexity of human development and therapeutic change.”

For many, it is the first time to interact with a real client. They enter the counseling room with a deep well of knowledge and a clear sense of ethical responsibility.

“Students arrive having spent nearly two years preparing,” Davis explains. “We provide a very protected, well-supported space for those first clinical experiences. Our faculty understand the developmental stages of beginning counselors, and we facilitate that growth with precision.”

Highly trained faculty supervisors

“We serve as a crucial bridge between urgent community needs and the reality that many families simply cannot access affordable services.”

-Greta Davis

**BY THE NUMBERS:
SERVICES**

Care covers a range of ages and needs as the current distribution of services shows:

- **61%** individual adult counseling
- **13%** couples counseling
- **11%** play therapy for children
- **11%** activity therapy for adolescents
- **3%** family counseling



Photo credit: iStock/Photo



Photo credit: iStock Photo

BY THE NUMBERS:
**COMMUNITY
IMPACT**

165

approximate number of clients served weekly

4,500

free or low-cost counseling hours provided annually

200+

community partners receive support from SMU interns

30-36

counselors in training provide services each semester

offer both individual and group supervision, observe sessions either through a two-way mirror or by recording, and guide students as they integrate theory with real human stories.

“This is where students discover their clinical voice,” Godhwani says. “We create a space where they can learn, reflect and refine – all while providing meaningful service to the community.”

As students advance, they complete two semesters of internship across the region, serving in schools, hospitals, nonprofits, private practices and agencies that address every dimension of mental health. Students tailor their training to their professional calling. Specialties offered include clinical mental health; marriage, couple and family counseling; and school counseling. Also available are opportunities for concentrated study in such areas as addictions and trauma.

The program’s comprehensive design prepares graduates to pursue credentials as licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, certified school counselors or licensed chemical dependency counselors in Texas. It also equips them to enter the field ready to make an immediate impact. As Godhwani puts it, “Our students don’t just learn how to be counselors; they learn how to serve with competence, humanity and purpose.”

A COMMUNITY THAT’S 200 PARTNERS STRONG

After their practicum, students complete two semesters of internship in the community, a pipeline that includes schools, nonprofits, hospitals and private practices. They also work

with agencies serving youth and families, as well as in the criminal justice system.

The Department of Counseling maintains roughly 200 partnerships beyond campus, many of which rely on SMU interns to stretch their limited resources.

“With 30 to 36 new interns every semester, we truly magnify the community’s capacity,” Godhwani notes. “Our students become part of the solution to Texas’ mental health access crisis.”

“This is where students discover their clinical voice. We create a space where they can learn, reflect and refine – all while providing meaningful service to the community.”

- Tara Godhwani

Among the program’s steadfast community partners is Momentous Institute. Founded by Salesmanship Club of Dallas, Momentous Institute has grown into a nationally respected organization known for strengthening the mental health of children, families and communities.

Alina Ramirez, clinical director of mental health services at Momentous Institute, joined the Department of Counseling Advisory Board in 2020 and has seen the program’s impact firsthand.

“What’s impressed me most is the integrity



“Through our partnership, I have seen the impressive quality of students who intern at our site. I truly believe our relationship represents a positive synergy within both our community and the counseling field.”

- Alina Ramirez

Mario De La Garza, counseling director and clinical assistant professor, along with other faculty and graduate students, works with clients at the SMU Center for Family Counseling.

with which Dr. Davis and the faculty have led and implemented the SMU counseling program,” Ramirez says. “The program’s clear vision to equip students for the field is carried out with authenticity and genuine care for the students and the clients who will eventually benefit from exceptional clinical care.”

For many years, SMU counseling interns have trained at Momentous Institute, supporting its accessible, family-based mental health programming for children and caregivers across North Texas. The two organizations also collaborate as referral partners, strengthening the local mental health safety net with shared commitment and complementary services.

“Through our partnership, I have seen the impressive quality of students who intern at our site,” Ramirez notes. “I truly believe our relationship represents a positive synergy within both our community and the counseling field.”

MORE ACCESS, MORE SUPPORT, HEALTHIER FAMILIES

The center’s atmosphere reflects the program’s mission: to equip students with the skills to serve and advocate for diverse clients within their cultural contexts. Therapy sessions run from 11:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., accommodating working families. Telehealth remains a permanent offering after its expansion during the pandemic, increasing access for clients who lack transportation, child care or flexible schedules. It now accounts for about 45% of all sessions.

“We are intentional about warmth,

inclusivity and cultural responsiveness,” Davis says.

Some students even develop specialty groups based on their interests and backgrounds, such as a collegiate athlete leading counseling groups for student-athletes.

The SMU counseling program is nationally accredited, comprehensive and grounded in three specialties – school counseling; clinical mental health; and marriage, couple and family counseling. Students emerge with a 63-hour master’s degree that leads directly to licensure.

“Our mission is to graduate counselors who not only have clinical skill but a deep understanding of their responsibility to the community,” Godhwani emphasizes. “What students learn here stays with them throughout their careers.”

And throughout North Texas, the impact is clear: more access, more support and more families receiving compassionate, professional care.

As Davis explains, “In a state where mental health needs are overwhelming, the SMU Center for Family Counseling ensures people don’t have to face those challenges alone.” ❖



Students leave prepared to serve:

89% of graduates are employed within six months

93% of community stakeholders rate SMU students as *much higher* or *moderately higher* in preparedness compared to students from other programs

The program maintains a **99% national exam pass rate**

Genesis Muñoz '26: Transforming a calling into a career

WHEN GENESIS MUÑOZ '26 GRADUATED FROM UNT DALLAS IN 2022 WITH A PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE, SHE KNEW HER CAREER WOULD CENTER ON HELPING PEOPLE.

She became a registered behavior technician in a play-based therapy clinic for children on the autism spectrum. In subsequent jobs, she supported front-desk operations in an addiction treatment center and assisted private practice clinicians as part of their care teams. With each role, she found herself drawn to the intimate, one-on-one process of supporting people on their mental health journeys.

That clarity ultimately led her to pursue a counseling graduate degree at SMU. She enrolled in fall 2023 and will complete her degree next year. What stands

Genesis Muñoz's Simmons training sparked a growing interest in trauma-informed care.



out most to her is the depth of training and the community that surrounds it. “The instructors bring such a variety of clinical specialties. Learning from people who have truly mastered their niche has been eye-opening,” she says.

She values the small class sizes, the close relationships developed with peers and the range of events – from Lunch and Learn series to informal trivia nights – that make the program feel connected and supportive, reinforcing her sense of belonging.

Muñoz was surprised by how competitive and respected the program is. “I didn’t realize how prepared we would be. Interns from SMU are genuinely sought after,” she says. “I already feel ready to take on clients, and I know I’ll have strong job prospects when I graduate.”

Her weekly schedule reflects the intensity and intentionality of the training model: group supervision on Monday mornings, classes focusing on such topics as the neurobiology of trauma, client sessions throughout the week and dedicated observation opportunities where she learns by watching more advanced students.

She currently works with an adult client processing significant trauma, as well as adolescents in activity-based therapy. Reviewing recorded sessions with supervisors and peers has become one of the most meaningful parts of her learning. “Over 13 weeks with my clients, I’ve seen such a difference in them,” she says. “It’s a privilege to witness that kind of change by offering unconditional positive regard, empathy and presence.”

Her career interests continue to evolve. Though Muñoz initially

imagined working exclusively with children and teens, her clinical experience has sparked a growing passion for trauma-informed care, particularly maternal and postpartum mental health. Her upcoming internship at Parkland’s Rape and Crisis Center will deepen that specialization. She envisions herself ultimately practicing in a hospital setting. “Postpartum experiences aren’t talked about enough,” she reflected. “I want to be part of changing that.”

Her experiences reshaped her approach to her own well-being. She began addressing her ADHD, attending sessions with a psychiatrist and embracing the importance of self-care

“Interns from SMU are genuinely sought after. I already feel ready to take on clients, and I know I’ll have strong job prospects when I graduate.”

-Genesis Muñoz '26

in sustaining a counseling career. “My family has always been supportive, and coming from a Hispanic/Latino community, it matters to me to become the kind of counselor who works to remove the stigma and make mental health care accessible.”

Muñoz admits that the financial commitment of graduate school is challenging. She relies on savings, loans and careful planning, but she encourages prospective students not to be discouraged by the cost and think of it as an investment in a fulfilling future. “If you feel called to help others, trust that instinct,” she says. “This program gives you the skills, the support and the community to grow into the counselor you want to become.”

“We’re all in this together,” she says of her cohort. “The work can get heavy, but we check in on each other constantly. Our professors are invested in our success, and our peer community keeps us grounded. If you’re someone who listens deeply, advocates for others and feels drawn to this work, you’ll find your place here.” ❖

Our community of counselors steps up hope and healing

As the nation mourned the loss of life from flooding in the Kerrville, Texas, area in July, alumna Eve Wiley '13 mobilized her Simmons School Department of Counseling network to help families navigate the tragedy's emotional aftermath. Here, she shares how her community came together to provide care and facilitate healing that continues today.

By Eve Wiley '13

Over the July Fourth holiday, as families across Texas settled in for a weekend of celebration, I found myself glued to my phone. My son was attending a summer camp in the Hill Country region devastated by the sudden flooding of the Guadalupe River. I refreshed news updates, fielded texts from friends and fought a rising sense of panic. I lived the same harrowing uncertainty that so many other parents felt with limited information about our children's safety, constant worry and questions from friends about how to talk to kids about what was happening.

As messages poured in from friends asking how to support their children emotionally, I began posting guidance on Instagram, focusing on ways to help those impacted by the flooding. The response was immediate. It became clear our community was not just facing a natural disaster, but the beginnings of a mental health crisis. People needed access to therapy and emotional support, and they needed it quickly.

As clinical director at The Housson Center, I oversee our counseling graduate interns and lead our community outreach initiatives. Our team already had a framework in place to serve diverse communities across Dallas. When our team gathered after the storm, we unanimously decided to expand our hours and launch a pro bono counseling initiative for anyone affected by the floods. We spread the word through churches, schools and community partners. Our long-standing partnership with the Department of Counseling at SMU was key to the initiative's success.

As of early November 2025, we've provided more than 300 hours of free counseling to those directly impacted by the floods.

And with each hour, we've walked alongside families carrying profound grief: parents mourning the children they lost, kids grieving siblings and teammates, and communities learning to cope with a loss too heavy for words. What's been most powerful is watching people come together in individual sessions, group therapy, parenting circles and team gatherings. As we moved through these sessions, it became clear that traditional talk therapy wasn't enough for the depth of trauma some people were carrying. We needed something that could truly reach the root of the suffering, not just help people manage it.

That realization led us to RTM – reconsolidation of traumatic memories – therapy, a neuroscience-based protocol that helps the brain safely reprocess trauma by removing the emotional pain while preserving the facts.

In December, three of our clinicians traveled to receive formal RTM training, making us the first in Texas to bring this groundbreaking, neuroscience-based trauma protocol to our clients. This program will remain available for as long as survivors need, supported in partnership with the Parenting for the Present Foundation, which provides clinician stipends as donations are made for this initiative.

The Housson Center has a longtime partnership with SMU as an approved internship site for counseling graduate students. These master's level interns were already deeply embedded in our clinical training program, working with our team in providing therapy to children, teens and families across Dallas. When the community crisis unfolded, our team gathered to ask one central question: *What can we do to help?* Each intern, without hesitation, volunteered to step forward and meet this growing need. It wasn't a requirement; it was a response born out of compassion and purpose.

What began as an academic placement transformed into something far greater: a movement of compassion that embodied the mission of SMU and the soul of our profession.

"I was humbled to be given an opportunity to work with the survivors. I never would've imagined at this early stage in my career that I would be called upon to counsel young girls and their families following a large-scale traumatic event," SMU intern Callie Conner '25 says. "Hearing their stories and seeing their resilience moved and inspired me."

She says her internship at The Housson Center adds another level of professionalism to her classroom training. "Under Eve's supervision, I learned counseling strategies, received constructive feedback and was able to hone my skills," she says. "In the midst of the floods and the ever-changing situation, I had full access to and support from some of the best clinical professionals in Dallas."

For SMU intern Camry Georgia '25, the experience has been defining. "Participating in the counseling program for Kerrville flood survivors has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my training," she says. "The exceptional supervision and hands-on guidance I've received through The Housson Center have prepared

me to step into this work with both competence and compassion. I've deeply valued the opportunity to connect with my community, give back, and serve as a steady support for those navigating immense loss and uncertainty. This experience has profoundly shaped me as a clinician both personally and professionally."

Georgia says her practicum experience "taught me



to balance empathy with structure, offering warmth while maintaining boundaries and direction. The combination of theoretical learning and real-world experience has allowed me to recognize trauma responses, use grounding techniques appropriately and pace conversations in a way that fosters safety and trust. Together, these experiences have helped me approach crisis counseling with steadiness, sensitivity, and respect for each survivor's unique experience and timing in their healing process."

In reflecting on the months since the floods, what stands out most is not the scale of loss, but the depth of community – neighbors supporting neighbors, students stepping up and clinicians generously providing their expertise. We are helping rewrite the story of what healing can look like when our counseling community comes together.

Camry Georgia '25 (left), Eve Wiley '13 (center) and Callie Conner '25 are among the counseling alumni making an impact in our communities.



Eric Bing incorporates virtual reality simulations into Dallas Police Department de-escalation training.

Shaping a safer, healthier city with community-driven projects

When Eric G. Bing looks at Dallas, he sees a city rich with potential and poised for even greater achievements when residents, students and institutions work shoulder to shoulder. Whether he's helping police officers strengthen de-escalation skills through immersive technology or guiding undergraduates as they tackle real public health challenges, Bing demonstrates that community-centered innovation makes Dallas stronger, safer and more connected.

"Dallas thrives when every voice matters and every solution grows from real community needs," Bing says.

It's a philosophy informed by decades of global and local leadership. A physician, epidemiologist and professor of global health who also has an MBA, Bing serves in

both the Simmons School of Education and Human Development and SMU's Department of Anthropology. His career spans award-winning health initiatives in Africa, Central America and the Caribbean; service with the George W. Bush Institute; and scholarly work that has produced more than 90 publications.

Two of his current Dallas-based projects – one using virtual reality (VR) to strengthen trust between law enforcement and residents and another empowering undergraduates to solve urgent urban challenges through hands-on research and collaboration – show exactly how that approach plays out.

REIMAGINING POLICE TRAINING THROUGH VR
In partnership with the Dallas Police Department and SMU's Technology-Enhanced Immersive Learning cluster, Bing is helping

lead a groundbreaking effort to incorporate VR simulations into officer de-escalation training. Supported by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, the project aims to improve safety for both officers and residents by equipping trainees with sharper judgment and more effective skills for handling tense encounters.

The research brings together "a community of people who are concerned that we need to train our police officers in the best way possible," Bing says.

The initiative builds on the department's evidence-based ICAT (integrating communications, assessment and tactics) and CIT (crisis

intervention training) curricula, approaches already shown to reduce excessive force incidents and lower injury rates. VR technology offers a powerful extension of that foundation, providing decision-rich simulations that mirror the complexity of real street encounters.

“We’re building immersive environments where officers can practice the split-second decisions that keep people safe,” Bing says. “The goal is to help them learn, reflect and adapt before they ever face those moments on duty.”

To develop those simulations, the team uses data from the Use of Force Police Force Analysis System and conducts interviews with trainers, community leaders and front-line officers. Scenarios include mental health crises and other high-stress interactions in which communication, empathy and quick thinking matter most.

Training launched in September. Each VR session captures trainees’ actions, from movement to verbal strategies to the timing of their decisions, providing immediate, actionable feedback. The system’s dashboard evolves with the training, ensuring every cohort benefits from continuous learning and refinement.

“We spent two years understanding their training, so we were learning *and* teaching,” Bing explains. “We’re using the same education principles we apply to all our research; it’s just in a different environment.”

Approximately 150 recruits per year will participate, allowing researchers to directly measure changes in confidence, skills and real-world use-of-force outcomes.

Maj. Anthony Greer of the Dallas Police Department says the opportunity to “work with



Dallas Police Department trainees also came to campus for de-escalation instruction.

Eric Bing emphasizes community-centered innovation to make Dallas stronger and safer.



“We’re building immersive environments where officers can practice the split-second decisions that keep people safe. The goal is to help them learn, reflect and adapt before they ever face those moments on duty.”

-Eric G. Bing

SMU, one of the top schools in the country, here in the city of Dallas, is huge. They bring an academic body to the department that no other police department has.”

He says the DPD, the community and SMU all benefit from this partnership “because we put out the best trained officers in the country. The officers win because they operate in a safe manner. The community wins because de-escalation moves us to have the best outcome that’s safest for citizens.”

STUDENTS TAKE ON HEALTH AND SAFETY CHALLENGES

While Bing’s work with DPD focuses on professionals already in the field, his role as an educator centers on preparing the next generation of public health leaders. Nowhere is that commitment more visible than in his Creating Global and Public Health Impact class, which culminates each year in the spirited Battle to Save Lives competition.

Spring 2025 marked the 10th anniversary of the event, and the challenge placed before students was unmistakably local: propose creative, evidence-driven strategies to enhance safety along the beloved Katy Trail

and increase use of Parkland Health’s innovative Video Visit Booths.

The impact goes far beyond the classroom. The city of Dallas recently incorporated the previous year’s winning project – the Katy Trail-Alternate Route design strategy – into a public

survey as one of four options under consideration for improving the city’s hike and bike network.

The students’ proposal addressed a persistent safety issue identified the year before: high bicycle speeds along the Katy Trail. Their design aimed to increase safety along the future Dallas LOOP Bikeway by offering a well-planned alternate

route that reduced congestion and improved the user experience.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

For many students, Bing’s course sparks or deepens a commitment to careers in health, public service or community advocacy. And that’s exactly the point.

“When students see themselves as problem-solvers with real responsibility, they rise to the challenge,” he says. “Dallas becomes their classroom, their partner and their inspiration.”

Whether through cutting-edge VR training or student-led innovations, Bing’s projects share a core belief that Dallas grows stronger when solutions emerge from collaboration, empathy and rigorous inquiry.

“Every project I’m part of is ultimately about building a city where everyone feels safe, supported and seen,” he reflects. “When we invest in people and engage the community, we create a city that reflects the best of who we are.”

And in these two initiatives, that future is already taking shape. ❖



A police trainee dons a VR headset to enter a lifelike scenario.

West Dallas STEM School and The Budd Center

Transformative collaborations and support set the stage for the next phases of expansion, research and innovation

By Karen Pierce '21

WHEN THE WEST DALLAS STEM SCHOOL (WDSS) OPENED ITS DOORS IN AUGUST 2021, IT REPRESENTED MORE THAN A NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CAMPUS.

It embodied what happens when a university, a public school system, a leading industry partner and a community come together to transform education in one of Dallas' historically underserved neighborhoods. The origin of the WDSS project is often described as a "stars aligning" moment, because each partner had different, but complementary, goals for the future of education in West Dallas. Dallas ISD wanted to offer families a high-quality STEM program option, Toyota USA wanted to improve workforce readiness, SMU Simmons wanted to innovatively reshape the field of education, and the West Dallas community wanted to ensure that their children were equipped to solve the problems of the future.

This fall is the beginning of an important transition as the original research-practice partnership phase concludes and all partners pivot toward sustaining and scaling the successful model components. At the center of this effort is The Budd Center at SMU Simmons.

The Budd Center's mission is simple but important: to ensure that every child in every neighborhood has access to high-quality education and the support systems needed to thrive. As demonstrated in West Dallas, the goal is not only to prepare students academically but also to nurture their families and neighborhoods in ways that create extended and enhanced learning environments for each child. The emphasis moving forward will be on expanding the School Zone and Parent Zone models, ensuring that family and community engagement is not just adjacent to the educational ecosystem but

a core function of school life.

The School Zone series has functioned for over a decade as the mechanism for building relationships and expanding networks among education-supporting nonprofit organizations in West Dallas. The future phase of this program will be to leverage those existing networks and incubate and launch new research to practice partnerships. The nonprofit organizations are experts in community organizing and are also best positioned to identify gaps and needs. The Budd Center will continue to work with these groups to co-design and implement solutions to challenges, while evaluating for impact and securing funding for the continuation of successful initiatives.

As an exemplar of the School Zone's collaborative planning processes, The Parent Zone series will be continued and expanded for the upcoming year, in partnership with KERA, Dallas College and both public and charter schools in West Dallas. After the initial pilot phase, it was determined that families found value in engaging with different

enrichment activities in an out-of-school setting and additional funding was secured by The Budd Center to continue the series.

Beyond these programs and partnerships, Simmons faculty and graduate students are involved in studying the impact of the WDSS. Recent research projects have examined how coordinated community partnerships improve schools' abilities to offer enrichment programming, how parent engagement shifts student outcomes, and how professional development for teachers fosters more equitable and innovative classroom practices.

Early results show that teachers report feeling better supported, parents report

stronger connections to the school, and students are showing measurable gains in both confidence and academic readiness. Just as importantly, the WDSS has become a living laboratory where Simmons researchers can study what works, for whom, and under what conditions, and then share those lessons with schools and communities across Dallas and beyond.

The work at the WDSS is ongoing, but it is already clear that when higher education institutions, PK-12 schools and communities work together, the results can be transformative. Donors, alumni and friends of SMU Simmons are helping fuel the next phases of program expansion and innovation, and their investment is producing a stronger school, as well as a stronger community.



With The Budd Center's leadership and Simmons' commitment to research-driven practice, West Dallas is showing what's possible when education becomes the anchor for communities. As this model grows, the hope is simple but ambitious: that every child, every family and every neighborhood will one day have access to the same kind of opportunities now taking root in West Dallas. ❖

The Budd Center provides a bridge to services that help children, families and neighborhoods thrive.

Coming in April: Second Global Sports Business Summit

FUELED BY THE SUCCESS OF LAST YEAR'S INAUGURAL EVENT THAT PACKED THE HOUSE

and put Dallas in the spotlight, SMU and the Dallas Sports Commission are gearing up for the second Global Sports Business Summit April 20.

The summit's timing couldn't be better as a prelude to North Texas' historic moment as a host region for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Dan Hunt '00, co-owner of FC Dallas and the Kansas City Chiefs and co-chair of the North Texas FIFA World Cup Organizing Committee Board, spoke at the first summit about helping to lead the charge to bring the world's biggest sporting event to the area. Dallas secured nine matches – more than any other host city – cementing its place on the international stage.

It's no surprise to local fans that the *Sports Business Journal* ranked Dallas as the nation's No. 1 city for sports business. The first Global Sports Business Summit leaned into that dominance,

drawing hundreds of attendees to SMU's Collins Executive Education Center for a fast-paced look at where the industry is headed. Presented by SMU's sport management program in collaboration

with the Dallas Sports Commission, the event brought together executives, innovators and students eager to break into one of the world's most competitive fields.

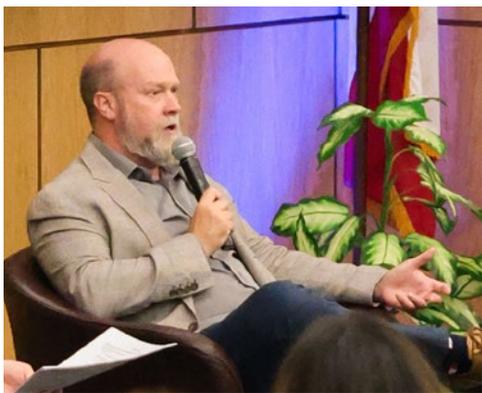
Industry leaders tackled big-picture issues and shared valuable insights. Panels explored the future of mega sports events, the explosive growth of women's sports and broadcasting,

and the evolving landscape of college athletics. Leadership voices from the Dallas Cowboys, Mavericks, FC Dallas, Texas Rangers and Wings joined representatives from the PGA of America, alongside SMU's new Director of Athletics Damon Evans, creating a lineup as deep as any championship roster.

For Peter Carton, director of sport management and clinical associate professor

“We felt there was a need in the marketplace to bring together sports industry executives and students aspiring to move into roles within the industry.”

– Peter Carton



Industry leaders shared insights to a full house last year, setting the stage for an even bigger summit this spring.

Dan Hunt '00, co-owner of FC Dallas and the Kansas City Chiefs and co-chair of the North Texas FIFA World Cup Organizing Committee Board, spoke at the 2025 summit about securing nine 2026 FIFA World Cup matches for North Texas.

at SMU, the months of preparation delivered exactly what the industry needed. “We felt there was a need

in the marketplace to bring together sports industry executives and students aspiring to move into roles within the industry,” Carton says. That exposure matters to students, “so they can see the depth and breadth of opportunities in the sports industry.”

Hunt called the summit an invaluable asset for the region. “There are a lot of ideas,

a lot of innovation discussed ranging from the importance of social media, TV strategy and broadcast, to streaming that helps all of us in the business think about how we can improve,” Hunt says. He also noted that hosting the event positions SMU as a national leader in sport management.

Carton credits the Dallas Sports Commission, led by Monica Paul and her team, for helping turn vision into reality. The collaboration has strengthened ties between SMU and DSC and set the stage for an even bigger summit April 20. ❖

Struggling readers need ‘Friends’

FOR GENERATIONS, CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES WERE OFTEN EXCLUDED FROM READING INSTRUCTION BECAUSE EDUCATORS TYPICALLY BELIEVED THAT MOST OF THESE STUDENTS COULD NOT LEARN TO READ. Over the past 20 years, a team of Simmons educators has been raising expectations and pushing back against that history. Their research led to the creation of Friends on the Block, a comprehensive text-based early literacy intervention being rolled out in pioneering classrooms from Lewisville, Texas, to Long Island, New York.

“Research is now clear that all kids learn to read in remarkably similar ways,” says principal investigator Jill Allor, University Distinguished Professor in Teaching and Learning at SMU. “What changes for children with disabilities is the intensity. They need more practice, clearer steps and repeated opportunities to succeed, but the science of reading still works.”

grade, which older, struggling readers often never fully mastered. Its flexible design allows teachers and families to customize lessons, making it effective for students with dyslexia, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, English language learners and any child still learning to read.

Rigorous research supported by national grants underpins Friends on the Block. It’s rooted in a 2005–2009 longitudinal study funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs and led by Patricia Mathes, now professor emeritus of Teaching and Learning, and Allor. Contributors included Francesca Go, now associate dean of assessment and student success and clinical associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning, and then-doctoral candidates Jennifer Cheatham ’10 and Diane Gifford ’13.

Stephanie Al Otaiba, Allor’s close collaborator, began working on the project when she accepted a position at Simmons in 2012. She now serves as Patsy and Ray Caldwell Centennial Chair in Teaching and Learning and professor.

In 2013, a four-year, \$1.5 million grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the Department of Education’s research, statistics and evaluation arm, launched the development of the Friends on the Block reading program and materials. In addition to Allor, author and owner/operator, and Al Otaiba, author, the initial Friends

team included Cheatham, author and creative director; Professor Emeritus Paul Yovanoff, co-principal investigator and methodologist; and Carlin Conner ’20 and program specialist Miriam Ortiz ’17, both of whom also earned doctorates from Simmons.

Allor weaves Friends on the Block

into the practicum experiences of the master’s students she teaches. Since 2015, an estimated 100 Simmons students, including undergraduates, have been trained with the program. Now, Allor hears from former students who are leading their own classrooms and credit the experience with shaping how they implement evidence-based practices every day.

Continuous study and revision have refined the program as Simmons researchers tracked student outcomes and strengthened materials over time.

Allor and Al Otaiba, along with partners from the University of Alabama and Oregon Research Institute, are completing a randomized control trial supported by \$3.3 million in IES grants to assess the program’s effectiveness at scale. Ortiz and doctoral candidate Charlotte Gregor ’28 are also part of the current research team.

Results thus far show that students with intensive needs, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, who participated in Friends on the Block made statistically significant greater gains than students in a comparison group on multiple assessments, including word recognition, phonics, fluency and comprehension. Also, data collected one year after the intervention showed that results were maintained for fluency and comprehension.

“These results indicate how important it is to advocate for more ambitious reading instruction to improve reading achievement for students with intensive needs, so we hope to get this positive message out to educators, families and to students themselves,” Al Otaiba says.

This spring marks a new chapter for Allor. She will retire from SMU to focus on her passion of translating research into practice, supporting schools in Texas, New York, Tennessee and other states as they implement Friends on the Block. ❖

Learn more at friendsontheblock.com.

Researchers Stephanie Al Otaiba (left) and Jill Allor developed Friends on the Block literacy intervention.



Friends on the Block includes 60 carefully sequenced, highly decodable student books organized into 14 levels, along with teacher guides and more than 100 learning games.

The program emphasizes early literacy skills typically developed in pre-kindergarten through early second



New assistant dean focuses on enrollment

Simmons School of Education and Human Development welcomes Ryan Cole '13, '17, '26 as its inaugural assistant dean of enrollment management.

Cole was selected following a nationwide search and brings extensive experience in higher education recruitment and admissions. He previously served as assistant dean for recruitment and admission at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts, where he led strategic enrollment initiatives and student outreach efforts.

A Houston native, Cole is a proud SMU alumnus. He earned a bachelor's degree in music education from Meadows and holds a master's degree in higher education from Simmons. He is scheduled to receive his Doctor of Education degree in December 2026.

Cole says his academic and professional ties to the University give him a unique perspective as he steps into the new role.

"Having been a student, an alumnus and now a leader at SMU and Simmons, I understand what makes this community special," Cole says. "That history allows me to connect authentically with prospective students and help them see themselves thriving here."

Interim Dean Michael Harris says Cole's background and enthusiasm make him well suited to lead Simmons' enrollment efforts.

"Ryan understands what prospective students are looking for when choosing a school," Harris says. "He brings tremendous energy to this role, and I look forward to seeing his vision take shape. I am confident he will make a significant impact on enrollment at Simmons."

Cole began his new role January 5. He says he is eager to collaborate across the school to advance Simmons' mission and growth.

"I look forward to working closely with Simmons faculty and staff to support our enrollment, marketing, communications and alumni engagement efforts," Cole says. "It's an exciting time to be part of SMU and Simmons, and I'm honored to help shape what comes next." ❖

New faces, same mission: Teaching and empowering Simmons students

Sport management and counseling may seem like very different fields, yet at their core, these disciplines explore how people think, connect and thrive. Four new Simmons School of Education and Human Development faculty members share that human-centered focus in their teaching and research. Whether investigating how digital media influences fan loyalty or guiding counseling students to support clients, these educators share a common goal: to help students reach their full potential.

DEUKMOOK BAE brings expertise in sport marketing, digital engagement and data-driven decision-making to his role as an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Physiology and Sport Management.

Bae earned a Ph.D. in sport and entertainment management from the University of South Carolina, where he taught courses in sport marketing, finance and business principles.

Bae's research centers on enhancing consumer engagement across digital sport consumption journeys. His primary interests include sport gambling behavior, pricing strategies, social media and sport consumer behavior, artificial intelligence integration in sport marketing, and sport management education.

His work appears in leading journals, and he serves as an ad hoc reviewer for several journals and the SEVT Conference.

An assistant professor of Applied Physiology and Sport Management, **BO LI** examines how digital and mass media, branding and consumer behavior intersect to shape the modern sports experience.

He previously held sport management faculty positions at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa. Prior to entering academia, Li held various positions in sport media and marketing. As a former journalist, he covered more than 100 sporting events, including Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups.

He has authored more than 40 peer-reviewed academic manuscripts published in leading journals, and he currently serves on the editorial board of the journal *Communication & Sport*.

Clinical Assistant Professor **LISA BEIJAN**

provides an immersive, practice-based understanding of counseling. Her teaching blends academic foundations with experiential learning that helps students connect theory to real-world practice.

Beijan is a licensed professional counselor supervisor in Texas, a licensed professional counselor in Oklahoma and a registered play therapist. Before

earning her doctorate, she spent 16 years in clinical practice in a wide range of settings. Her experiences deepened a belief in the power of compassionate, creative counseling.

Prior to joining SMU, Beijan served as a teaching assistant professor for four years at Oklahoma State University. She previously held the position of adjunct instructor at Tarleton State University and the University of North Texas.

Research by Clinical Associate Professor **TIFFANY BORDONADA** explores caregiver identity, grief and chronic sorrow, while her teaching empowers students to navigate the complexities of human experience with insight and compassion.

Bordonada, a national certified counselor, has clinical experience that encompasses residential treatment for adolescent offenders, outpatient counseling for young adults and group therapy for caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Before joining SMU, she served as a counselor educator at St. Edward's University in Austin.

She also co-directed the Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate program at the University of Scranton.

Bordonada is a member of several professional groups and regularly presents at national, regional and state conferences.



Deukmook Bae



Bo Li

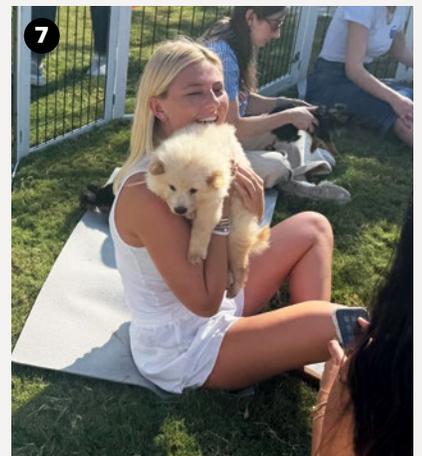


Lisa Beijan



Tiffany Bordonada

Simmons Spotlight



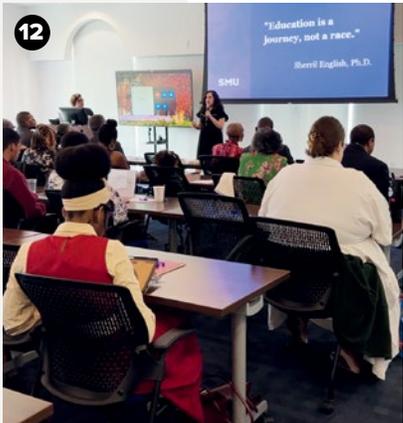
“It is important to give faculty, staff and students a chance to connect outside the classroom. Fresh air, fun and fitness are a great way to do that.”

- Laura Robinson-Doyle at Hilltop Hustle



“We at Simmons already lead the way at SMU in research and are anxious to be part of a trajectory that accelerates our work even more.”

- Interim Dean Michael Harris at the SMU presidential inauguration



1-3 A six-week study of the global sports industry began June 11, 2025, in France. **4-5** Interim Dean Michael Harris joined students, faculty, staff and friends at the Hilltop Hustle 5K walk and run in October. **6-7** Simmons celebrated the inauguration of SMU President Jay C. Hartzell September 12, 2025, with a party on the lawn featuring games, fellowship and ice cream. No one could resist pausing for “puppy yoga.” **8** Scholars from universities in South Korea and Taiwan joined Simmons faculty at the 2025 International Visiting Scholars Symposium spearheaded by Professor Jiun-Yu “Jerry” Wu. **9** Gigi Glisson Poglitsch '69, '72 (center), a member of Simmons Executive Board, and fellow Mustangs showed off their school spirit at the Simmons Homecoming tent. **10-11** Faculty and staff “Pony Up!” at the Simmons Homecoming tent. **12** Simmons will host a Beginning Teacher Institute May 7.

Interdisciplinary thinkers explore timely issues at annual symposium

Scholars gathered in July for the Texas Graduate Liberal Studies Symposium, a daylong exchange of ideas co-hosted by SMU and Rice University. The event brought together participants from graduate liberal studies programs to share research, creative work and personal inquiry while exploring enduring and urgent questions across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.

The symposium featured a wide range of presentations that reflected the breadth of liberal studies scholarship. In addition to SMU and Rice, participants represented Dallas Baptist University, Pontifical Gregorian University, University of Dallas and The University of Texas at Dallas. Sessions explored art, identity and creative practice, with presentations on self-portraiture, cultural expression and collaboration in art and design. Other panels examined trauma, healing and expression through music, narrative and education. Philosophy and literature took center stage in conversations about Plato’s *Republic*, identity formation and 19th-century American texts, while discussions of justice and public discourse addressed freedom of speech, genocide and the biopolitics of science.

Additional sessions focused on education, institutions and emerging technologies, including research on AI and student retention, threat assessment processes, and the role of artificial intelligence in addressing global health inequities. Panels on media, memory and representation considered journalism, museums and collective memory, while science- and society-focused presentations connected environmental resilience, food systems and public health.

The annual symposium reflects the objective of Simmons School’s Graduate Liberal Studies programs: channeling the power of interdisciplinary learning to ask better questions, build stronger communities, and meet the demands of the 21st century with curiosity and purpose. The program is part of the Department of Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies.

Designed for flexibility, the Master of Liberal Studies degree allows students to pursue intellectual passions while building critical and creative thinking skills through coursework in the humanities, social justice, organizational dynamics, and arts and culture.

The Doctor of Liberal Studies program extends that work through rigorous, faculty-guided research. DLS students engage deeply with interdisciplinary questions and complete a doctoral thesis that integrates theory and practice for meaningful impact.

Kate Montgomery, department chair and clinical assistant professor of Human-Centered Interdisciplinary Studies, serves on the board of the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs, helping connect SMU to a national network of institutions committed to interdisciplinary inquiry and lifelong learning.



Switching on STREAM dreams



“By stepping into labs, experimenting with real tools and learning directly from professionals, students move beyond abstract ideas about college and careers.”

- LaChelle Cunningham

SMU BUZZED WITH CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY AND THE UNMISTAKABLE ENERGY OF STUDENTS discovering what’s possible during the eighth annual Upward Bound STREAM Day. Sponsored by College Access Programs in the Simmons School of Education and Human Development, the event welcomed 82 high school students from across North Texas for a hands-on deep dive into science, technology, research, engineering, art and math, known collectively as STREAM.

STREAM Day reflects the broader mission of Upward Bound Math and Science College Access Programs, which provide academic support, mentoring and college preparation to help students successfully transition from high school to higher education, according to Erica Fayson, program leader. The program’s impact is impressive: 98% of students in the

SMU Upward Bound program go on to earn college degrees.

98% of STUDENTS in the SMU Upward Bound program go on to earn college degrees

Throughout the day, exploration took center stage. Eric Godat, director of research technology in SMU’s Office of Information

Technology, linked emerging technology to students’ everyday experiences during a session on artificial intelligence. He

introduced students to how AI is reshaping teaching and learning, influencing social media content, and transforming workforce demands and career pathways across industries.

Science came alive in the lab with Helen Babbili, senior lecturer in the Department of Chemistry, who turned a familiar snack into an unexpected lesson. Students extracted oil from potato chips to determine which varieties contained the most oil, applying core chemistry concepts in a way that was both practical and memorable.

Creativity and innovation continued with community partners and SMU faculty working side by side. Harry Kennedy, executive director of HAKing Innovation, introduced students to 3D design modeling using Tinkercad, a free web-based platform. With lab space provided by Bethany Smith, lecturer in the Department of Biological Sciences, Kennedy guided the interactive “Chemlogne and Chemfume” exercise. Using essential oils, students created custom colognes or perfumes and left campus with a travel-size bottle of their own concoction. Rounding out the day, Brittera Sales, a career and technical education (CTE) business

Simmons hosted 82 North Texas high school students for Upward Bound STREAM Day.

Demonstrations and activities encouraged students to try new things and explore future options.



instructor from Lakeview Centennial High School, guided a graphic design workshop where students created original fonts and designed buttons, hats, drawstring backpacks and pencil bags.

Opportunities like Upward Bound STREAM Day encourage students to try new things and perhaps discover interests and talents they didn’t know they had. “By stepping into labs, experimenting with real tools and learning directly from professionals, students move beyond abstract ideas about college and careers,” says LaChelle Cunningham, director of College Access Programs. “They build confidence, ask bigger questions and begin to imagine new possibilities for their futures.”

This experience was just Part I, Fayson says. Students are already looking ahead to Part II, when they return to campus in the spring to continue their STREAM journey. ❖

Fueling ambitions, advancing health education

A POWERFUL NEW INVESTMENT IN SMU OPENS DOORS FOR STUDENTS IN THE SIMMONS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND ACCELERATES THE FUTURE OF HEALTH-FOCUSED EDUCATION.

The historic gift from the O'Donnell Foundation, which could exceed \$60 million when fully funded, will establish the O'Donnell Academic Honors Fund to recruit, develop and graduate the next generation of exceptional scholars in critical fields.

The Bachelor of Science in applied physiology and health management (APHM) program in Simmons is among the high-impact majors designated to receive initial funding. As part of the initiative, 20 outstanding APHM undergraduates will receive scholarships to support their SMU education and future goals.

"The O'Donnell Academic Honors Fund will create transformational opportunities for our APHM students," says interim Dean Michael Harris. "O'Donnell Scholars will deepen their learning with powerful practical experiences to be ready to lead in health-related careers."

Those experiences include research assistantships, industry internships and other hands-on opportunities that allow students to explore health professions while still in the classroom. APHM students study whole-body physiology through an evidence-based lens, preparing for careers in physical therapy, athletic training, exercise physiology, research science, physician assistant roles and beyond.

"Our students understand whole-body human physiology at the intersection of science, medicine and health," says Scott Davis, associate professor and director of the APHM major. "This new honors program will empower them

to apply that knowledge and accelerate their careers in health-focused professions."

The initiative gives Simmons another opportunity to do what it does best: challenge



students academically while surrounding them with mentors and experiences that shape who they become and how they show up in the world beyond campus.

"We are incredibly grateful to the O'Donnell Foundation for this funding," Harris adds, "as it allows us to create an honors-style learning community that will provide O'Donnell Scholars with highly personalized, small-sized, high-impact courses that will result in these students not only making an impact at SMU but in their communities for years to come." ❖

Researchers take their findings to the world

Simmons researchers traveled far and wide over the summer to share information and lead solutions-focused conversations on the global stage.

HONG KONG

Leanne Ketterlin Geller, director of Research in Mathematics Education, participated in a panel discussion at the Mathematical Cognition and Learning Society annual meeting in Hong Kong in June, where she shared findings from a replication study on a fraction intervention for fourth grade students with mathematics difficulties. In July, she connected with researchers and graduate students focused on interventions and assessment practices for students with disabilities at the Pacific Coast Research Conference held at Seoul National University in South Korea.



FINLAND



Congratulations to Anthony Petrosino, professor of Teaching and Learning at Simmons; Jessie Zarazaga, clinical associate of professor Civil and Environmental Engineering at Lyle School of Engineering; and former SMU postdoc Max Sherard, assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of North Texas. Their paper, *Space and Time as Elements to Design within Engineering for Sustainability*, received the Outstanding Long Paper Award at the International Society of the Learning Sciences conference in Helsinki, Finland, in June.

ITALY

Candace Walkington, Annette and Harold Simmons Centennial Chair and professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning, and her team shared their cutting-edge research at the 26th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence in Education in Palermo, Italy, in July. Their poster introduced a novel method for using generative AI to produce diagrams to accompany math tasks. They also shared findings from a yearlong study of how teachers use generative AI and large language models within the ASSISTments platform to personalize math problems to their students' interests. After implementing these tasks with 500 students, the team reflected on the impact and student feedback.



Marveling at ‘superheroes’

A new career direction leads to extraordinary professors and a welcoming community

By Amelia Dominguez '24, '26

EDUCATORS - IT'S REALLY JUST A SYNONYM FOR SUPERHEROES.

From the time I was a little girl with curly pigtails, I have always known that teachers are the backbone of our society. They inspire, guide, comfort and positively redirect their students' lives. After graduating from SMU with degrees in English and film, I found myself unsure of my next step. Babysitting helped me realize my true calling. One day, after helping a little girl brainstorm fun ways to learn math, she hugged me and said, "I wish you were my teacher." That moment was my light bulb. Hearing about Simmons' graduate program from my godmother, a staff member, set me on my new path.

Despite my fears, stepping into an SMU classroom and meeting the Simmons faculty felt like coming home. I was eager to apply for the Master of Education with Teacher Preparation Program, but hesitant about pursuing additional schooling.

She also provided essential insight about literacy, especially for students with language-based learning disabilities. After taking a class with Francesca Go in undergrad, I knew I had to take another class with her. Professor Go's no-nonsense, sarcastic humor makes for captivating lectures and encourages participation.

Karla Del Rosal, an incredible educator, genuinely cares about her students as whole individuals. She answers emails or texts at any hour to ensure her students feel at ease. Her assignments prepare us to be better teachers, and she's willing to rearrange meetings or due dates if it means her students will succeed. She also inspires through her remarkable work ethic as a professor, advisor and director of graduate studies.

I appreciate Simmons' emphasis on diverse learners. Each class highlights the importance of differentiation in creating effective lesson plans. The program ensures graduates become equitable and compassionate educators who can teach students from diverse cultural and cognitive backgrounds. Simmons even offers courses in culturally responsive teaching and the

foundations of special education.

As someone who didn't major in education, I was anxious about field experience. But Simmons ensures graduate students get inside classrooms from the start. The program offers strong connections with partner districts, including Dallas ISD and Highland Park ISD, establishing a foundation for student observations and teaching. Before classes begin, every M.Ed. student receives an email from Alexis Helfenstein, program specialist for the Department of Teaching and Learning, with test preparation programs and personalized study plans for certification exams.

Simmons has it all – extraordinary professors, an emphasis on equitable teaching, school connections and certification resources. But the best part is the strong community I've found among my peers. Simmons brings together aspiring teachers who share a passion for educating the next generation. I value the emotional support before finals and the Starbucks breaks between classes and study sessions. I'm especially motivated knowing I can debrief with friends about Taylor Swift's newest album. I will graduate with a master's, but also with lifelong friends who will always have my back. ❖

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The director explained the program lasts only 18 months and starts when you're ready – I could begin in January 2025 and graduate by May 2026. I have built my life in Dallas, so Simmons was the perfect fit. This University has always felt like an extension of my home.

On my first day of classes, I felt both eager and full of self-doubt, but these feelings faded as I got to know Simmons' phenomenal faculty. Charlotte Gregor '28, a Simmons Ph.D.

candidate, taught my first master's class. She led engaging lectures and incorporated fun activities to demonstrate what aspiring teachers should include in future lessons.



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ALYSE LOACH '26, a special education teacher at Hillcrest High School, received a Kathrynne and Gene Bishop Scholarship from the Simmons School of Education and Human Development that enables her to pursue a Master of Education degree with a concentration in special education. One of Simmons School's highest funding priorities is providing more opportunities for students like Alyse to seek advanced education degrees. Your gift to Simmons School scholarships is your chance to make a lasting impact on the future.



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