

EDU

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24

Making Math Personal

At the College of Education and City Academy's annual Math Symposium, high school students use math to demystify the social issues they care about most.

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From Classroom to Castaway

"Survivor" contestant, elementary school principal, and College of Education alum Sean Edwards reflects on his journey from Educational Leadership & Policy student to the wilds of Fiji.

08 **AI Has Entered the Classroom**

And it's not leaving. Two CoE professors explain why that's a good thing.



College of Education
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

EDU

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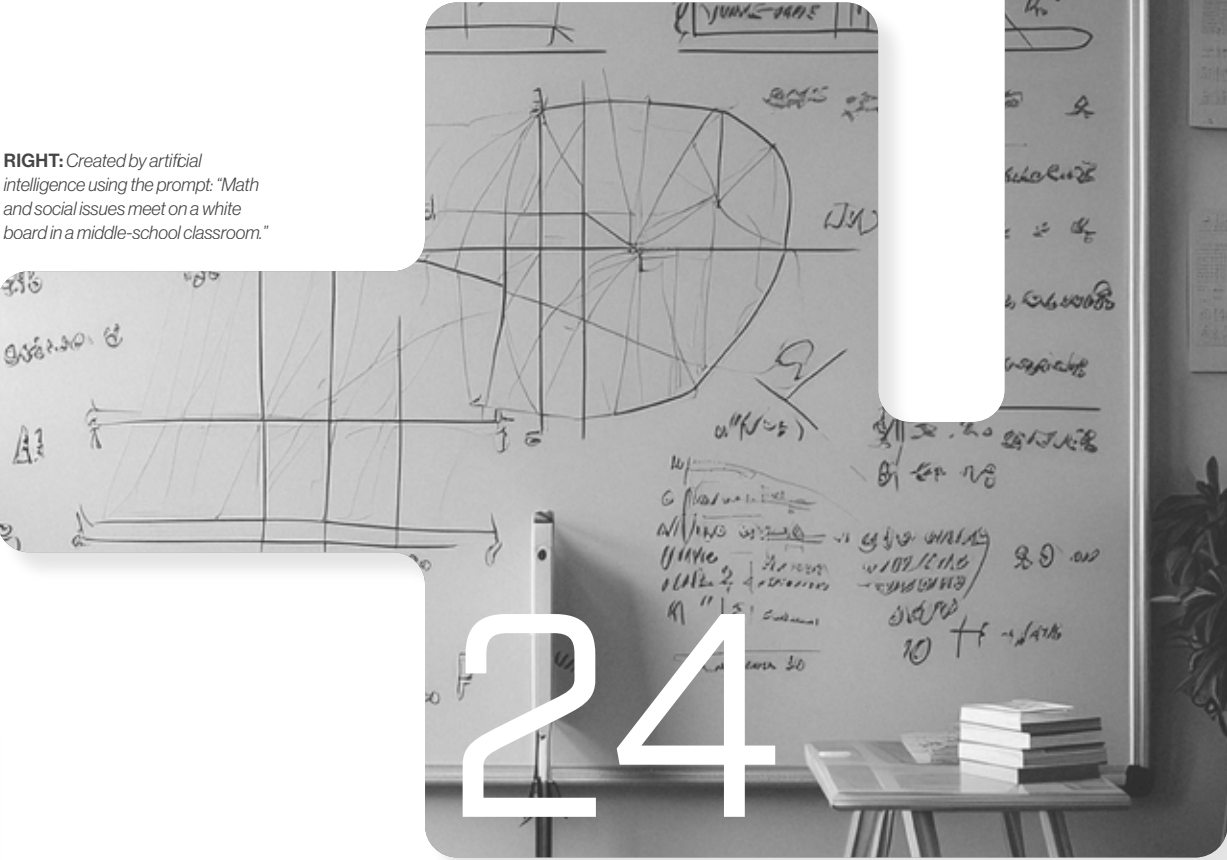
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RIGHT: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: "Math and social issues meet on a white board in a middle-school classroom."



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ABOVE: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: "A humanoid robot enters the classroom with curiosity and good intentions, ready to collaborate."



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"Survivor" contestant, elementary school principal, and College of Education alum Sean Edwards reflects on his journey from Educational Leadership & Policy student to the wilds of Fiji.

LEFT: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: "CoE alum arrives in Fiji to find the knowledge of his doctoral dissertation externalized as a beautiful school."

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FROM THE DEAN

TO OUR STAKEHOLDERS, PEERS, STUDENTS, AND COMMUNITY—

I am thrilled to introduce the third edition of the EDU Magazine. Just over a year into my tenure as Dean of the College of Education, I find myself continually energized by the accomplishments of our faculty, the promise of our students, and the ways our college creates lasting impact throughout the community. As the following narratives show, we believe that lasting societal impact begins with education.

Education is Impact

In partnership with City Academy, a public charter school in the heart of Salt Lake City, the College of Education hosted its third annual Math Symposium this spring with its highest turnout yet. Secondary math students presented on the social issues that matter to them most, all filtered through the lens of mathematics. The symposium grew out of a collaboration between ECS Professor José Francisco Gutiérrez and UITE alum Roger Quiñonez, current chair of the City Academy math department. We're proud to say that the executive director of City Academy, Sonia Woodbury, is yet another CoE alum. I am pleased to see how the event is garnering more attention around the valley, cementing itself as a powerful example of family involvement in mathematics education and demonstrating how mathematical inquiry can strengthen students' identities, as well as their connections to their communities.

Education is Progress

The best educators, mental health professionals, and K-12 higher education leaders meet students where they are. In the case of AI, it's no surprise that leading-edge scholars in our college are meeting the world where it is, too. Utah Education Policy Center Director Andrea Rorrer and Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology Chenglu Li engage with the AI boom head-on by asking some of the most pressing questions about its ethical and responsible in-classroom use. Turn the page to see how AI has entered the classroom and read more about why Rorrer and Li think that's a good thing. Through work like Rorrer and Li's, I believe the College of Education is positioned to make a significant impact on early AI literacy across the state.

Education is Community

Nothing brings me greater joy than watching CoE alumni shine in the community, whether that's in the Utah State Office of Education, Upward Bound programs throughout the Intermountain West, or on the small screen as a contestant in a beloved reality TV show, of which I myself am a not-so-secret fan. This issue profiles alumna and Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction Sydnee Dickson, who earned her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership & Policy and her M.Ed. in school counseling in the College of Education. She recalls how a graduate course in the College of Education was her first introduction to creating impactful policy. In this issue, we also honor the late William Walter Sullivan, who arrived at the U in 1969 and quickly distinguished himself in the College of Education, earning both a master's degree in Education Administration and a Ph.D. in Education. Sullivan has generously donated his beloved University of Utah regalia to the college community for future doctoral candidates who may not be able to afford their own regalia. Finally, we catch up with Educational Leadership & Policy graduate Sean Edwards, Ed.D., who is an elementary school principal in Provo and a former "Survivor" contestant. He shares his journey from classroom to castaway, as well as his advice for aspiring educational administrators.

Education is You

As our strategic planning process draws to a close this fall—the first comprehensive strategic planning process for the College in over 20 years—we are compiling the countless interviews, surveys, listening sessions, focus groups, and workshops into actionable steps to elevate the University of Utah College of Education both locally and nationally. Our plan mirrors the goals, aspirations, and priorities of CoE faculty and staff who lent their voices to us throughout this process. I look forward to what lies ahead for the continued growth of the College of Education, and I know that the plan's impact will spread across alumni, K-12 districts and schools, colleges, and universities, all built on the unique visions of the CoE community. To impact education, we must continue to act together.

Warmly,

Frankie Santos Laanan
FRANKIE SANTOS LAANAN
Dean



AI HAS ENTERED THE CLASSROOM

And it's not leaving. Two CoE professors explain why that's a good thing.



ANDREA RORRER
Professor of Educational Leadership
& Policy, Director of the Utah
Education Policy Center (UEPC)



CHENGLU LI
Assistant Professor of Instructional
Design and Educational Psychology

AS THE WORLD BEGINS its reckoning with publicly available artificial intelligence tools, College of Education faculty continue to do what educators do best: meet the field and students where they are. Andrea Rorrer, Director of the Utah Education Policy Center, a university research center housed within the CoE, and Chenglu Li, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology, are rising to meet the moment of AI both empirically and responsibly. Each one sees the potential of large language models (LLMs) to support research and enhance in-classroom learning through differentiated instruction.

For Rorrer and the UEPC team, AI is emerging as a research collaborator, while Li envisions AI as an in-classroom facilitator. Though they carry different nuances, each one's vision is integral to the College of Education's application of AI. Rorrer and Li's foci complement one another, strengthening both the CoE and wider university.

Rorrer and Li, along with CoE faculty Zac Imel and Anne Cook, are addressing the most pressing questions about AI tools in the field of education. How can we foreground the ethical and responsible use of AI in teaching and in research? How will the College of Education prepare the future workforce with AI literacy? How will we prepare future educators to incorporate AI into their classrooms both early and impactfully? What are the opportunities and challenges presented by current AI?

Their answers are optimistic: if we put in the work and take time to implement AI in responsible and ethical ways, it can be a valued collaborator and facilitator. As they note, AI will not upend the way students learn and do their work, rather, it can expand what the College of Education and academia already know about developing leaders, counselors, teachers, and scholars.

Though both Li and Rorrer's team with Rachel Barnett, Bill Altermatt, and Jeremy Acree at the UEPC are currently working with LLMs to support their research, Li's focus is on AI application in the classroom, where he sees AI functioning as a facilitator and peer for students. For Li, the success of AI in the classroom hinges on incorporating early AI literacy into core subjects like mathematics. One of his research projects, the Learning Engineering Virtual Institute (LEVI) project, uses AI with an aim toward doubling math learning progress for public middle school students in all socioeconomic groups. And the UEPC's focus is on leveraging AI as a research collaborator.

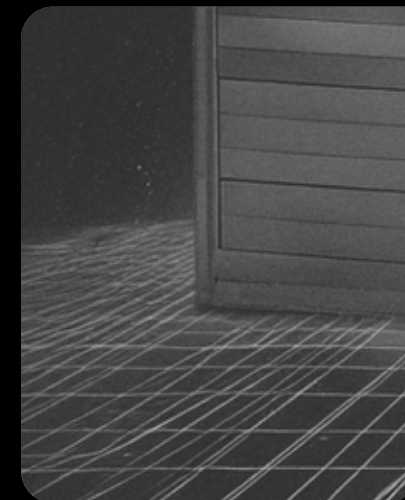
In both cases, Rorrer's service as chair of the university's One-U Responsible AI Initiative Future of Teaching & Learning working group makes it easy for her to see how the College's exploration, development, and use of AI aligns with the initiative's mission: advancing

AI to achieve societal good—all while protecting privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties, and promoting fairness, accountability, transparency, and access for all populations.

The CoE is positioned to impact early AI literacy across the state.



RIGHT: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: "Friendly 1990s computers look toward the future."



AI is no more cause for alarm than computers were in the '90s.

Anne Cook's work as director of the Martha Bradley Evans Center for Teaching Excellence also aligns with the One-U Responsible AI Initiative by providing AI resources for faculty and students. Cook is a Professor of Educational Psychology in the CoE.

In their approaches to AI, Rorrer and Li bring a critical eye to its capabilities. AI is not a panacea, a cure-all, or a stand-in for the critical thinking process. Getting over the magical or even "threatening" aspects of AI, and understanding the way it pieces information together behind the scenes, is key to a bright future with this learning tool. AI is no more cause for alarm than the computers that began to make their way into classrooms in the 1990s, says Li, who believes the College of Education is positioned to make a significant impact on AI literacy across the state.

AI as Collaborator: UEPC's Research-practice Partnership

Rorrer has served as UEPC's director for 18 years. The UEPC began investigating and reviewing AI solutions as sources of support for the center's mission about eight years ago. Currently, there are 20 staff affiliated with the UEPC full-time, performing research evaluation, technical assistance, and providing professional learning. The nature of the center's work has made it an ideal place to explore how responsible AI may inform how they do what they do.

"We have found that it is imperative to be able to consistently scan the environment, not only for innovations relevant to our current work and research topics, but explore the technologies that may support the work we do," Rorrer says. While Rorrer's team believes there are benefits to be had from AI, they also knew that AI and large language models take time to learn, understand, and responsibly apply. "They're not for the faint of heart."

One of Rorrer and Li's colleagues, however—Zac Imel, Ph.D., Professor of Educational Psychology and Chief Science Officer at Lyssn—successfully used LLMs to co-found Lyssn in 2017, well before the current AI boom. Lyssn is an AI-powered assessment platform that improves interactions between behavioral health practitioners and their clients. "What's interesting about Lyssn is that it combines Imel's research expertise in counseling with his and colleagues' vision for AI" says Rorrer.

As AI use continues to be called for in the field of higher education, the UEPC developed its guiding principles for AI use in research, evaluation, and technical assistance support. A research practice partnership with Leah Voorhies, Assistant Superintendent of Student Support and State Director of Special Education at the Utah State Board of Education, has allowed the UEPC to use AI for a research project. Using their guiding principles, including maintaining human-AI collaboration, the

UEPC has been exploring the question, “How can AI support the research that we’re doing in ways that contribute to the rigor and the relevance of the research and support our mission as a center to ensure that research is actionable and impactful?”

These questions led Rorrer’s team to Anthropic’s AI tool Claude, which uses LLMs with AI in part intended for research purposes. As Rorrer and her team well know, a large language model like Claude can certainly be learned, but it also “takes learning, training, and critical reflection. You have to engage in creating, understanding, and interrogating what AI tools can do, what they do, what they don’t do and, most importantly, keeping at the forefront the ethical use and development of AI.” Essentially, Rorrer wanted her core team members to create a shared understanding of “what AI was beyond the hype.”

And for the UEPC team, AI has potential as a collaborator. It is not a repository in which to drop data, come back, and copy from the results. “We have to be intentional about how we’re going to use the AI,” Rorrer says. “We must have transparency about how we’re using the AI to transform the data and then interrogating the whole process throughout. We keep the principle of ethical and responsible use at the center of all that we’re doing. And now, we are using a multi-method approach to verify findings, which again centers the humans and AI as collaborators.”

At the time of this article’s printing, the UEPC and the Utah State Board of Education’s research report was due out in late August, 2024.

AI as Facilitator and Peer: Li’s implementation of AI in the Classroom

Chenglu Li, Ph.D., joined the College of Education in the fall of 2023 as an Assistant Professor of Instructional Design and Educational Psychology, and he has been using AI in his graduate classrooms from day one. Li brought his research on generative and artificial

intelligence technologies to the college, including large language models, which are the backbone of natural language generation. He continues to integrate LLMs into his research project LEVI, funded by the University of Florida at Gainesville, where he earned his doctorate degree and wrote his dissertation on conversational AI applications in algebra learning.

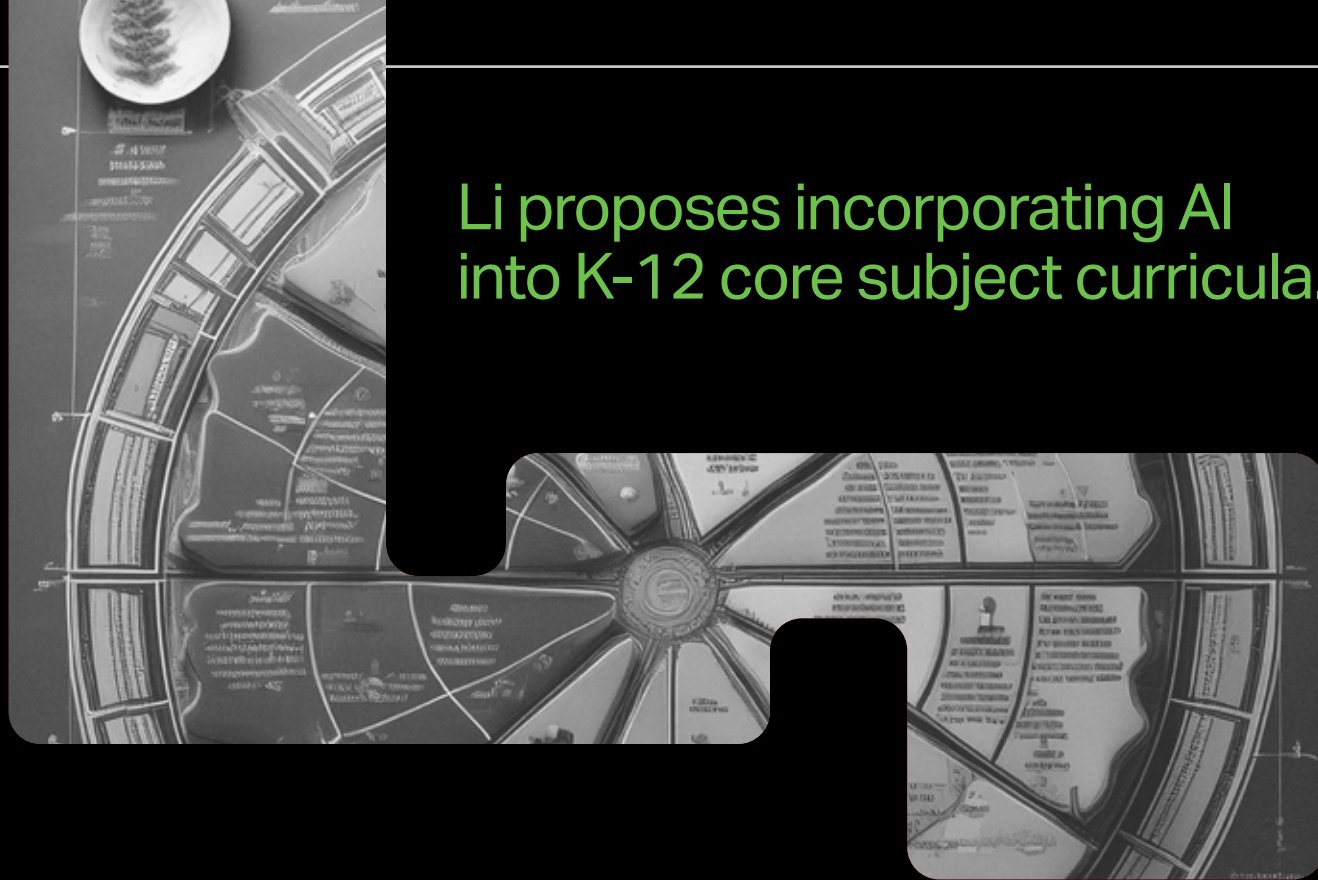
After his first year teaching at the U, Li continues to be optimistic about the ways teachers and students can harness AI in the K-20 classrooms. By training future teachers, school counselors and administrators to view AI as a learnable skill rather than a threat, by exploring and getting creative with AI, and by stressing the importance of early AI literacy, he believes we can prepare future educators to introduce AI in K-12 classrooms in much the same way teachers of the 1990s were prioritizing the introduction of computing.

Li proposes doing so by incorporating AI into K-12 core subject curricula. Right now, AI might be something students encounter in after-school programs, extra-curricular activities, or summer camps, and not all populations have access to such programming, he explains. That’s why integrating AI into K-12 core subjects is key. When the College of Education begins to prepare future teachers in this way, Li believes we will discover that AI validates and affirms human knowledge; it’s not a new way to do critical thinking—rather, it underlines what we already know about learning theories.

“In the curriculum we developed for LEVI, we explore ways that we can further involve students in K-12 settings to learn about AI by actually integrating AI into the core subjects of K-12,” he says. The LEVI project’s goal is to double math learning in middle-school math students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, and its guiding question is, “how do we teach our students math while teaching them AI concepts? What kinds of things can they learn about machine learning in a math classroom?”

RIGHT: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: “K-12 curriculum map showing AI integration in core subjects.”

BELOW: Created by artificial intelligence using the prompt: “Data with an AI system displayed on a large screen.”



Li proposes incorporating AI into K-12 core subject curricula.

Li offers this example: students learning statistics can discover all the techniques applied in machine learning that are borrowed straight from statistics. “We might use matrix vector operations, which appear in machine learning and relate directly to how the machine actually sees things, like faces. And it can tell whether we are happy or sad. But how does the camera actually tell? Using matrix vectors to help students understand this seems to achieve two things at once,” he explains.

Li recognizes that the first step to integrating AI into core subjects is preparing teachers to effectively and responsibly use AI themselves. To start, teachers must simply begin using AI, to demystify it. “AI is not perfect,” Li says. “It’s not there yet. Lots of people are worried about AI taking their jobs, AI ruling the world; I think that’s just too far away from reality. And I don’t think that will actually happen. There is a big community behind AI, making sure that the AI platforms we use are ethical and responsible,” like Rorrer and Cook have done in their work with the university’s One-U RAI Initiative.

Again, the question teachers should be asking themselves isn’t “how can AI help students?” It’s more about looking for the ways that AI backs up “old-school” learning theories, how students actually learn. “AI just provides the context,” Li says. “It provides a new kind of resource for students to learn from, but how students actually learn still falls back to learning theories that we have been researching for many, many years.”

In his own classroom, Li encourages his students to use generative AI to understand its limitations as well as its advantages. He encourages using the “chain of thought” technique in writing prompts, which involves asking AI to output its steps or its “thought process” rather than outputting a finished product. Li also requires students to include Chat GPT prompts in their submissions, as we have done with our AI-generated images throughout the fall 2024 edition of EDU Magazine.

Overall, Li thinks AI will play the role of “facilitator” in the classroom. AI can brainstorm with teachers about lesson plans and summarize prior errors based on data from previous class sessions. AI can perform predictive analytics. In terms of post-teaching, it can be helpful in terms of automated assessments; instead of teachers grading open-ended questions, AI can look for patterns in student responses. Teachers can even use AI to activate students’ prior knowledge and as a diagnostic tool, he explains.

Li believes the College of Education can play an impactful role in AI literacy levels across the state. “We have this unique mission in the College of Education: better preparing the next generation to be effective, responsible, and innovative users of AI. One of the most important aspects that we want to address is, ‘how do we prepare the future workforce with enough AI literacy so they actually know what AI is from a high-level perspective, and how they might actually use it in their work? What are the opportunities and challenges of using the current AI, and what might be directions for the future they can work on to make AI better?’ And I think that’s something we should continue to address in the College of Education.”

With faculty like Rorrer and the UEPC team, Li, Cook, and Imel making strides at a university and college level, the College of Education is positioned to meet the world where it is, mired in a cultural reckoning with AI, and ready to innovate in ways that leave a lasting impact with our graduates.

—JANE STRINGHAM



ZAC IMEL
Professor of Educational Psychology,
Co-Founder of Lyssn

Educational Psychology Professor Zac Imel co-founded the AI-driven healthcare technology company Lyssn. Developed well ahead of the AI boom, Lyssn leverages over a decade of research to provide on-demand training modules with expert-level feedback. The platform grew out of an academic question, “Could spoken language AI be trained to understand empathy?” and today uses gold-standard evaluation tools to improve fidelity to evidence-based practices.

Imel received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2009 and completed his pre-doctoral internship at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, where Lyssn is headquartered. Here in the College of Education, Imel’s research focuses on promoting quality mental health treatment, specifically psychotherapy.

Lyssn currently serves child welfare and human services agencies, CCBHCs, crisis response/988 systems, and various behavioral health and educational programs. Lyssn helps clinicians improve their skills, support their staff, and enhance patient satisfaction.

As Imel states, “Lyssn is focused on unlocking the black box of therapy using reliable and validated AI technologies and supporting therapists to help make sure people get the best behavioral health care possible.”



For Rorrer and the UEPC, AI is becoming a true collaborator.

TOP OF MIND

Faculty and Student Award Highlights

William A. Smith, Ph.D.

Professor of Education, Culture, & Society

Distinguished Professor of Education, 2024

Chief Executive Administrator for the Huntsman Mental Health Institute (HMHI)

Jon M. Huntsman Presidential Endowed Chair

William Smith stands to receive his Distinguished Professor designation at the University of Utah Faculty Awards Dinner on April 23, 2024.

William A. Smith

A Trailblazer in Education and Mental Health

Distinguished Professor

NOT ONLY HAS PROFESSOR SMITH made substantial contributions to the field of education, but he also holds eminent positions across the college and our wider campus community. The most recent is his 2024 designation as Distinguished Professor of Education.

The prestigious rank of Distinguished Professor is reserved for select University of Utah faculty—less than 5 percent of total tenured professors—who garner national or, in the case of Professor Smith, international recognition for scholarly excellence.

Professor Smith is internationally renowned for coining the framework of Racial Battle Fatigue. He articulates the framework as a systemic race-related repetitive stress injury that illuminates the profound and widespread nature of racial stressors in affecting the wellbeing of racially minoritized peoples.

Smith is the first African American in University of Utah history to receive the elite Distinguished Professor designation and only the second person in the College of Education. Professor Smith's academic contributions and leadership roles have significantly shaped the educational landscape, leaving an indelible mark on the University of Utah and across the fields of Education, Psychiatry and Ethnic Studies—all disciplines in which he teaches at the U.

Chief Executive Administrator for the Huntsman Mental Health Institute

Professor Smith concurrently holds the prominent role of Chief Executive Administrator at the Huntsman Mental Health Institute (HMHI) at the University of Utah. His work involves orchestrating the institute's expansive projects at community, institutional, and national levels—including the transformative "Love, Your Mind" campaign, for which he was featured this spring on MSNBC's "Morning Joe." The campaign is designed to connect deeply with the nearly 40% of American adults likely to encounter mental health challenges but who do not seek help. It was developed in partnership with the Ad Council.

Presidential Endowed Chair

The Jon M. Huntsman Presidential Chair in the School of Medicine represents the apex of academic honor at the University. It endures as long as the institution itself and signifies permanent homage to the brilliance of its holder—Professor William A. Smith—as well as the legacy of the benefactor who established it. For Smith to be bestowed with the Presidential Chair further cements his distinguished stature within the academic community and only serves to further underscore his profound impact on the University and the broader scholarly world.

—JANE STRINGHAM

Robert Violano

Outstanding Teacher of the Year

ROBERT VIOLANO, honored as the University of Utah's Outstanding Teacher of the Year for 2024, epitomizes dedication and excellence in education. As a full-time eighth-grade integrated science teacher in the Canyons School District, Violano's journey from student to mentor and educator is deeply rooted in his passion for teaching and nurturing future educators.

Violano earned two master's degrees from the University of Utah: one in Education and another in Physics Teaching. His path into education was not just about imparting knowledge but also about fostering a

supportive environment for aspiring teachers. This commitment led him to mentor students in the Emma Eccles Jones Teach for Utah / Noyce Scholars program, including standout student Jessica Pike.

Reflecting on his mentoring experience, Violano admires Jessica's brilliance and kindness, highlighting her potential to excel in the teaching profession. His motivation to support her through her student teaching journey stems from his early career challenges and a firm belief in reducing turnover within the teaching profession. Recently earning an endorsement in educational coaching underscores his dedication to bridging the gap between theory and practice in education.

Violano's teaching philosophy emphasizes real-world application and creating a supportive learning environment that goes beyond textbooks. His goal is not only to educate but also to inspire a new generation of passionate educators.

Receiving the Outstanding Teacher of the Year award was a humbling experience for Violano, who views it as recognition of his dedication rather than exceptionalism. He cherishes the nomination by Jessica, whose letter highlighted his profound impact on her teaching style and career trajectory.

With a decade of experience at Midvale Middle School, Violano has woven his passion for education into multiple aspects of his life; he has also served as a student teacher mentor, a snowboard instructor, and a mountain bike coach. These roles reflect his commitment to fostering growth and learning.

When asked about the award's impact on his career, Violano remains committed to public education, emphasizing its intrinsic value despite the challenges it faces. His focus remains on fostering a supportive community within education, where teachers and students thrive.

—LILLY MARTINESCU

ROBERT VIOLANO
*Midvale Middle School Science
Teacher and Teacher Coach*

*Outstanding Public School
Teacher, 2024*

Photo courtesy of Robert Violano



Alex Hyres heads to the podium at the U's Faculty Awards Dinner on April 23, 2024.

PHOTO BY HARRIET RICHARDSON

Alex Hyres

Early Career Teaching Award

SINCE JOINING the College of Education faculty in 2018, Alexander Hyres' accomplished scholarly background in US history and social justice has enriched the entire CoE community. His research explores the intersections of race, education, and social justice, with a focus on historical and contemporary educational practices. He received the Early Career Teaching Award from the CoE back in 2022 and we were delighted to applaud Hyres as he received the same recognition at a university-wide level just two years later.

University of Utah Early Career Teaching awardees demonstrate the highest distinction in teaching, shown by activities that result in increased learning by students—such as the development of new teaching methods or other innovations. They are tenure-line faculty with at least three full years but less than eight years of service at the U, with less than ten years of service overall at any university. Hyres was one of six 2024 awardees across the university.

Hyres' teaching philosophy centers on creating learning environments where all voices can be heard, empowering students to critically engage with social issues and work towards positive change in their communities. One piece of advice Hyres received in graduate school now informs his own teaching practice: "Write the story." To him, this means simplifying the research and writing process by getting out of your head and getting to work.

In addition to his outstanding teaching, Hyres is also recognized for his scholarly contributions to the field of education. Hyres' groundbreaking work has been published in numerous academic journals and has garnered attention for its insightful contributions to the field.

He is now revising his doctoral dissertation into a book, "Protest and Pedagogy: Charlottesville's Black Freedom Struggle and the Making of the American High School." It is under contract with the University of Georgia Press and forthcoming in spring, 2025.

—JANE STRINGHAM

ALEX HYRES, PH.D.
*Assistant Professor of Education,
Culture, & Society*

*University of Utah Early Career
Teaching Award, 2024*

Lauren Barth-Cohen

Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award



LAUREN BARTH-COHEN, Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Utah, is embarking on a new academic journey this fall. Holding a Ph.D. in Science and Math Education from the University of California, Berkeley, and a B.A. in Physics from Smith College, Barth-Cohen has a rich background in science education. Her work spans the learning sciences and Physics Education Research (PER), focusing on student and teacher learning in the physical sciences. She has published extensively in prestigious journals and secured over three million dollars in funding from the National Science Foundation.

Barth-Cohen was honored with the prestigious Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award (Distinguished Scholar Fellowship, Israel) for the 2024-2025 academic year. She made the difficult decision to decline the award. "I am honored to have been selected for a Fulbright U.S. Scholar Award for the 2024-2025 academic year. My dream has been to collaborate with colleagues at the Technion in Haifa. After much deliberation and with a heavy heart, I declined the award. With the ongoing violence in the Middle East, I decided this wasn't the right time to travel there with my family," she explains.

Instead, Barth-Cohen will spend her sabbatical at Uppsala University in Sweden, collaborating on Physics Education Research. "I'll be on sabbatical this year, and I've made alternative plans to spend the fall at Uppsala University in Sweden where I'll be working with collaborators in Physics Education Research," she shares. This opportunity aligns seamlessly with her research interests and provides a conducive environment for scholarly growth.

Barth-Cohen aims to gain fresh insights into physics education and explore innovative teaching methodologies through her work in Sweden. Her long-term career goal is to enhance science education by integrating research findings into classroom practices, ultimately improving student learning outcomes in the physical sciences.

As Barth-Cohen prepares for this new chapter, her dedication to advancing science education continues to inspire her colleagues and students. We look forward to the valuable contributions she will undoubtedly make during her time in Sweden and beyond.

—LILLY MARTINESCU

Alyssa Lee

Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Award



IN A CELEBRATION of academic achievement and global citizenship, Alyssa Lee, a student from our own CoE community, has been awarded a Fulbright U.S. Student Program scholarship for the 2024-2025 academic year. Lee graduated cum laude with an Honors B.A. in Elementary Education in 2023 and has been a teacher in Granite School District for the last two years. Now, she is set to travel to Taiwan to be an English Teaching Assistant (ETA).

"I am honored to receive a Fulbright award and so excited for everything I will learn by living and teaching in another country," Lee says. This competitive award provides her with the opportunity to immerse herself in Taiwanese culture while sharing her expertise in English language instruction. And her own passion for learning extends beyond the classroom; Lee is currently studying Mandarin and looks forward to gaining firsthand experience that will broaden her global perspective. "This experience will strengthen my ability to serve students in my future classrooms, whether they be in the U.S. or abroad."

Lee's journey towards this achievement was supported by her involvement in the Honors College, where she completed a senior honors thesis and her dedication to academic excellence and cultural exchange blossomed.

As a Fulbright ETA, she will join a cohort of American educators who play a pivotal role in classrooms abroad, not only teaching English but also serving as cultural ambassadors for the United States.

As Lee prepares for this transformative experience, our CoE community celebrates her accomplishments and looks forward to the positive impact she will undoubtedly make as a Fulbright scholar. Her story is a testament to the power of education to transcend borders and create meaningful connections across the world.

In the words of Lee herself, "I am eager to embark on this journey of learning and discovery. It's an incredible privilege to represent my country and my college while learning from and contributing to the vibrant community in Taiwan."

—LILLY MARTINESCU

Melody Apezteguia

Assistant Principal of the Year



MELODY APEZTEGUIA'S journey in education is a testament to her dedication and passion for both teaching and leadership. Recently honored as the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals (UASSP) Assistant Principal of the Year, Apezteguia's career spans over three decades, marked by her commitment to student and teacher success. Apezteguia is a current student here at the College of Education, pursuing her doctorate in Educational Leadership & Policy.

Apezteguia began her career as a mathematics teacher, spending six years in Idaho Falls before moving to Houston, Texas. During her eight years in Houston, she not only taught but also served as a department chair and team leader, stepping into leadership roles that would shape her future in education. Her return to Utah, motivated by a desire to be closer to family after her mother's passing, led her to American Fork High School, where she has spent the past 16 years, including seven as an assistant principal.

In her current role at American Fork High School, Apezteguia's influence extends beyond administrative duties. She plays a pivotal role in student engagement, frequently meeting with students and staff to build meaningful relationships. Her approach emphasizes listening, understanding, and including students in problem-solving processes, fostering an environment where students feel valued and heard. Her belief that relationships are foundational to effective education is evident in her daily interactions and long-term impact on the school community.

Receiving the UASSP Assistant Principal of the Year award is a recognition of Apezteguia's exceptional

leadership and dedication. Reflecting on the honor, she emphasizes the collective effort of her team, acknowledging that such achievements are the result of collaborative work. Her philosophy underscores the importance of teamwork in achieving educational success. She stated that it's "a great honor to represent that group of people whether it was teachers at that time or assistant principals now."

Looking ahead, Apezteguia is excited about the potential to influence educational policy and practice further. She aims to leverage her new knowledge and experiences to advocate for equity and inclusion in education, areas she is deeply passionate about. Her vision includes potentially transitioning to a role in higher education, where she can continue to inspire and mentor future educational leaders.

The CoE holds a special place in Apezteguia's heart, not just for its rigorous academic environment but also for its commitment to fostering a sense of belonging. She speaks highly of her experiences there, highlighting how the university's emphasis on research and innovation has influenced her approach to educational leadership. Apezteguia appreciates the CoE's "idea of intersectionality" and their view of education, which aligns with her own values of continuous improvement and lifelong learning.

Apezteguia's story is one of resilience, growth, and dedication to education. Her impact on students, teachers, and the broader educational community exemplifies the qualities celebrated by the UASSP Assistant Principal of the Year award.

—LILLY MARTINESCU

BY THE NUMBERS

Faculty

85

10

Faculty Members

New Faculty

Awards

Association & Foundation

State Government

Other

Federal Government

11

10

7

9

Activity

113

7

44

Articles (Peer Reviewed)

Books

Book Chapters

134

87

Conference Papers and Proceedings (Refereed)

Invited Talks/Keynotes

Award Dollars

Association & Foundation

State Government

Other

Federal Government

Total: \$8,735,807

\$1,353,335

\$1,369,554

\$2,154,060

\$3,858,858

2023–2024 Academic Year

The College of Education had a total enrollment of **776 students** for the academic year.

Graduate Students

Total: 528 Graduate Students

312

216

Master's Students

Doctoral Students

59%

Full-Time

90%

Residents

3.9

Average GPA

Majors

33% Educational Psychology

19% Special Education

30% Educational Leadership & Policy

13% Education, Culture, & Society

5% School Psychology

Undergraduate Students

Total: 248 Undergraduate Students

248

Undergraduate Students

68%

Full-Time

90%

Residents

3.425

Average GPA

Majors

73% Elementary Education

16.1% Educational Psychology

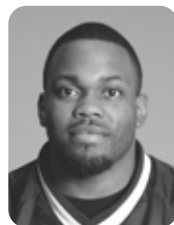
10.9% Special Education

NEW FACULTY



Brendan Schuetze, Ph.D.
Educational Psychology

Schuetze is a learning and cognitive scientist who researches computational models and cognitive science to improve educational outcomes. Previously, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Potsdam, Germany. He holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from The University of Texas at Austin. In Utah, he looks forward to the mountains, the theatre scene, and Real Salt Lake games!



Jeremy Horne, Ph.D.
Education, Culture, & Society

Horne holds a Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin's Department of Education Policy and Planning. His research examines links between education policy and Black students' lived experiences within educational systems predicated on their inhumanity. In a recent study, Horne utilized qualitative and spatial methods to examine the psychic effects of gentrification on historically Black school communities.



Omi Salas-SantaCruz, Ph.D.
Education, Culture, & Society

Salas-SantaCruz holds a Ph.D. in Education from UC Berkeley. Their work centers on decolonial and Latinx trans feminisms, focusing on trans* and queer of color space-making and resistance. Growing up as a trans-fronterizx along the Tijuana-San Diego border informs their research, teaching, and life practices. Their current project explores race, Latinidad, trans-inclusion epistemology, and practices of being.



Miguel Trujillo, Ph.D.
Education, Culture, & Society

Trujillo holds a Ph.D. from the University of Denver. As the associate director of University Neighborhood Partners, he brings his strong connections with school leaders, local community organizations, state offices, local youth, and policymakers to the CoE.



Samantha Ross-Cypcar, Ph.D.
Special Education

Ross-Cypcar holds a Ph.D. from Oregon State University in Kinesiology. Her research critically evaluates the measurement of physical activity and related health behaviors for national monitoring of health among children with disabilities. Ross-Cypcar brings seven years of experience coordinating community-university partnered, adapted physical activity programs to support and grow the U-FIT family.



Lyndsey Aiono-Conradi, Ph.D.
Special Education

Aiono-Conradi's research focuses on creating inclusive environments for students with extensive support needs. Aiono-Conradi advocates for education that reflects students' cultural values, fosters belonging, and supports well-being. A former assistant professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and Board-Certified Behavior Analyst, she has also taught special education in Salt Lake City and Washington County.



Christina Peters, Ph.D., BCBA-D
Special Education

Peters, Ph.D., BCBA-D, is an Assistant Professor in Applied Disabilities Studies and a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst with over 15 years of experience. She holds a Ph.D. in Behavior Analytic Psychology from the University of Nevada, Reno. Peters specializes in traumatic brain injury rehabilitation, serves on the ABAI executive council, and volunteers for the Behavior Analysis Certification Board®.



Peggy Kong, Ed.D.
Educational Leadership & Policy

Kong holds an Ed.D. from Harvard University and comes to the College of Education from Drexel University, where she was an Associate Clinical Professor. Her research interests include comparative and international education, equity in education, family and community, Chinese education and society, and the sociology of education.

COMING OCTOBER, 2024

THE INAUGURAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Dean's Distinguished

SPEAKER SERIES

"Salinas is a rising star in academe, [and] an expert on Latinx students in College."

— Diverse Issues in Higher Education

Cristóbal Salinas Jr., Ph.D.
Professor

*Educational Leadership and Research Methodology
College of Education, Florida Atlantic University*

Dr. Salinas has published more than 80 manuscripts in print, including 6 books, and has delivered over 250 lectures. His prolific writing and research illuminate the importance of understanding and addressing Latino/a/x student identity and development. Salinas is frequently sought after by media outlets such as CNN, NBC News, NPR, Telemundo, National Review, Chemistry World, Good Morning America, and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Dr. Salinas is the founder and former Editor-in-Chief for the journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity and currently serves as Editor-in-Chief for the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education.

"Futuristic research."

— The New York Times



*Photo courtesy of
Salinas's social media*

BOOK-SHELF

Teleconsultation in Schools

A Guide to Collaborative Practice



AARON J. FISCHER, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, co-authored the book "Teleconsultation in Schools: A Guide to Collaborative Practice" (APA, 2024). It is a vital resource for school psychology professionals exploring teleconsulting. As education systems

continue to evolve post-COVID, the demand for effective remote consultation services has surged. This guide provides a thorough introduction to delivering effective and efficient teleconsultation.

The book outlines a clear framework for teleconsulting, covering essential aspects such as building rapport, identifying issues, developing treatment plans, and conducting ongoing evaluations. The authors present a step-by-step approach that ensures professionals can establish productive relationships with educators, students, and families. The inclusion of case examples and online infographics makes complex concepts accessible and practical.

One of the book's notable strengths is its focus on troubleshooting both technical and client-related difficulties, ensuring practitioners are well-equipped to handle challenges. Additionally, the authors address potential barriers to service, such as accessibility, and discuss the promising future of teleconsultation in schools.

Teleconsultation in Schools is an indispensable read for school psychology professionals seeking to enhance their remote consultation skills. It equips them with the necessary tools and knowledge to support educators and students effectively in an ever-changing educational landscape.

—ANAIS CORRAL

Disability, Intersectionality, and Belonging in Special Education

Socioculturally Sustaining Practices



SANDY SMITH, Assistant Professor (Clinical) of Special Education, co-wrote chapters 8 & 9, "Socioculturally Sustaining Practices" and "Educational Practices to Acknowledge and Incorporate Students' Sociocultural Identities and Experiences" in the book "Disability, Intersectionality,

and Belonging in Special Education." This insightful work provides an innovative perspective on special education, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing all identities and experiences of students with disabilities through an intersectional lens.

The book prepares educators to use socioculturally sustaining practices, curricula, and instruction, empowering them to meet the needs of disabled individuals and their families. By highlighting the intersections of disability with race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers, the authors advocate for a holistic approach that values each student's unique contributions.

Addressing systemic and historical social injustices in special education, the book critiques the traditional, limited approach to cultural perspectives often found in special education training. It challenges educators to move beyond superficial acknowledgments of cultural differences to truly inclusive practices.

Practical strategies and real-world examples demonstrate how to create supportive environments and overcome common barriers to implementing these practices. The book also emphasizes collaboration, advocating for partnerships between educators, families, and communities to ensure culturally responsive support for students with disabilities.

"Disability, Intersectionality, and Belonging in Special Education" is a crucial resource for anyone involved in special education. Promoting sociocultural competence and equity provides the tools and knowledge necessary to support and celebrate identities of all students.

—ANAIS CORRAL



MAKING MATH PERSONAL

City Academy Students Shine at the third annual Math Symposium

THE THIRD ANNUAL City Academy Math Symposium, organized by the College of Education and City Academy, a secondary charter school in the heart of Salt Lake City, continues to showcase how mathematical inquiry and analysis can strengthen students’ identities, as well as their connections to their communities. This year, over 120 attendees strolled the Sorenson Arts and Education Complex as 50 middle and high school students presented on topics that mattered to them most—all filtered through the lens of mathematics—making 2024’s symposium the biggest one yet.

Lead symposium organizers include José Francisco Gutiérrez, Ph.D., assistant professor of Education, Culture, & Society, and College of Education alum Roger Quiñonez, chair of the City Academy Mathematics Department. Gutiérrez and Quiñonez first conceptualized the symposium to foster connection and interdisciplinary learning among students and their families.

Gutiérrez explains how mathematics has historically been a difficult learning area for families—even traumatic, and certainly assimilatory. “Folks who grew up in another era may still have memories of violence and isolation associated with math learning,” he says. “That’s still in the DNA of math education.”

Gutiérrez and Quiñonez’s work challenges a history of family rupture at schools through mathematics, education, and putting in the time to build relationships that generate change. “We see the benefits of doing this work from the kid side and from the family side. Students learn about social justice and advocacy. They

learn to communicate their ideas to their families and the general public,” says Gutiérrez. And, perhaps the best part, parents get to see their children shine in unexpected ways.

At the symposium, mother Jocelyn E. Dolor remarked, “I love this event - this is my second time attending. It is a wonderful chance for students to practice their public speaking,” and leads to the development of both academic and communication skills.

Her son’s project addressed a pressing question that many of us share: “Is There a Way We Can Restore The Great Salt Lake?” And his presentation poster was the result of months-long, in-classroom preparation directed by math teachers at City Academy.

Empowering Through Discovery
One special education math teacher, Lillian Scoville, participated in this year’s event for the first time. Looking back on the months leading up to the event, she recounts how her students’ projects began with a brainstorming session last December. She encouraged her students to focus on sociocultural issues that mattered to them personally, with an aim toward empowering students and helping them to take ownership of their learning.

I marvel at how students share with such vulnerability.

ABOVE: Roger Quiñonez, chair of the City Academy Mathematics department, and Professor Gutiérrez pose at the symposium.

RIGHT: City Academy students mill about as the third annual Math Symposium gets underway.

Teachers create spaces that amplify student voices, where students can explore issues important to them.



“They became more interested in the mathematical aspects of it all because they got to choose something meaningful to them,” Scoville says. She explains that while some students were initially hesitant, most ended up embracing the opportunity to explore topics deeply relevant to their lives and environments, not unlike the choice to address efforts to restore the Great Salt Lake. This year’s symposium featured a rich range of additional research topics, including the effects of vaping on teenagers, mental health awareness, food security, and homelessness in Utah.

Building Skills for the Future
The symposium required students to apply mathematical tools to their chosen real-world problems. Scoville emphasized the importance of understanding data and graphs, encouraging her students to interpret and tell stories through their findings. Scoville described how students with different levels of understanding and abilities occasionally faced difficulties in narrowing down their research questions and comprehending complex data. It was her priority to ensure that each student could contribute to the event meaningfully, and at their own level. In the end, across proficiency levels, she saw students make significant strides in their ability to analyze and present data.

Scoville feels the event itself was a transformative experience for City Academy students and their families: “They had to step up, talk with intelligence, and take pride in their work,” she observes. “I feel

like it was valuable for the students to see that they can understand complex situations and that they have someplace to go in their understanding.” She adds, “I think it helped them to gain some confidence.”

For Gutiérrez, “Observing and interacting with students and teachers [at the symposium] is truly one of the bright spots of my year. . .I marvel at how students share with such vulnerability. I’m grateful that I get to support the amazing teachers at City Academy. They work hard to create spaces that amplify student voices, where students can explore issues important to them.”

Looking Ahead
As this annual event garners more attention in the College of Education and local school districts, it is cementing itself as a powerful example of family involvement in mathematics education. With the College of Education’s funding and support, organizers hope to strengthen and grow this partnership into a long-lasting tradition that promotes the University of Utah’s goal of increasing its community presence.

Reflecting on this year’s symposium, Scoville expresses excitement for future iterations. She plans to introduce “data days” throughout the upcoming school year, where students will regularly analyze graphs and charts to build their analytical skills incrementally. Additionally, she intends to develop a clear rubric to guide students in self-assessment, ensuring they understand their progress and areas for improvement.

But the real success of the symposium lies in students reaching their own goals and mastering their projects, even beyond their initial understanding of their chosen issue. As Scoville’s and Gutiérrez’s reflections show, fostering critical thinking and empowering students to explore their passions not only enhances their learning but also prepares them to contribute thoughtfully to their communities. It showcases math education as a powerful catalyst for personal and societal transformation, paving the way for a brighter, more informed generation.

—ANAIS CORRAL & JANE STRINGHAM



- LIST OF 2024 POSTER TITLES (PARTIAL)**
- “How Vaping Affects Teenagers Through Everyday Life”
 - “What Is Food Security? Why Isn’t This Issue Solved Yet?”
 - “Is There A Way That We Can Restore The Great Salt Lake?”
 - “Human Trafficking”
 - “Furries - Good or Bad?”
 - “Evolution of Animal Testing”
 - “Unhoused People In Utah”
 - “Anorexia Among Teenagers”
 - “Global Warming”
 - “Pollution: Homes vs. Corporations, Which Makes More?”
 - “What Is Whaling? Why Are Whales Important To The Environment?”
 - “What Can We Do To Prevent The Thwaites Glacier From Melting?”
 - “What Is TikTok and Why Should We Want to Keep It?”
 - “How Does Air Pollution Affect Adults in SLC, Utah?”
 - “Which Teaching Styles Affect Student Engagement The Most?”
 - “Satellites and Space”

ALUMNI PROFILES

William Walter Sullivan

A Legacy of Educational Excellence and Dedication



ABOVE: Sullivan at work in his office, early on in his career. Photo courtesy of Sherri Sullivan.

RIGHT: Photo courtesy of Sherri Sullivan.

THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH'S

College of Education proudly honors the late William Walter Sullivan, Ph.D., a remarkable alumnus whose contributions to education have left an enduring legacy. Sullivan, who served as the Associate Vice President for Retention and Outreach at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), passed away on September 25, 2023. His dedication to educational access and student success is a testament to the values he upheld throughout his life.

Educational Journey and Early Beginnings

Sullivan's path in education began in the fall of 1969 when he arrived at the University of Utah from Chicago. He was part of a cohort of students recruited to diversify the university following significant events in collegiate athletics. Sullivan quickly distinguished himself in the College of Education, earning both a master's degree in Education Administration with a specialization in cultural foundations and a Ph.D. in Education, focusing on curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on social and behavioral sciences.

His commitment to helping all students attain college access was evident early in his career. In 1972-1973, he worked as a summer recruiter for the Upward Bound Program, where he drove around Salt Lake City engaging with students and their families and encouraging them to pursue higher education. Sullivan often used his own resources to ensure these students had appropriate attire for their new academic environment, reflecting his belief in the importance of self-confidence and presentation.

Career and Contributions

Sullivan's career in education was shaped by his focus on college access and student support. After earning his degrees, he began teaching at West High School in Salt Lake City, a position he secured through the robust recruitment efforts of the university. His work at West High School and later at UNLV showcased his ability to inspire and support students from all communities and backgrounds.

Throughout his tenure at UNLV, Sullivan was known for his innovative approach to retention and outreach. He was instrumental in writing numerous grants and established programs that positively impacted over 25,000 students. His work extended beyond the classroom, influencing policies and practices that promoted belonging and support for disadvantaged students.

Personal Reflections and Legacy

Paul Ross, Ph.D, Sullivan's college roommate and lifelong friend, shared fond memories of their time at the University of Utah. He recounted their shared experiences in Austin Hall, the camaraderie among the group of Chicago students, and Sullivan's leadership in various initiatives, including supporting the election of the first Black student body president, Grover Washington.

"He always had that drive to help."



He always had that drive to help.

Sullivan's wife, Sherri, emphasized his lifelong commitment to helping students succeed: "He would use his own money" and donations he had gathered to help these students who came from poorer backgrounds and buy them new clothes, so they "would look cool," just like college students. Sullivan's legacy is further honored by the establishment of the William W. Sullivan and Sherri B. Sullivan Endowment and Scholarship at UNLV, ensuring that his impact on education continues for future generations.

Honoring His Memory

In a gesture that encapsulates Sullivan's enduring connection to the University of Utah, his family has donated his cherished U cap, gown, and hood to the College of Education. This regalia, which Sullivan proudly wore to numerous UNLV functions, will be gifted to future graduates for use in their hooding ceremonies, allowing them to honor his memory and continue his legacy of excellence and dedication to education. It also brings full-circle Sullivan's early efforts to help students dress for success in job interviews and academic environments.

In addition, the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) has changed the name of the Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach to The William W. Sullivan Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach. As a result of his many contributions over the years, the NSHE wanted to honor his hard work through this center.

The College of Education is proud to tell Sullivan's story and count him among our growing number of impactful alumni.

—LILLY MARTINESCU



ABOVE: Photo courtesy of Sherri Sullivan.

RIGHT: Dickson connects with students at lunchtime. Photo courtesy of Dickson.



ABOVE: Photo courtesy of Sherri Sullivan.

Sydnee Dickson

A Data-Driven Path from Counselor to Superintendent

UTAH SUPERINTENDENT

and College of Education alum Sydnee Dickson credits her success to 'data-driven' grad programs in both School Counseling and Educational Leadership & Policy in the College of Education.

With over four decades dedicated to public education in Utah, Dickson, Ed.D., has made an indelible mark on the educational landscape. From humble beginnings in a rural community to serving as the Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction, her career is a testament to her dedication to students and educators alike.

Dickson's journey in education began in earnest after she graduated from the University of Utah with a master's degree in School Counseling. This foundational experience equipped her with the skills and insights that would guide her throughout the remainder of her career. Her later pursuit of a doctorate in Educational



Leadership & Policy in the University of Utah College of Education further solidified her expertise and prepared her for the visible leadership roles she would assume.

Throughout her 43-year career, Dickson has worked across diverse roles in education, including teacher, school counselor, principal, district administrator, and ultimately, the State Superintendent. Her work has been pivotal in mentoring teachers, developing educational policies, and championing initiatives that support all types of communities. But in each role, she is guided by passion and her desire to make an impact.

"People always ask me, 'how did you get here?' and I would just say that I'm led by the passion at the time. I see a need. How can I grow and impact that need? And that thought process has led me to different degrees and opportunities."

Dickson's education began in a two-room schoolhouse where her grandmother was her teacher and her community numbered no more than 100 people. This early experience instilled in her a deep appreciation for education and the varying contexts in which it occurs. When her family moved to the larger town of St. George, Dickson continued her educational journey and eventually made her way to Utah State University. There, she discovered her calling in education, pivoting from initial interests in psychology and law to a passionate commitment to teaching and counseling.

Dickson's academic path was characterized by determination and a willingness to embrace challenges. She worked diligently to earn scholarships and support herself through college. Her leadership roles in student organizations and advisory councils during her time at Utah State University honed her skills and prepared her for a dynamic career in education.

After obtaining her master's degree in School Counseling from the University of Utah's College of Education, Dickson's career took off. She recalls the data-driven nature of the program, which emphasized statistics, problem-solving, and listening skills. These competencies proved invaluable throughout her career, from her early days as a school counselor at Murray High School to her tenure as a principal and district administrator.

Encouraged by colleagues to pursue administrative roles, Dickson earned another master's degree from Brigham Young University and eventually a doctorate from the University of Utah. Her doctoral studies in the College of Education Educational Leadership & Policy program deepened her understanding of how to create impactful educational policies. Influential professors like Andrea Rorrer provided critical support and guidance, shaping her approach to educational leadership.

She recalls an early doctoral course where a College of Education professor described the 'sausage-making of policy,' which compares the process of lawmaking to the unsightly process of sausage-making. "I just thought that was fascinating," she says. "I kind of got hooked and started thinking about how policy impacts education specifically, but also what goes into making good policy."

When reflecting on her proudest achievements, Dickson emphasizes the individual students she has helped along the way. Whether supporting a student through a

Dedicate an hour each day to professional development and seek meaning and growth in every educational experience.

difficult time or helping them realize their potential, these personal connections have been the most rewarding aspect of her career. Even in her current role, where she influences policy on a macro level, the goal remains the same: to create opportunities and improve outcomes for students.

Dickson advises aspiring educators to stay passionate and focused on their mission. Teaching, she acknowledges, is challenging and not driven by financial rewards but by the desire to make a difference. She encourages graduate students to dedicate an hour each day to their professional development and to seek meaning and growth in every educational experience.

Dickson credits the University of Utah with providing a comprehensive and human-centered education that has been integral to her success. The focus on data-driven decision-making, leadership models, and practical application has informed her approach to educational leadership. Courses and professors that emphasized the human experience and the use of data to enhance it have had a lasting impact on her career.

Sydnee Dickson's journey from a rural schoolhouse to the highest educational office in Utah illustrates how a solid educational foundation and a commitment to personal growth can lead to a fulfilling and impactful career. The College of Education is proud to count her among its distinguished alumni!

—LILLY MARTINESCU



LEFT: Photo courtesy of Dickson.

From Classroom to Castaway

The Inspiring Journey of Sean Edwards, Ed.D.

WHEN YOU MEET SEAN EDWARDS, principal of Canyon Crest Elementary School and College of Education alum, his warmth and enthusiasm are immediately evident. But what you might not guess is that this dedicated educator has recently added "Survivor castaway" to his impressive list of accomplishments by participating in season 45 of the CBS reality show "Survivor" in 2023. In this feature, Edwards shares his journey from the halls of the University of Utah to the wilds of Fiji, demonstrating how his background in education prepared him for the adventure of a lifetime.





I finally felt ready to put myself out there and take a risk.



A Passion for Education

Edwards's journey began in central New Jersey, near Princeton, where he grew up with his two sisters. His older sister Elaine, who has significant disabilities, inspired his early interest in special education. While still in high school, he worked at an after-school program for students with autism. This formative experience ignited his passion for the field.

"I started working at an after-school program for my sister's school, which serves students with autism specifically," Edwards recalls. "That's what got me into education."

Edwards pursued his bachelor's degree in special education at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo. During his studies, he worked as an instructional assistant at a school for students with autism, further solidifying his commitment to education. As a new graduate, he taught special education at Timpview High School in Provo, Utah. But his career took a temporary detour when he embarked on a two-year service mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Las Vegas.

When Edwards resumed teaching at Timpview High School, he decided to pursue a master's degree in special education, again from BYU. His academic journey didn't stop there; he went on to earn a certificate in education administration from Utah State University and later a doctorate in Educational Leadership & Policy from the University of Utah College of Education.

"I loved my time in the Ed Leadership program at the U's College of Education," Edwards says. "It shaped me in profound ways and prepared me for the complex challenges of educational leadership."

The Call of Survivor

A lifelong fan of the CBS reality TV show "Survivor," Edwards vividly remembers watching the first season with his family. "I've loved 'Survivor' since season 1 in 2000," he says. "I always thought it would be amazing to be a castaway and play the game."

While watching season 41, Sean finally felt confident enough to apply. "Jeff Probst's call during the finale of season 40 really struck me," he explains. "I finally felt ready to put myself out there and take a risk."

Edwards submitted his application video in March of 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraged by his husband to follow his dreams. It didn't work. But he persisted, refining his approach and reapplying until he received a call back in August, 2022. By Spring, 2023, he found himself on the beaches of Fiji as a contestant on "Survivor" 45.

ABOVE: Sean before heading to the island. Photo provided by Sean Edwards from CBS.

LEFT: Sean at the reunion show. Photo provided by Sean Edwards.



Building relationships and understanding different perspectives were crucial in 'Survivor.'

LEFT: Sean Edwards and Matt Doane, UEPC Research Associate & Study Coordinator, at their wedding. Photo provided by Sean Edwards.

Lessons from the Island

Transitioning from elementary school principal to "Survivor" contestant was a significant shift, but Edwards found that his skills as an educator were vital in the game: "My career in education helped me empathize with others and see the bigger picture. Building relationships and understanding different perspectives were crucial in 'Survivor.'"

And Sean thrived on the challenges: "I loved them more than I expected," he admits. "Even though I wasn't the biggest physical threat, I held my own and gained a lot of confidence."

You may remember Edwards's emotional departure from the game in episode 4. Reflecting on the experience, he acknowledges the regret but also the valuable lessons learned: "I made a mistake by asking to be voted out, but it taught me about resilience and the importance of learning from our errors."

Bringing Survivor Skills Back to School

Returning to his role as principal after his "Survivor" adventure, Edwards has a newfound appreciation for his work. "The experience made me grateful for my role in education," he explains. "It also gave me a unique platform to connect with my students and community."

Edwards's journey on Survivor also highlighted his commitment to representing the LGBTQ+ community: "Being visible as an LGBTQ+ person, especially in a conservative area, was important to me," he says. "Survivor allowed me to show that we can thrive and be resilient."

Advice for Aspiring Educational Leaders

For those interested in pursuing educational leadership, Edwards offers valuable advice: "Shadow various administrators and understand the complexities of the role. Know your educational philosophy and what you stand for. And find a strong program—like the University of Utah's nationally recognized Ed Leadership program—that can provide the foundation you need."

—LILLY MARTINESCU



RIGHT: Sean Edwards's graduation at the University of Utah. Photo provided by Sean Edwards.

The State of the Field

2024 Convocation Speech to the CoE Graduates

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION GRADUATES, if you're not already asking yourself this question, I can guarantee it's on its way: "Wait, what? How is it that I find myself in a role or future roles that are by their very nature transformative? How is it that I have or will have the privilege and sometimes hard luck, to lead people, foster learning, and build trust, belonging and success across the state and beyond?"

I vividly remember my own U of U undergraduate commencement ceremony in 1984, sitting in that enormous Huntsman Center and feeling simultaneously a huge sense of accomplishment and a very uncertain vision of what my next steps would be. No job lined up, no idea what to do next but ecstatic that the student life was over.

And I vividly remember my doctorate commencement in this very hall in 2006. My graduate experience and studies fueled by all those years in between: interviewing for new jobs, clarifying real desires, solving wicked student issues, crying with colleagues, growing professionally and personally and taking leaps into new roles and responsibilities.

Whether you are in the undergraduate camp, the masters camp, the education specialist camp, or the doctoral camp, you did it! I salute you all.

Now to start with a statement of the obvious: The field of education is under fire and facing critical student issues we've not seen before.

How many of you are currently employed in the education field? You know it; you see it; you live it every day. Students are struggling more than ever with their mental health. In fact, mental health concerns now beat academic and financial concerns in driving students to consider leaving college. According to an EAB survey, 22% of high school students named "Not Mentally Ready" as their reason for opting out of college altogether—an 8% increase from pre-pandemic times. For those who

Locate your why. You will need it.

do attend college, as many as three in four students are now saying that they considered leaving college at some point over the last six months due to emotional stress.

The pandemic also accelerated an already downward trend of proficiency levels among students. Many students missed crucial classroom experiences or faced challenges with remote learning, creating gaps in their educational foundation. The National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend Assessment recorded a five-point drop in average assessment scores from 2020 to 2022—the largest drop ever recorded.



Deneece G. Huftalin

President of Salt Lake Community College, 2014-2024

Ph.D. in Educational Leadership & Policy, 2006

And external pressures are mounting as well. Public education systems are being scrutinized and micromanaged, legislatures are intervening in governance and curriculum, parents are questioning your professionalism, politicians are decrying your purpose and worse, defaming your practices. To say the education climate is suffering is an understatement.

In fact, I was recently in Washington DC enjoying a dinner with two presidential colleagues. I shared that I had been invited to address you at this commencement and I asked them what advice they would give you all. The first words out of one of their mouths was, "run!" She was semi-serious.

I say this not to scare you or make you question your hard work, but to acknowledge the difficulties you will face and the frustrations and weariness you may find yourself wrapped within.

That's when you remember the "why." And you shift from, "Wait...what?" to, "Wait...why?"

Locate your why. You will need it.

You are or will be in a role in which you create the space for people to think, you create the space for democracy to thrive, you build and nourish the environments where integrity, science, empathy, curiosity and constant learning can flourish. We need you in these spaces more than ever before; standing your ground, encouraging dialogue, acknowledging the identities and cultures of those you teach...not to divide but to UNITE.

ABOVE: Deneece G. Huftalin addresses CoE graduates at Convocation on May 3, 2024.

So, to help you keep that why close to your heart and provide support as you traverse your career, let me share a few ideas and quotes, which have guided my work over the past ten years and which I hope may guide yours.

Adopt Positive Restlessness

One of the criticisms of public and higher education is the pace with which it moves and its interest in maintaining the status quo and reinforcing class structures. There's a lot of praise and attention given to innovation and entrepreneurship in our curriculum, especially at the college level, but in reality, it is often hard to enact in the institutions in which we lead. I encourage you to approach your work with a positive but critical eye—not to change for change's sake, but to identify where some of the sacred cows live and interrogate the why behind those actions or processes.

The data are clear that those who graduate from high school and complete some postsecondary credential are more likely to realize upward mobility, earn better wages, have access to healthcare and be happier than those who don't. And yet, we still have a significant percentage of students who don't graduate from high school and even more that choose not to go to college. While the college age population is going up in Salt Lake County, the college age going rate is going down. In fact, national data shows that of those high



ABOVE: An elementary education graduate holds her diploma high as she crosses the stage to shake Dean Laanari's hand.

school students not attending college, the percentage of students who cited "college is not worth the cost of attending" as their reason moved from 8% in 2019 to 20% in 2023. You all can change that trajectory; but you won't do it without adopting positive restlessness as a framework. Dare to try new things; lead with an eye toward closing achievement and college going gaps and resist those who hang onto or fiercely defend practices that have no evidence of working.

Every year during my SLCC presidency, I have chosen a quote to kick off the year and ground our work together as faculty, staff and students. And I'm pulling three of those today to share with you. History is full of wise poets, activists, historians and writers, and I've often sought out solace and wisdom by reading diverse texts.

So the first. As you face the divisiveness and plurality of your environments, hold true to Wallace Stegner's view

of culture: "culture is a pyramid, to which each of us brings a stone."

All strong organizations care about culture...the culture of belonging, the culture of care, the culture of learning and community. And unless you've literally been hiding under a rock for the past eight years, you have undoubtedly witnessed the weaponization of culture in our country. Partisan politicians and privatized media outlets have turned cultures against each other with fear, misinformation, stereotypes and fringe thinking disguised as fact.

But I hope it's clear to you as educational leaders and scholars that each of us contributes to the culture of a community and that diversity within culture allows it to build stronger and uniquely. We are stronger when we reject the stereotypes and fears thrust upon us about "certain cultures" and instead create spaces where all are welcome, heard, considered, respected and ultimately contribute to the learning environment we hope to surround ourselves in.

Salt Lake County demographics are rapidly changing as are the state's collectively. Whether you will serve in rural Utah or Washington County or the Wasatch Back, your school, college or organization's cultures will be ever evolving. For instance, SLCC is now an Emerging HSI, given the growth of Latinx students accessing our offerings.

Many of our local schools already serve diverse racial and ethnic populations with numerous languages present in the classrooms and families. The structures of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion all intersect and create stronger learning environments if we acknowledge them as not limiters or dividers but as assets. With the recent passage of HB261, we now have some limits on how we can signal belonging and intervene for success, but it is essential we do that. We do want all students to succeed, and we know that not all students have the same preparation, support, language skills or financial resources. As I have shared widely throughout my presidency, not all FTE's are equal.

Your school cultures need support and attention. Your role will undoubtedly bring with it difficult negotiations and various views and perspectives about how to approach and use that structural diversity. Honor all students and parents and help them honor each other.

We create stronger foundations when we accept the stones that all of us...students, faculty and staff...bring to our spaces; we learn, we are shaped and we shape each other.

Congressman John Lewis, despite all of the oppression and violence around him, consistently stood up against injustice. His words, "You must be brave, bold and courageous and find a way, to get in the way" capture his commitment to adopting positive restlessness. He got in the way at segregated lunch counters; he got in the way of discriminatory voting practices, he got in the way of police officers and mobs who were violently denying him the right to peacefully protest. His entire life was dedicated to getting in the way of injustice.

Many of you will never have to literally get in the way of another group who is trying to oppress or harm. Some of you will. But as leaders, educators, and scholars I think it's important for us to remember Congressman



PHOTO BY JANE STRINGHAM

Lewis' words for the spectrum of action they invite. Getting in the way can happen on the tumultuous streets during a protest, or in a living room where you gently urge someone to complete an application for financial aid and enroll in college as the first in their family to do so. You can get in the way by reading, listening, understanding facts and then challenging others to consider more civil and peaceful conversations toward a better, more just solution. You can get in the way by referring a student to a tutoring center, or by mentoring a new principal, or advancing a new policy that will dismantle previous biases.

The congressman was right that you need courage; but it's clear to me that you wouldn't be graduating today if you hadn't been bold and brave at other times in your life. I encourage you to call upon the mettle you've shown during your time earning this degree and "find a way, to get in the way." Seek out opportunities to improve the lives of others. Look for ways to connect with your neighbors, families and communities. Promote understanding, belonging, and peace wherever you can. Keep an open mind and be committed to lifelong learning and growth. Most importantly, never miss a chance to stand up for what is right.

And when, in the midst of your career you find yourself tired and weary of some of the issues you are facing, consider David Whyte's advice:

"The antidote to exhaustion is not rest, it's wholeheartedness..."

This goes back to finding your "why." There are countless examples throughout history of people who have found the necessary reserves to prevail despite deep and powerful defeats. People who have acted through sheer passion to conquer evil, power through failure and rise above defeat buoyed by what lies within their heart. Think of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters. Think of Nelson Mandela. These are those who were inspired to counter negative forces with their own more powerful ones: love, passion, freedom, the sanctity of life.

As you graduate today and continue on with your education—your career, this singular journey of yours—I encourage you to pay attention to your sources of

energy. Let's do it right now. Close your eyes and think of a time when you were fully engaged, fully connected to what it was you were doing, whether it was debating an issue, or performing a certain skill, or embedded in a particular environment or place; a time when your body and mind were connected and humming along as though you could have gone on forever. That is wholeheartedness. And that is an unlimited source of energy which, if tapped and nurtured, can propel and sustain you.

My sense is that this goal you have achieved today, this culmination of many hours of thought and writing, and confusion and clarity was at least partially driven by a deeper source connected to your heart: your passion for learning, your commitment to your family, your boundless curiosity and motivation to grow. These desires within you quietly fueled your late night study sessions, and countered your disappointing, frustrating setbacks along the way. Your wholeheartedness beat out your exhaustion; and it will continue to do so as long as you continue to pause long enough to reconnect with it.

As I formally retire from education, a career that has blessed me in so many countless ways, I am thrilled to look out over this crowd and see the next generations of leaders prepared to help transform lives, families, this state and the world.

—DENECE G. HUFTALIN

The antidote to exhaustion is not rest, it's wholeheartedness.

ABOVE: Dean Laanan and President Huftalin connect after Convocation with a show of U pride.





PHOTOS BY JOHN W. LANDFAIR

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