

# uncg research

Fall 2020

Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

## A TIME FOR CHANGE

Tough challenges call for transformative solutions

pg. 10



Do you feel stressed or low in energy?

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Cover photo: Research assistant and UNCG alum Xiadani Avila recruits participants for the Strong Minds, Strong Communities project.



It's on the cover and in every aspect of our lives: We find ourselves in a very different world in 2020. A world challenged by a pandemic, as well as by stark examples of – and increasing national discourse on – the ways systemic racism ravages our communities. We find ourselves in a state of “liminality.”

First coined by Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) and further developed by Victor Turner (1920–1983), liminality roughly translates from Latin to “threshold.” It is the in-between spaces – in

relationships, social roles, and organizations, in times of transition and change, between an ending and a new beginning, between knowing and unknowing.

We are certainly in a liminal season. As with many other universities, UNC Greensboro ramped down in the spring, temporarily moving classes online and discontinuing most forms of research and scholarship due to the pandemic. But slowly, with great care and exceptional risk mitigation, faculty, staff, and students began to pick up the threads of their scholarship once more.

Creating an avatar was one way to keep research participants safe so that a critical clinical trial on Alzheimer's could continue. Others turned their focus toward the pandemic specifically, working on a device that uses magnetic nanoparticles to try to better detect COVID-19 or studying how micronutrients like zinc or selenium can impact the severity of COVID-19 symptoms.

Some stepped into the interstitial spaces widened by the pandemic, pivoting from community-engaged research to leveraging trusted relationships to deliver much needed direct relief, including cleaning supplies, rent supplements to keep families in their homes, or tutoring.

For many, it is the pandemic created by institutional racism that has been the calling. The Centering Black Voices Lab is exploring the trauma of violence on Black men and boys – and disrupting erroneous and limited narratives about them by elevating their voices. In our cover story, we discuss disparities in access to and the impact of mental health services for communities of color. Through a series of grants, UNCG faculty and students are working to develop more effective, culturally responsive mental health interventions, while at the same time expanding and training the future workforce to better meet these challenges as we move forward.

Uncertainty is difficult. We like to know where we are heading. But as Ed Catmull, of Creativity, Inc. says, there is “a sweet spot between the known and unknown where originality happens.” UNCG scholars are creatively stepping into this time of uncertainty, to advance our knowledge and our impact, for the benefit of our communities urgently in need of health and repair.

**TERRI L. SHELTON, PH.D.**  
Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement

UNCG Research is online. Enjoy additional photography, shareable stories, and more at [researchmagazine.uncg.edu](https://researchmagazine.uncg.edu).

## FEATURES



### We're Here - Estamos aquí

Mental health care has never been more critical. But it's not one-size-fits-all. In a field historically designed by and for White people, researchers are working to expand access and improve care for everyone.

Photo: Sept. 2020



### Centering Black Voices

Dr. Smith Lee's research lab explores the unequal burdens of trauma and grief in the lives of young Black men. Her new project aims to disrupt dehumanizing narratives of Black men in poverty by elevating their voices.

Photo: April 2019



### Pivot Point

On campus this year, scholars shifted focus: Do nutrients play a role in COVID-19? Can we develop faster tests? How do we serve our most vulnerable? And how do you collect data during a pandemic?

Photo: July 2020

# uncg research

## DEPARTMENTS

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## CAN WE AFFORD TO FLY?

When airplanes first caught Keith Debbage's fancy, the term "carbon footprint" didn't exist. It was the 1960s, and he was a kid happy to accompany his father to air shows on weekends. Never mind that watching planes was what his dad, a Royal Air Force radar operator, did at his day job. People who love flight never tire of planes.

Debbage is still a fan. Now, as a geography and entrepreneurship professor, he is able to combine his passion for flight with professional interests. The airline industry is one of his areas of study, and lately he's been thinking a lot about one of the downsides of flight.

Jet aircraft are major polluters, and Americans – who love to travel – bear the responsibility for much of that pollution.

"Right now," Dr. Debbage says, "about a fifth of the global carbon footprint from tourism is attributable to air travel." Americans – just 4% of the global population – "account for 50% of all carbon dioxide emissions from airplanes worldwide."

That sort of tidbit motivates a geographer to dig deeper. Or in this case, two geographers, both named Debbage.

Debbage's son, Neil, is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio. "He's got a bigger green ethic than I do," his father cracks. The younger geographer challenged his dad to work together on an examination of airline tourism's carbon footprint, with the added goal of being published in a prestigious journal, the *Annals of Tourism Research*.

They did, and it was.

There's been ongoing debate about whether direct flights are less polluting than itineraries with short hops and connecting flights. Often it's a question of big planes versus smaller jets. Carbon footprint data exists for all sorts of commercial aircraft, from regional jets to the largest wide-body Boeing and Airbus planes. The Debbages looked at more than 1,000 flights originating from 10 major Northeastern airports destined for 13 popular destinations, mostly in the Sunbelt. They compared emissions generated by connecting routes vs. direct flights and found conclusive evidence.

"Bottom line is, direct routes are more green," he says.

How green? The difference is about 100 kilograms of carbon, or about equivalent to the amount of energy needed to run a refrigerator for a year. That sounds pretty good, right?

But then there's this: Scientists have determined that to keep global warming from exceeding 2 degrees Celsius, each person on earth must not consume more than 2,300 kilograms of carbon per year. Of that amount, 575 kilos are allocated for travel, including daily commutes and vacations.

The Debbages found a round trip between those Northeast and Sunbelt airports, even without connections, consumes "on average, two-thirds of an individual's entire mobility budget for the year."

It was a sobering revelation for a lifelong aviation fan.

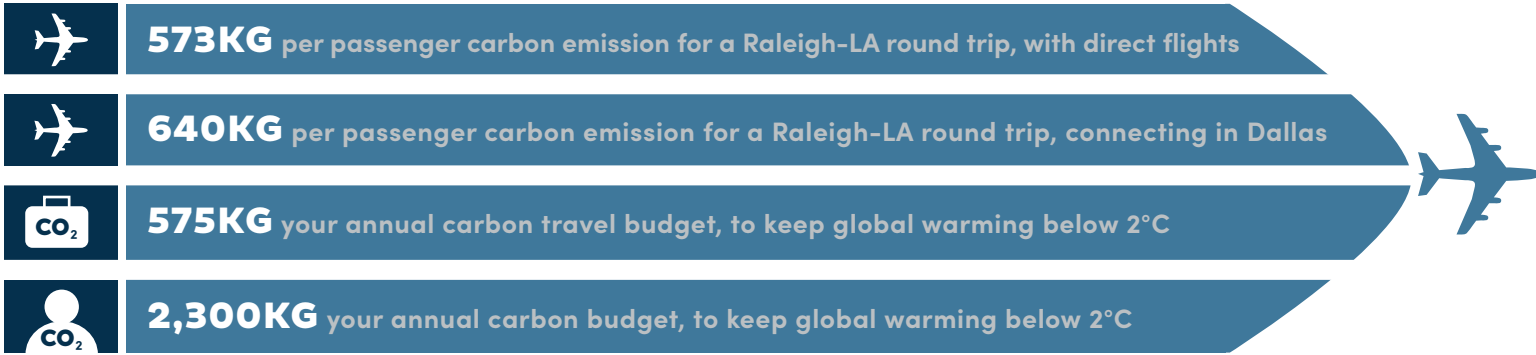
"Airline travel may be one of our worst environmental sins," Debbage says. "It was really kind of shocking."



**Debbage's findings on flight's carbon footprint have netted national media coverage and invitations to present his paper at conferences in Sweden and Dubai. This year he also won an American Association of Geographers' Best Paper Award.**

**He flew to the Middle East aboard an Airbus A380, "probably the biggest gas-guzzler, carbon-emitter civilian aircraft in the world," he says. The irony is not lost on him.**





**GREEN INNOVATION**

The most effective way to cut global airline industry carbon emissions is also the most drastic: Don't fly. Since that isn't a practical option, engineers, economists, and geographers are studying other ways that airlines can reduce their carbon footprints.

Strategies range from increased use of lightweight composite materials, such as those employed by Greensboro-based HondaJet in the airframe of its light business jet, to better aircraft engine design, to green fuels.

Green fuels, also known as biofuels, are sourced from plant-based and other organic materials. When burned, biofuels release drastically reduced amounts of carbon as compared to petroleum-based jet fuel.

Debbage and his son are writing a chapter on these trends for the upcoming "Handbook of Innovation for Sustainable Tourism."

"Virgin Airlines and several U.S. carriers have already experimented with biofuels," the elder Debbage says. Early results prove that large commercial aircraft can be powered by biofuels. "Right now, the goal is to elevate the share of aircraft that do that."

Scandinavian Airlines, also known as SAS, is another carrier in the forefront of testing biofuels. "You can figure out why," Debbage notes, "because it's based in Sweden." Greta Thunberg is not the only Swede with climate concerns.

Debbage expects it may be another decade before aircraft biofuels become widely adopted. The stakes are higher than in

Americans make up

**4%**  
of the global population

and account for  
**50%**  
of world-wide carbon emissions from airplanes

the automotive industry, which is rapidly transitioning to hybrid systems and electric power.

"The pace of change for aviation cannot be what it is for automobiles," he says. "A fuel failure at 30,000 feet is catastrophic. Aviation is a much more delicate proposition."

**BOOSTING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Economic developers preach that an airport can be an economic driver for an entire region, attracting industry and spurring long-term job growth. Oftentimes that's true. But sometimes it isn't. Why the difference?

An ambitious project, led in part by Debbage, is sifting through economic, industrial, and demographic data in regions surrounding scores of airports nationwide to identify commonalities of success.

"It's one of the most exciting things I've worked on," Debbage says, "because I'm working with a big team of about 15 researchers." They are part of a larger project managed by an airline industry consulting firm, with funding from the National Academies of Science.

The team will study air passenger traffic patterns, air cargo, types of industries and their proximity to the airport, as well as regional wage and salaries. All sorts of data go into the hopper. It's a geographer's dream.

Working in concert with Debbage is his colleague James Nelson, director of the Spatial Analysis Lab at UNCG. "He's doing all the heavy lifting in terms of mapping airline and airport-related businesses," Debbage says.

The group will also collaborate with airport managers to develop an assessment procedure. In the end, he says, airports, local governments, and economic developers will have a web-based tool to analyze the regional strengths of an airport and target specific industries for recruitment.

With the COVID-19 pandemic crippling air travel, the study has become even more critical.

"We hope to provide airports with a leg up as we come out of the pandemic and passenger traffic comes back," Debbage says. "That's my goal."

by Tom Lassiter • learn more [go.uncg.edu/debbage](http://go.uncg.edu/debbage)



**Debt of a lifetime**

Social scientists, politicians, and others have long held that higher education has the power to overcome inequities – and to lay the foundation for everyone to achieve the American Dream.

But what happens when you are 18 and have to take out the equivalent of a home mortgage to pay for a four-year degree? Or when you begin your adult life spending up to \$1,000 a month on loan payments?

Questions like these drive research by Arielle Kuperberg, associate professor of sociology and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

Dr. Kuperberg and collaborator Dr. Joan Maya Mazelis at Rutgers University-Camden are examining how student loans affect the trajectory of our lives, with their most recent project receiving support from the National Science Foundation.

Their research is timely. Student loan debt has nearly doubled over the last decade, reaching \$1.6 trillion. Of the 45 million Americans with student debt, says Kuperberg, as many as 10 million may be out of work due to the pandemic and ensuing recession. The government has paused payments on some federal loans until at least year end.

While loans play a vital role in helping 70% of students afford higher education, Kuperberg warns against unintended consequences. She has found that many, when faced with steep college loan payments, worry more about the future, delay marriage, and even put off seeking medical and dental care.

In one survey, one-third of respondents with student debt said they would postpone having children because of it. Kuperberg also found that, by age 35, women who graduated college with student loans were 15% less likely to have children than those who graduated without loans.

"This not only has negative effects on young people's ability to establish themselves," she notes, "it also could have long-term implications for society."

A major focus of the new NSF-funded project – a longitudinal study involving approximately 6,000 surveys and over 200 detailed interviews – is social mobility. People with student loans are more likely to come from families with fewer resources, and the researchers found they are also 34% more likely to give money to their families during college.

By age 32, people with student loans and a college degree earned about \$8,000 less than their debt-free counterparts.

These dynamics both reflect and perpetuate a class divide, Kuperberg says.

She hopes her research will make a difference for her children and future generations.

"Understanding these mechanisms is key to designing policy," she says. "How do we best ensure that student loans don't restrict social mobility and instead do what they're supposed to do, which is help people get ahead? It shouldn't have to be a trade-off."

by Dawn Martin • learn more [go.uncg.edu/kuperberg](http://go.uncg.edu/kuperberg)

**18%**  
of graduates with loans were delaying serious romantic relationships 15 months after graduation



**25%**  
of the graduates were delaying marriage



**32%**  
of students with loans say they will put off having children



# WHOT ARE MY CHICES?

*“I don’t see McDonald’s as the enemy. If you make one change at McDonald’s to make an item healthier, you’ll have more public health impact than any other intervention because McDonald’s has such a reach around the world.”*

Dr. Jared McGuirt thinks we should pay more attention to billboards. “Advertisements in our environment have simple messaging; the graphics are very intentional. These companies know what they’re doing,” says the assistant professor of nutrition. “We should take our cues from the business sector.”

His research focuses on our food environment and interventions to nudge people toward healthier choices, like billboards nudge consumers to buy products.

“We know that the environment influences choices,” says McGuirt, who has a master’s in public health and a PhD in nutrition intervention and policy. “So how can we modify the environment or the way people interact with it, to influence their eating behaviors?”



When McGuirt arrived at UNCG in 2017, the Spartan Village complex was about to open a Bestway supermarket. McGuirt seized the opportunity to study how the new living arrangement changed students’ dietary patterns. Here, he demonstrates how Bluetooth beacons will be placed in the store.



This is the first time anyone’s formally evaluated the impact of a mixed-use development where people are living in such close proximity to a new supermarket, McGuirt says.

## GETTING SOLDIERS FIT

Military leadership has noticed rising levels of obesity among service members, rendering them “unfit to fight.” So officials at Fort Bragg reached out to McGuirt, who has investigated the food environment in North Carolina for over 12 years, for help. When he assessed the military base, he found a “gauntlet of fast food” and other less healthy options. These findings were presented to Army officials, including the U.S. Surgeon General.

To address the issue, McGuirt and his collaborators have created a layered approach that leverages soldiers’ cell phones. First, the researchers are setting up geo-fencing – a virtual perimeter – so that when soldiers enter the base, they receive notifications with information about the base’s healthier food venues.

They’re also placing Bluetooth messaging beacons within each eating area. As a soldier approaches a venue, they will receive information about healthy options available there. They might be at a fast-food restaurant – but did they know the restaurant has salads?

“It’s really hard to convince people to just totally change their diet,” McGuirt says. “But we can design the environment in a way to make it easier for them to make healthier choices.”

## REACHING THE DIGITAL GENERATION

One of McGuirt’s largest interdepartmental collaborations targets children’s nutrition knowledge and behavior, with a focus on five- to ten-year-olds and their parents.

The group – which includes Dr. Christopher Rhea in kinesiology and Dr. Omari Dyson in peace and conflict studies – is building out a virtual-reality nutrition program, with funding from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

In the program, an avatar addresses kids by name and gives them personalized, interactive guidance and recommendations. For

*“We’re not going to demonize anything, because that’s just going to turn people off. I’m not going to go out there and say ‘You can never drink soda.’ With the food environment nudges, we’ll say, ‘Why don’t you try a diet soda instead because you’re going to not consume as much sugar? Why don’t you try peanuts instead of potato chips?’”*

example, in one module kids pick out healthy ingredients to make a smoothie, with guidance from the avatar.

The team acquired data from Google and the USDA to identify typical food options available in different areas. That way, kids aren’t being asked to work with items that are too expensive or inaccessible.

The avatar is key to the program’s success and the wave of the future, says McGuirt. “Companies like Facebook know it’s more persuasive when it looks like a person is giving you information.” Think Alexa or Siri, but the next generation.

The team will compete next year for a \$125,000 prize, with the aim of expanding the interactive program to more age ranges and locales.

When the pilot ended, participants asked how they could keep using the program, McGuirt says. “They liked that it was interactive and very different from what they were used to in terms of health information.”

## COVID AND ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD FOR CHILDREN

Millions of American kids rely on school for nutritious meals, so widespread closures from COVID-19 meant school districts had to put together school meal pickup sites rapidly, to feed those children.

But are the designated sites accessible for the kids that need them most?

McGuirt is collaborating on several projects to examine pickup site locations in North Carolina, in the four largest American cities, and elsewhere across the U.S. It’s about optimization, McGuirt explains. “We want to account for factors like neighborhood income and food deserts – areas with limited access to healthy foods.”

The results could help inform decisions made by stakeholders like the USDA, school districts, and state policy makers – both during the pandemic and in the future.

“Every year there are summer school meal programs. Our findings could also help them,” says McGuirt.

“I’m trying to get people to recognize that place matters. Let’s see if we can make nutrition and health more accessible for everyone.”

by Dr. Yen Duong • learn more [go.uncg.edu/mcguirt](https://go.uncg.edu/mcguirt)



# SMALL LEAP FOR FROGS, GIANT LEAP FOR MANKIND



The brains of bullfrogs hold secrets that could, someday, help fighter pilots perform better and protect stroke patients.

That's why two federal agencies — the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense — have awarded Assistant Professor of Biology Joseph Santin nearly \$1 million to study how the brain circuit responsible for breathing in frogs can, in certain circumstances, function dramatically longer than expected without oxygen.

"We found that if we take animals that had recently been hibernating, and then make the particular neural circuit that we study hypoxic or anoxic — put them under low- or no-oxygen conditions — it works for a lot longer without oxygen than it did before hibernation," he says.

Santin's research isolates the neural cells responsible for breathing in frogs in a petri dish, where they can be examined and exposed to different conditions more easily. Normally, this neural circuit might run for five to ten minutes without oxygen. But Santin and his students have found that, after hibernation, these circuits can continue to function for much longer without oxygen — often upwards of three to four hours.

Why is Uncle Sam interested? Because we'd like human neurons to function better in environments with limited or no oxygen.

## HELP FOR STROKE VICTIMS, PILOTS

The National Institutes of Health awarded Santin's lab \$355,000 for the potential application of his research for stroke treatment. When a stroke blocks blood flow to part of the brain, those neural tissues stop getting oxygen, often leading to permanent brain damage, paralysis, or even death.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 795,000 people have strokes each year and some 140,000 people die due to them. It is also a leading cause of disability in people over age 65.

The Department of Defense granted Santin \$637,000 because the research could point the way to helping pilots

function better in high-altitude, low-oxygen environments where clear thinking and sharp reflexes are critical.

Santin, a neurophysiologist, didn't set out to study frog brains or how cells perform in low-oxygen environments. Rather, he's interested in the cellular and molecular roots of animal adaptations, such as hibernation.

"As soon as we stop coming up with interesting questions in the amphibian respiratory system, I'll stop asking them and do something different. But interesting questions just keep popping up."

## FLIPPING A SWITCH

The interesting question here is how hibernation seems to prime the brain in a way that protects it from damage.

"We basically want to figure out how to flip the switch between hypoxia-intolerant states, which our human brains constantly exist in," Santin says, "and keep brain function from collapsing when you take away the energy source."

Frogs aren't humans, of course. However, he notes that basic cellular functions, such as energy metabolism, are similar across most animals. Both frog and human brains use oxygen and glucose to produce energy.

Though it's too early to say exactly what's going on, Santin suspects a systemic effect involving multiple chemical and cellular functions, which make brain cells more efficient and allow them to produce energy with less or no oxygen.

"I think it's going to ultimately be a kind of a supply and demand issue," he says. "You're going to have to manage the supply of energy and also dial down the demand. The challenge is that dialing down demand while maintaining function is not a trivial task."

If Santin can unlock how amphibian neural circuits manage that, however, future researchers might one day turn those discoveries into therapies.

"The dogma is that the brain is the most energetically costly, oxygen-dependent organ," he says. "We're showing that doesn't always have to be true."

by Mark Toczak • [learn more go.uncg.edu/santin](http://learn.more.go.uncg.edu/santin)

"I think students who can be part of the entire process of science are more likely to be successful in any area that requires critical thinking — academic research or otherwise," says Santin, who has mentored eight students since he launched his lab at UNCG last year.

Sasha Adams was introduced to Santin's lab through UNCG's NIH-funded MARC U-STAR program, which aims to increase diversity in the biomedical sciences. She's already co-authored one paper on hypoxia tolerance and is working on a second. She hopes to go to graduate school and continue working in Santin's lab. "He's a great mentor," she says. "He's helped me to grow a lot as a scientist and researcher."





# WE'RE ESTAMOS AQUÍ HERE

**IN A COVID-19 WORLD, mental health care is perhaps more important than it ever was before.**

But like the rest of health care, mental health care in the United States isn't always accessible. It can be expensive. There's a stigma associated with seeking care. And, broadly speaking, it's a field that excludes many.

For years, UNC Greensboro has been committed to transforming the field of mental health through culturally responsive care. It's an approach that improves outcomes by developing and delivering treatments and interventions that take into account cultural contexts and nuances.

Culturally responsive care isn't about making assumptions or responding to stereotypes. It means practicing cultural humility and fighting against systemic inequities upon which our mental health care system has been built.

It's about reducing disparities and making real change in our communities. And Spartans are leading the way, through training, outreach, and research.

**“It's been important for me to work with different communities and help normalize things like anxiety and depression. Language plays a key role in this – we need friendly, accessible language that breaks down some of these terms.”**

— PhD candidate **Sudheera Ranaweera** is involved in a \$2.2M training grant to diversify mental health services

## A TRADITION OF SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

Historically, the vast majority of psychology research in the U.S. has been conducted by White researchers, with most participants being White and affluent, says Susan Keane, professor of psychology. Most mental health professionals have been White men, although today, the field tends to be dominated by White women.

The result? Many segments of the population are excluded, leaving certain communities and groups more privileged over others. Treatments, often developed by White researchers for White people, are not as effective when applied to other racial and ethnic groups.

Conversations around culturally competent mental health care, often referred to as culturally responsive care, began in the late 1980s. While significant progress has been made in recent decades, more work remains.

“COVID-19 has laid bare the deep disparities that exist in minoritized communities that we've all known have been there,” says associate psychology professor Gabriela Livas Stein. “Culturally responsive care is about dismantling these systemic inequalities, while at the same time acknowledging the resilience and strength of these communities.”

UNCG's approach starts with how it trains its students. Since the late 1980s, UNCG's clinical

psychology program has had a “philosophy of helping the underserved,” says Dr. Keane, who serves as clinical training director.

A new five-year, \$2.2 million grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration will further this work. The grant aims to recruit, retain, and support the training of clinical psychologists from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds to enter primary care settings and medically underserved communities.

The goal of the grant is twofold: diversify the clinical workforce and address disparities in access. UNCG will team up with a variety of community partners – including Brenner Children's Hospital in Forsyth County and Moss Street Partnership School in Rockingham County – to offer additional clinical experience to students.

Keane leads the grant, with Dr. Rosemary Nelson-Gray, Dr. Jason Herndon, Dr. Julia Mendez Smith, and Dr. Stein as co-principal investigators. “It's important that people from a variety of communities are able to see themselves in this profession. Diversifying the workforce now will help to continue to diversify the workforce long term,” says Herndon, who is director of UNCG's Psychology Clinic.

“Additionally, while people can absolutely serve communities that are different from them, it's important for people to have the option to see a mental health care professional who identifies with their community.”

*Photo: Research assistant Xiadani Avila and community health worker Maria Soledad Aispuru (l-r) recruit participants for the Strong Minds, Strong Communities project, at a local event in Sept. 2020.*



## INCREASING ACCESS

When it comes to effective mental health services, the client-therapist relationship is key.

There has to be trust – and trust often requires some level of connection or shared experience.

For Black and Latinx communities, it's particularly important. But in a field that has been built by and for middle- to upper-middle-class White Americans, it can be difficult to build trusted relationships. There can also be socioeconomic and linguistic barriers, as well as cultural stigmas.

All these social historical realities existed pre-COVID-19. Now, barriers have increased, and stressors have multiplied. The Black and Latinx communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, which has serious implications for mental health.

Dr. Gabriela Livas Stein is a leader in research on mental health and Latinx families. Her latest project is a five-year, \$4.3 million National Institutes of Health-funded study that aims to increase mental health care access for local underserved populations.

"Strong Minds, Strong Communities" is co-led by Dr. Kari Eddington in psychology with co-investigators Dr. Stephanie Irby Coard and Dr. Andrew Supple in human development and family studies.

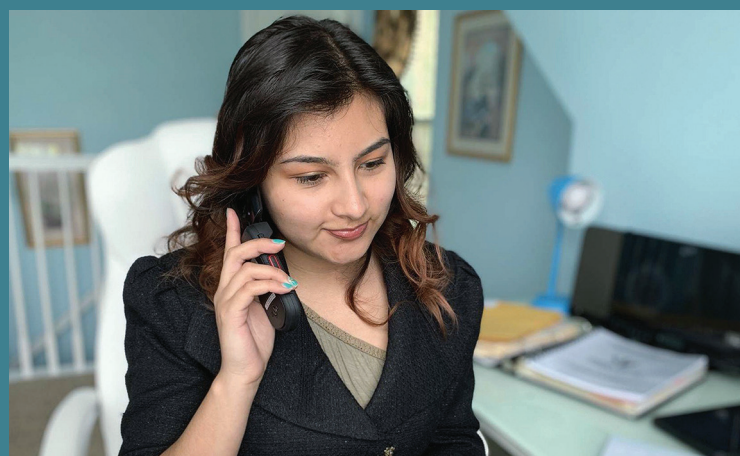
The team includes community health workers who have been trained to deliver an empirically supported intervention. Part of their work is partnering with community organizations to recruit participants in need of these services. Engaging communities is key – it helps address the mistrust that often exists between medical providers and underserved populations, and it helps in delivering interventions that better speak to the experiences of clients.

"Having community health workers who are integrated in the community allows for the intervention to be really embedded and enriched by cultural nuances," says Stein.

*"The intervention is interactive. We use role playing in group sessions to teach parents to advocate for their kids at school and in health care settings. We also teach self-care – to do this advocacy you need to take care of yourself."*

– **Community partner Dr. Juan Prandoni** works with providers across NC to implement **Padres Efectivos**, a Stein lab intervention

Stein's CAMINOS Lab directs several community-engaged projects aimed at increasing access to mental health care. In 2013, they developed and tested "Padres Efectivos," an intervention for Latinx families raising children with mental health needs. The intervention was a success, and now a version is being disseminated across the state by community partner El Futuro, a nonprofit outpatient clinic based in Durham, North Carolina. "I've seen the intervention have such great impacts," says Dr. Juan Prandoni, who is El Futuro's training director and a PhD alum of the Stein lab.



The Strong Minds, Strong Communities intervention is offered in both English and Spanish. Roughly 65% of the study's participants are Latinx, and the project also serves a large Black population. Studies have shown that in the United States, only 11% of Latinx people and 13% of Black people obtain the mental health services they need, says Stein.

Due to COVID-19, the intervention is now offered over the phone and via video conferencing. Leslie Estrada (photo above), a 2019 UNCG graduate, is one of the study's community health workers.

Estrada has seen increased levels of anxiety among the participants in recent months. Yet as they work through the intervention, she's seen symptoms dramatically decrease.

"It's amazing to see how people can grow throughout the intervention. We're just there as a guide – it's up to them to put in the work. I've seen people improve, and that's been fulfilling."



CAMINOS lab researchers meet. Clinical psych doctoral students Puja Patel (l) and Michele Chan (c) are part of the first cohort funded by the new training grant, while postdoc Michelle Martin Romero (r) is now a faculty member at UNCG. Photo: Nov. 2018

## RACISM'S IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

The country has been battling another virus this year: racism.

Instances of racist violence continue to plague our communities, with high-profile violent events targeting Black individuals sparking nationwide conversations about policing, race, and systemic inequities.

Concerns are climbing around the heavy psychological toll Black youth and families face, as they see violent images and videos of the deaths of innocent Black people on the news and in their social media feeds.

"Occurrences in media and social media are incredibly traumatizing, and you don't necessarily have a choice. Even if children don't think it's traumatizing, it is," says Dr. Coard.

Meanwhile, Asian American families have seen an increase in discrimination due to COVID-19, and Latinx families also continue to experience xenophobia, in part due to national debates around immigration.

And it's not just media that is impacting the mental health of minoritized youth. It's the everyday instances of racism – that existed long before the internet did – that affect people of color in the United States at an early age. Children experience discrimination in schools, daycares, parks, and playgrounds. They often start to internalize these messages, which can result in negative mental health and academic outcomes long term.

In response to this critical issue, Coard and Stein have teamed up on the "One Talk at a Time" project – an online video series that helps parents of color talk with their children about racism – along with Dr. Laura Gonzalez in the School of Education and Dr. Lisa Kiang at Wake Forest University.

The pilot program launched in 2018 with funding from a UNCG Strategic Seed Grant. The program is designed for families in the United States, with specific videos for Black, Latinx, and Asian American families.

Now, the team is developing videos for White families, led by Dr. Gonzalez.

Typically, when White caregivers have conversations about race with kids, Coard explains, they take a color-blind approach, or they simply say, "We're all human, we must treat people equally." This approach is problematic because it doesn't prepare White children to be anti-racists – to understand their privilege, to recognize racism, and to actively work to dismantle racism.

And, of course, some families deliberately perpetuate White supremacy.

"I think that these videos for White families will close the loop, because racism needs to be discussed and addressed with people who are in positions of power and privilege," says Coard.

"It brings them to the table so that they can get schooled on the experiences of families of color and see how their positionality can be part of the solution, not just the problem."

## A COMMON GOAL

Mental health care is an interdisciplinary field, and as a result, UNCG's response involves researchers across disciplines – from psychology to human development and families studies to education – and a variety of community partners. It's a collective effort led by faculty, students, and advocates from diverse backgrounds, but with the same goal: reducing health disparities.

"Culturally relevant care has always been important – before COVID-19, before Black Lives Matter, before all of this," says Coard.

"There are lots of strategies and interventions and programs that we know can have a positive impact on families and youth, but they have to be relevant to our places and spaces. If you don't make these interventions so that they speak to diverse populations and their experiences, then you might as well not have them," says Coard. "We're taking what we know works, and we're making it work for diverse families and communities."

by Alyssa Bedrosian • learn more at [psy.uncg.edu](https://psy.uncg.edu) | [caminoslab.org/strongminds](https://caminoslab.org/strongminds) | [caminoslab.org/onetalk](https://caminoslab.org/onetalk)



Gonzalez, Stein, Coard, and Kiang (l-r) teamed up to launch the One Talk at a Time project. Photo: Jan. 2019





## HIP HOP AND HIGHER ED

In 1995, a young Donovan Livingston listened to Nas' "If I Ruled the World," featuring Lauryn Hill, for the very first time.

Hearing the lyrics marked a before and after in Livingston's life. The empowering song allowed him to imagine new possibilities. Hip hop inspired him in ways that other genres hadn't.

"After that, I was hooked," he says. "From then on, I was just trying to hone my craft."

And he has. Livingston made national headlines in May 2016 when his spoken-word convocation speech to the Harvard Graduate School of Education went viral.

A few months later, Livingston – with a bachelor's and two master's degrees in hand, from UNC Chapel Hill, Columbia, and Harvard, respectively – arrived at UNCG to further his academics and his art.

"Dr. Leila Villaverde, my chair, approaches a lot of her work through an artistic lens. She really insisted that I incorporate hip hop into my research," he says, describing his work in UNCG's Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations program. That kind of support is one of the reasons he chose UNCG. "Had I gone somewhere else for my PhD, I'm not sure if my advisor would have pushed me that way."

With a background in the field of college access, Livingston is particularly interested in how hip hop allows us to "remix spaces on campus for the purposes of celebrating students whose voices are historically left out of mainstream narratives in colleges and universities."

Livingston defended virtually in May. His dissertation, "Speech is my Hammer, Bang the World into Shape: Making Meaning in College Through Hip-Hop Lyricism," explores how hip-hop artists use lyricism as a means for navigating college life.

For his qualitative, arts-informed study, Livingston conducted in-depth interviews and a focus group with five participants. Each participant recorded a song describing their college experience and then engaged in a "coding cypher," in which they listened to the songs as a group and worked together to identify themes and patterns that emerged.

Livingston found the student lyricists acquired transferable skills – such as critical thinking, goal setting, and time management – from being involved in hip hop in college. Hip hop also contributed to the artists' knowledge of self, emotional intelligence, and community building.

Livingston himself was president of a spoken-word poetry group as an undergraduate. While hip hop often appears in those types of co-curricular spaces, Livingston found that several of his study's participants were also engaging with hip hop in the classroom.

"A lot of the artists talked about how their final papers and projects incorporate some form of music or hip-hop expression," he says. "Their faculty have been receptive to that type of thinking, and I think that's really important. How do we make students feel comfortable with inserting their cultural forms of expression into an academic space?"

Over the years, Livingston has continued to develop his craft – writing and performing on campus, in the community, and across the country. In 2017, his Harvard convocation speech was published by Random House as a book, "Lift Off: From the Classroom to the Stars."

In May, he was one of eight best-selling authors – a group that included Lauren Graham, George Saunders, and Martha Stewart – to participate in Random House's Virtual Commencement for the Class of 2020. He's presented and performed at universities such as Auburn, Vanderbilt, and Florida International, and at events like SXSW in Austin, Texas.

On July 18, Livingston released his third studio album, titled "Molasses."

Livingston views his art, and hip hop more broadly, as a vehicle for identifying social problems and then imagining solutions to those problems.

"A lot of the themes that come out in my writing deal with inequality, injustices, and systemic change."

Last September, Livingston was named an assistant dean in the Office of the Provost at Wake Forest University in nearby Winston-Salem.

He graduated from UNCG this August. Currently, he's continuing his work at Wake Forest and teaching a hip hop in higher education course there this fall. Livingston hopes to turn his dissertation study into a book – and put out a mixtape featuring the artists' songs.

Long term, he plans to continue this work of "remixing and reimagining" spaces of higher education.

"As a hip-hop scholar, it's important that I'm not just publishing, but I'm recording, writing, and finding ways to make hip hop matter on my own campus. I want to continue to build this bridge between hip hop and higher education."

by Alyssa Bedrosian • learn more [grs.uncg.edu](https://grs.uncg.edu) | [go.uncg.edu/elcf](https://go.uncg.edu/elcf)



# GOOD COUNSEL

*Burlington Industries Excellence Professor L. DiAnne Borders is our 2019 Senior Research Excellence Award winner. She is a leading figure in the field of counselor education, both nationally and internationally – in fact, with over 100 peer-reviewed publications and 20 books and chapters, Dr. Borders is Google Scholar’s second most-cited researcher in the area of counseling and supervision. She is also a Fellow of the American Counseling Association, the editor-in-chief of The Clinical Supervisor, and a recipient of Lifetime Achievement, Supervision, and Legacy awards from the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. In 2018, the Southern division of that association launched the L. DiAnne Borders Clinical Supervision Award in recognition of her body of work, which is lauded not just for its breadth but also for its methodological rigor and complexity.*

## COACH’S COACH

“The ultimate goal of all my research is at the end of the supervisor-counselor-client chain – more effective services for clients. But to get there, you have to start at the top, with clinical supervision.

“Good basketball players are not necessarily good coaches. The same idea holds true in the mental health world: Good therapists are not necessarily good supervisors. Clinical supervision is an entirely different skill set. And that is what I study: the mindset, observation skills, and decision making of really effective clinical supervisors. How they break down what they know about being effective clinicians, and then help student counselors understand and apply that knowledge with their own clients – in the thousands of nuanced scenarios a counseling session can take.

“I spend a lot of time analyzing supervision session recordings. What do expert supervisors prioritize that novice supervisors miss? What interventions help novice supervisors steadily move toward expertise? And how is novices’ development influenced by their identities, personal histories, professional experiences – even their thoughts about being in an evaluator, or gatekeeper, role.”

## FACING WHAT YOU FEAR

“Interpersonal process recall, or IPR, is a great tool for supervisors. There’s a lot of data going through our brain, and, in the moment, we choose things to pay attention to – often things we’re most comfortable with and are willing, or able, to ‘hear.’ So a supervisor will say to the counselor: ‘Let’s go back to that session as if you were there. What were you thinking at the time? Was there something you wanted to say that you didn’t? What stopped you?’

“It helps determine where counselors are uncomfortable or unsure. For example, trauma is very scary to new counselors. Expert supervisors know they must help novices handle their own reactions to a client’s story before they can develop a plan for working with the client. Cultural issues are also often scary, especially for White counselors, and we’ve found that IPR is a useful method for growing multicultural awareness. I’m blessed to be able to keep learning, constantly, from colleagues and doctoral students. Right now, I’m working on a new trauma-informed supervision framework.”

## THE ART OF TEACHING

“Everybody talks about clinical supervision as the signature pedagogy of the mental health professions. But we don’t talk enough about the basics of how people learn. Over the years of practicing and teaching supervision, I became aware of how much I was drawing from my teacher education background in this work. So few people in the mental health professions have a pedagogical background. So they draw on what they know – their clinical background. But people who do supervision well recognize it’s inherently an educational process.

“I’ve seen supervisors focus entirely on the client: ‘Here’s what I would do’ or ‘Do more of this.’ Just telling – that’s not the best approach to teaching, right? There’s a real art to corrective feedback. Supervisors need strong clinical skills and strong pedagogical knowledge. The question is: How do I help my doctoral student supervisors give their counselors what they need, so they in turn are able to go back and give their clients what they need? The complexity of all that continues to fascinate me.”

## GROWING THE FIELD

“When I did my dissertation on supervision in counseling, I read everything that had been written. I can’t keep up anymore. Awareness of the importance of supervision is just exploding, not only across disciplines but globally. Early on, I was involved in helping clinical supervision be recognized as a specialty within my field. We didn’t have standards for practice or an ethical code for clinical supervision, so I worked on task forces within the profession to help create those. And now? I provide clinical supervision. I teach it. I study it. It’s a dream job.

“Our counseling program is consistently ranked in the top five in the nation. At the doctoral level, we graduate people who are truly prepared to be professors, skilled in teaching, supervision, and research. Because of our doctoral program, our master’s students receive much more supervision, so they likewise are well prepared. Our faculty model is to be involved in making a difference. That’s part of our message to our students as well: How do you want to give back to the profession and have an impact?”

*by Mike Harris and Sangeetha Shivaji • learn more [go.uncg.edu/borders](http://go.uncg.edu/borders)*







# CENTERING BLACK VOICES

DR. SMITH LEE'S RESEARCH LAB EXPLORES THE UNEQUAL BURDENS OF TRAUMA AND GRIEF IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG BLACK MEN

It was as if no one had ever asked him to tell his story.

Jocelyn R. Smith Lee, now an assistant professor of human development and family studies at UNC Greensboro, was interviewing a young man in Baltimore. It was part of her work as a doctoral research assistant, examining how young Black men transition from childhood to adulthood in communities where they're disconnected from traditional school-to-work pathways.

"His interview went four hours, uninterrupted. Nobody got up. Nobody went to the restroom," she says. "That really spoke to me about his need, and perhaps the larger need I was tapping into, of creating a space for the men to tell their stories."

Unprompted, these interviews often turned into recitations of loss, violence, and negative encounters with law enforcement. Young men would describe to Smith Lee the friends, family members, and acquaintances who had been killed, sometimes by police.

Their stories revealed invisible wounds of trauma and grief among young Black males, a toll that has received almost no attention from researchers or the media, even as the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police has become a galvanizing issue.

Smith Lee aims to raise awareness of the trauma of Black boys and men who know those victims of violence through family ties or social connections, or who are victims themselves.

Their experiences, she says, are rarely reported.

Her work examines how violence affects the health, development, and family relationships of young Black men, and how current social policy has failed to take these experiences into account. It also seeks to center their voices, empowering them to tell their own stories and define their own narratives.

*Photography by Dr. Zun Lee, one of Dr. Smith Lee's collaborators on her new Gates Foundation-funded project, is featured throughout this story. His art explores Black family spaces and lives as sites of intimacy, belonging, and possibility – pushing back against external narratives and stereotypes. Story images predate the COVID-19 pandemic.*



## What's it like to be 19 years old and Black in the city?

*“Rough. It's rough because it's like a set image for a 19-year-old young Black man, and it's just scrutiny everywhere you go. Like police pull you over, for no probable cause, and it's hard to get a job and, it's, it's just a lot, it's a lot ... If he lives in an urban area, he's selling drugs, or he's a gangbanger, or he doesn't have a stable foundation at home. And that's all the opposite of me. But yet, I still get pulled over by the police. I still get looked at in a certain way because of who I am.”*

– Wayne, 19, interviewed by Smith Lee in Baltimore



The 40 young men Smith Lee interviewed reported, on average, losing three loved ones to homicide. When 16 of those young men were reinterviewed 3 to 5 years later, about half had experienced a life-threatening injury in the intervening period. Her research was published in the American Journal of Public Health and the Journal of Black Psychology.

*When Smith Lee (right, center) received her doctorate, the boys and young men she had formed relationships with at YO! shared in her accomplishment and pride. Some attended her graduation. For those who could not be there, she brought graduation back to the center, by visiting dressed in full regalia – a moment captured here by Zizwe Allette.*



## RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

In 2013, Smith Lee was conducting research at the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Center, with the Youth Opportunity program – or “YO!” – which offers GED instruction, job training and placement, access to counseling, and other services.

She didn't want to be a “drive-by” researcher – extracting knowledge and then vanishing back into academia without contributing any value to the community. “Oftentimes the communities aren't benefiting from the work,” she says.

And to center the experiences and voices of Black boys and men in her work, she needed to find ways to connect with them.

## SHARED EXPERIENCES

Many YO! members faced the loss of friends and family members with little support, and the community center's resources were already strained.

“It became clear that creating a grief and loss group in the center would be a clear way, a tangible way, of me serving this important organization,” says Smith Lee, who is trained and was licensed as a therapist.

She also had to prove to the young men at the center that she could be trusted, and she had to close the perceived gap between her life and their lives.

“I spent countless hours in the center just showing up, spending time there,” she says, “going to town hall meetings, to open mic performances in the center, basketball games in the community.”

That showing up helped her establish trust with participants and staff. “She'd always keep her word with the members,” says Zizwe Allette, a GED teacher and photographer at the center. “She would assist them in getting to where they needed to go if they had to take a GED test ... just did whatever it took to help students.”

To be effective as a grief counselor, and to solicit the kind of detailed narratives she wanted as a researcher, Smith Lee had to establish rapport. She often began by sharing her own experiences.

“I would disclose to them that I had lost loved ones to violence in my life,” she says. “And even though I was a doctoral student at the University of Maryland, my neighborhood was not that different from theirs. And it helped to kind of bridge the gap, or defuse some assumptions about who I might be because of the educational trajectory I was on.”

Smith Lee also had to overcome the young men's difficulty with identifying and expressing their feelings – a challenge reinforced by social mores that discourage them from expressing emotions, especially those related to pain and vulnerability.

She used the “How Are You Feeling Today?” chart, an educational and clinical tool that features drawn faces expressing 30 different emotions, to help the young men identify their feelings more precisely. Life history calendars helped the young men accurately recall important experiences from their lives, including the loss of friends and family members to violence.

“These traumatic losses are really developmental tasks that young men – and boys – are challenged to figure out as they progress to adulthood,” she explains.

The 40 young men she interviewed reported, on average, losing three loved ones to homicide, usually during their adolescent years. Most of the young men – 36 – also brought up, unprompted, the role of police encounters in their lives.

## IN THEIR OWN VOICES

From television cop dramas to TV news, young Black men are often portrayed as criminals to be feared or punished.

Those images, almost always produced by outsiders, are designed to present a negative narrative about being young, Black, and male in an urban neighborhood. Too often, they dehumanize young Black men, presenting them as social problems rather than treating them as human beings worthy of dignity and investment.



*Zun Lee visited Ferguson, Mo., twice in 2014, as protests ignited nationwide over the killing of Michael Brown by a police officer. There, he says, he found “people that somehow find the strength to act to make things better, often purely by faith ... People that care deeply. Have immense pride and joy. Love hard.” He titled the resulting series “Black Love Matters.”*



## On having a friend killed by police

*“Then I found out that the police killed him – like I just lost all respect, like all respect for police and all that.”*

– Jahad, 23, recounts the impact of losing a close childhood friend at age 15





Lee divides his time between Canada and the U.S., but in the last couple of years he has lived mostly in Charlotte, teaching photography, engaging with Black residents in various historically African American neighborhoods of West Charlotte, and becoming a part of that community.

He took up photography as a hobby, while still working as a physician and health care consultant. In a series of photographs he took starting in 2011, Lee showed the intimate lives of Black fathers, with pictures that revealed their day-to-day moments caring for their children – images that counter oft-repeated and scientifically unsupported portrayals of Black men as disengaged fathers.

Lee hopes to reveal the same kinds of truths about the lives of Black boys and young men in Baltimore – except now those young men will choose the moments, take the pictures, and construct their own narratives.

“I’m encouraging people to look at their own lives and visualize what they deem important, versus somebody else who might not be part of the community.”

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The innovative work Smith Lee and her collaborators are doing is critical for anyone interested in helping individuals overcome the effects of violence and in helping communities deconstruct the systems that create violence in the first place.

Researchers and policy makers are increasingly exploring concepts such as adverse childhood experiences – or ACEs – to understand how social circumstances, such as poverty or living in a particular neighborhood, can affect education and health outcomes over a lifetime. But, Smith Lee says, research on ACEs and even post-traumatic stress doesn’t fully account for the burden carried by the Black boys and men she works with.

To be effective, she says, social policy and reform also need to account for systemic racism and white supremacy, which has shaped communities, policing, education, and other societal institutions for generations.

Her work, she hopes, will help change that.

“I’ve always held the dream in my heart of developing some kind of center that would become a nexus of research policy and practice that’s related to trauma, violence, and healing for Black families,” she says.

“I would love to see the work trigger, or lead to, investments in the lives of young Black men that mirror the level of adversity that they are navigating.”

*Editor’s note: Smith Lee’s interview participants are identified with pseudonyms in this story.*

by Mark Toczak • learn more at [go.uncg.edu/smith-lee](http://go.uncg.edu/smith-lee) | [hebcac.org/about-yo](http://hebcac.org/about-yo) | [zunlee.com](http://zunlee.com)

Through the Voices for Economic Opportunity Grand Challenge, the Gates Foundation sought solutions to the “huge gap between long-standing assumptions about poverty and the reality of millions of Americans’ lives,” which lies at the root of ineffective, inadequate policy solutions. Smith Lee’s answer to that challenge was one of just 28 proposals funded out of a pool of over 1,200.

## Greensboro stories, Greensboro solutions

Greensboro is not Baltimore. For one, it’s much smaller.

But, Smith Lee notes, “the same ingredients, the same legacy is present in terms of those societal conditions that create the context for violence to occur.”

And it does occur, with homicides disproportionately affecting Black men. In 2017, for example, of the 39 homicides Greensboro had experienced through November, 34 of the victims were Black and 35 were male, according to newspaper reports.

“One of the things that made it easy to say ‘Yes’ to a position here was an awareness that there were concerned residents working and really trying to make a difference and reduce those disparities within the city,” Smith Lee says.

Before the pandemic struck, Smith Lee and UNCG assistant professor of public health education Erica Payton conducted focus groups with middle school students and their parents, high school students and their parents, and young adult Black men, seeking to understand the effects of homicide and the factors that contribute to local violence.

Their next step is doing deeper research within family systems, and seeking input from key stakeholders – activists, clergy, educators, law enforcement, health care providers, local media, and elected officials.

Once they have developed a more complete picture of the systemic forces driving homicides in Greensboro, they plan to present those findings at a community forum and work with stakeholders to identify steps to reduce future violence.



The day after Smith Lee interviewed for her position at UNCG – where she would ultimately launch her Centering Black Voices Lab – she attended Lee’s Father Figure exhibition in NYC. Their meeting (left) was captured by Smith Lee’s husband, C.J. Lee.

In Smith Lee’s new project, she’s teaming up with YO! colleague Allette and Zun Lee (no relation), an award-winning visual artist, physician, and educator, to equip young Black men in Baltimore with skills in ethnography and photography, so they can create and share a more complete and nuanced narrative about their lives.

Local and digital exhibits of the young men’s images and personal stories will engage societal leaders and the public in dialogue about the root causes of poverty, and “deepen awareness about the pain and the promise of young Black men,” Smith Lee says. “By sharing these stories – of traumatic loss, resilience, and quests for economic mobility – our goal is to recast the narrative of Black male humanity in the national consciousness.”

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has backed her “Disrupting Dehumanizing Narratives of Black Men in Poverty” project with a highly competitive \$100,000 Grand Challenge grant.

It’s the right time for Zun Lee, who was named a Guggenheim Fellow this year. “I’ve kind of veered away from just purely making photos to moving toward the bigger question of ‘What is the importance of stories?’” he says. “Who tells the stories about whom? And who benefits from it and who is at a disadvantage from it?”



# PIVOT POINT

WE'RE IN THE BIGGEST PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY most living people have faced. Since March, campus researchers have had to pivot – to serve our most vulnerable, to seek answers to scientific questions generated by the pandemic, and to design new ways to carry out their research in a new world.

Researchers test toenails of North Carolinians who have battled COVID-19.

## RAPID RESPONSE

Dr. Diya Abdo calls COVID-19 “anything but the great equalizer.” As the pandemic unfolded in the United States, many people bemoaned quarantine and self-isolation, but as the director of the UNCG Center for New North Carolinians points out, those are luxuries that many others can't afford.

Immigrants, refugees, those in substandard housing, and low-paid and uninsured workers were among the groups most impacted by necessary closures. They were also more vulnerable to the illness due to employment and living conditions, and lack of health care and health care supplies.

As infrastructures stalled or failed, it became clear that communities served by UNCG centers were in the middle of Guilford County's COVID-19 “hot spots.” Directors and their staff had to move quickly, in ways outside of their usual “accompaniment model” of service.

In collaboration with Dr. Stephen Sills, director of the UNCG Center for Housing and Community Studies, Abdo secured several grants. But they weren't the typical grants, which might go toward case management and research. Instead, they were for helping clients meet their most basic needs: housing, food, and health services.

With support from the United Way's Virus Relief Fund, Guilford County, and the North Carolina Healthcare Association, their two centers – known as the CNNC and CHCS – have been able to offer food assistance, rent support, cleaning supplies, masks, hand sanitizer, and school supplies to more than 100 families. They've also provided educational materials, employment services, public health services, and interpretation services.

The pandemic has been particularly devastating for residents at risk for eviction. In response, the Greensboro Housing Coalition has established a rental assistance program and Eviction Resolution Project. The CHCS and Legal Aid of NC are collaborators on the project, which received \$900,000 in funding from the City of Greensboro and the Guilford County Homeless Continuum of Care.

In August, Sills says, courts were backlogged in North Carolina, with over 10,000 eviction cases. He expects even more massive numbers in January as the CDC moratoriums on evictions expire.

To try to get ahead of this pending crisis, the CHCS is also developing an additional eviction mediation program pairing tenants facing eviction with volunteer mediators, such as Elon law school students and UNCG students from the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies.



The CNNC's Natacha Nikokeza distributes tablets – donated by UNCG's Lloyd International Honors College – to kids at Glen Haven Community Center, to support distance learning during the pandemic. Story photos were taken between July and October 2020.

“They will attempt to negotiate between the tenant and the landlord, creating a payback plan but keeping people in place, so that they're not displaced during these times,” Sills explains.

Meanwhile, Abdo and her staff, many from refugee and immigrant communities themselves, continue efforts to meet basic needs.

“I think this is a test to our responsiveness,” she says. “This kind of direct service is hard. But to stretch and do that, despite the challenges, shows we have a great infrastructure for supporting refugees and immigrants in this city.”

Public health graduate student Tiarra Brown works as an afterschool program coordinator at the CHCS Cottage Gardens Resource Center, located in an apartment complex in east Greensboro.

While the in-person program is on hold, Brown is doing food drop-offs and has organized virtual tutoring, in addition to coordinating the provision of educational supplies, food gift cards, and rental assistance checks provided by grants.

“It's frustrating not being able to do in-person programming,” she says, “but I am incredibly proud to be a part of CHCS and the Greensboro community right now. We noticed a need, especially during the pandemic, and came up with ways to address it in a very a short amount of time.”





## NUTRITIONAL STATUS


Assistant professors Seth Armah and Maryanne Perrin are waist-deep in a project examining the interplay of nutrition and COVID-19 in our state. Their funding comes from the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory, as part of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act passed in March.

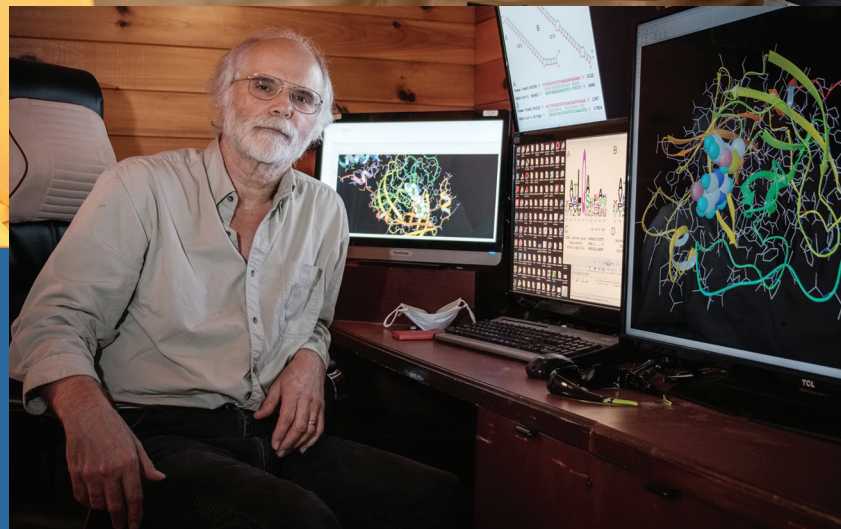
The researchers are looking at how micronutrient status affects the severity of COVID-19 symptoms, with a focus on zinc and selenium. Their inspiration came from a study from China, which found that regions with selenium deficiencies had higher COVID-19 mortality rates than other areas.

“That set our research on selenium,” says Dr. Perrin (top left). “Nobody was really looking at diet quality or nutritional status as a factor in symptom severity, and North Carolina is another region where the soil has lower selenium.”

Studies have shown that selenium supplementation, in combination with other treatments, improves antibody levels and promotes faster clearing of different viruses from our bodies, Armah says. Zinc also plays important roles in immune system function.

For the study, subjects who have had COVID-19 are interviewed about their symptoms and dietary intake, and have their selenium

 Selenium is toxic at high doses, the researchers warn, so don't use supplements without consulting a health care provider.



UNCG biochemistry professor Ethan W. Taylor is part of the team of researchers that identified a significant association between COVID-19 prognosis and regional selenium status in China. The essential dietary trace element has been found to be a factor in the incidence, severity, or mortality of various viral diseases. Dr. Taylor is currently studying the mechanisms behind these findings.

and zinc levels tested. Instead of doing blood samples, Armah and Perrin are using toenail samples that participants submit by mail. With the interviews performed remotely, they are carrying out their research in a completely contact-free manner.

The study should be complete by the end of the year.

“Currently we have a lot of people who have put their lives on the line, doing what they can to fight this battle,” says Armah (top right). “We are not medical professionals, so we cannot work at the front line. But there is something that we can do, and to be able to help fight this virus is very rewarding for us.”

## EARLY DETECTION

With community spread of the novel coronavirus occurring in nearly every country, presymptomatic transmission is perhaps the most intense challenge in public health worldwide.

A recent study in *Nature Medicine* posited that presymptomatic disease stages accounted for 44% of secondary case infections. There's a critical need for simple and reliable methods to detect the virus early during the incubation period and in asymptomatic patients.

Sensing the virus at such a stage – when viral particles are at very low concentrations – is a challenging task.

Current methods require nucleic acid amplification, explains UNCG assistant professor Tetyana Ignatova in the Joint School of Nanoscience and Nanoengineering. They're expensive, time consuming, require advanced expertise, and can't be made widely available at points of care – where patients are tested.

But what if we could do it in a different way: quickly, cheaply, and with high accuracy? Dr. Ignatova is trying just that, through a new NSF-funded collaboration with Penn State University and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

The team – comprised of nanoscientists, engineers, and virologists – is working on a device that uses magnetic nanoparticles to bind live virus molecules.

“A magnetic field will be used to concentrate the nanoparticles that have bound the virus,” Ignatova explains. “And they'll be designed to fluoresce,” or glow. Those steps, which she and doctoral student Kirby Schmidt are developing, will allow detection of the virus at very low concentrations.

“If we can manage this,” says Ignatova, “we can make the detection process much, much more efficient.” Because the test only senses live molecules, it could also reduce false positives from patients tested after the disease has run its course.

“The nanoparticles can attach to any type of coronavirus, not only the novel SARS-Cov-2,” Schmidt adds. “And it may be possible to detect other viruses this way. I am hopeful that this research will drive future detection methods.”

## AVATAR ACTIVATED

Kinesiology professor Jennifer Etnier is engaged in a \$3.4 million National Institutes of Health clinical trial on physical activity and Alzheimer's disease – a continuation of a 2013 study that showed exercise correlated with improvements in memory.

Her team is currently looking at the effect of exercise on middle-aged and older adults with a genetic risk of Alzheimer's disease. “If we could delay Alzheimer's by one to two years, the impact would be enormous from a public health perspective,” Dr. Etnier says.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted two crucial parts of the study: regular, guided exercise for participants and fitness and cognitive testing at regular intervals. To reinstate the first, they converted their exercise program from face-to-face YMCA sessions to a Zoom format, which Etnier says has worked well, especially for new recruits.

Since researchers gained approval to resume working with subjects on campus, fitness tests have been conducted in an environmental chamber, a room that can be completely sealed off and also has enormous ceiling fans turning over all air in the space every 17 minutes.



iGrow, an ambitious NIH-funded UNCG study, aims to track 300 pregnant mothers from their third trimester until their children are two, to identify prenatal and early life predictors of childhood obesity. When all in-person research came to a halt in March, the team had to pause data collection from 175 existing subjects as well as new participant recruitment.

This summer, they converted information-collecting to online formats and developed stringent new procedures for COVID-safe in-person data collection, modeling their operations after those being used by pediatric offices. After assessment by a review committee that included pediatricians, project operations resumed in mid-July. “Our researchers are wearing masks, shields, and ICU gowns and gloves, and screening our participants in the parking lot,” says Dr. Esther Leerkes, one of the project's lead researchers. “With our families coming to campus, we've heard pretty consistently that they felt really safe because of all the precautions we've been taking.”

But perhaps the biggest difference is how the four-hour cognitive test is conducted. Dr. Shin Park, a postdoc on the study, has an interest in AI technology. After experimenting with Google's text-to-speech generation technique, he decided to create an avatar who can function as a director for the test, decreasing contact between the researchers and subjects.

The avatar provides all necessary verbal instructions, so the researcher speaks far less, lowering the risk of transmission through expelled droplets.

With the avatar leading, the testing is more standardized and can now be carried out by a student or staff member with less training. It's an unexpected silver lining. Both Park and Etnier foresee using the avatar in the future, even after the pandemic ends.

But Etnier's favorite thing about the avatar is his approach. “Things will get better,” the avatar tells study participants. “So stay strong during this tough time. Although I don't produce respiratory droplets, I'm going to put on my mask because it's a rule at UNCG.”

And then, he puts on his mask.

by Susan Kirby-Smith • learn more [cnnn.uncg.edu](http://cnnn.uncg.edu) | [chcs.uncg.edu](http://chcs.uncg.edu) | [go.uncg.edu/nutrition](http://go.uncg.edu/nutrition) | [jsnn.ncat.uncg.edu](http://jsnn.ncat.uncg.edu) | [kin.uncg.edu](http://kin.uncg.edu) | [go.uncg.edu/hdf](http://go.uncg.edu/hdf)



# We've been here before

*How Black and independent politics drive change*



*Dr. Lenora Fulani, who made history in 1988 as an independent presidential candidate, spoke at UNCG in 2018.*

In the new afterword of Dr. Omar Ali's book, "In the Balance of Power: Independent Black Politics and Third Party Movements in the U.S.," Jacqueline Salit calls out the damage partisanship has done to American politics and American political culture.

"Today there is also a profound weakening of governing and political institutions, of parties and ideology and public trust," writes Salit, who was a major figure in the groundbreaking 1988 campaign of Dr. Lenora Fulani, the first woman and Black person to get on the ballot in all 50 states as a presidential candidate.

"The consent of the governed is slipping away. While the stranglehold of party loyalty is at an apex, the public desire for political freedom, for choice, for mobility, and for development among ordinary Americans is spreading."

Ohio University Press, which published the first edition of Ali's book in 2008, requested an updated second edition for this fall.

Ali, a historian of the global African diaspora, has been thinking a lot about political culture lately, and how it shapes and constrains our politics.

American political culture "is fundamentally based on a bipartisan system," he says, and "driven by ideology."

How we discuss societal problems, as well as how political – and then policy – responses are formulated to those problems, is

shaped by that culture. If you've ever had a Facebook discussion thread descend into partisan trash talking, you've seen this dynamic in action.

"We're made insane in this country, suspicious of differences, and closed-minded," Ali says. "The cure to that is creating new ways of being with each other, by being open and curious."

Many people are open to finding a new way to talk with each other about issues we face, he says, especially those among the roughly 43% of voters who identify as independents.

"Independents tend to be less driven by knee-jerk partisanship, which keeps people divided."

Ali's book explores the history of Black and independent alliances in America, which date as far back as the 1840s, when the abolitionist Liberty Party arose as part of the anti-slavery movement.

Those alliances still matter today.

After George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in May, Black Lives Matter demonstrators demanded reforms in Minneapolis and in scores of cities, under both Democratic and Republican leadership.

This year – seven years after the Black Lives Matter movement began – African American protesters were joined in those



*A 1973 voter registration drive at the Black Expo in Chicago*



*A 2014 protest in Chicago, decrying police brutality against Black Americans*

demands by many other people of color and White people. Even large corporations spoke out against racial injustice.

In the new edition, Ali documents how, just as in the past, these independent Black activists are finding themselves driving political and policy change. City councils from Austin, Texas, to Asheville, North Carolina, have reorganized policing and community services budgets. The deaths of Black people at the hands of police became a subject in the presidential campaign.

"If you look at any piece of legislation, you have to go back at least 20 years prior, to the movement-building efforts that led to the shifting of the culture, and the pressures that were mounted from the outside, to have people on the inside – elected officials – make changes to the law," Ali says. "African Americans, and Black independents in particular, have been at the forefront of every major reform movement in the nation's history leading to progressive changes."

by Mark Toszczak • learn more at [go.uncg.edu/ali](http://go.uncg.edu/ali) | [go.uncg.edu/in-the-balance-of-power](http://go.uncg.edu/in-the-balance-of-power)

# White working class blues go red

Working-class Whites surprised everyone in the 2016 election, right? News programs touted the unexpected proportion who voted for then-candidate Trump, making the difference in states like Pennsylvania and Michigan.

But if you go back to 2000 as the Clinton era ended, says professor of political science Charles Prysby, a shift had already begun.

Before, Democrats did significantly better among White working-class voters than White middle-class voters. By 2012, the tide had completely turned.

Dr. Prysby lays out this research in the new book "Rich Voter, Poor Voter, Red Voter, Blue Voter: Social Class and Voting Behavior in Contemporary America," published by Routledge.

While the trend was even more pronounced in Trump's favor in 2016, Mitt Romney also did better among working-class White voters than he did among middle-class White voters, says Prysby. "Even though Romney was an entirely different kind of Republican than Trump."

What happened? This voting demographic had been solidly Democratic since the 1930s.

No one factor is at play. It's partly issues like immigration, abortion, and gay rights, as White working-class voters in the last 20 years have become more conservative on social issues. White working-class voters also no longer see the Democratic Party as better on economic concerns. They're now more skeptical about the benefits of free trade. One of the Democrats' key issues of the 1990s was future benefits of NAFTA. It turned out that issue helped Trump with this demographic in 2016.

The media often get it wrong when looking at social class, as well, Prysby says. They usually use education to measure social class: individuals with college educations are middle class, those without are working class. But a lot of clearly middle-class and even upper middle-class voters lack a four-year degree. Bill Gates comes to mind, he notes.

Income is a better measure. But there are caveats: marital status matters, because a two-adult household likely has a higher income than a single-adult household. And take a close look at younger voters. It is difficult to measure social class for young people, as they may not have completed their education or started their career. A twenty-something law school student may be cash poor, but is hardly working class.

When the media say it's all about Trump's appeal, they're missing the full picture. "This shift in the relationship between social class and voting has been occurring throughout this century. It isn't just a Trump phenomenon. And I think it'll continue beyond Trump."

by Mike Harris • learn more at [go.uncg.edu/rich-voter-poor-voter](http://go.uncg.edu/rich-voter-poor-voter)



# HANDS-ON HISTORY

Most people see only the obvious at 442 Gorrell Street – a handsome, two-story frame house accented with lime green trim and encircled by a low wall of rough-hewn Mount Airy granite. Torren Gatson, an assistant professor of history, sees more. When he lays eyes on Greensboro's historic Magnolia House, he sees "a community vessel."

As the Magnolia House Motel from the late 1940s through the 1970s, the property was a safe haven for African American travelers in the Jim Crow era. The Green Book Motorist Guide, the resource for Black travelers recently made famous by Hollywood, listed it in several editions.

Here, close by Bennett College and N.C. A&T State University, the author James Baldwin stayed the night. So did Satchel Paige, Ike and Tina Turner, and Louis Armstrong, who is said to have had a fondness for the innkeeper's ham biscuits.

Dr. Gatson, in addition to his position in the academy, is a public historian. He revels in engaging with the community to learn the people's stories, history in the first person.

For instance, there's the kid who remembers riding his bike past the Magnolia House and seeing James Brown hanging out and playing with the neighborhood children. That kid was Samuel Pass, whose powerful childhood memories led him, as an adult, to buy the property and rescue it.

Today his daughter, Natalie Pass-Miller, is interim director of the nonprofit established to restore and preserve the property and celebrate its service to the African American traveling public. Equally significant is its role as a staging area for social action and the civil rights movement. It's this latter function that gets the public historian most fired up.

The Magnolia House, Gatson explains, played an elemental role in "the fight for civil rights" in Greensboro and Guilford County. It was a "bastion of culture for African Americans," he says, where Black people were welcome in the days before integration and racially mixed business and social functions. Owners Arthur and Louise Gist, who bought the 5,000-square-foot structure in 1949, opened the facility to meetings of the NAACP and other progressive organizations.

## ON THE PORCH

The front porch of a Southern home BA/C – before the advent of air conditioning – was as necessary for livability as a roof and window screens. This was true regardless of race or income. Useful in all seasons, the porch in summer was a place of cool respite for Black and White, rich and poor.

But the porch was particularly important, Gatson says, for those living in shotgun houses, some of the most modest Southern homes. He and Dr. Asha Kutty, his colleague in interior architecture, are studying porches in a shotgun house community in Wilson, North Carolina. The East Wilson Historic District had more than 300 of those houses, most built in the early 20th century. Today, the historically African American neighborhood has fewer than 90.

Gatson and Kutty will collect oral histories from current and former residents to gain an understanding of what transpired on the porch, a transition zone between the public street and the private interior, and what that meant. "The porch evolved to serve as a catalyst, a spearhead for community and culture," Gatson says. The pairing of a historian and an architect to explore this aspect of African American culture, he says, should result in "some truly unique work and rich perspective."



detail from the  
Fall 1956 Green Book cover





*Gatson and his graduate student collaborators examine archival photos with Natalie Pass-Miller (third from left). Students spent the day collecting memories and photos from older local residents and the library. Hands-on, community-engaged work is a hallmark of the Department of History's master's in museum studies program. Photo predates the COVID-19 pandemic.*

## CREDIT DUE

From 1619 onward, they constructed exquisite furniture, sewed fine garments, forged iron, worked leather and tin, and built seagoing vessels in the Southern states. Free or enslaved, Black craftspeople were highly regarded for the quality of their handiwork.

Examples of the artisans' creations that survive today – such as furniture by Thomas Day, the free Black North Carolina craftsman – are prized by museums and collectors. But Day, who remains well-known 150 years after his death, is an exception among Black craftspeople of that era. Far too many of his peers remain largely unknown.

The Black Craftspeople Digital Archive, or BCDA, seeks to change that. Gatson is co-director of BCDA. The initiative, which seeks to identify and celebrate Black craftspeople of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, was founded by his colleague Dr. Tiffany Momon, a public historian currently at Sewanee, the University of the South.

In June, BCDA's Instagram account grew from around 400 followers to nearly 20,000 in a matter of weeks, thanks in part to mentions on some highly trafficked websites. The surge, Gatson says, was a complete shock. This September, he and Momon launched the BCDA website.

"We know the South was built off of the hands of labor," Gatson says. "But those skilled craftspeople haven't been given the full weight and magnitude of attention that is warranted. I'm really honored to work on a project like this."

"Just the fact that the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP held planning, strategy, and logistical sessions at the Magnolia House," Gatson says, firmly establishes its place in history. The facility also hosted business meetings. Black Veterans of Foreign Wars met there, as did a Black Women's Democratic Club and other community groups.

"So, while it's a motel and a center for civil rights, we're also saying it's a community vessel."

The multi-layered history reflects a family invested in their community. Arthur Gist was a veteran. Ann, the couple's daughter, and another woman made headlines in June 1957 when they attempted to visit Greensboro's Whites-only, city-owned Lindley Park Pool.

Arthur and Louise's sons, Herman and Buddy, carved their own niches in the city's political and cultural history. Herman represented Guilford County in the General Assembly for more than a decade before his death in 1994. The late Buddy Gist's friendship with the jazz great Miles Davis led to UNCG naming its jazz studies program for the prolific artist.

Preserving historic sites and identifying artifacts of material culture infuse Gatson's work, on and off campus. In the classroom or in the field, he thrives on "community-engaged collaborative efforts, mixed with scholarship to produce impactful products." The deep dive into the Magnolia House gives his students, pursuing master's degrees in museum studies, the hands-on experience that is essential to their becoming public history practitioners.

Angela Thorpe, director of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, says the relationship between Gatson and the Magnolia House "can be a model for preserving other African American heritage assets." Thorpe, too, has strong connections to UNCG, where she earned her master's degree in history. "It's an honor," she says, "that the Magnolia House has been able to connect deeply with Dr. Gatson to do this critical historic preservation work."

by Tom Lassiter • Learn more at [go.uncg.edu/gatson](http://go.uncg.edu/gatson) | [his.uncg.edu/museumstudies](http://his.uncg.edu/museumstudies) | [thehistoricmagnoliahouse.org](http://thehistoricmagnoliahouse.org)

# A TIME TO ACT

**THEATER** courses through Professor Natalie Sowell's blood.

"Both my mom and my family were doing theater when I was really small," she says. "My mom taught theater classes – I was in a youth theater group. I don't really remember ever not doing theater. It's always been a part of the fabric of our lives."

In April, Sowell was named the new director of the School of Theatre, marking her return to UNCG after almost 20 years. In 2000, she attended the University for her MFA in theater for youth.

Sowell says she felt comfortable coming back to the minority-serving institution because she knew the administration would support the larger goals of equity and justice that run through her work.

"Being anti-racist is important to me," Sowell says. "I looked at the job advertisement, and it looked like the School of Theatre was clear about moving in that direction."

From directing plays centering often marginalized identities to performing as an African and African American folktale storyteller, and through residencies and workshops across the world, she has always been rooted in justice work.

A trained Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner, Sowell believes in the power of theater to create change, both on small and large scales. The practice's participatory methods, she says, unpack concepts like microaggressions, racism, and gender and sexual orientation. She's applied them in settings ranging from a Massachusetts jail to a Nigerian secondary school.

"It's a matter of being active," Sowell says. "Theatre of the Oppressed makes one come up with solutions and come up with how to enact them. To me, that's essential. To sit together and to step into the shoes of those with challenges and then collectively imagine and dialogue with what's possible."

Currently arts ambassador for Massachusetts' Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, Sowell also illustrates children's books and consults on the Doors to the World project, which promotes the use of global children's lit in the classroom. She's passionate about diversity – "representation matters." This work, she says, is about empowering young people of color.

"To feel confident in your voice and to be able to articulate when you don't feel seen – I think those things have to be taught when you're young."

And for those who are still striving to be heard, like many of the Black, Brown or LGBTQ+ students on campus, she hopes to act as an amplifier for their voices.

"I'm the first woman in this position in 100 years – and the first woman of color – so I think that the students are excited," Sowell says. "Students have said to me, 'We need someone who's going to listen to us. We need someone who's going to advocate for us.' ... I will be able to build where they have already started and take us forward."

by Sayaka Matsuoka • Learn more at [go.uncg.edu/sowell](http://go.uncg.edu/sowell)







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**PANDEMIC PROTOCOLS** With care and thoughtful practices in place to mitigate risk, campus researchers returned to their scholarly activities. Here, Dr. Joseph Santin and graduate student Nikolaus Bueschke examine neural cells responsible for breathing in hibernating bullfrogs. One day, their findings may benefit stroke victims or pilots flying in low-oxygen environments. Photo: Sept. 2020

