



# A new name on the Main Quad

A prominent building on the Main Quad has a new name: the **Literatures, Cultures & Linguistics Building**. The School of Literatures, Cultures & Linguistics changed the name following a vote of faculty members, staff, and students. The original name, Foreign Languages Building, was selected in 1968 due to funding received through the National Defense Education Act. "Since then, the rationale for studying languages and cultures has changed," the school said in an announcement.



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Above photo and cover photo/illustration by Carly Conway

## NEWS FROM LAS



## 94% of recent grads find a first destination within six months

An annual study of recent alumni reports that 94 percent of LAS alumni who graduated during the 2021-2022 period secured a first destination within six months of commencement. The data comes from the Illini Success Initiative, a campuswide report that shines light on the early career paths of bachelor's degree recipients. This year's report examines undergraduates who graduated during August 2021, December 2021, and May 2022.

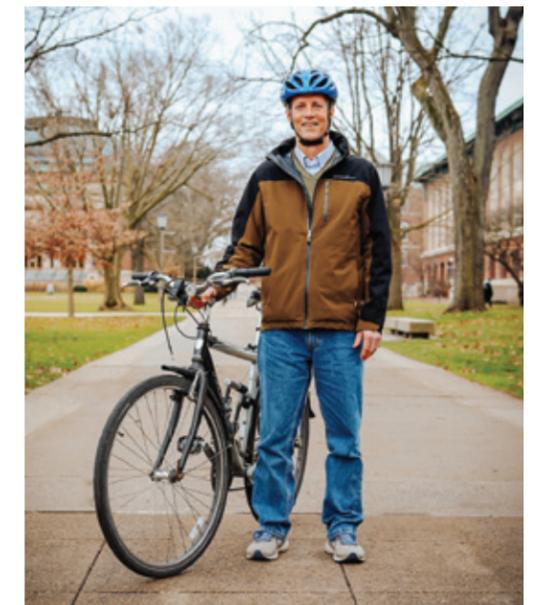
[go.illinois.edu/Career-Success-F23](http://go.illinois.edu/Career-Success-F23)

## Professors recognized with named positions

Several professors and administrators have received named positions, which is one of the highest campus honors. Recent investiture ceremonies were held for the following: **Venetria K. Patton** named the Harry E. Preble Dean; microbiology professor **Rachel Whitaker** named Harry E. Preble Professor; professor **Bruce Fouke** named the Ralph E. Grim Professor in Earth Sciences and Environmental Change; math and statistics professor **Runhuan Feng** named the State Farm Companies Foundation® Professor in Actuarial Science; chemistry professor **Martin Burke** named the May and Ving Lee Professor for Chemical Innovation; and economics professor **Marcelo Cunha Medeiros** named Jorge Paulo Lemann Chair in Brazilian Economy. [go.illinois.edu/Investitures-F23](http://go.illinois.edu/Investitures-F23)



From left: Jerry Dávila, director of the Illinois Global Institute; George Deltas, head of the Department of Economics; Harry E. Preble Dean Venetria K. Patton; Marcelo Cunha Medeiros, the Jorge Paulo Lemann Chair in Brazilian Economy; Jorge Paulo Lemann; Chancellor Robert J. Jones; economics professor Eun Yi Chung; and Vice Provost Kevin Jackson.



## The many rides of Dave Tewksbury

Longtime and well-admired professor **Dave Tewksbury** retired earlier this year. Few professors have had such wide-reaching impact at Illinois as Tewksbury, who arrived on campus in 1996. Aside from noted accomplishments in teaching and research, he served for several years as head of the Department of Communication and as an associate dean in the College of LAS, helping to oversee collegewide operations and assisting LAS through the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic. [go.illinois.edu/Dave-Tewksbury-F23](http://go.illinois.edu/Dave-Tewksbury-F23)

## Altgeld and Illini Hall project marks key stage

Demolition is complete at Illini Hall, marking a key stage in the Altgeld and Illini Hall Project to advance learning and research spaces in mathematics, statistics, and data sciences at the University of Illinois. Crews from Alpine Demolition Services made way for the construction of a new 140,000-square-foot facility. Meanwhile work has also begun on renovating Altgeld Hall. Here, workers clean and restore the building's exterior. Read about preserving the sound of the Altgeld Chimes at [go.illinois.edu/Altgeld-Chimes\\_F23](https://go.illinois.edu/Altgeld-Chimes_F23), or learn more about renovation project at [go.las.illinois.edu/Altgeld-Illini](https://go.las.illinois.edu/Altgeld-Illini).



Photo by Carly Conway



## Providing a new kind of learning

A professor and alumna have partnered with Immerse and Meta (formerly Facebook, Inc.) to provide underserved high school students with headsets to participate in virtual reality language learning courses. **Randall Sadler**, professor of linguistics and director of the English as a Second Language Program, and **Tricia Thrasher** (MA, '18; PhD, '22, French), research and English program manager at Immerse, have received a \$350,000 grant for the project. [go.illinois.edu/New-Kind-Learning-F23](https://go.illinois.edu/New-Kind-Learning-F23)



From left: (students named) were part of a group of 18 who were recognized by the Center for a Public Anthropology. (Photo by Carly Conway.)

## 18 students receive awards for writing about racism, policing

Students enrolled in an introductory anthropology course received Public Anthropology Awards from the Center for a Public Anthropology for their insights on racism and policing. Under the instruction of anthropology professor **Andrew Orta**, the students were prompted to write stories about how two people of opposing perspectives on the topic of race relations and policing might open channels of communication. [go.illinois.edu/Writing-Broader-Perspective-F23](https://go.illinois.edu/Writing-Broader-Perspective-F23)



## Project reconnects Native American tribes with historic tradition

Native American tribes that once called Illinois home painted deer and bison hides with stories and symbols that were important to their culture. Some of the best examples of this tradition are four painted hide robes made sometime between 1680 and 1750. History professor **Robert Morrissey** is working with an interdisciplinary group to reconnect the tribes with their tradition of hide painting and with the ceremonial robes. [go.illinois.edu/Historic-Tradition-F23](https://go.illinois.edu/Historic-Tradition-F23)

Photo courtesy of Robert Morrissey.

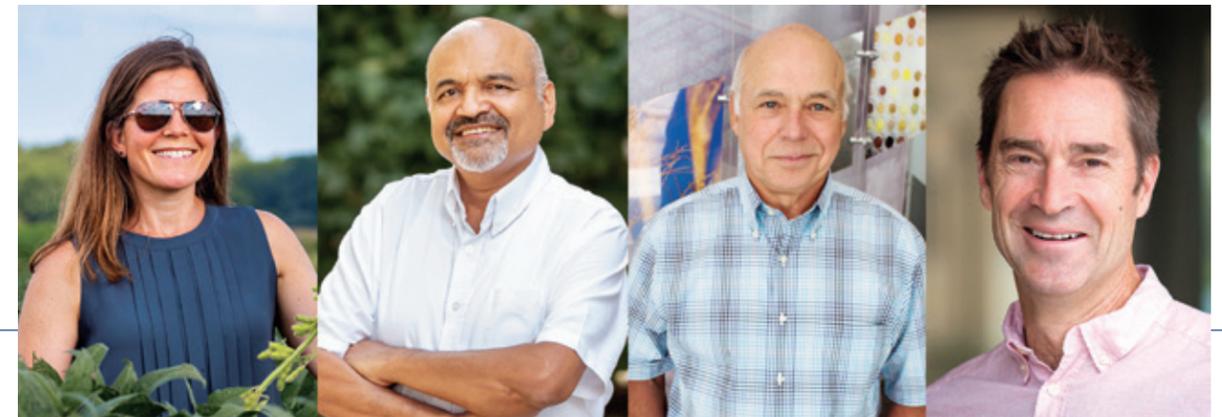
## Video series highlights the history of skin

A series of eight videos available online highlights history professor **Craig Koslofsky's** research on ways of marking and understanding skin in the early modern world. Koslofsky is writing a book, "The Deep Surface: Skin in the Early Modern World, 1450-1750." The videos provide a preview of Koslofsky's book and highlight the Illinois campus along with perspectives of other Illinois scholars. [go.illinois.edu/History-of-Skin-F23](https://go.illinois.edu/History-of-Skin-F23)



Photo by Michelle Hassel

From left: Elizabeth Ainsworth, Atul Jain, Donald Ort, and Brent Roberts.



## LAS scientists rank among the world's most influential

Five LAS researchers were named to the 2022 Clarivate Analytics Highly Cited Researchers list, which recognizes research scientists and social scientists who have demonstrated exceptional influence as reflected by peer citation during the last decade. This list includes plant biology and crop sciences professor **Elizabeth Ainsworth**, atmospheric science professor **Atul Jain**, plant biology professor **Donald Ort**, and psychology professor **Brent Roberts**. Psychology professor **Ed Diener**, who is deceased, is also on this year's list. [go.illinois.edu/Most-Influential\\_F23](https://go.illinois.edu/Most-Influential_F23)

For more about these LAS news stories and others please visit [las.illinois.edu/news](https://las.illinois.edu/news)

From left: Jerrold M. Levy, Lawrence Page, T. Markus Funk, Jacob Becraft, Maria C. Carrillo, Doug Hoffman, Britney Robbins, and Eric Whitaker.



# Alumni honored

FOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEIR FIELDS & COMMUNITIES

Photo by Darrell Hoemann

*For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, the College of LAS last spring honored alumni award winners.*

## LAS ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

**Maria C. Carrillo** (BS, '91, psychology) is chief science officer for the Alzheimer's Association.

**T. Markus Funk** (BA, '91, Germanic languages and literatures; BS, '92, business administration) is a partner in the law firm Perkins Coie and teaches law at Oxford University, Northwestern, and the University of Chicago.

**Lawrence M. Page** (MS, '68; PhD, '72, zoology) is the curator of fishes at the Florida Museum of Natural History.

**Eric P. Whitaker** (BS, '78, biology; MS, '81, health education) served with the U.S. Foreign Service and Department of State and as U.S. Ambassador to Niger from 2017 to 2021.

## LAS DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARDS

**Douglas H. Hoffman** (BA, '75, religious studies) retired from Cboe Global Markets, formerly known as the Chicago Board Options Exchange, and volunteers with the Program for Jewish Culture & Society.

**Jerrold M. Levy** (BS, '73, actuarial science) retired as a consulting actuary and pension consultant. He served on the LAS Alumni Council and has been a member of the Mathematics Development Advisory Board.

## LAS ALUMNI HUMANITARIAN AWARD

**Lance E. Rodewald** (BS, '76, chemistry; MS, '84, computer science) is a senior advisor to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention and led immunization programs for the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

## LAS OUTSTANDING YOUNG ALUMNI AWARDS

**Jacob Becraft** (BS, '13, chemical engineering) is co-founder and CEO of the biopharmaceutical company Strand Therapeutics.

**Britney P. Robbins** (BA, '10, rhetoric/creative writing) is founder and CEO of The Gray Matter Experience, a non-profit that teaches entrepreneurship to Black youth, and a manager for CAST US, a venture capital fund to support Black, Latinx, and women entrepreneurs.

Find in-depth profiles and video features of the award winners at [go.illinois.edu/Alumni-Honorees23](https://go.illinois.edu/Alumni-Honorees23).

Nominations are being accepted for the LAS alumni awards. Learn more at [las.illinois.edu/alumni/awards](https://las.illinois.edu/alumni/awards).

# LAS @Work

**Joseph Frumkin** (BS, '13, integrative biology) is the guest engagement coordinator with Lincoln Park Zoo. His job includes designing public education presentations and managing the fellowship program.



Frumkin at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. (Photos courtesy of Joseph Frumkin.)

## What is a typical workday?

A day at the zoo is far from typical. We engage the public and inspire them to take their own action to protect wildlife. Sometimes it involves me delivering a program to an audience of 500 people, while other times it involves mentoring our Guest Engagement Fellows on free-choice learning environments. Every conversation I have on zoo grounds is unique, which has me continually learning something new.

## What do you like best about your work?

I have always met interesting folks who provide unique perspectives. One colleague was a history major before coming to Lincoln Park Zoo, where he stayed for 14 years. Another colleague has an acting background but now delivers aquatic presentations focused on marine mammal anatomy at Shedd Aquarium. Each of these people have helped to guide my own professional path.

## In hindsight, what about college best prepared you for your life and career?

The emphasis on communicating with peers. Many classes had components that focused on group discussion and collaboration. I use these skills daily in every role. Classes

like field ecology, herpetology, insect ecology, and more all encouraged group learning through collaborative labs and research projects.

## Please describe your proudest achievement.

While working as an engagement specialist with Shedd Aquarium I designed (a program called) From the Field to the Floor. This program sent interpretive educators out into the field with a researcher, and we live streamed research back to Shedd Aquarium. Guests could engage scientists and interpreters through the live stream and be a part of research without having to leave Shedd.

The program gave me the opportunity to spend 10 days on Shedd Aquarium's research vessel in the Bahamas where I live streamed an expedition with our marine research team, focusing on grouper population dynamics. It was a highly collaborative process that defines how I build all my programs to this day.

By Kayleigh Rahn

To read more alumni profiles or to suggest someone for an LAS@Work feature, visit [go.las.illinois.edu/atWork-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/atWork-F23)

Carol Symes in Lincoln Hall Theater.  
(Photo by Carly Conway)

# SCENES FROM THEATER, ACADEMIC COMMUNITY, AND LIFELONG LEARNING



*Carol Symes named a University Scholar for excellence in research, teaching, and service*

Director of graduate studies doesn't necessarily sound like a show-stopping role.

At Illinois, it's an essential job reserved for faculty members who are ready for the challenges that come with largely unnoticed tasks. It's a job that, if done correctly, is noted very little by those who benefit most — the students. However, in the Department of History, professor Carol Symes took charge of the position during the global pandemic.

Luckily Symes, a former professional stage actor, was cast perfectly for the role.

"I knew going in that my job would be to not only know what (graduate students) are working on as scholars, but to also be aware of the challenges they are facing at home that

might be getting in the way of their advancement," Symes said. "I found that when we were all in isolation, keeping up those lines of communication became even more crucial. Students and their advisors showed tremendous resilience and intellectual creativity in the ways they approached these problems."

From resolving pandemic-related travel issues to helping students find sources for food, Symes worked tirelessly to help students learn and graduate from the University of Illinois. Despite the challenges, the history department graduated more than 25 PhD students in the middle of the pandemic.

"These are students who, because they felt supported, cared for, and heard, were able to make progress," she explained. "I was glad to be in the job at that time, even though it was challenging."

Symes was recently recognized as a University Scholar for her outstanding contributions to teaching, research, and service at Illinois.

"It's lovely when a professional organization recognizes your work, but when it's people who are working and living alongside you day by day, that really means a lot," Symes said. "(This award) is really recognizing the entirety of what one does as a faculty member here. It's very important to me to be a good citizen of this university that has treated me so well and given me so much."

With a unique background in professional theater, Symes brings a fresh perspective to the study of medieval history. Her academic work centers on medieval Europe and its global context: the history of premodern media as well as the processes by which products and perceptions of the medieval past are transmitted to future generations.

"I think it's important that during the period that I study, theater was the mass medium," Symes explained. "It is the mechanism through which people received their information, engaged in political discourse, learned about religion, negotiated their social status. Understanding theater is absolutely essential to understanding how these people interacted with one another."

She says the skills she learned as an actor — presentation, self-awareness, and communication — have helped in nearly every facet of academia.

"Being an actor involves empathy, the ability to meet people where they are, and to read a room," she said. "Those are all useful when you are in a classroom full of people, and you are teaching them complicated content and difficult, sometimes controversial, topics."

History department chair Dana Rabin met Symes as she was joining the department about 20 years ago. They soon became friends and close colleagues.

"Her appreciation of other disciplines allows her to be in dialogue with many different kinds of scholars," Rabin said. "Carol brings so much energy, creativity, and innovation to sources about the medieval period."

*Understanding theater is absolutely essential to understanding how these people interacted with one another.*

Among other roles, Symes holds joint appointments in the Departments of Theatre and Classics and Program in Medieval Studies and is affiliated with the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, LAS Global Studies, the European Union Center, and the Program for Jewish Culture & Society. She also founded "The Medieval Globe," the first academic journal to promote methods for studying the interconnectivity of the medieval

world. Her first book, the award-winning "A Common Stage: Theater and Public Life in Medieval Aras," is considered a launching point for the field of premodern media studies.

After professional training at the Bristol Old Vic

Theater School in England, where she also earned a certificate in stage combat, Symes performed in residential and repertory theaters on the East Coast while earning a PhD from Harvard. She is still a member of Actors' Equity, the professional union.

In a field that seems ancient, new knowledge has required Symes to constantly adjust her perspective and continue as a lifelong learner.

"On the one hand, yes, I'm an expert in a very old field, but it's an old field that is actually being radically transformed," she said. "There are teams of people, art historians, genetic scientists, archaeologists, engineers, who are bringing their expertise to new data in order to understand it and interpret it. You can't stand still; you have to be constantly moving."

*By Kayleigh Rahn*

# ‘Data nerds’ helping difference makers

The **Cline Center for Advanced Social Research** develops powerful tools for social scientists, humanists, and communities to analyze and understand massive data collections

The first thing professor **Scott Althaus** shows you when you enter the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research is a painting by the artist Brian Alfred. It shows seven giant letters arranged on a hill, evoking the landmark “Hollywood” sign that stands above Los Angeles.



The letters are shown from the back, exposing the superstructure that holds them up. They spell “F-R-E-E-D-O-M.” It’s a terrific introduction to the Cline Center, which helps researchers get a handle on giant datasets, so policymakers and citizens can take actions that improve their governments and communities.

Both the painting and the center show the realities that make us what we are – some only seen if you know where (and how) to look.

“We want to create data interventions that allow difference makers – in the public sector, in the private sector, they might be researchers, they might be practitioners – to make decisions that improve societal well-being. We want to supply them with the highest-quality data so that the decisions they make are as well-informed with good facts as they can be,” said Althaus, the Merriam Professor of Political Science,

professor of communication, and director of the Cline Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

The Cline Center won the Provost’s Excellence in Public Engagement Team Award in May 2023. The team includes Althaus, Loretta Auvil, Joseph Bajjalieh, Kelly Hammond, Jay Jennings, Michael Martin, Buddy Peyton, Tom Redman, and Ajay Singh.

“We’re the data nerds,” he said.

## Keep it on the fairway

They’re data nerds in complicated times. The work they do and information they analyze is often centered on controversial topics. Ethnic, religious, and gender identity. Coups, political unrest, and backsliding democracies. Terrorism and global conflict. Exactly the areas where many people are generating a lot of heat without much light, these days.

“The assumption in many conversations is that anyone who is collecting data on these topics must have some policy ax grind – some reason for doing it,” Althaus said. “We’re not political. We’re non-partisan, non-advocacy. It comes as a surprise [to many] that we don’t have an ax to grind.”

That attitude was established by the people most responsible for the Cline Center’s creation – the late Richard (BS, ’57,

political science) and Carole Cline, who provided an endowment for the center, and professor emeritus and founding director Peter Nardulli.

“[Richard Cline’s] number one rule for the center was ‘Let’s keep it on the fairway,’ nothing too far to the right or to the left,” Nardulli said. “He always focused on our high-tech expertise” and how it could be used by policymakers and thinkers of all stripes.

Having come up through the finance department at supermarket giant Jewel before becoming its CEO, Richard (known more as Dick) Cline served as CEO of the billion-dollar gas company Nicor for a decade in the 1980s and ‘90s. He also spent three years as chair of the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

The Clines established the endowment for the center in 2004, and Dick was deeply involved in its intellectual development. He died in March 2023 at 88.



Peter F. Nardulli, left, with Carole and the late Richard Cline. (Photo by Kwame Ross.)

“Dick and Pete [saw] a very important role for the center with the technological expertise that we had here and the ability to scan very large volumes of news data from around the world. That became the signature research focus for the Cline Center. If we can extract basic insights from these news holdings, we can apply those techniques to a variety of topics, and lots of people can use this information to improve societal welfare around the world. That’s in no small part owing to the vision of Dick Cline,” Althaus said.

## More SPOTLITE, less heat

The Cline Center conducts its analysis through a variety of platforms, from the Coup D’Etat Project, created in 2013 to better understand the transfer of political power, to the Composition of Religious and Ethnic Groups Project to gauge the divisions affecting countries around the world. Researchers may draw upon the center’s massive repository of more than 170 million news reports from as far back as 1915.

Take the topic of police use of lethal force, for example. Prompted by the 2014 protest surrounding the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer, the Cline Center team realized that there was no authoritative registry of these acts. The center launched SPOTLITE Illinois in response. The project collects data on all instances of the use of lethal force by police from 2014 to 2021. It relies on the Cline Center’s index of more than 170 million news stories

and automated analytical and machine-learning techniques developed by the center's researchers.

A dashboard system released earlier this year ([www.spotlite.illinois.edu](http://www.spotlite.illinois.edu)) makes the data available to anyone on the web, and it offers a set of "data layers" that makes the massive amount of information easier to study. The team plans to make a nationwide version available by the end of 2023.

At a county level, users can see how many incidents have occurred over time, see how they've changed over time, and get details from news reports of the incidents. The dashboard also offers information on the racial or ethnic characteristics of those involved in these police encounters. That information is often incomplete or incorrect in news reports. To develop it, the SPOTLITE team established a procedure for assessing those characteristics using independent human analysts and hundreds of images of the civilians involved in these incidents. The procedure included a means of deciding whether they had confidence in their determination.

A group of experts from on and off campus oversee the process of categorizing information about the individuals involved in these incidents so that the SPOTLITE project can be useful for revealing any disparities involving racial or ethnic groups. That debiasing assessment and accountability committee is made up of research methods experts who also come from communities that have experienced historical injustices by police.

"It was extremely important for us to call together that group and have them be empowered to say to the research team, 'You can't do it that way,'" Althaus explained. "This is an extremely sensitive topic that has repercussions for communities of color in the United States, because of histories of injustice...It's taken us a long time to be confident in our methods because the stakes are really high in getting this information right."

Overall stakeholders giving input on and using the SPOTLITE tool are incredibly varied. Since the project's inception, representatives from the Police Executive Research Forum, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association, the ACLU, the NAACP, the Invisible Institute, and academic research experts have all been involved. Michael

Schlosser, a member of the SPOTLITE leadership team, is a career law enforcement officer who recently retired as the director of the university's Police Training Institute. This deep and wide engagement has encouraged an ongoing conversation about the problems that exist in documenting police uses of lethal force and what characteristics would be useful in a common data source.

*I did not know how this was going to go – to bring these groups together. But the conversations went great because, while there are a lot of things these groups would disagree on, the one thing they could agree on was that the data were terrible," Althaus said.*

With tools like SPOTLITE, citizens are empowered to understand how their local law enforcement agencies have exercised their authority and whether there has been anything that has been inappropriate or a matter of concern. Policing agencies have an authoritative set of records from a neutral third party that help to document these things for the local communities, and they are able to improve their training programs and develop better models for use of force policies.

The upcoming national version of SPOTLITE will expand that positive impact.

"We'll be able to statistically model how many of these instances would we expect in a given county in a given period," Althaus said. "When we see cases where there are many more of these incidents than we expect, that might be a place that's deserving of special attention. Maybe there's something wrong. Maybe there's a need to take a close look at what is happening and understand if there are opportunities for reform. On the converse side, it's also the case that we want to identify the places that have far fewer of these incidences than we might expect."

In fact, as he describes the issues addressed by SPOTLITE, Althaus could be talking about the questions that drive so many projects at the Cline Center: Where are there opportunities for reform? Where are things going well? And how might the insight they gather be shared as widely as possible?

*By Bill Bell*

New York City, Victoria Woodhull and women's suffrage, 1871 (Image from Adobe Stock)



## Justine Murison explores the nuances of American literature

**Justine Murison**, professor of English, researches and teaches 19th century American literature. She's fascinated by what she calls "the meeting place of the material and the immaterial: the boundaries between, for instance, psychological emotion and physiological response, spiritual striving and bodily care, and imaginative reading and social consequences."



### What are you working on now?

I just published a new book, "Faith in Exposure: Privacy and Secularism in the Nineteenth-Century United States" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023). Recent legal history in the United States reveals a hardening tendency to treat religious freedom and sexual and reproductive freedom as competing, even opposing, claims on public life. They are united, though, by the fact that both are rooted in American culture's understanding of privacy. "Faith in Exposure" finds the roots of those contradictions in the 19th century.

The book project I am turning to now, "American Obscenity: Realism in the Age of Comstock," extends research in the final chapter of that previous book, which examined the exposure of Henry Ward Beecher's extramarital affair by Free Love and women's rights advocate Victoria Woodhull. The ensuing scandal led to the Beecher-Tilton trial for criminal conversation and to Woodhull's arrest (and subsequent release) in 1873 for the distribution of obscenity. (This) culminated in the first federal obscenity law in the United States.

What became immediately apparent to me in that research was first, there is a need to theorize, from the perspective of genre theory and literary history, the influence of these new obscenity laws on literary history, and, second, the importance of understanding reproductive information as having once been legally and culturally categorized as obscene, and the lasting impact of that for reproductive rights.

### What is your proudest achievement?

I am so proud to have been commissioned to edit the Norton Library's edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter." I generally have great success when I teach "The Scarlet Letter," and that's in part because I try to bring to life the weirdness of the novel, the fun of Hawthorne's catty narrator, and the truly revolutionary politics with which the novel engages.

*By Dave Evensen*

For more faculty profiles, visit [go.las.illinois.edu/LASexperts-F23](http://go.las.illinois.edu/LASexperts-F23)

# RESEARCH IN LAS

## Professor teaches computers the concept of love

**Rini Mehta**, professor of comparative and world literature and religion and an affiliate of the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, has been using artificial intelligence to categorize songs by renowned Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore. She's found that the computer doesn't always agree with humans about what a love song is, even when the songs are clearly labeled as such. Sometimes it sees love in songs about spring. Mehta doesn't think these are necessarily mistakes but rather a difference of interpretation. [go.las.illinois.edu/love-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/love-F23)

## Professor examines social media users' views of racial equality

In a study of social media expression and the polarization of users' views on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and All Lives Matter (ALM) movements, communication professor **Stewart Coles** found that people low in racial resentment who expressed themselves more frequently on these media were less supportive of BLM and marginally less supportive of ALM.

[go.las.illinois.edu/racial-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/racial-F23)

## Reading for pleasure can strengthen memory in older adults



A team of researchers at the Beckman Institute have uncovered yet another reason to love reading: it may help preserve memory skills as people — and their brains — grow older. Professors **Aron Barbey** (psychology), **Liz Stine-Morrow** (educational psychology), and **Daniel Llaro** (molecular and integrative physiology), with help from the Champaign Public Library, found that a group of older adults who read engaging books for eight weeks showed significant improvements to working memory and episodic memory.

[go.las.illinois.edu/read-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/read-F23)

## Institute creates the Center for Indigenous Science



The Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology has created the Center for Indigenous Science for cutting-edge research and training in Indigenous science. The center will

be headed by **Jenny L. Davis**, professor of American Indian studies, and **Ripan S. Malhi**, professor of anthropology. The new center will provide a welcoming environment where Indigenous peoples can work together with scientists at the IGB and across campus, and promote research that is ethical, sustainable, and community-focused.

[go.las.illinois.edu/indigenous-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/indigenous-F23)

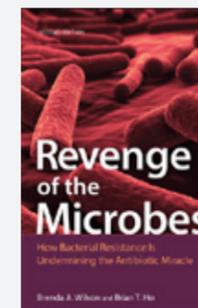


## Books in LAS



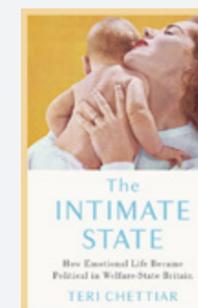
### “Hong Kong Media and Asia’s Cold War;”

by **Po-Shek Fu**, professor of history, explores the war between Communist China, Nationalist Taiwan, and the United States and its relation to Hong Kong cinema and media. It presents the first systematic study of Hong Kong's cultural cold war. (Oxford University Press)



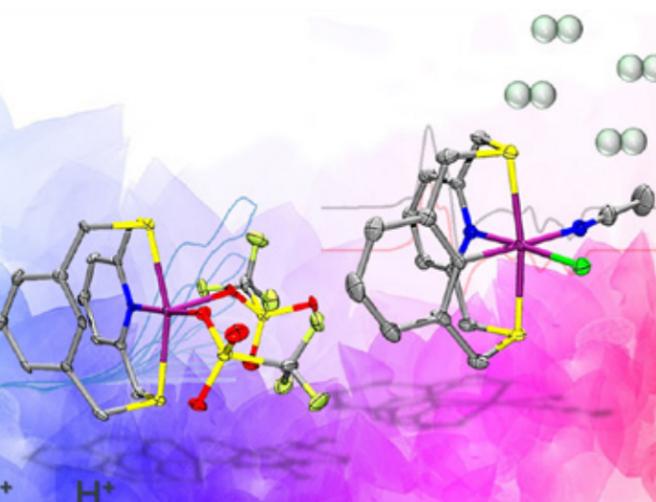
### “Revenge of the Microbes: How Bacterial Resistance is Undermining the Antibiotic Miracle (Second edition);”

by **Brenda Wilson**, professor of microbiology, and **Brian T. Ho**, follows up on the initial edition's description of the threat of antibiotic resistance. They review our current arsenal against infectious diseases and the various ways pathogens evade or overcome them. (Wiley)



### “The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain;”

by **Teri Chettiar**, professor of history, offers a history of the social science and politics surrounding sex, love, and family in post-1945 Britain. It uncovers how emotional intimacy became a central tenet of political stability for British mental health professionals and social reformers. (Oxford University Press)

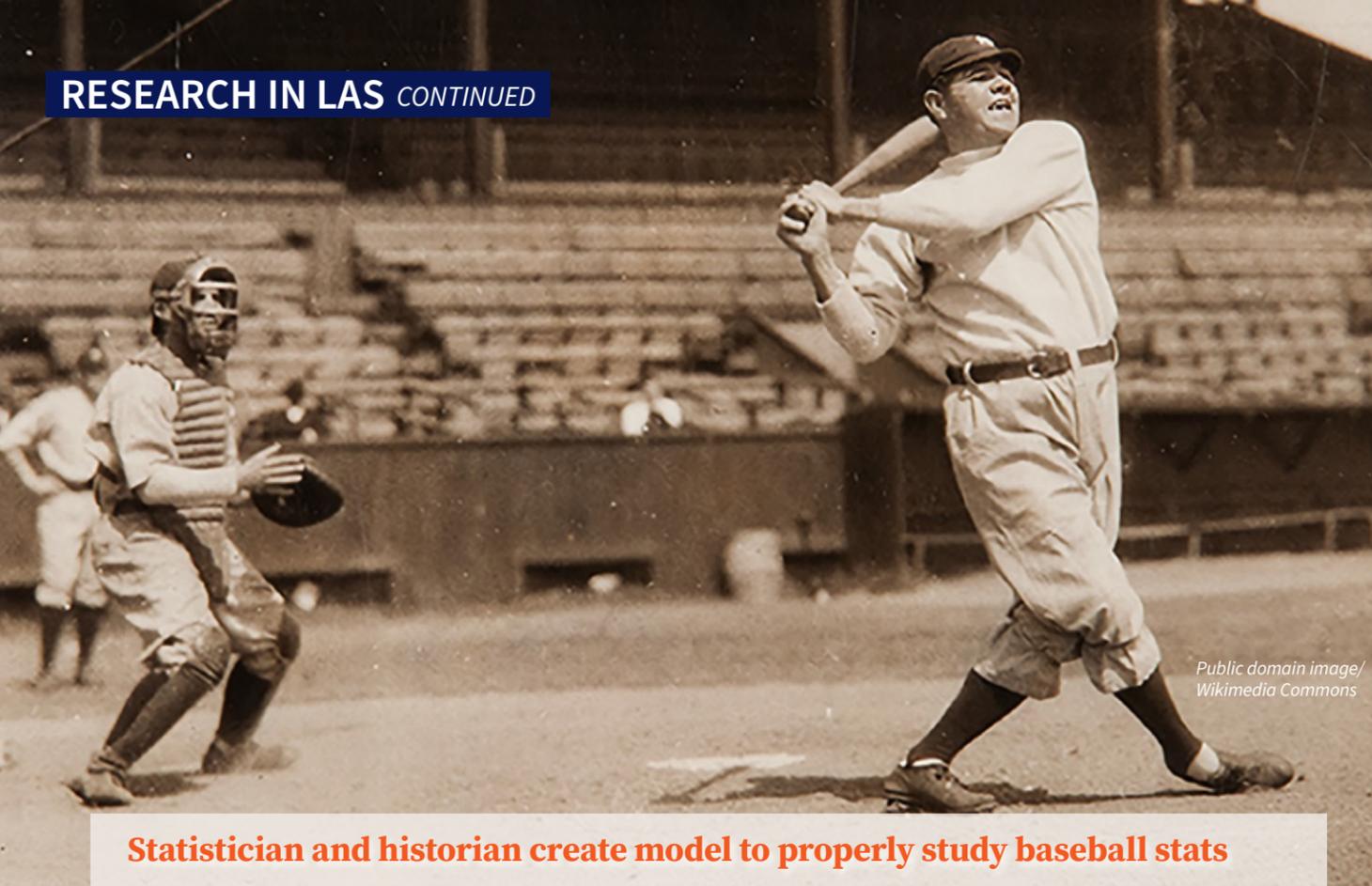


*Nickel-iron hydrogenase, described by researchers as “one of nature’s most complicated and beautiful enzymes,” may be crucial in the world’s push toward a renewable energy economy. (Graphic courtesy Mirica group.)*

## Mimicking biological enzymes may be key to hydrogen fuel production

An ancient biological enzyme known as nickel-iron hydrogenase may play a key role in producing hydrogen for a renewables-based energy economy, according to chemistry professor **Liviu Mirica**, who led the study with graduate student Sagnik Chakrabarti. Careful study of the enzyme led the researchers to design a synthetic molecule that mimics the hydrogen gas-producing chemical reaction performed by the enzyme.

[go.las.illinois.edu/enzyme-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/enzyme-F23)

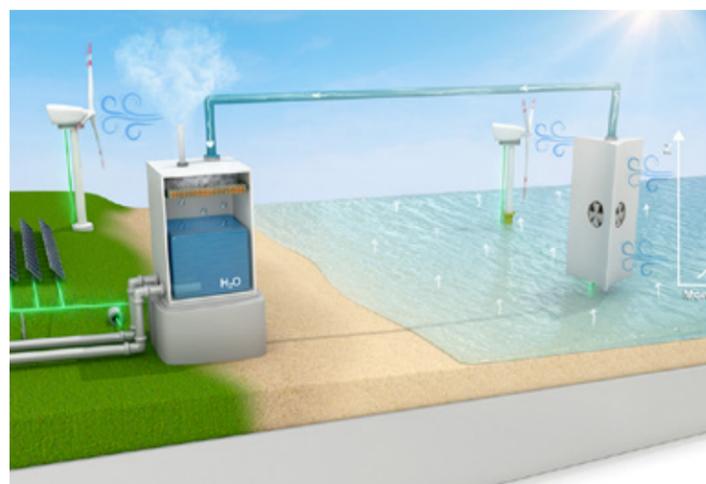


Public domain image/  
Wikimedia Commons

### Statistician and historian create model to properly study baseball stats

Lifelong baseball fan and statistics professor **Daniel Eck** noticed that baseball statistics seem to place higher values on the performances of players from past eras, specifically pre-integration. To right this, Eck and graduate student Shen Yan set to work on an era-adjusted statistical method to compare the greats. They connected with history professor **Adrian Burgos** to reexamine the baseball greats through the lens of who, when, and how they played.

[go.las.illinois.edu/baseball-F23](http://go.las.illinois.edu/baseball-F23)



The illustration shows the researchers' proposed approach for capturing moisture above ocean surfaces and transporting it to land for condensation. (Graphic courtesy Praveen Kumar and Nature Scientific Reports.)

### Researchers propose new structures to harvest untapped sources of water

A study at the University of Illinois evaluated 14 water-stressed locations across the globe for the feasibility of a hypothetical structure capable of capturing water vapor from above the ocean and condensing it into fresh water. The findings by professors **Francina Dominguez** (atmospheric sciences) and **Praveen Kumar** (civil and environmental engineering) suggest that harvesting oceanic water vapor is a feasible solution for areas facing limited supplies of fresh water. "Eventually, we will need to find a way to increase the supply of fresh water as conservation and recycled water from existing sources, albeit essential, will not be sufficient to meet human needs. We think our newly proposed method can do that at large scales," said Kumar.

[go.las.illinois.edu/water-F23](http://go.las.illinois.edu/water-F23)

### Professor works on software app to address medical misinformation



**Kevin Leicht**, a sociology professor and the science team lead at the U of I System's Discovery Partners Institute in Chicago, is co-leading the development of a software app that will alert clinicians to medical misinformation circulating on social media so they can address it with patients if they choose. The work, funded through a \$100,000 grant from the Jump Applied Research for Community Health through Engineering and Simulation initiative in the Grainger College of Engineering, addresses the rising problem of false health information.

[go.las.illinois.edu/medical-F23](http://go.las.illinois.edu/medical-F23)

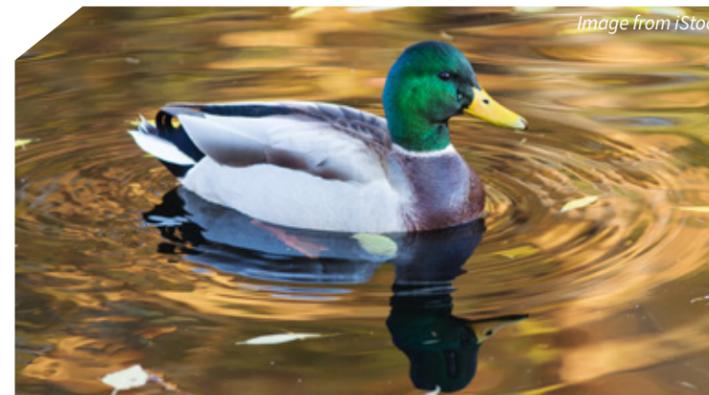


Image from iStock

### Scientists receive \$9.5 million to study emerging pathogens

Four faculty at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, plus a collaborator in Colorado, are part of an ambitious, three-year project funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to study how aquatic birds, especially ducks, carry influenza viruses. The researchers, including **Wilfred van der Donk** and **Angad Mehta** (chemistry) and **Nicholas Wu** and **Beth Stadtmueller** (biochemistry) hope to also better understand how transmission influenza from birds to other animals and humans can be thwarted, preventing future pandemics.

[go.las.illinois.edu/pathogen-F23](http://go.las.illinois.edu/pathogen-F23)

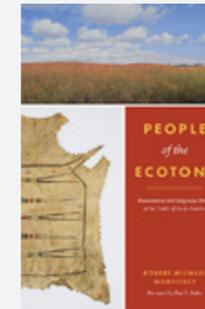


Read more about research and scholarship in the College of LAS. Visit [las.illinois.edu/news](http://las.illinois.edu/news)



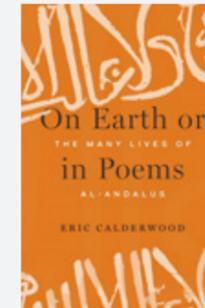
## Books in LAS

*continued*



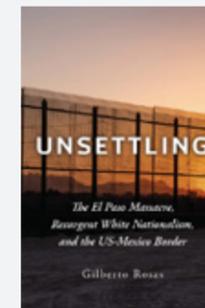
### "People of the Ecotone"

by **Robert Morrissey**, professor of history, weaves together a history of Native peoples with a history of an ecotone to tell a new story about the roots of the Fox Wars. Morrissey also offers the first comprehensive environmental history of some of North America's former tallgrass prairies. (University of Washington Press)



### "On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of al-Andalus,"

by **Eric Calderwood**, professor of Spanish and Portuguese, traces the role of al-Andalus, a legendary place pre-dating Spain and Portugal on the Iberian Peninsula, in music and in debates about Arab and Berber identities, Arab and Muslim feminisms, the politics of Palestine and Israel, and immigration and multiculturalism in Europe. (Harvard University Press)



### "Unsettling,"

by **Gilberto Rosas**, professor of Latino/Latina studies and anthropology, draws on poignant stories and compelling testimonies from workers in immigrant justice organizations, federal public defenders, immigration attorneys, and human rights activists to document the cruelties and indignities inflicted on border crossers and examine white nationalism in the United States. (Johns Hopkins University Press)

# HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A HIGHER CALLING



Mr. Rosten

## For many, an LAS degree is the first step for a career in teaching

**Brian Rosten** was supposed to be an engineer. It's what his parents wanted. And he was on board with the plan, until an internship at a plastics plant made him realize it was not the path for him. "It was soul-crushing," said Rosten (BS, '12, chemistry; MS, '21, educational policy, organization and leadership), who didn't like the idea of sitting at a desk, doing the same thing, day after day. "I was destined for cubicle work, and I was just not about that life." Fortunately, he had an experience tutoring multi-language learners in high school and discovered that was something he enjoyed. So, he made the switch to teaching during his junior year.

For **Betsy Alderman**, there was never any other plan. "I wanted to be a teacher since I was a really little kid," said the Catlin, Illinois, native, who always planned to pursue that dream at Illinois. "I bleed orange and blue," said Alderman (BS, '12, mathematics), who practically grew up in the shadow of the university and loved Illinois sports. Placement in local schools during her secondary education studies helped seal the deal and provided a seamless transition for Alderman, who currently teaches math at Centennial High School in Champaign.

While the two LAS alumni began their journey in very different places, they both got where they wanted to go — thanks to a program that allows students to pursue a degree in the field of their choice, then acquire the skills they need to share their passion with the world. Since 2000, thousands of LAS alumni have graduated with a Teacher Education Minor in Secondary School Teaching, provided through the College of Education. It's open to students pursuing degrees in a wide range of fields, including biology, chemistry, earth science, English, history, mathematics, and physics.

Those pursuing this path are admitted into either the College of LAS or the Grainger College of Engineering (for physics), then apply during their sophomore year to enter the minor.

"Students begin taking classes in their professional education sequence during the spring of their junior year," said **Barbara Hug**, who serves as the program coordinator. Classes continue in the fall of the following year, and then it's on to student teaching in the spring. "Students take education classes before they get into the professional education sequence as part of their general education requirement," explained Hug, who said it's essentially a full, four-year program.

“The secondary ed program provides options for those who may later decide to pursue a different career. And for those who do go into teaching, it’s something that opens doors.”

The program has traditionally been the path for U of I students pursuing a secondary education degree, although that path has shifted a little over the years. "The secondary program used to actually be for sixth through 12th grade," said Hug. That's changed now, with the state requiring separate credentials for high school and middle school. The Grainger pathway is also a fairly recent change for the physics students. From the beginning, however, the College of LAS has been at the heart of the program. The college has also been key to the secondary education program's goal of broadening the diversity of students entering teaching.

"The secondary ed program could not exist without LAS," said Hug. That's because high school teachers need a certain number of credits in their discipline, and those are taken outside of the College of Education. But Hug said there are also other benefits to graduating from a teaching program with an LAS degree. For one, it provides options for those who may later decide to pursue a different career. And for those who do go into teaching, it's something that opens doors. "LAS is a strong college," said Hug. "And having that degree says something."

For Rosten, who teaches sixth grade at Franklin Middle School in Champaign, it's more than a stamp on a diploma; it's an edge he sees in the classroom. "I notice a difference in responses from my students in those moments at the beginning of the school year when they realize that I have something that they don't have, which is that access to content knowledge," explained Rosten. "There's almost this awe of 'Oh! This is an actual scientist who's going to help me understand this stuff that I don't understand.'" Once they see that, said Rosten, their entire relationship changes.

Prior to Franklin, Rosten taught at nearby Centennial, where he also coached football for six years. It was the enthusiasm he saw in younger students that encouraged him to make the switch. Even in middle school, however, he said it's important to have at least one person on staff with deep science content knowledge. And he has that, thanks to his time studying chemistry at Illinois.

On average the secondary education program at Illinois has around 125 to 150 students who are grouped together by discipline as soon as they enter the program. "They travel with those same students for the next three semesters, which allows them to form really close connections," said Hug.

That's something that program alumna **Hannah Yeam** really liked about the program. "The only classes that many of us shared were the classes through the secondary ed program," said Yeam (BA, '06, English; BS, '06, communication; MS, '10,



Mrs. Alderman

educational psychology), who teaches English and multicultural lit at Rantoul Township High School. "All of us were taking different English courses at the time, but I had a really great TA who was able to create bridges between whatever it was we were studying and being able to apply it in the education program."

Essentially, said Yeam, her major gave her the "what," but her minor gave her the "how," taking everything to the next level.

For many, being in a high school class is the next level.

And the program wastes no time in providing that experience. “Starting that first spring semester, students are placed in schools in the surrounding area,” said Hug. “Right from the get-go, you’re not only in the teacher education course sequence, but you’re also out in the field doing things.”

That could easily be intimidating for some, but chemistry major **Suaad Rashid** said the program makes it easy for students to acclimate. The



*All of us were taking different English courses at the time, but I had a really great TA who was able to create bridges between whatever it was we were studying and being able to apply it in the education program.*

first semester, they may spend only a few hours in class each week, maybe leading a lesson or two. The following semester, things are a little more hands-on. And the last finds them at the front of the room, fully testing all the things they’ve learned. “It’s not like you’re going from zero to 100,” said Rashid. “They ease you into it. I like that a lot.”

For history major **Kay Tetlak**, pedagogy classes are the highlight of the program. “By far the assessments course was my favorite,” said Tetlak. “I felt like I was gaining a skill that was relevant for teaching and that I could actually apply to my future class. And on top of that, it was incredibly tactile. I was creating things which I can then save to my drive and use later on.”

Of course, there are many schools that provide secondary education training. And no two programs are the same. Over time, Rosten has had the opportunity to meet teachers from some of those programs, which has given him a chance to compare their relative strengths. “Some would say that the U of I is way more theoretical and philosophical. And, on a broad-strokes level, I definitely agree with that,” said Rosten. “But I think that’s reflective of getting education as a minor as opposed to having it be your major.”

Having that major, however, can be a real plus. “There’s definitely research that shows that the deeper content knowledge you have, the more likely you are going to stay in teaching” said Rosten. “And for me personally, I was willing to put in the work to figure out the rest.” While that meant that there were a few moments during the first couple of years where he felt like he was building a plane as he flew it, “at least I had the engine,” said Rosten.

During those years, his parents might have been happier if he were building a plane, or creating a new chemical compound, or doing just about anything else an engineering degree would have enabled him to achieve. But eventually they realized that his passion was to inspire others to dream, experience, and explore the greater world around them—which, Rosten noted, is a very liberal arts way of looking at the world.

“I think the liberal arts approach is very aligned with the values of the American school system,” said Rosten. “School is sort of predicated on this idea that you’re supposed to get experiences that your parents can’t provide you.” Put another way, it means that teachers are really just engineers of a different sort, doing their part to build a better world.

*By John Turner*

## A MINUTE WITH THE DEAN

»» **Venetria K. Patton** the Harry E. Preble Dean of the College of LAS, discusses new and upcoming developments at the start of a fresh school year.

### How are you feeling about the 2023-24 academic year?

Excited! Hopeful—and confident! So many promising indicators of success have emerged during the past few months. Our student enrollment has reached historic or nearly historic levels. The Illini Success survey indicates that 94 percent of our new graduates are finding first destinations within six months of commencement. These are signs that so many things are going well in our college, from our student support programs to teaching and research. Additionally, our infrastructure projects, which will bring new and renovated spaces to so many of our students and faculty members, are steadily moving forward.”

### The Office of the Chancellor – Public Engagement named the College of LAS to its Engaged Unit Program. What does that mean?

That was wonderful news and falls in line with one of my top priorities. The College of LAS is home to many community-based

**SUBMIT A QUESTION** for Dean Patton, and she may answer it in the next magazine. Email it to [las-news@illinois.edu](mailto:las-news@illinois.edu) and put “Ask Dean Patton” in the subject line.

*Venetria K. Patton*

projects, but unfortunately it’s not always clear to people across our college community how to start such a project or connect with a community group. With help from the new program, the College of LAS is forming infrastructure to track and catalog public engagement activities and support anyone who wants to pursue a university-community partnership. I’m sure that this will lead to greater public engagement and, most importantly, even more successful outcomes.”

### You’re entering your third year as dean. Are there any changes on the horizon?

The college is always changing, but a particularly noteworthy development is that we’re creating a new position: an associate dean for research. The amount of research and scholarship that occurs in science, social and behavioral science, and humanities in the College of LAS is astonishing; however, we can do even more with additional support for our researchers and scholars. This associate dean will establish an LAS Research Office to help faculty members and students connect with the support they need to be even more successful at delivering their findings and ideas to the world.”

*By Dave Evensen*

# WINDOWS TO THE DEEP PAST

*A gift helps U of I keep learning from its massive collection of coal balls*



*The interior of a coal ball can reveal details about vegetation that existed hundreds of millions of years ago. This is one of many stored at a warehouse at the U of I. (Photo by Carly Conway.)*

Paleobotanists at the University of Illinois understand one thing better than perhaps anyone in the world: Studying coal balls is a long-term commitment. The late plant biologist **Tom Phillips** began hauling the prehistoric objects out of the ground more than a half-century ago and filled a warehouse with tens of thousands of them. He passed away in 2018, but the coal balls have revealed only a tiny fraction of their insights into ancient Earth.

This is when most people ask, “What’s a coal ball?” To the untrained eye they would appear to be a regular old rock. If you sawed them open, however, you’d gain a perfectly preserved window into what plants used to be like 300 million years ago, from the spores and leaves down to the cell structure.

Thanks to a gift, U of I’s massive coal ball collection, the largest in the world, will continue to be researched. **Michael** (MS, ’02, Earth science and environmental change) and **Lalana**

**Fortwengler** have helped create the Tom L. Phillips Memorial Fund for Paleobotany.

According to the School of Integrative Biology, the fund has so far supported a dozen graduate and undergraduate students conducting paleobotanical research. The fund is supporting the development of an image analysis platform, so that the collection can be made digitally available to paleobotanists around the world.

**Surangi Punyasena**, a professor of plant biology, said coal balls are found primarily in coal seams in the central United States and parts of Europe and China. They were formed during the Late Carboniferous and Early Permian ages, when the chemical conditions of the environment (much of Illinois and the Midwest resembled the Florida Everglades at that time) allowed for exceptional preservation of plants.

*“Coal balls perfectly preserve a window into what plants used to be like 300 million years ago.”*

The plant life of that age would have resembled alien forests today, Punyasena said. Today’s spore-bearing plants are tiny, such as ferns, but back then they were as large as trees. The plants and surrounding environment are preserved in the coal balls.

**Scott Lakeram**, a graduate student in plant biology, said that he grew up in awe of dinosaurs and prehistoric life. “Every kid wants to be a paleontologist,” he said. He earned his undergraduate degree at Texas A&M University and came to U of I for graduate school for the enormous coal ball collection.

Lakeram studies the interactions of prehistoric bugs with plants of that period. Doing so requires obtaining high resolution images of the interior of the coal balls; this is done by sawing

open the coal balls and polishing the exposed surfaces so that a thin layer of the ancient plant cells and other material can be lifted onto cellulose acetate paper. These “peels” are studied closely by scientists.

It’s a process that Tom Phillips created and others have developed. To date, U of I researchers throughout the decades have created more than 250,000 coal ball peels. Part of Lakeram’s work is digitizing high-magnification images of them.

“The point of digitizing the peels is (to) eventually create an artificial intelligence to automate the identification of the plant contents within these balls,” he said.

There’s plenty of time for learning new methods. Punyasena said that the immense size of the collection is part of its legacy.



**Video:** [go.illinois.edu/CoalBalls](https://go.illinois.edu/CoalBalls)

Learn more about how U of I’s unique collection of coal balls helps scientists look back in time to learn about the plants and trees of the Pennsylvanian age’s coal swamps, which are depicted in this Alice Prickett painting, created at the request of Tom Phillips.

“I don’t think that we will ever be done analyzing this material,” she said. “It is not just the scale of the material that’s interesting or important, but the fact that each generation of researchers can bring new questions, new techniques to the collection. The beauty of the collection is that its utility never goes away.”

**Scott Elrick**, head of the bedrock geology section at the Illinois State Geological Survey and one of the co-curators of the collection, worked with Tom Phillips for several years prior to his death. As he stands in the coal ball warehouse, surrounded by rows of tall shelves and dusty boxes, it’s hard not to reflect on the incredible passage of time—both conceivable and not—represented within the space.

“In my conversations with Tom in his later years, he said that in some respects he was more of a curator than he was a scientist,” Elrick said. It’s a sentiment that hardly anyone agrees with, including the National Academy of Sciences, which made Phillips a member in 1999. As Elrick notes, the collection is about more than the answers it’s provided. It’s a scientific laboratory for the ages.

“There’s easily 50,000 individual coal balls here,” he said. “What are the opportunities that are sitting here? What do you know and what don’t you know? And how do you know what you don’t know?”

Elrick smiled widely at the thought.

*By Dave Evensen*



Courtesy of University of Illinois Athletics

# THE GRITTY PURSUIT OF A DREAM

## As good as she was at basketball, Ashley Berggren's next sport was a big hit

On Feb. 22, 1998, the U of I women's basketball team fell to Purdue, dropping their record to 18-8. With her fifth point that day, however, future Illinois Athletics Hall of Famer **Ashley Berggren** became the all-time women's leading scorer in school history.

Berggren (BS, '98, psychology) would finish her career with 2,089 points, a mark that would stand for more than a decade. The record cemented her as one of the greatest players in program history, but the scoring title wasn't the target of her 1995-1998 college career.

"I didn't think about trophies. I don't think I even got a trophy for (being named) All-American," Berggren recalled. "I think about all the games and the moments with my teammates that led to the awards—that's what really sticks out in my mind."

Many of those moments occurred in Huff Hall, where the team played the majority of its home games in the 1990s. When Berggren arrived on campus in 1994, the Illini had gone seven years without a winning record. Not long after her arrival, however, former athletic director Ron Guenther made a decision that fundamentally changed the program, Berggren said.

"He made a commitment to the women's game. He invested in the women's game," Berggren said, "Our budget went up, we were chartering planes, there was more food around in general."

Guenther also hired Theresa Grentz as the new head coach. These changes created the environment that allowed Berggren to become a three-time first team all-Big Ten winner, the 1997 Big 10 player of the year,



From L-R: After graduating from the U of I, Ashley Berggren played receiver (and occasionally quarterback) in the Women's Football Alliance. In 2013 she helped the Chicago Force win its first championship. Second from right: Berggren was inducted into the Illinois Athletics Hall of Fame in 2019. Far right: Berggren attended the Hall of Fame ceremony with her wife, Pria, and son, Maverick. (Photos provided.)

and the program's first Associated Press All-American.

During her sophomore year Berggren set a record that has yet to be broken, averaging 24.6 points per game. She also finished second in the Big Ten with 9.4 rebounds per game. The following year, her junior season, the team made it to the NCAA tournament for the first time in a decade, advancing to the Sweet 16. It did the same her senior year.

At 5 ft. 9, Berggren was often called too short for Division I basketball, but she possessed grit that's hard to measure.

*"I attribute a lot to my siblings, my older brother Mark and my sister Erica. I saw some of the things (Erica) was achieving and I wanted to do the same,"*

Berggren said, "And my brother instilled that tenacity in me, because when we would battle he'd say, 'Suck it up, you gotta compete if you want to play with us.' So I did."

She began getting college recruiting letters in the eighth grade and became a three-sport star in high school, playing basketball, volleyball, and softball. Berggren had many accolades in softball, but ultimately she chose basketball. Deep down, however, she harbored a different dream.

"I wanted to take over Jim McMahon's position, be the quarterback for the Chicago Bears and take them to a Super Bowl," Berggren said. "I still remember where I was when they won it. It's one of those things you remember."

As a girl, Berggren looked up to Walter Payton and Mike Singletary, two Chicago Bears who happened to live in her hometown of Barrington, Illinois. She never let go of that dream, even after college when Berggren was drafted by the Chicago Condors of the American Basketball League.

A few years later she moved to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she met her future wife, Pria. Berggren returned to the Chicagoland area for a teaching position at Schaumburg High School (during which time she also coached high school basketball), and one day she spotted a flyer advertising tryouts for the Chicago Force of the Women's Football Alliance.

"I thought, 'Oh, this is possible? I think I could try,'" Berggren recalled. "And it was a lot of fun."

Berggren joined the Chicago Force in 2011 and was named rookie of the year. She played four years and won a gold medal at the International Federation of American Football's World Women's Championships in 2013. She played mainly wide receiver, but she also played defensive end and enjoyed occasional stints at her dream position: a quarterback for a Chicago football team.

Berggren now lives with Pria in London as a stay-home mom to three sons who are more interested in soccer than basketball or American football, on account of growing up in England. She also serves as a school governor (similar to a school board position) for two schools. She is proud to have been a female sports star in a sport that now features athletes like Angel Reese, Hailey Van Lith, and Caitlyn Clark.

"To be part of that evolution is really, really special. Not too many people can experience that," Berggren said, "The way the community embraced our team and myself was really, really special."

*By Christian Jones*

# The making of the MAMMOTH

The campus community was delighted in March at the installation of a true-to-life, 12-foot statue of a mammoth near the Main Quad. Created by Rantoul, Illinois-based Taylor Studios, the mammoth is part of the campus Art-In-Architecture program stemming from the Natural History Building renovation.



**FEBRUARY 2023:** The mammoth started as white foam blocks. Artists shaped it using a chain saw and other tools before cutting it open to add a steel support structure. The tusks, created with fiberglass and supported by steel, were built using the mold of real mammoth tusks. Steve Marshak, professor emeritus of geology, and Bob Rauber, director of the School of Earth, Society & Environment, consulted with Taylor Studios on the mammoth's appearance. (Photo courtesy of Taylor Studios)



**FEBRUARY 2023:** The bottom of the mammoth is pictured after an initial coating. Once the structure was carved from foam and supported with steel, artists covered it with layers of fiberglass and epoxy resin and used primer, automotive paint, and a clear coat to create the mammoth's color. (Photo courtesy of Taylor Studios)



**MARCH 7, 2023:** In this photo, taken a couple of weeks before its introduction to campus, the mammoth stands ready before artists applied its final coatings of paint. (Photo by Erika Lee)



**MARCH 20, 2023:** After a few months of construction, the mammoth was revealed on March 20, 2023. It was transported by truck and installed by Taylor Studios at its final destination near the south entrance of the Natural History Building. (Photo by Erika Lee)

# The squirrel experiment

**In 1901, against all odds, the University of Illinois set out to bring gray squirrels to campus**

By the turn of the 20th century the residents of east-central Illinois had learned a few hard facts about the environment, and one of them was this: Once you chase away the squirrels they almost never come back. Nevertheless, in 1901, the University of Illinois launched a plan to return the long-lost tree-dwellers to campus.

To appreciate the magnitude of the plan, consider what had been lost. Forget what you think qualifies as a lot of squirrels; gray squirrel populations in the Midwest during the mid-1800s were “truly astonishing,” according to a 1978 study by the Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS), with hunters capable of claiming hundreds per day. By 1900, however, due to hunting and the clearing of virgin forests, the arboreal grays were virtually absent from Illinois.

They weren’t forgotten by geology professor **Charles Rolfe**, however, who, besides being prominent in clay and groundwater research, would also earn the nickname of squirrel master. In May 1901 he proposed a plan to President Andrew Draper to bring a few dozen squirrels to campus, put them in breeding cages, and complete an unlikely faunal comeback.

Draper “heartily approved” and successfully pitched the \$250 plan to the Board of Trustees.

**If successful, the influence upon university life, and upon the feelings of students, would be considerable, and students would carry that influence to all parts of the state,” Draper said.**

It’s hard to know when Draper and Rolfe realized that they were over their heads, but the plan was plagued with setbacks from the start. Imported squirrels died in their shipping containers before

arriving. Many that survived the trip died of disease or disappeared. Local residents started shooting them.

“(Grounds superintendent) Fred Atkinson tells me hunters are all over the premises almost every day, Sundays included,” Rolfe wrote to Draper in December 1901. “We shall certainly lose some squirrels if this is not stopped.”

Alarmed, the university and local community mobilized to action. The cities of Urbana and Champaign passed ordinances making it illegal to kill or wound a squirrel, punishable with fines of \$3-\$10.

Unfortunately, the new laws meant nothing to one of the squirrels’ most ancient enemies: dogs. Rolfe reported that dogs were raiding campus for squirrels, prompting Draper to write a stern order to groundskeepers. The Daily Illini later called it a kill order, which may or may not have been an overinterpretation of the president’s word choice.

“I notice a number of dogs about the campus,” Draper wrote. “People owning them should be notified to take care of them, or we will.”

The odds facing the squirrel experiment, however, remained steep and sometimes inexplicable. In one case the university purchased two dozen squirrels from a supplier in Washington, D.C., at a price of 50-75 cents each (about \$17-\$25 in

today’s dollars). Many of them died mysteriously after being released into a stand of evergreens.

Draper, who had met with the squirrel supplier during a trip to Washington, was exasperated, having promised the business office that it would be the last squirrel-related expense.

“We certainly can (pay) no further expense in this matter. I have gone so far already as to be embarrassed about it,” Draper wrote to Rolfe. “I am not sure (that) the pine trees are killing them.”

A few months later, in October 1903, Rolfe made a last-ditch effort to save the project, suggesting that he knew a trapper in Ohio who could supply squirrels at a reasonable price. By then, however, Draper was near the end of his term as president, and the squirrel experiment had taken its toll. No more squirrels were purchased.

“I am thoroughly discredited in the business office because of the squirrel matter already,” Draper wrote.

There’s little mention of the squirrel experiment after Draper’s successor, Edmund James, arrived in 1904. Perhaps a hands-off approach worked, however, because it soon became clear that

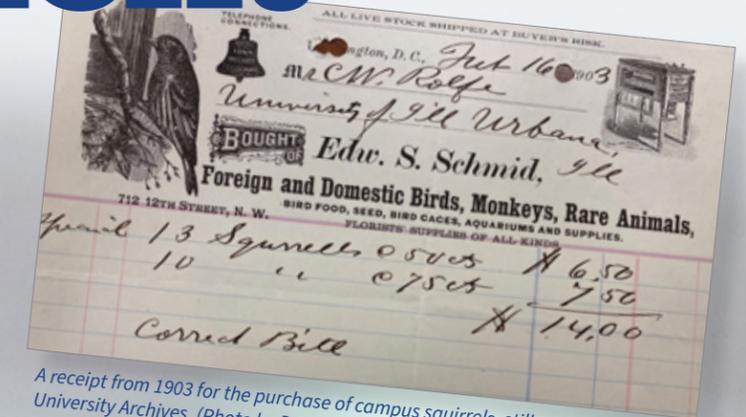
squirrels had survived and even begun to thrive. Today, INHS reports that they travel easily between campus and surrounding habitats.

“We don’t have any indicators that the population is unstable or in any peril,” said **Eric Schaubert**, principal research scientist and director of INHS. Added **Ed Heske**, a former adjunct professor of biology and mammalian ecologist at INHS, “I don’t know if there have been other introductions of grays to (Champaign-Urbana)... but that introduction on campus about 120 years ago was super successful.”

In fact, in 1919, during an historic rise in student enrollment, the Daily Illini mused that the squirrels had become tied to the fortunes of the university itself.

“We wonder if the increased registration,” the paper wrote, “has anything to do with the increase in the number of squirrels flitting about the campus.”

*By Dave Evensen*



*A receipt from 1903 for the purchase of campus squirrels, still on file at University Archives. (Photo by Dave Evensen.)*



# Peaceful places

From the Arboretum to Boneyard Creek, university leadership is working to grow and create resilient and sustainable landscapes throughout campus. Do you know the ins and outs of green spaces on campus? Here's a little tour you might not have been on before.



University of Illinois Arboretum  
Photo by Michelle Hassel

**3 QUADS**

North (or Engineering) Quad, South Quad, and Main Quad

**3.9 MILES**

Length of Boneyard Creek

**10,000 SQFT**

Size of Red Oak Rain Garden, near Allen Residence Hall

**18,000+**  
Trees on campus

**690 MILES**  
Length of sidewalks and walking paths in Champaign-Urbana

**39**  
Trees and bushes in the Lincoln Hall courtyards

**10 GARDENS**  
at University of Illinois Arboretum

**160 ACRES**  
at University of Illinois Arboretum

**350 PLANTS**  
in the Psychology Building atrium



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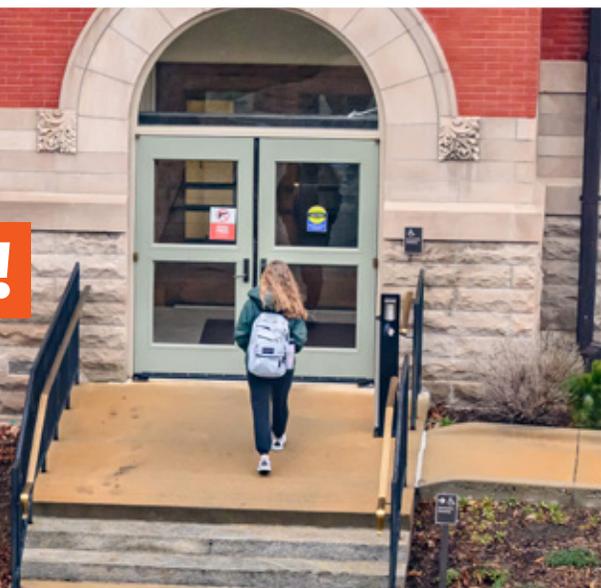


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# SHARE YOUR FAVORITE PLACES!



This issue of The Quadrangle spotlights the new mammoth statue, which has quickly become a U of I landmark. When you think of your time on campus, do you picture listening to a lecture in Lincoln Hall, reading a book in the sun on the Quad, working in a lab in Morrill Hall...or someplace else?



**Submit a photo of your favorite campus spot** and we'll share selected images in the next issue of the magazine and on social media.  
[go.las.illinois.edu/SharePix-F23](https://go.las.illinois.edu/SharePix-F23)

Mammoth statue by the Natural History Building. (Photo by Fred Zwicky.)