It's the first sentence of our cover feature story. And it's a lifeline running through UNCG research and scholarship.

Just look at the breadth, depth, and longevity of the partnerships highlighted in this one issue.

With nonprofits, businesses, and faith communities like the Beloved Community Center, Communities in Schools, Disney, EI Futuro, Greensboro History Museum, Greensboro's Magnolia House, Guilford Urban Farming Initiative, Montagnard Dega Association, Neighborhood Markets, St. Phillip AME Zion Church, and World Health Organization.

With educational institutions and public entities, like Dudley High School, Duke, Hillsborough Police Department, Greensboro Public Libraries, Guilford County Prison Farm, Johnson C. Smith University, Maria Mitchell Observatory in Massachusetts, UNC Chapel Hill, and UNC Charlotte.

With funders like the National Archives, National Communication Association, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Institutes of Health, National Institute for Standards and Technology, and the National Science Foundation.

And last but by no means least – between faculty and the undergraduate and graduate students who play critical roles in the generation of new knowledge.

Partnership and collaboration are fundamental to the teacher-scholar model that makes our university so special.

Whatever your definition of the characteristics of a good partnership – trust, transparency, mutual benefit, respect, reciprocity, common vision or goals or values – you'll find them in abundance in this issue's stories and across UNCG. Bridging communities and crossing borders and disciplinary boundaries.

Partnerships take more work, can take more time, and can be messy. They're not for the faint of heart.

But as the proverb says: "If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together."

We are going far.

TERRI L. SHELTON, PHD
Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement

UNCG Research is online. Enjoy additional photography, shareable stories, and more at researchmagazine.uncg.edu.
A rare moment of quiet falls over the dozen Dudley High School freshmen seated in a circle in Coach Mitchell’s physical education class. It’s Tuesday, so the class is being led by UNCG’s Michael Hemphill, Jeremy Rinker, and Omari Dyson. Rinker, an associate professor of peace and conflict studies, has asked the students to share an example of a hero in their lives.

“My mother,” the first student answers. “She works and then comes home and cooks us dinner.”

As they move around the circle, each student has a chance to share. The goal is to build trust, so everybody feels safe, respected, and included. “At the start of each year, most people aren’t comfortable sharing, but over time, as we build relationships, they trust us and each other enough to open up,” says Rinker. These relationships are foundational to the practices of restorative justice—a collaborative and peacemaking approach to conflict resolution.

This is the final year of a three-year curriculum designed by Dr. Hemphill, Dr. Rinker, and Dr. Dyson to introduce restorative justice to Dudley High School students.

“Communities in Schools is a dropout prevention nonprofit that is embedded in schools five days a week,” Hemphill explains. “Through our contact with them, we found that a lot of Dudley students were ending up at in-school suspension. Our partnership with Communities in Schools and Dudley High School aims to change the school climate from punitive to restorative, so kids feel safe and like they’re part of a community, even when they make mistakes.”

Ultimately, Hemphill says, this assets-based approach, which builds on the strengths and perspectives of children in the community, should reduce suspensions and dropouts and help students develop conflict resolution skills they will take through life.

A Dudley High School Senior practices taekwondo with grad student Yongsun Lee, as Coach Darlene Mitchell and Dr. Michael Hemphill look on.
Restorative justice’s values could be taught in any class, but Hemphill, an associate professor of kinesiology, realized a golden opportunity in the PE elective. “To graduate from high school in NC, you have to take health and PE, and our state’s essential curriculum standards prioritize teaching conflict-resolution skills,” he says. “Students typically take PE in the 9th grade, so over the course of a few years, you can impact an entire high school.”

The three-part class meets twice a week. After circle time, students work with Yongsun “Sun” Lee, a doctoral student and taekwondo instructor, to practice the restorative values they’ve learned while they learn taekwondo fundamentals. “I emphasize bowing to partners before and after drills as a way to show respect and trust,” Lee says. “And I ask students to share the ways they show respect in school, home, or community – and in physical education.”

Lee points out that, while many Westerners think of martial arts as the art of fighting, the Chinese character “wu,” which they’ve learned while they learn taekwondo fundamentals.

“When kids keep things bottled up, the smallest conflict causes them to explode. This program has given them a space where they feel comfortable opening up.”

The class meets in the last academic period of the day. “During fourth block, it’s hard to keep their attention,” Mitchell says. “I’ve seen a major difference in how students responded during this class. Kids have really taken to it, and they’re engaged and respectful. When I step in to observe, I notice that the students are expressing themselves. I absolutely love it.”

As their UNCG-funded project comes to a close, Rinker, Hemphill, and Dyson are pursuing opportunities to scale their curriculum to other schools. “I wish every high school kid could take this class,” says Mitchell. “When students don’t understand or know how to handle conflict, it’s difficult when they become adults. Now, when they graduate and go out into the real world, they’ll remember what they learned.”

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The class ends with a final, more informal circle where students give a shout-out to others who exhibited values they talked about. “The second circle ensures we’re hearing the perspectives of everybody – the loud kids and the shy kids,” Rinker says, and it verifies the kids’ understanding of new concepts.

In a recent article published in the Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, the researchers identified pedagogical strategies that were effective. Those included “listening, building community, and healing circles in response to interpersonal and structural conflict or harm,” Hemphill says. Success was tracked by documenting how students connected the lessons they learned to other aspects of their lives. “Transit is the important thing – when young people take these values beyond the context of PE and apply them in their school, communities, and homes.”

Darlene Mitchell, who heads up Dudley’s PE department, believes these restorative justice practices are especially important as the students return to school following the pandemic. “COVID has done a number on these kids, mentally. They hold a lot of things in, and they don’t trust just anybody,” she says. “When kids keep things bottled up, the smallest conflict causes them to explode. This program has given them a space where they feel comfortable opening up.”

“During partner drills, students can check if their partner is ready to hold a punch or kick pad before starting, and punch and kick more strongly only with their partner’s permission,” says Lee. “Knowing how to interact with others in positive ways is an essential factor for peace.” The doctoral student came to UNCG from South Korea to study kinesiology and youth sport development.

“I would find that ten percent of students every year would make wild mistakes,” Wiley explains. “So when I started looking at psychology for my higher education degrees, I was very much motivated by trying to understand how people learn languages.”

His findings were published in the flagship journal for the Association for Psychological Science last July. The study was conducted at Johns Hopkins University, where Wiley completed his doctorate and a Distinguished Science of Learning Fellowship. “A lot of my work there was part of a multisite NIH study on post-stroke aphasia and how strokes cause spelling deficits.”

Wiley next hopes to look at whether the way people write letters impacts their retention. “And how people write letters varies,” he says. “We have all this evidence that handwriting matters – maybe you write other matters.”

Wiley says these findings may indicate the way many adults learn new languages is flawed. With the proliferation of apps like Duolingo and even Rosetta Stone, handwriting is lost and that can mean taking longer to learn a new language, he says. “For adults, if you’re trying to learn a new language, you should really incorporate handwriting.”

Sayaka Matsuoka • learn more at go.uncg.edu/r-wiley
Dr. Ayalew Ligaba Osena grew up on a farm in Ethiopia, where his family raised crops including tef – a grain that’s vital to his home country.

Today, as a plant physiologist and molecular biologist at UNCG, Osena is working to unlock the secrets of this versatile and largely unknown crop.

*Eragrostis tef*, commonly known as tef or teff, is an annual grass crop that produces a tiny seed about 150th of the size of a wheat grain. The plant is native to Ethiopia, where it’s a staple food crop that’s ground into flour to make fermented, spongy flat bread known as “buddeena” in Osena’s native language Afan Oromo or “injera” in Amharic.

Tef has gained a foothold in the United States, where it is mostly grown as a forage grass to feed animals. But as an orphan crop – one that isn’t produced globally – it gets scant attention from scientists and funding agencies.

“Tef is a very interesting crop,” Osena says. “It has many essential traits, but also challenges.”

Among tef’s benefits: It’s packed with essential minerals like calcium, iron, and manganese, and vitamins and amino acids. It’s gluten-free, low in sugar, and high in fiber. It thrives in most soil types and tolerates most weather conditions.

But tef is temperamental. It’s susceptible to lodging – tef’s slender stalks can bend before the plant matures. The seeds can also shatter – dropping right off the plant before it’s threshed. Both conditions can dramatically reduce yields, which are already extremely low compared to wheat, corn, and other staple U.S. crops.

Osena intimately knows the challenges of tef. As a child, he spent untold hours with traditional hand tools tending to his family’s crop, before and after long walks to and from school.

Now, as a researcher whose studies have taken him from Ethiopia to Germany, to Japan, and to America, he hopes to develop technologies to help tef growers globally.

“Using human cell studies, in collaboration with Cornell University, we showed that iron stored in tef is more bioavailable than that of wheat and rice grains. About 3.5 ounces of tef bread should meet the NIH-recommended daily iron intake for adults aged 19-50.”

Dr. Osena’s research group brings the latest advances in molecular biotechnology to food crops. They are genetically modifying rice (center photo), tobacco plants, and tef (bottom photo), to address issues of nutrition, health, and food security. In the top inset photo, Osena (right) works with undergraduate Colt Russell on a project to create heat-tolerant crops that can survive global warming.
Numerical analysis is hitting its stride at UNCG. Two researchers dedicated to the subfield recently won two prestigious NSF grants in support of their work. The three-year grants, won by less than one-third of mathematicians applicants, are a particularly unusual accomplishment for more “pure” research in an applied field.

Dr. Tom Lewis and Dr. Yi Zhang work in computational applied math, a branch of mathematics that uses computers to attack all kinds of scientific problems, from how fast cancer cells can spread and how populations grow and decay, to how metals conduct heat and how gravitational fields affect objects in space.

Such problems can be described with partial differential equations, which show how changing variables relate to each other. Usually partial differential equations describing real phenomena do not have known solutions, so numerical analysts like Lewis and Zhang generate approximate solutions under specific sets of conditions.

Many applied mathematicians spend their careers working closely with engineers – writing code to find approximate solutions to partial differential equations for specific applications. But Lewis and Zhang go deeper: They’re hoping to change the methods applied mathematicians use.

Analyzing and engineers often use something called monotone methods to handle a particularly challenging class of partial differential equations. These methods require a lot of heavy lifting to find solutions, with complicated code required for each specific problem. Lewis is working to replace monotone methods with “narrow-stencil methods,” using an idea that began with Lewis’ PhD advisor, who was later also Zhang’s postdoctoral supervisor.

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“We basically broke analytic barriers that’ve been around since the ‘90s,” Lewis says. “There’s top research that implies what we’re doing is not feasible, and we proved that it was.” Lewis and Zhang (above) are also creating new versions of methods that analysts have used since the 1970s to address so-called optimization problems. Think: minimizing cost or energy or maximizing a certain outcome in a complex system. With their new funding, Lewis and Zhang will further develop these “penalty-free” methods and work to demonstrate their reliability and efficiency in solving industry problems. They’ll also apply both narrow-stencil and penalty-free methods to expanding classes of partial differential equations – with the potential to impact areas ranging from optics to economics.

The grants are another feather in the cap of UNCG’s unique computational math program, which now offers applied-math doctoral students rigorous training in both partial differential equations theory and numerical computing, preparing them for both academic and industrial work.

“Yi and I are basically the numerical group in our department continue to make a name for itself.” Adds Zhang, “It helps our graduates compete and we’re honored to be pioneering and growing that reputation.” Lewis says.

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PARTNERSHIPS. With the 30-year-old Beloved Community Center, in support of economic, social, gender, and racial justice.

With Neighborhood Markets and the Guilford Urban Farming Initiative, to combat food insecurity.

With the Greensboro History Museum and the Greensboro Library, to elevate civic conversations and make more learning more accessible.

That’s what lies at the heart of the National Communication Association’s Center for Communication, Community Collaboration, and Change – or NCA-CCCC, which launched at UNC Greensboro in 2019.

Why is NCA-CCCC here? That’s thanks to Greensboro’s long, proud history of community action and UNCG’s reputation for impactful collaborations.

When the NCA announced its largest grant ever – funding communication research involving partnerships between an academic institution and its local community – department head Dr. Roy Schwartzman, Dr. Spoma Jovanovic, and other faculty members in communication studies knew that UNCG was the perfect fit.

“Our university is known for its emphasis on community-engaged research, commitment to service learning, and history of partnerships with local nonprofits,” says Schwartzman. The NCA agreed.

With the grant and matching University funding, the team established the NCA-CCCC to build on existing partnerships – and create new ones. The center’s theme: to cultivate resilient communities.

They chose that focus, says Jovanovic, “because we’re seeing a lot of social crises that seemed to be chronic, that are really threatening the ability of various populations to thrive.”

Large income disparities, food hardship, aggressive voter suppression laws, racial violence, and incidents of insufficiently redressed police violence – all erode confidence in social institutions and threaten the resilience of communities.

These problems cannot be solved from the outside in or the top down.

“We have to build upon the strengths of our community—through people and grassroots organizers,” says Jovanovic.

“The people are the spark, the ones who have the direct experience, who can say that things need to be different. Tapping into that is how we find the greatest opportunity for progress.”

As the NCA-CCCC scholars and their partners began work, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, adding to and amplifying the inequities they hoped to dismantle.

The center theme of resilience seemed almost prescient.

“We all had to expand our capacity to address adversity,” says Jovanovic.

Fortunately, these are not people who back down from a challenge.
EVERYBODY EATS

Every Saturday at 7:30 a.m. in a church parking lot in Sunset Hills, next to UNCG’s campus, farmers unpack their produce, alongside bakers, relish makers, and meat vendors. A similar group sets up on the other side of campus, in the Glenwood neighborhood, on Thursday evenings.

The two locations joined efforts four years ago to form the nonprofit Neighborhood Markets and launch the Greens for Greens program, which allows Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – or SNAP – beneficiaries to shop at farmers markets by doubling their funds for fresh food. The program not only expands who can shop at farmers markets and have access to fresh food, but also boosts the local economy by putting money into the hands of small farmers and entrepreneurs.

In Glenwood, market manager Liz Seymour (photo right) runs the cards and hands out the wooden tokens as co-manager Shante Woody stocks the set-up. In Sunset Hills, the work falls to co-managers Kathy Newsom and Stephen Johnson, with assistance from UNCG’s Dr. Marianne LeGreco.

For more than a decade, LeGreco has been one of the driving forces behind local food security initiatives, including urban garden projects, fresh food mobile markets, entrepreneurship programs, and culinary workshops. In 2015, the Greensboro and High Point area was identified as the most food insecure area in the nation. As Greens for Greens and similar initiatives were put into place, the area’s food insecurity ranking fell by eight percent.

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“Beloved has a real open-door policy, which means we have to take on really challenging questions and things that divide us,” says Joyce Johnson, who is one of the leaders of the Beloved Community Center, or BCC.

Despite divisions, we learn how to talk with each other, work with one another, hear each other, to figure out how we share this space on Mother Earth, so that I’m not diminished, and you’re not diminished. So that together we have something that we call the love of community,” Jovanovic (photo, right), along with her colleagues and students, has worked with the center and conducted research on its actions for over 15 years.

The scholars also gathered data, finding that the markets boosted financial security and provided community connections – during the pandemic and also during racial and political tensions brought up by instances of police brutality.

“They weren’t your typical conversations. “The project aims to engage community members, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, and to strengthen community leadership – giving citizens tools to influence city policies and governing processes. Responses from the Democracy Tables and surveys fed into infographics to be shared with decision-makers in Greensboro – and a museum display is under development by a UNCG museum studies graduate student. The researchers also presented their work at a 2021 Smithsonian conference and are preparing a manual for other museums interested in pursuing similar experience-based dialogues.

BELOVED COMMUNITY

The Beloved Community Center, which has served the region for over three decades, takes its name from the “Beloved Community” Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of on the other side of campus, in the Glenwood neighborhood, on Thursday evenings.

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“It’s hard to look at some of these things in isolation,” LeGreco says. Her 2021 book “Everybody Eats,” co-authored with Dr. Nishaa Douglas, uses case studies in Greensboro to analyze the infrastructure of food justice. “When we’re thinking about food insecurity, it’s about building a stronger system. All of the pieces work together.”

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“We’re doing research on how to help communities in Greensboro – and a museum display is under development by a UNCG museum studies graduate student. The researchers also presented their work at a 2021 Smithsonian conference and are preparing a manual for other museums interested in pursuing similar experience-based dialogues.

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UNCG faculty and students have helped develop and refine communication strategies and storytelling techniques for RCC. "Part of the gift of this relationship with UNCC’s communication studies department," says Johnson, "is that so much of what we do requires communication, storytelling, really listening, hearing, understanding, and then being able to translate that into action." Johnson and Jovanovic say that what sets RCC apart is its ability to keep connecting people and to keep moving society in a more equitable direction, during times of widespread social unrest, through calm periods, and over decades.

"People don’t always intend to be organizers," says Johnson. "You see something, it hurts you, it touches your heart, and you move. But then you might move on. What Beloved does is provide continuity."

**DEMOCRATIZATION OF LEARNING**

Dr. Cristiane S. Damasceno first participated in the international Learning Circles project when it was piloted at the Chicago Public Library in 2015. "They’re different from college classrooms, where experts are in charge of things," she says. Instead, students direct their own learning and "group discussions prompt them to cultivate the skills to learn independently."

Now, Damasceno and her colleagues are working with Greensboro Public Library to host Learning Circles locally. The project relies on materials and logistical support from Peer University, a global network that developed early Massive Open Online Courses and works with organizations worldwide to promote free access to information and self-guided learning. In the free study groups, a facilitator, who does not need to be a content expert, keeps conversations flowing.

"It’s that open-source model," says the library’s specialist Beth Sheffield, who manages the program. "You take any kind of class and come together, access the material, and learn together. The library provides the framework. For us, it’s about how can we make material accessible to people and meet them where they are." In the last two years, learning circle topics — chosen through community member surveys — included healthy cooking, American Sign Language, jobs skills, technical support, coding for kids, poetry, and "21 Days of Racial Equity and Social Justice," which was offered three times because of its popularity.

Circles have been mostly online during the pandemic, but some were offered in person (photo above) at a Greensboro Urban Ministry-managed apartment building for those who have recently experienced homelessness. "We wanted it to be not only a garden of sustenance, but a place of peace," explains Pastor Lisa Caldwell, who facilitated the use of the land and involvement of congregant volunteers, many of whom grew up in the neighborhood.

Dr. Etsuko Kinefuchi (photo above) and her UNCG students are volunteering in the garden and conducting surveys with St. Phillip neighbors, to gauge their level of interest in the garden and in farming, and their attitudes about protecting the Earth. Kinefuchi studies ecological approaches to culture, identity, and communication. "An eco-justice lens is tied to social justice," she says. "So, the garden is a good way to look at that — food access as a social justice matter, but also ecojustice, cultivating the land sustainably."

ADA-accessible raised beds stand alongside open-in-ground vegetable plots. There’s a greenhouse, and garden designer Brandon King has included areas for a children’s garden, flowers, pollinators, and fruit. Seeds, plants, and supplies come from the agricultural extension office, the Guilford County Prison Farm, and Truist Bank, with the NCA-CCCC filling in some funding gaps.

**SHAREd GROUND**

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2021, volunteers broke ground for a neighborhood agriculture project in Southeast Greensboro, with the Guilford Urban Farming Initiative. The land is part of St. Phillip AME Zion Church, a main partner on the project to establish "St. Phillip Garden of Peace."

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“We wanted it to be not only a garden of sustenance, but a place of peace,” explains Pastor Lisa Caldwell, who facilitated the use of the land and involvement of congregant volunteers, many of whom grew up in the neighborhood.

Dr. Etsuko Kinefuchi (photo above) and her UNCG students are volunteering in the garden and conducting surveys with St. Phillip neighbors, to gauge their level of interest in the garden and in farming, and their attitudes about protecting the Earth. Kinefuchi studies ecological approaches to culture, identity, and communication. “An eco-justice lens is tied to social justice,” she says. “So, the garden is a good way to look at that — food access as a social justice matter, but also ecojustice, cultivating the land sustainably.”

ADA-accessible raised beds stand alongside open-in-ground vegetable plots. There’s a greenhouse, and garden designer Brandon King has included areas for a children’s garden, flowers, pollinators, and fruit. Seeds, plants, and supplies come from the agricultural extension office, the Guilford County Prison Farm, and Truist Bank, with the NCA-CCCC filling in some funding gaps.

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**Illuminating Strengths**

Dr. Gabriela Lisa Stein received 2021’s Junior Research Excellence Award for scholarship on impacts of Latinx cultural values, cultural stressors, and mental health access. A leader in the Latinx child development field, the psychology professor has over 70 peer-reviewed articles and $5.5 million in funding.

**COMMUNITY RESILIENCE**

“I began identifying resilience factors in minoritized communities because much of the existing research focused on deficits. There wasn’t much on what I experienced in my life—community processes that promote positive outcomes for kids and families.”

“My work has highlighted the protective role of Latinx familism values—loyalty, obligation, respect, support, and identification through one’s family network. Familism values support family-based coping and a sense of meaning and predict greater self-esteem and academic achievement and motivation, and fewer depressive symptoms.”

**CULTURAL STRESSORS**

“Discrimination impacts depressive symptomology, self-efficacy, self-esteem, academic motivation, and college-going. It has a long shadow. Discrimination kids experience in fifth grade predicts symptoms to the end of 12th grade.”

“I’ve also studied acculturation gap conflict, where kids and parents acculturate to American values at different speeds. That can lead to family conflict, but it’s a unique stressor when we also see differences in attributions. If a parent tells their child, ‘Hey, clean your room,’ and the child doesn’t, in this scenario, they might say, ‘My kid is becoming disrespectful,’ or the kid might think, ‘They’re too Latinx—I wish they were like other parents.’”

“The gap exacerbates effects of family conflict and predicts depressive symptoms among kids and moms. For kids, it also impacts self-esteem and racial ethnic group pride, reducing protective effects familism might otherwise provide.”

**THE COSTS OF ACHIEVEMENT**

“In Latinx communities, greater risk for depressive symptoms starts in adolescence—they have the highest levels among racial ethnic groups. But we were surprised to find depressive symptoms weren’t associated with decreased academic motivation or grades, differing from what’s seen in White, non-Latinx groups.”

“The double-edged sword of health may mean youth struggling with depression, discrimination, and more prioritize family goals over mental health. There’s a cost to achievement.”

**NO MAGIC BULLET**

“I’m interested in what can buffer against discrimination, though of course nothing completely erases its effects.”

“For example, I’ve explored shift and persist coping, which is protective for Latinx youth experiencing economic stress. You move away from the stressor cognitively and persist with what provides meaning and optimism. But we found these methods insufficient to protect youth from discrimination’s impacts.”

“We’re testing different factors and putting together pieces that might be useful. Kids need a menu of resilience strategies—shift and persist, familial, strong ethnic racial identity, and so on.”

**FINDINGS TO IMPACT**

“Less than 10% of people with mental health distress in communities of color access support. Our NIH Strong Minds, Strong Communities project tackles that issue by providing culturally responsive care through community health workers—to address not just language barriers, but also those related to trust and stigma.”

“Community work is where I draw inspiration. For example, we collaborated with Latinx mental health clinic El Futuro on Partners Electrostimulation in response to their long waitlist. The program helps families support kids’ mental health while waiting for individualized care, and it’s been disseminated across the state now.”

“More recently, community partners were asking us to talk to families about coping with discrimination, and I was lucky enough to partner with great researchers to develop ‘One Talk at a Time’ online, to help parents with these conversations.”

“I’m proud of my research team and the collaborative environment we’ve built, where we work with community partners to answer questions that push the field forward.”

**mental ACTIVITY**

Dr. Jennifer Etnier received the Senior Research Excellence Award for her scholarship on physical activity and cognition. A fellow of the National Academy of Kinesiology and the American College of Sports Medicine, Etnier is known internationally as an expert on exercise’s impact on aging brains, with more than 90 peer-reviewed articles and over $6 million in funding. The Julia Taylor Morton Distinguished Professor also holds five teaching awards and is a youth sports advocate who won 2017’s Greensboro United Soccer Association’s Coach of the Year.

**MOVING INTO KINESIOLOGY**

“I started out as a college athlete pursuing computer science and math. But I realized I didn’t want to spend all day on a computer, so I led a sports psychology master’s, planning to work with athletes. As I led my PhD work, I became interested in the broader benefits of physical activity for health.”

“The irony is, as a researcher, I spend all day on a computer. But there’s nothing more fun than finding and figuring out how to answer an interesting question.”

**EXERCISE AND COGNITION**

“Older adults in my family had differences in quality of life relative to cognitive capacity, which triggered my interest in exercise to protect cognitive performance.”

“My lab found a single session of moderate intensity aerobic exercise improves memory—in the short term and after 24 hours. Even better, if you participate in physical activity on a regular basis, cognitive benefits accumulate. Formerly sedentary people saw benefits in our studies at the four-month mark and more at the eight-month mark.”

**COMMUNITY TO A CAUSE**

“Our NIH clinical trial explores whether physical activity can delay or prevent Alzheimer’s. Participants, all with family histories of Alzheimer’s, spend a year in our study. I’ve learned how committed research volunteers can be. We have someone in Florida driving to Greensboro three times a year to participate. It’s really special and makes research particularly rewarding.”

**APOE GENOTYPE**

“APOE genotype is the strongest susceptibility gene for Alzheimer’s. You could have 0, 1, or 2 copies of APOE, giving you lowest, heightened, or dramatically increased risk.”

“Our PAAZD study will verify our findings that physical activity improves memory for aging adults with a stronger research design. But our major question is whether exercise will cognitively protect people with genetic risk for Alzheimer’s, and whether genetic risk changes that effect.”

“We’re also doing MRIs. Individuals with highest genetic risk have structural brain changes as early as their 30s. If we can capture brain changes mitigated by exercise, that would be really powerful.”

“Any findings that exercise can protect people at risk would be great. Alzheimer’s is a leading cause of American deaths. If we can delay onset, that’s more years with better quality of life—more years with your children and grandchildren.”

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS**

“We’ve found impacts across the lifespan. For example, exercise during the school day produces improvements in memory, which persist 24 hours later. This suggests physical activity may maximize the learning experience.”

“Students Exercise before you study, and you may improve your test performance the next day.”

**COACH AT HEART**

“Mentoring is one of my biggest joys. Seeing students develop into independent scholars is a remarkable transition.”

“I love to help people move towards their potential. I also get that coaching soccer.”

**“We know physical activity is so important to physical and mental health. The two books I wrote on youth sports psychology focus on helping young athletes achieve their potential and helping coaches ensure kids have a great experiences and find a sport they fall in love with. And then they hopefully become lifelong physically active individuals.”**

interviews by Sangeetha Shivaji

Learn more at go.uncg.edu/etnier
goa.uncg.edu/paad2
As flames rapidly engulf a burning building, the heat becomes overpowering. Thick, choking smoke rises quickly. Firefighters drop to the ground and crawl beneath the haze. They are looking for victims but can barely see the hands in front of their faces. Now imagine if they could wear specialized glasses that could “see through” the smoke – illuminating each room’s floor plan, identifying victims’ locations, and pointing out where fellow first responders are in the building. “When it comes to law enforcement, VR will be used both to simulate upcoming technologies and to improve current training protocols. Kopper and his team are currently launching a project with the Hillsborough Police Department to test their tech – while also helping officers learn to handle or avoid potential escalations in routine traffic stops. Instructors will be able to tweak each scenario to include different types of cars, circumstances, and driver demographics such as race and gender.”

“VR is a tool that can expose officers to situations that might be too dangerous to simulate in real life, in a safe and controlled environment,” Kopper notes. And, by not having to turn their backs on relevant information such as the car’s ownership, a driver’s driver demographics such as race and gender.

“VR lab advances next-gen tech

This year UNCG launches a PhD in computer science. Dr. Kopper’s interdisciplinary research projects offer incoming students an unusual experience: “A lot of times in our field, we are focused to our labs and implications of the work we do are not immediately visible. It’s nice to be able to see the effect and the potential.”
**USER EXPERIENCE**

As the saying goes: You only have one chance to make a first impression.

Kopper’s lab members keep that in mind as they work toward streamlining users’ experience with virtual reality.

“VR technology has the potential for so many important and useful applications, but if you have a bad experience with it the first time, you will become a skeptic,” says Kopper. “It’s difficult to go back and want to give it another try.”

Feelings of nausea or motion sickness can arise when a user’s eyes tell the brain they are in motion, but signals from the rest of the body disagree.

To combat this, Kopper and his Duke University PhD student Zekun Cao theorize that adding small static elements will lessen viewer disconcert. For instance, if viewers sense they are inside a stationary cockpit while “flying” in VR, that might help with feelings of stability. Or perhaps even less obtrusive elements could help, such as tiny dots that don’t move in the user’s peripheral vision.

“We are running studies on this right now,” Kopper says, “and we are getting some promising results.”

The lab is also interested in how well virtual reality training translates to real-life learning. Think of it this way: When you bowl in a Wii video game, you are holding a controller, but not an actual bowling ball. It makes for a fun and entertaining game, but without the weight of the ball, you won’t learn accurate techniques for how to bowl in real life.

**REBUILDING HISTORY**

Books, documentaries, and museum exhibits offer us peeks into history, but what if you could actually walk back in time?

While most of the Interactive Realities Lab’s projects look to the future, a few look back, shining a light on lost history.

“The work was conducted in partnership with Dr. Asha Kutty and UNCG’s Interior Architecture Department, and the immersive experience is based on the designs of undergraduate Hannah Tripp,” Kopper says.

That is also one of the goals of a two-year project funded through the National Archives to virtually reconstruct two African American neighborhoods destroyed decades ago in Charlotte’s urban renewal.

“School children who participated in the experience said they felt as if they had been transported to a different place and time,” Kopper says.

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When Xuem Siu first arrived in the U.S. as a 24-year-old in 2008, he barely spoke any English. He could count to ten and exchange basic greetings, but that was about it. Now the master's student in public health considers English his fourth language, behind Jarai, Bahnar, and Vietnamese.

Siu is part of Greensboro’s Montagnard community, which at about 7,000 members is the largest gathering of the people outside of Vietnam. Many Montagnards, who come from several ethnic groups in the Vietnamese highlands, were resettled here after supporting U.S. troops during the Vietnam War.

Siu is working to address the challenges faced by his and other local refugee communities, particularly when it comes to the pandemic. Morrison’s team attends community meetings, talks to local leaders, develops and offers suggestions, and actively takes part in community efforts. At the beginning of the pandemic, Morrison’s then-graduate students – Saif Al Amin and Fatima-Ezzahra Salmi – worked with the Montagnard, Bhutanese, and Congolese communities to build systems that would help them weather the storm.

Her team observed how younger Montagnards were using social media to increase COVID-19 awareness and building on their efforts, creating translated infographics and videos, and helping distribute materials to families in need.

Now, Siu and Morrison are helping locals adapt to new challenges like getting vaccines and boosters and avoiding variants. Morrison’s team and the Montagnard Dega Association have been able to assist close to 200 families and have helped vaccinate more than 500 individuals. Since the fall of 2020, 40 adults have received food on a monthly basis.

Already a UNCG graduate with a master’s in peace and conflict studies, Siu returned to the University last year to become the first community health scholar directly supported by the Montagnard Dega Association, a local nonprofit. “This job is so important, that’s why I took this role,” he says. “I wanted to contribute to the community.”

Siu’s work is part of research his mentor Dr. Sharon Morrison has conducted with refugee communities in Greensboro for more than 15 years. This community-based participatory research, she says, involves working alongside communities to identify problems and implement solutions together. “The community identifies the issue and we get the data to inform strategies.”

The team has also documented the Montagnard nonprofit’s response to the pandemic, with a resulting publication in the North Carolina Medical Journal. Publications, they say, will help others see how community-based participatory research can work to directly help underserved communities.

“When we talk about community engagement, we take our lead from the community and that’s how work gets done,” says Morrison. “Whatever we find, we then give back to the community.”

And their efforts are working. Community members are accessing the information they need more readily now, Siu says, because of social media efforts, and community leaders are more aware of how to engage. The Montagnard nonprofit is growing, and new generations of community leaders are feeling empowered to create positive change, tapping into resources like the Kate B. Reynolds grant that’s supporting Siu’s work.

Now, Morrison’s research group is assisting as the Montagnard Dega Association trains Cambodian and Bhutanese community leaders in emergency preparedness and responses. And while Siu may not admit it himself, he too, has emerged as a leader within his community.

“I see a lot of smiles,” he says. “They’re working together. We have more resources, more networks. What I see is really successful.”

by Sayaka Matsuoka • learn more at hhs.uncg.edu/phe

When Al Amin (photo below) came to the U.S. from Bangladesh in 2018, he was drawn to UNCG’s reputation for community-engaged research: “Working for the community has always been the preference for me.”

Al Amin’s focus was social media and digital assets to increase awareness of COVID-19. Salmi (lower left photo), who also has a bachelor’s from UNCG, focused on infographics and distributing food and PPE to families in need. Al Amin and Salmi both graduated with MPH degrees in 2021. Salmi now works for UNICEF, while Al Amin is entering the epidemiology PhD program at UNC Chapel Hill.

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A HISTORY WITH HERBERT

Over the course of three decades at UNCG Greensboro, Dr. Christopher Hodgkins has served as author or editor of eight books on Renaissance literature, the Bible, and the British imperial imagination. Along the way, he’s been at the forefront of efforts to re-shape the way we read and interpret the works of seventeenth-century English poet and clergyman George Herbert.

“Nearly all of Herbert’s poems are quite brief,” says Hodgkins, “but they’re all different. He’s a profound artist, a craftsman of tremendous precision.”

Herbert gives us, he says, “a tremendous precision.”

“The night before King Charles I was beheaded by the Puritans in January of 1649, he is said to have read ‘The Temple.’ But many of the Puritans – including some who beheaded the king – were reading ‘The Temple’ too.”

Hodgkins’ own research has expanded modern understandings of the Cambridge-educated poet-priest. “He’s mainly a figure who’s interested in the inner spiritual life, but for a long time, people assumed that’s all that interested Herbert. He was seen as like a medieval monk who retired from the world.”

Yet, in comparing Herbert’s poetry with other texts, Hodgkins found that Herbert continued to be far more engaged with current events and politics than many nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics recognized. “We discovered in his writings that even while he was out in this little village parish church in Wilton, he was still thinking very pointedly about national and international politics of his time. We now see him as much more topically engaged. He was a member of Parliament and wrote about how to deal with contemporary social problems and political issues – including a poetic critique of rising imperialism.”

Hodgkins’ initial interest in religious poetry and the political and religious contexts for literature brought him to what he calls the question of the imperial imagination, a subject of his second book. “How do people imagine their right to go and either take or conquer – or colonize – other lands and people? Do they just say ‘I’m doing it because I can?’ Usually not. Various European explorers sailed across the ocean and found lands inhabited by other peoples – and they built a system whereby they could exploit those resources while telling themselves they were bringing blessings to those people.”

Today, Hodgkins continues his exploration of how cultures collide, collaborate, or combine – specifically in the context of transatlantic exchange through his work with the Atlantic World Research Network. Connecting scholars across six continents, the UNCG-based network, which was founded and is directed by Hodgkins, is approaching its 20th anniversary.
Hodgkins holds a first edition of "The Temple" from UNCG's collection. It was travel-sized, he says, by design.

"One of the secrets of Herbert's success was the design of "The Temple" early editions. It came in a small desktop-size book — about the size and shape of a modern smartphone — so that the book fit in your pocket and could be carried everywhere. It even had an index for locating poems on different topics to interest varied readers: "Grief" for some, "Greatness" for others, and everything from "The Sinner" to "The Star," from "Thornlees" to three poems simply called "Love.""\n
The Herbert Collection at UNC Greensboro

A little-known fact is the first modern biography of George Herbert came out of UNCG in 1971. The author was Dr. Amy Charles, who began working at the University when it was still Woman's College. She also purchased with her own money almost every one of the earliest editions of "The Temple.

"By the time of her death in 1980," says Hodgkins, "she had donated all of these to UNCG Special Collections." The collection was completed at the University through the work of Chancellor William Marquart and Special Collections librarian Kenny Mills and William Finley.

"Thus our Herbert collection is one of the world's best, ranking with those at Harvard, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the Bodleian at Oxford," he says. UNCG Libraries is a point of pride for Hodgkins. "It was there when Jackson Library acquired its millionth volume. I can only praise our librarians' commitment to building and preserving our book collection — not just rare books but all books."

Hodgkins has served as author or editor of four books that deal directly with Herbert, and co-edited "The Digital Temple," which was selected by the American Library Association's Choice magazine as an Outstanding Academic Title of 2013. "The Digital Temple" allows online users the opportunity to explore manuscript versions and the first print edition of Herbert's most celebrated work.

Hodgkins, who has twice held UNCG's Class of 1952 Distinguished Professorship in English, has also organized a series of conferences focused exclusively on Herbert: the first in Salisbury, England, in 2007. The collective success of these events — taking place from Paris to North Carolina to Wales to Arizona — paved the way for him to found the George Herbert Society, with UNCG as its home base. Their next conference is planned for June of this year at Cambridge University.

Hodgkins' research and work to convene other scholars with similar interests has earned him a reputation as one of the leading Herbert experts in the world. Now, with a $100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, he and co-editor Dr. Robert Whalen of Northern Michigan University are editing "George Herbert's Complete Works" for Oxford University Press.

"The Oxford Texts," notes Hodgkins, "bring major and now rediscovered writers into prominence and put them in a long-lasting physical form. The idea behind these is to have intelligent and durable introductions, brief biographies of the figures involved, running annotations that explain archaic terminology, and some commentary on the critical and reception histories of the works."

The forthcoming series will appear in three volumes instead of one, mainly because it will include a thorough exploration of the history of the texts, as well as the history of criticism on those texts. It will feature newly discovered manuscripts and also commentary interspersed throughout the individual works.

The series will have a digital manifestation based at UNCG. University Libraries will work with Hodgkins and Oxford to mount a free-access resource that will allow online users to view all the multiple early "witnesses" or versions of Herbert's work, both manuscript and print.

"That will be a lasting anchor for Herbert studies, to complement our world-class print collection," says Hodgkins, "right here at UNCG."

Hodgkins says that when, in 1980s, he first discovered "The Temple," he couldn't possibly have anticipated the ways Herbert's poetry would shape his own life and career. "I didn't imagine I'd eventually become a Herbert scholar and eventually publish a three-volume complete works — with the same publisher of this little Oxford Classics book that a high school friend had just tossed into my hand. That is beyond my ability to plan. It began simply with a great admiration and enjoyment and love."
When astrophysicist Aliisa Aarnio had leftover time on a session at the Apache Point Observatory, she called undergraduate Kamara Culbreath. “Hey, I have some telescope time with a three-and-a-half meter,” she said. “Are there any galaxies you want to look at?”

From Dr. Aarnio’s office at UNCG, they examined remote galaxies through the telescope in New Mexico. It was 4 a.m., but such is the life of astronomers.

Aarnio and her student researchers study young star systems—that’s a mere 1 million to 40 million years old. When a star is born, Aarnio says, material from the surrounding molecular cloud is gravitationally attracted to it and, under rotation, “spins out like pizza dough spinning on a skilled chef’s finger.” This flattened disc of all the leftover dust and gas material from the formation of the star, explains undergrad Mariam Juarez, “is where planets are born.”

The team’s goal is to better understand what these young stars look like before they hit the main sequence—a middle age, when planets are no longer forming. To gather data on young stars, Culbreath combs existing surveys of the night sky in visible light, infrared, the far infrared, radio, and other wavelengths. “Gathering the data is a long process that requires complex coding,” Culbreath says, “but I’m interested in the computational side.” The results give him a full picture of a star’s spectral energy distribution.

If the data Culbreath gathers does not match an existing database of 200,000 star and disk models, the team must develop new models. That’s where Juarez comes in, with information from the star’s spectra, which provides hints about a star’s rotation, “flattens out like pizza dough spinning on a skilled chef’s finger.” This flattened disc of all the leftover dust and gas material from the formation of the star, explains undergrad Mariam Juarez, “is where planets are born.”

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Thai country music of the northeast country sound, and today the phin is used in rural workers revolution in Thailand became associated with this. While the phin is more a Laotian instrument, a 1970s project was full of difficult issues concerning cultural representation, but it’s one of the best films Disney has done along those lines. We can rightly critique corporate entertainment, but when you have a chance to participate, then that should be an opportunity to facilitate change.

Douglas first visited Myanmar as an ethnomusicology doctoral student. “Ethnomusicology is anthropology and music combined – trying to understand music within a cultural context. As a guitarist I both taught lessons there and took them with senior masters. Those lessons helped me develop relationships. I was invited into homes, had meals, met families, and listened to stories.”

He returns every few years for more field work. “I’m interested in how sound and music are tools that people use to navigate their identities,” he says. “For example, chants and bells can cultivate certain mental practices in Buddhism, but those sounds also articulate different ways of belonging to a Buddhist community. My work explores power relations between different ethnic and religious groups and how sound is used to establish or push against different identities.”

When movie production was beginning, Disney put together what they called the “Southeast Asian Story Trust,” a group of consultants on everything: food, textiles, architecture, language, martial arts, dance, and other cultural representations.

Douglas helped composers bring regional sounds to what was largely a big orchestral, Western-style score. He started out by submitting lists of instruments and audio files. Because the story takes place in a mythical place, it was important the sound be broadly representative: “I told them about things that might be hot buttons and helped make sure the sound wasn’t too localized or connected to a specific religious tradition. Disney sent me early drafts of the film, and I went through them second by second, listening to what might sound too outside of the region, like too Chinese or too Japanese. I listened to make sure the sounds matched up with the locations like a city, a tea shop, the palace, an open market. It was a study of sounds in the environment, matched up with the locations like a city, a tea shop, the palace, an open market. It was a study of sounds in the environment, of sounds that cue a certain place. That was fun to do.”

Douglas finally got to meet the other consultants, most from Southeast Asia, in a virtual gathering after a screening of the final product. “Consultants were dialing in from places like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It was so great to be together and hear them sharing their reactions to the film, saying things like ‘I recognize that soup in the café scene,’ or ‘The martial arts scenes were exactly like what I remember my grandfather doing.’ People were delighted to see elements like ‘I recognize that textile on the costume was perfect,’ or ‘The martial arts scenes were exactly like what I remember my grandfather doing.’ People were delighted to see elements of their cultures represented.”

Douglas is using the experience as a springboard in his music and anthropology classrooms. “Discussing the movie opens up a conversation about sound as representation, about mediated representations of different cultures, and about the power dynamics involved. Disney certainly didn’t take all my advice. For example, some singing styles found in Southeast Asia, while more representative, are arguably not as palatable to Western ticket buyers.”

The experience was stimulating, he says. “The project was full of difficult issues concerning cultural representation, but it’s one of the best films Disney has done along those lines. We can rightly critique corporate entertainment, but when you have a chance to participate, then that should be an opportunity to facilitate change.”
The Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships is celebrating 25 years of turning research into policy and practices that advance the well-being of families in our state. Above, Early Childhood Specialist Courtney Barrett (left) meets with teacher Jyothsna Ramesh at KinderNest Preschool, as part of the center’s Bringing out the Best program, which helps Guilford children under five with social-emotional challenges. Here’s to the next 25 years of putting our children, families, and state on the path to success.