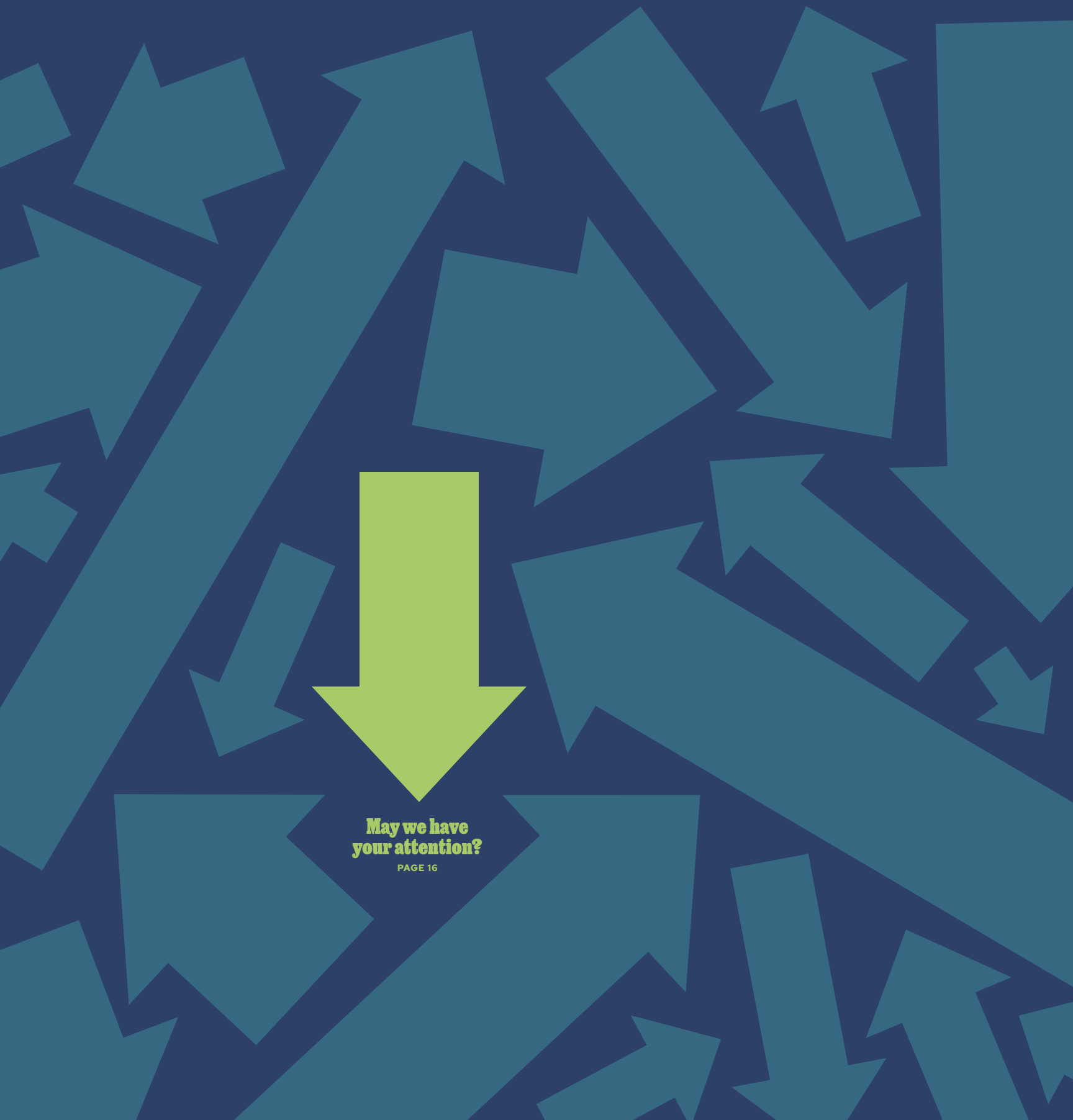
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON COLLEGE OF LETTERS & SCIENCE

SPRING 2026

Letters&Science



May we have your attention?

PAGE 16

Golden oyster mushrooms have escaped cultivation captivity and become a prolific invasive fungal species in the Midwest. Aishwarya Veerabahu, a botany PhD candidate, is researching their spread and impact.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF AISHWARYA VEERABAHU

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DEPARTMENTS

FEATURES

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BRICK

L&S alumni TJ Driver (left) and Zach Nasgowitz are the entrepreneurial minds behind Brick, a tool to help you set boundaries with your phone.

#WeAreLS

The Winter Olympics may be over, but the love of curling lives on. Both UW–Madison and the College of Letters & Science are home to a surprising number of amateur curlers, including L&S Dean Eric M. Wilcots.

@UWMadisonLS February 26, 2026

When the sun comes out, Badgers show up. We definitely know how to make the most of a beautiful day!

@UWMadisonLS March 10, 2026

Winter Carnival weekend delivered plenty to see on and around Lake Mendota. That standout igloo was built from hand-cut ice blocks by our L&S Dean's Ambassador Henry Fries … incredible work.

@UWMadisonLS February 9, 2026

This University Roundtable session in Union South featured some of the students who make up the SoulFolk Collective, a research group in the Department of African American Studies that's conducting an oral history of the Black experience in Madison.

@UWMadisonLS March 26, 2026

PHOTOS: ERIK GUNNESON (CURLING), JAKE PIPER (TERRACE, IGLOO), HOPE KELHAM (UNIVERSITY ROUNDTABLE)

Letters&Science

SPRING 2026

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FROM THE DEAN

Time to Think

Today, information comes at you fast. Scrolling through news sites and social media, you get answers to questions you don't even know you have. And when you don't know something, you can learn the basics as quickly as you can type a prompt. It's enough to make me wonder: When do we, as individuals and as a society, take the time to think?

Our magazine's cover feature "Pay Attention" (page 16) explores the implications of living in the age of the attention economy. As I reflect on this piece, I am reminded of the unique value of a classroom setting. It's one of the few, precious spaces in today's society where we are pushed to strengthen the parts of our brains that allow us to focus, think critically and solve problems. The goal is not for students to immediately know the answer to any question like a search engine. It's for them to learn how to navigate all of the information out there — even when it's contradictory — and make the critical decisions that push them closer to their goals, be that business success, societal change or personal growth.

And it works. We see this time after time through the alumni featured in this magazine. In "The Good Neighbor" (page 32), Mario Sims (MS'93, PhD'97) drew from his sociology major to make medical discoveries that landed him a spot in the National Academy of Medicine. Evelyn Williams (PhD'12) is in the field as a restoration ecologist doing what she calls "hopeful science" to restore natural ecosystems, relying on the deep understanding of plants she developed during her doctorate. You can read about her and two more alumni who are environmental leaders in "Green Lights" (page 22). And even though Dan Erdman ('80, EMBA'99) didn't set out to major in art history when he started college, he has relied on the way of thinking he cultivated during his studies to support his success in real estate. In "By Design" (page 34), Erdman pays it forward, in true Badger fashion, by founding the first-ever Frank Lloyd Wright Professorship in Modern American Architecture, which opens opportunities for faculty research, student learning and some incredible off-campus trips to historic buildings. Our students are just as impressive. From Jess Randall's world travels (page 14) that have unlocked a better understanding of global health to Aishwarya Veerabahu's discovery that an invasive mushroom is spreading across the Midwest (page 6), they exemplify the curiosity mindset that is central to a Letters & Science degree.

This magazine is a celebration of the L&S community. Our students, alumni, faculty and staff are the living embodiment of the power of a liberal arts education. Around the world, our Badgers are leading change, fueling discovery and pursuing excellence. In my role as Dean — and soon as the Interim Chancellor for UW-Madison — I see what a gift that is every day and how one thoughtful person can make an impressive impact. The world-class education, research and service in the College are a result of people like you who support L&S and our mission. With your ongoing commitment to this community, we will continue to grow and build up the next generation of learners and leaders. Thank you for championing the College of Letters & Science.

On, Wisconsin!

Eric M. Wilcots
Dean and Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy, College of Letters & Science

Students who take classes through the future Department of Biology will study life in all of its forms.

PHOTO: JEFF MILLER

Science Brought to Life

Water, plants, animals and humans—they're all essential to the study of life on our planet. That's why the University of Wisconsin–Madison is entering an exciting new era of researching, teaching and expanding the biological sciences by launching the new Department of Biology within the College of Letters & Science. The new department will represent the combined efforts and talents of the current integrative biology and botany departments and the Wisconsin State Herbarium, Botany Garden and Greenhouse, UW Zoological Museum, and an upcoming Center for Botany.

"Modern biology is highly collaborative and interdisciplinary, and it's really communications between scientists from diverse disciplines that drive scientific discovery," says Mary Halloran, a professor and chair for the current Department of Integrative Biology. "We are stewards of our planet's biodiversity, and by forming a new Department of Biology, we celebrate our mission and honor our commitment to finding a better future for all life on Earth," adds Anne Pringle, chair of the current Department of Botany, L&S Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Botany.

Both botany and integrative biology have a long history of research and discovery at UW–Madison. Examples range from limnologists working to understand and protect Wisconsin's freshwater resources, to conservation biologists fighting extinction by freezing cryogenic-quality samples of endangered species, to botanists working with NASA to send tomatoes into space. Launching this new department is just the beginning. The goal is to build a physical hub for the biological sciences on campus, where scientists can come together to enhance teaching, learning, research and more.

MEDIA MENTION

"The people who are really going to be doing science on the moon and building those observatories on the moon are the people who are the undergraduates and the grad students right now."

THOMAS BEATTY,
an assistant professor of astronomy, tells a local news outlet how the Artemis II mission is inspiring the next generation of astronomers.

3

1,100

That's the number of seats in Irving & Dorothy Levy Hall, which will open its doors this summer. The new hub for the humanities and the descriptive social sciences will house eight L&S academic units.

Nathan Larson (left) and Cheryl DeWelt with student at the rooftop garden of the Madison Children's Museum.

PHOTO: AARON GRANAT

5

Going Places

For the "Mindfulness in Restorative Environments" course offered through the Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture, Nathan Larson ('95, MS'05) takes his students around town for hands-on experiences. The class is all about affecting positive change through the planning and design process. Visiting locations that do this work well, including the Troy Kids' Garden and the Madison Children's Museum, showcases why the extra effort matters. On a visit to the Allen Centennial Garden, Larson instructed his students to work together to create a floral art installation, passing on the lesson that this work is meant to be creative and collaborative. "We need restorative environments because they promote health and well-being," Larson says. "They're incredibly valuable places, and there's a scarcity of them."

Tag along with the class at **go.wisc.edu/goingplaces373**.

4

Know the Archipelago

The new Puerto Rican Studies Hub is the first of its kind in the Midwest. L&S professors Aurora Santiago Ortiz (assistant professor of gender and women's studies and Chicanx/e and Latinx/e studies) and Jorell Meléndez-Badillo (associate history professor) led the effort to get the research center started with support from a $3 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. "We firmly believe in the field of Puerto Rican studies," says Santiago Ortiz. "We're also seeing an extension of the Wisconsin Idea, which is accumulating knowledge in service of the broader community outside of the University," Meléndez-Badillo adds.

PHOTO: ALTHEA DOTZOUR

Aurora Santiago Ortiz (left) and Jorell Meléndez-Badillo are leading the new Puerto Rican Studies Hub.

Call it a prison break, because golden oyster mushrooms have managed to wiggle their way out of cultivation captivity and into Midwestern ecosystems. While the escapees are thriving in their new home, the invasion is pushing out native fungal communities.

BY ALLI WATTERS

How did these mushrooms

For Aishwarya Veerabahu, the discovery started with a gut feeling. Hiking around Wisconsin's forests, she felt surrounded by golden oyster mushrooms on all sides.

"They're everywhere," says Veerabahu, a PhD candidate in the Department of Botany. "When you walk through the forest and see golden oysters, you get this eerie, instinctive feeling that these mushrooms are an invasive species."

This wasn't Veerabahu's first experience with invasive populations. She grew up in Southern California, where out-of-place plants are spreading across the scrublands and outcompeting native species for resources. When she saw those dense clusters of golden oyster mushrooms on logs around the forest floor, it reminded her of the invasive grasses and thistles back home, and she knew immediately that she was looking at an invasive species.

But as a researcher, she had to prove it. Veerabahu took samples and dug into the data, poring over spreadsheets that analyzed the biodiversity of fungal life collected from wood with and without golden oyster mushrooms.

"The *eureka* moment was kind of unglamorous," Veerabahu says. "I was scrolling through Excel, and I could see by eye — before doing any statistics — that the sampled trees with golden oysters on them had fewer fungal species than trees without golden oysters."

Decreased biodiversity is a key indicator that the spread of a species is having a significant negative impact on the native ecosystem. Combine that with the knowledge that golden oysters are native to Eastern Asia, and the case for golden oysters being invasive is not only compelling — it's closed. But how did these mushrooms trek across oceans and continents to become so prolific in North America? And why are they most prolific in the Midwest of all places?

escape?

To hypothesize about their journey overseas, you need one crucial culinary clue: Golden oysters are delicious. Their vibrant yellow caps are nutty and sweet, often compared to the taste of a cashew when cooked. Companies started shipping grow kits, so fans and farmers alike could cultivate their own golden oysters at home. Early documentation of this comes in a book written by mycologist Paul Stamets in 2000.

"He describes sneaking a few samples over to North America, and then he adds this foreboding sentence suggesting it will be very interesting to see whether this species 'escapes' to the woodlands," Veerabahu says. "Of course, at the time there were not many laws about fungi and moving them around — honestly, there aren't many laws now. That's something I'm trying to change with my work."

The thing about mushrooms is that they don't spread through seeds and root systems, but instead they reproduce through spores, which are tricky to contain. When mushroom farmers and enthusiasts cultivate mushrooms or compost scraps, they spread, in this case quite quickly. This pushes out native fungal populations that play a crucial role in the carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus cycles of the forest.

In 2014, the first documentation of rogue golden oysters came from an Iowa mushroom club. Sightings continued popping up from foragers, naturalists and community scientists in Wisconsin, Michigan and New York. Now, some Midwestern forests have become such hot spots that people have been known to leave their foraging trips carrying trash bags stuffed with golden oysters.

"It's crazy because this is the first cultivated mushroom to escape captivity and spread," Veerabahu says. "And it definitely escaped within the last couple of decades and spread in front of our eyes."

While research on invasive plant and animal species is fairly common, research on the invasive fungal kingdom is still in its infancy. *Amanita muscaria* — the famed "Super Mario mushroom" known for its red cap and white spots — is considered the first invasive that moved across the Southern Hemisphere with help from the timber industry. This is a fact Anne Pringle, the L&S Mary Herman Rubinstein Professor and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Botany, tracked down through her work in the Pringle Laboratory, which investigates the ecology and evolution of fungi.

It was Pringle who inspired Veerabahu to come do research in Wisconsin with the Pringle Lab. Now, she's part of a team of experts who are helping create guidelines on how to protect global fungal populations. This summer, she'll speak at a United Nations World Biodiversity Forum about addressing invasive fungal species and conducting socially informed management.

"It's tough as a scientist to be working with something that has already done damage here in North America," Veerabahu says. "But it feels really good to be getting the warning out in Europe and potentially preventing the devastation of fungal communities native to there." ■

EAT UP!

Love the taste of golden oysters? Consider one of these edible alternatives native to most of North America (but always check with your local mushroom club before foraging).

SUMMER OYSTER
Umami and nutty with notes of licorice

MORELS
Savory and earthy with smoky undertones

CHANTERELLE
Nutty and peppery with a fruity aroma

BLACK TRUMPETS
Rich and smoky with truffle-like qualities

PEARL OYSTER
Mild and savory with a slightly sweet flavor

DIALOGUE

Embracing Uncertainty

A mathematician and a philosopher walk into a bar … and they debate the concept of uncertainty.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

Michael Titelbaum (left) and Jordan Ellenberg view uncertainty differently, but both agree that trying to beat it back through prediction markets is a dubious idea.

Uncertainty is an essential part of the human condition. We all struggle with it. It's also the central concept of books currently being written by not one, but two College of Letters & Science faculty members: *Don't Be Too Sure* by Jordan Ellenberg from the Department of Mathematics and *Think Better* by Michael Titelbaum from the Department of Philosophy. To take advantage of this cosmic coincidence, we put them in a room together and watched the existential fireworks ensue.

MICHAEL TITELBAUM (Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Philosophy): People are not very good about reasoning with uncertainty. They are modestly good at thinking in all-or-nothing, black-or-white categories, but a lot of things we have to figure out and decisions we have to make in life are more gray than that. There are decades of research showing when people try to think in cases that involve a lot of uncertainty, they make a lot of mistakes. The hope is to give people some guideposts and some straightforward lessons to help them think better in cases of uncertainty.

JORDAN ELLENBERG (John D. MacArthur and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Mathematics): There is a stereotype that what people might come to a mathematician for is certainty. For example, "Compute for me: If I do A, what is the consequence B?" People really crave that for deep-seated psychological reasons. My book is slightly cruel in that you've come to me and I'm going to pull the rug out from under you and say, "No, you can't ask for that. That's not the way the world is."

The world is made of uncertainty, but then, to hopefully soften that blow, there are lots of rather rigorous and well-thought-through ways of thinking about uncertainty. Rather than pushing it away — a natural impulse — you can instead engage with the world as it is. And then the good news is that the discipline of mathematics doesn't just give up and not talk about things if they're uncertain.

PHOTO: PAULIUS MUSTEIKIS

MT: Did you watch the "Golden Globes" this year? Before each award was announced, they would share what the current probabilities of victory were, according to Polymarket's prediction models. The odds were literally just an aggregation of people's opinions, because there is no data history you can look back on for how often Leonardo DiCaprio is going to win best actor in a musical or comedy.

That's the world we're in now, where everybody thinks of everything as quantifiable, and they think that the rational way to proceed with any decision you could ever try to make is to compile these numbers and then let the numbers run your decision-making. So, one of the other things I'm going to talk about in my book is: What sort of decisions doesn't it make sense to attach probabilities to?

JE: This is one way we're in agreement. It's not the case that every kind of uncertainty is well modeled by a number between zero or one.

MT: There are two different questions you can ask. One is: Is it well modeled by a number? A different question you can ask is: Of the ways we have available to model it, is this the best one? And there are people who think that the best thing we've got going is a number between zero and one, and so that's the way we should make our decisions.

JE: It would be too much for me to say I want to eliminate people feeling uncomfortable with uncertainty. I think we're human beings, and that's part of human nature. It's funny: I just read a book by Pema Chödrön called *Comfortable with Uncertainty*. It's a great book, but come on, nobody's that chill.

MT: Well, uncertainty is tied to anxiety, right? It's also built into a lot of the ways we talk about the world. We have a lot of concepts where something is safe or it's unsafe. Something's a good bet or it's a bad bet. One of the things that I try to do to help people get a little more comfortable with uncertainty is to point out that we also have ways of talking about the world that are more comfortable being in the middle.

Jordan, it's so funny because you come from a discipline where everyone looks to you mathematicians for answers, as if you're going to have these authoritative answers. I come from a discipline where students walk into a philosophy class assuming there are no right answers. So, the idea that you can make progress at all on these questions, and that there are some things all philosophers agree on, is very strange and surprising to them.

JE: There's this sort of tension. Mathematicians have developed these probability tools that can really help you out of some bad spots and get you to a better way of thinking. But when it goes too far, you start ruining the "Golden Globes," for crying out loud. ■

Amber Wichowsky teaches students how to deliberate across differences.

PHOTO: JEFF MILLER

TEACHING

Let's Be Civil

Amber Wichowsky's class is the anchor of a new undergraduate degree in public policy.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

The experience begins, not with arguments and controversy, but with storytelling.

The 30 assembled students are paired off, and each is asked to share a story with their partner about a time when they changed their mind about a political issue. Later, they're asked to reshare the story they were told to the class, speaking as the partner who relayed it to them.

That's the launching pad for "Advancing Public Policy in a Divided America," a class that serves as the foundational requirement for a brand-new undergraduate degree program in public policy beginning in the fall at the La Follette School of Public Affairs. And as Amber Wichowsky, the associate professor hired to teach it explains, the strategy is intentional.

"This approach does a couple of things," says Wichowsky, whose background in political science includes a focus on political behavior and the creation of a civic dialogue curriculum at Marquette University. "First, it gets students in the habit of deep listening, which is the ability to sit with somebody and just listen to them for several minutes. And hopefully, they're also learning a little bit about each other. Where are people coming from?"

Those skills seem to be in painfully short supply in the modern political environment — and just about everywhere else. Deeply polarized points of view have made it extremely challenging for people to talk to each other, let alone work together to solve important social and political issues.

For Wichowsky, her first goal is to create a safe but talkative environment, where students learn about the roots of our country's current division, the science of how we develop our political opinions, and how that understanding can be used to have more civil and open conversations about contentious issues. Students are also introduced to nonpartisan policy research methods and spend time evaluating policy arguments and evidence. In the course's final unit, students practice negotiation skills in a role-play exercise.

It's not always easy. In last year's class session, students worked through differing perspectives, experiences and stereotypes as they deliberated different approaches to policing reform. Wichowsky notes that such conversations can be uncomfortable, but that students in the class come away seeing the value of engaging across differences and more confident about their own civic skills.

"I tell students that if you want to break through this impasse, you have to think about coalitions and coalition building," says Wichowsky. "On a particular issue, you might actually have some common ground. But the only way you're going to know that is if you're talking to people and having that kind of social connection. If you're in the echo chamber, you're blind to those possibilities."

Just as it began, Wichowsky's class ends with a story exchange. Her students now know each other better and are more open to being vulnerable. And maybe, just maybe, are more open to understanding another's viewpoint. ■

"On a particular issue, you might actually have some common ground. But the only way you're going to know that is if you're talking to people and having that kind of social connection."

AMBER WICHOWSKY
Associate Professor of Public Affairs

This 1,200-year-old dugout canoe was found at the bottom of Lake Mendota.

PHOTO: TAMARA THOMSEN / WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

RESEARCH

Making Waves

Five years after discovering the first ancient dugout canoe found in Lake Mendota, researchers are now mapping a parking system for boats that are thousands of years old.

BY ABBY ANDERSON

A hollowed hunk of canoe made from elm, oak or some other type of wood found lodged in the Lake Mendota shoreline. A direct piece of history embedded in Madison's very own urban waterways. A shared transportation network, centuries-old: an ancient BCycle, if you will.

Dugout canoes are the world's oldest boat type, constructed by hollowing out a massive tree trunk and traditionally used by Indigenous populations. They're the centerpiece of the Wisconsin Dugout Canoe Survey Project, a collaborative effort with archaeology experts, tribal historic preservation officers, historical societies and more.

The project started back in 2018 with Ryan Smazal ('19), at the time an undergrad studying history and political science, and Tamara Thomsen ('91, MS'93), an alumna from the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences and maritime archaeologist with the Wisconsin Historical Society. Smazal had a research-minded affinity for underwater archaeology, and Thomsen suggested he research and document dugout canoes across the state. By sheer coincidence, three years later, Thomsen was on a recreational dive with a serendipitous safety stop when she spotted a bowed nub poking out of the sediment.

"That was the first of the Lake Mendota dugouts that was found," says Sissel Schroeder, Smazal's thesis advisor and a professor of anthropology as well as the Bradshaw Knight Professor of Environmental Humanities in the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies. "It was radiocarbon dated to 1,200 years ago, and the Historical Society mounted the effort to raise it and then do the conservation work."

It soon became clear that the pieces brought up were different colors, densities and textures. That meant the remains were not from only one vessel. They represented other dugouts concealed in the Mendota shoreline.

"The dugouts being revealed are of great interest to us, as they serve to support our oral history of our Indigenous connections to the Dejope [Four Lakes] region," says Bill Quackenbush, tribal historic preservation officer for the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin. "Our ancestral connection to these four lakes reaches as far back as the last glacial episode."

The 16 dugouts that have now been discovered — the oldest of which dates back more than 5,000 years — are in three different clusters near the Shorewood Hills Marina. Each cluster is directly in front of a gully through a bluff, offering an alternative passageway for travelers to the sheer rock face.

"We are getting some new information about traditional ecological knowledge and technological innovation," says Schroeder, explaining that canoes weren't just abandoned randomly. They were deliberately sunk and stored at specific access points. "Those locations where the dugouts are clustered were like nodes of transportation. It was a way of sharing the water transportation method with the community. The concept of ownership didn't exist — they were available for people to use when they needed it."

The BCycle analogy is one that Schroeder and Thomsen have regularly referenced. Much like the bike racks scattered around campus, every canoe was fair game for any mobile endeavors.

"One of the things that's been really fascinating about dugout canoes is that they're easy for us to envision," Schroeder says. "Many of the artifacts that we find as archeologists are broken pieces, making something very difficult to visualize. It creates this extra distance between people and ancient material culture. But canoes are easy for people to recognize what the object is and how it was used, and maybe even imagine themselves in the water in a dugout canoe." ■

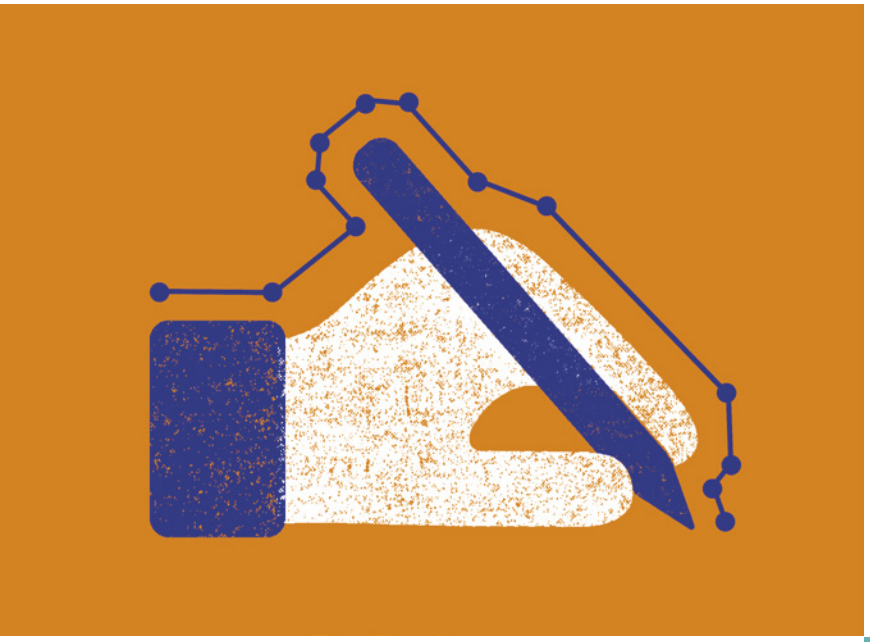
CULTURE

The AI Effect

Through the Center for Humanistic Inquiry into AI and Uncertainty, L&S researchers are answering the tough AI questions.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

You might have thought that studying the impacts of artificial intelligence is only for researchers in computer science and physics. Not so fast: Thanks to a sizable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the College of Letters & Science launched the Center for Humanistic Inquiry into AI and Uncertainty late last year. The Center recently unveiled its first set of fellowship grants to L&S faculty researchers in the humanities and social sciences. They're tackling some seriously thorny questions about the ways in which AI is altering our world.



01 THE WRITE WAY

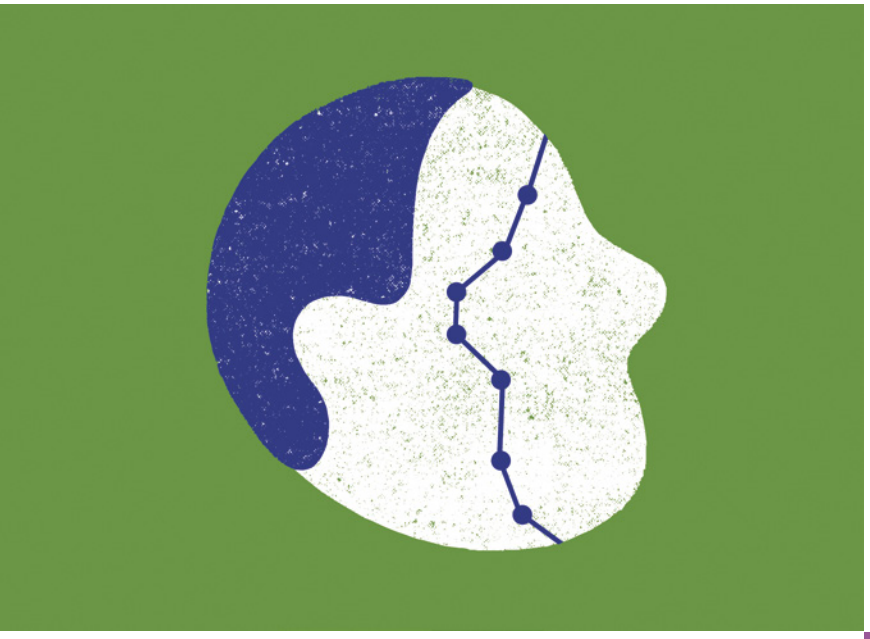
Much of what we think of as artificial intelligence are based on large language models (LLMs), systems trained on massive datasets that generate the answers to the queries you put into chatbots. Ainehi Edoro-Glines, the Constellations Mellon-Morgridge and Vilas Early Career Professor of English, is tackling a question that's currently flummoxing the humanities: What does the automation of writing mean for disciplines built on the written word? To find out, she and a team of students are constructing a laboratory to study how students are using LLMs and how that changes their perception of writing.

02 THE LIMIT DOES EXIST

Devin Kennedy, an assistant professor of history and the Evelyn and Herbert Howe-Bascom Professor of Integrated Liberal Studies, has spent his career charting the history of computer science. He's now focused on exploring the theory of computing, a subfield of computer science that looks at the basic algorithms computers use and what their ultimate limits might be. "I'm trying to write the history of a very technical subject," says Kennedy. "That requires lots of time and patience to learn, get stuck and ask questions until you understand the language of researchers, their ideas and the issues that motivate them."

03 NEW NORMS

Anja Wanner was already researching her new book project, *Bad Grammar in the Digital Age*, when the Center launched last year, and the consonance was perfect. Wanner, the Enid H. Anderson Professor of English, is looking at how our view of what it means to understand language is challenged by digital platforms and AI. As AI makes linguistic performance more accessible while divorcing it from human identity and intent, what does that mean for linguistic experts? "Has the text that you are reading right now been produced by me, or did I copy and paste a suggestion from ChatGPT?" Wanner asks. "Would the latter violate any professional norms? Would I still be the author if my role is only to write prompts? Does it even matter?"



04 SHAPING SENSE OF SELF

Catalina Toma, an H.I. Romnes Faculty Fellow and professor of communication arts, studies how technologically mediated interactions affect human self-concepts and relationships. As teenagers increasingly turn to conversational AI to work through complex emotional, relationship and identity issues, Toma is seeking to expand the debate beyond the familiar binary of AI as either a productivity tool or a social threat. "Unlike peers or parents, AI systems draw on vast datasets of human communication, respond without fatigue or judgment, and often mirror or amplify users' emotions and self-descriptions," says Toma. "If adolescents are internalizing AI-generated feedback as insights about who they are, then AI is becoming an epistemic actor in the development of self-knowledge."

05 MORE TO COME

While the initial round of fellowships only included some of the College's humanities and social science departments, there's much more to come in future funding cycles. Jeremy Morris, a professor of communication arts who serves as the Center's inaugural director, anticipates future project proposals from faculty in departments like journalism and mass communication, gender and women's studies, philosophy and more. "Hopefully, what we're building here is a robust network of people who are approaching AI from humanities and social scientific perspectives, who can be thought leaders," he says. "AI's biggest impacts are not going to be technical; they're going to be cultural."

ILLUSTRATIONS: MIGUEL PORLAN

STUDENTS

Here, There, Everywhere

Jess Randall's collegiate career has taken her around the world, teaching her lessons in and out of the classroom.

BY LYDIA PICOTTE

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JESS RANDALL

Jess Randall did a summer internship in rural Kenya with Health By All Means, a grassroots women's health organization.

For most undergraduates, a UW–Madison education means climbing Bascom Hill, trying to get to lecture on time, and getting lost in the Humanities Building. It does not mean scuba diving in coral reefs, giving presentations in Italian art galleries, and riding a motorbike through rural Kenya.

But that is the UW–Madison experience that senior Jess Randall has come to know.

Majoring in biology and global health in the L&S Honors Program and earning certificates in environmental studies, gender and women's studies, and leadership, Randall has used her time at UW–Madison to take advantage of extensive international opportunities. So far, she has traveled to 24 countries, participated in three study abroad programs and interned in Kenya.

The first opportunity came through her First-Year Interest Group (FIG). It was the chance to spend the summer studying coral reefs in Belize. Randall jumped at the idea and hasn't stopped moving since.

"I realized when I was in Belize that, as a person who goes to UW, I have access to opportunities," says Randall. "Before, I just thought that was something that happens in the movies or that only other people could do. But no, we have so many resources here. That really opened my eyes and made me realize that I could go out and experience the world."

She later spent a summer in Italy, where she immersed herself in the culture of Rome. This was juxtaposed with lessons about the impact of climate change on Italian cuisine. She had a similar experience in Uganda, where her trips through the country's national parks were interspersed between meetings with local healthcare providers and community members who taught her about their practices and challenges.

It's hardly surprising that Randall has chosen to tackle so many adventures. Her friends are familiar with her signature catchphrase — "Everything is figure-out-able!" — and it informs the ultimate theme of Randall's stories: the ability to find joy in her travels without losing sight of the important lessons they teach her.

The perspective shifts that she has experienced from being immersed in new corners of the world, particularly in regard to healthcare, have both altered her career plans and forced her to reckon with an entirely new worldview.

"Seeing so many structural inequalities really informs the way that I see different issues, and it's drawn me further away from just individual patient care toward population-level global health," she explains.

These structural inequities were made most apparent to Randall on her trip this past summer to rural Kenya. The aspiring doctor spent eight weeks working as a community health outreach intern with the Nikumbuke

Project, a women-led grassroots community health NGO. During this time, she was hospitalized with malaria, hookworm and severe dehydration.

As grateful as she was to have gotten care at a hospital in Kenya, she looks back on the experience with frustration.

"I have this almost painful awareness that what I received is out of reach for so many people who were living right down the street from me," says Randall. "Most don't have the option of going to the hospital. And me, the *mzungu* [Swahili for *foreigner*], I was taken straight there. Millions of people die from malaria, and it's not because it's untreatable or unpreventable. It's because globally, we haven't prioritized the lives of the people it impacts most."

Experiences like this have changed the way she approaches problem-solving, leadership and research by deepening her understanding of privilege.

"You have to ask, 'Who was included in the data? Who wasn't? Where did the funding come from?'" she says. "It's so important to include local voices, because a lot of times we come in from the outside and perpetuate this very real Western savior idea."

When she's home, Randall uses these ideas to inform her actions. Her list of on-campus endeavors includes leadership in multiple healthcare initiatives, being a member of Hoofer Scuba Club and being an L&S Dean's Ambassador. Her most recent project involves building a support network for students returning from study abroad, who are often left alone to battle reverse culture shock and sometimes mental health issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

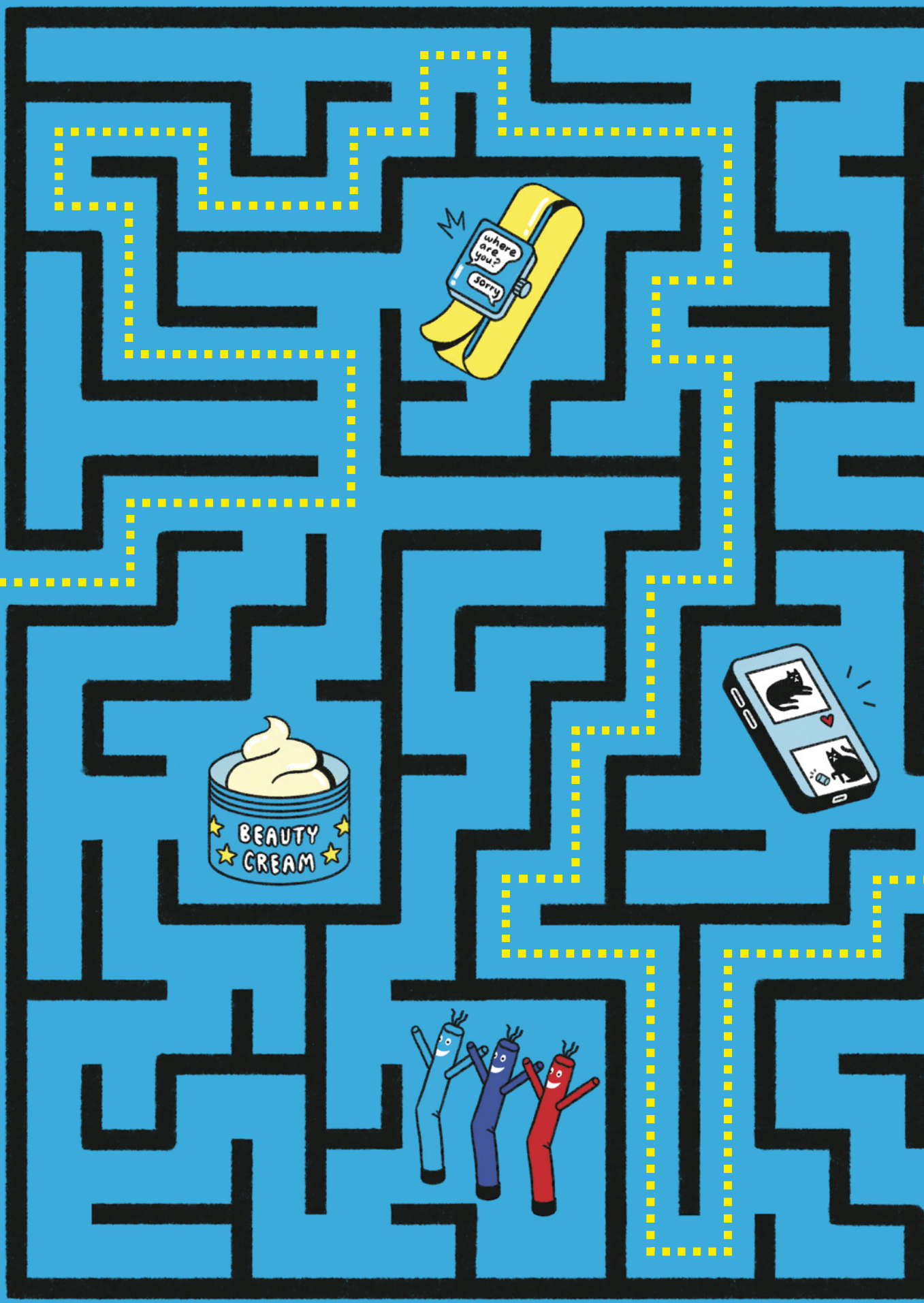
Moving forward, she hopes to approach local and global problems as an active listener who helps fill the gaps identified by affected communities and uplift local leaders, rather than simply "exporting solutions." Randall's travels have left her with the self-motivation to never stop problem-solving and the self-awareness to know she can't do it alone. She urges others to figure out how they can use their status to help others, too.

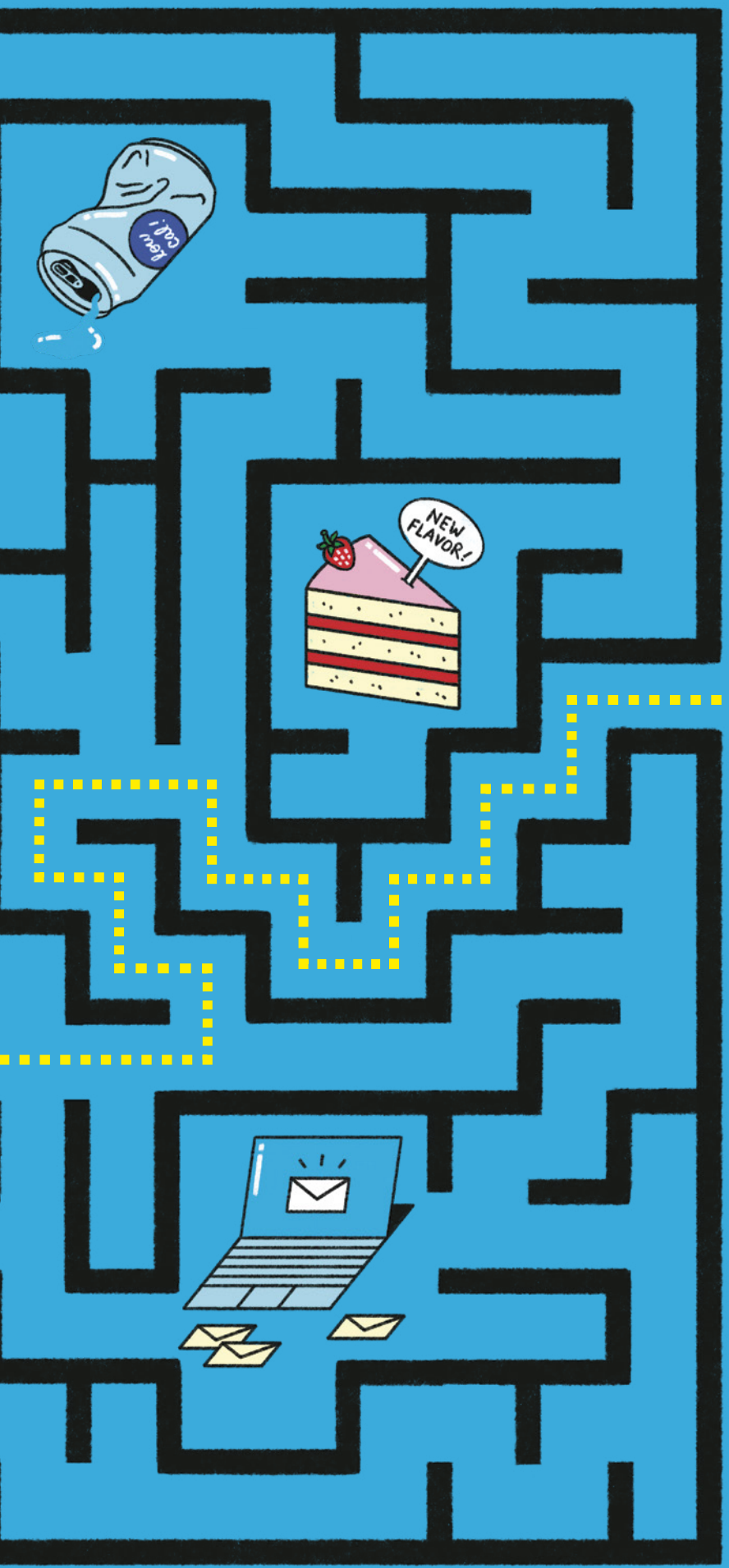
For Randall, the true impact of her travels is not the places themselves, but the perspectives they've given her. With each experience, she has become more aware of the systems shaping health, access and opportunity — and of the responsibility that comes with having the chance to experience them firsthand.

"If you have a privilege or an opportunity that other people might not have, you should pursue it," she says. "Then you can share that experience and that work." ■

Hear more about Jess Randall's travel insights on the L&S Elevate Podcast at go.wisc.edu/lsrandall.

PAY





ATTENTION

Imagine a winding maze full of twists and turns. To complete it will take focus and an ability to resist the shiny distractions designed to draw you off course. This labyrinth represents the attention economy, and L&S researchers, students and alumni are here to serve as your tour guide. They'll walk you through the tangled ethics of the attention economy, the science behind your ability to focus and the tools available to help you through the labyrinth. Because when your time is considered a prized commodity, there are a lot of outside forces at work trying to keep you trapped in their grasp.

BY ALLI WATTERS

ILLUSTRATIONS: JOSIE NORTON

1

An Ethical Dilemma

Your time is their money. Here's how a philosopher grapples with the ethics of the attention economy.

THE BIRDS ARE CHIRPING, the sun is rising, and it's time to wake up. What's the first thing you reach for? Maybe it's a glass of water or an old-school alarm clock, but if you're an American, statistically it's most likely that you're grabbing for a phone. It might start with silencing a morning wake-up call, but this habit opens you up to checking your email, scrolling through social media or reading the news.

This is how many corporations are making their profits. Because as you're checking your feeds, they're sneaking in ads while simultaneously collecting a bankable asset — your data. Welcome to the contemporary attention economy, where your individual time is the valuable product bought and sold to fuel the world's economic engine.

"We've made a cultural choice to invite these devices into all kinds of contexts," says Clinton Castro (MA'14, PhD'18), a philosophy alumnus and current assistant professor for the Information School and affiliate faculty member of the Department of Philosophy. "As a bike commuter, I often have uncomfortably close calls with a car because someone is on their phone. Think about the bizarre circumstances that have normalized this kind of behavior — even if we all know it's bad to be on your phone while driving."

In writing his 2024 book *Kantian Ethics and the Attention Economy*, Castro notes that the attention economy is nothing new. He traces it back to the 1830s when *The New York Sun* started subsidizing the cost of a newspaper with advertising that targeted their massive audience. What is new are tactics like aggressive data collection, addictive algorithmic curation and advanced micro-targeted advertising, all used by big tech companies.

There are a lot of ways to approach the personal and ethical pitfalls of the attention economy — constant distraction, screen overexposure, body image issues, mental health concerns, rapid polarization. For Castro, these concerns are united and given moral weight by Immanuel Kant's views on the importance of autonomy, loosely defined as the ability to set and pursue your own goals.

When social media and smart phones are required to get through day-to-day life, your autonomy is at risk because these technologies can degrade key capabilities and promote inauthenticity.

"Last year I tried to go apple picking, and the orchard I found required me to download their app to see the map and varieties," Castro says. "This is a testament to how embedded we are with this technology — I couldn't even go apple picking without my phone."

The Kantian core of what he studies exposes the ways the attention economy forces us to cede the authorship of our own lives to entities that are only interested in our time for the money. To change this would require sweeping societal shifts, including government protections. Castro advocates for this, especially in the case of children, who he fears are falling into a "collective trap."

But as people wait for high-level change, there are some means of individual escape. Castro himself has no social media and bought an annoyingly small and slow phone to curb his screen appetite, though he still checks a necessary email account for work. At the end of the day, it's up to the individual to decide how their priorities inform their level of engagement in the parts of the attention economy within their control.

"Kant encourages us to understand which things are important to us and why, and then make a wise choice in the face of those considerations," Castro says. "And that's appropriate advice, when talking about autonomy."

3

School of Thought

Think of the children! Madison's K-12 students are the heart of a research project in the La Follette School of Public Affairs.

LATE LAST YEAR, WISCONSIN GOV. TONY EVERS ('73, MS'76, PhD'86) signed a law requiring all the state's public schools to create a phone ban policy by July 1, 2026. He left the specifics of the bans up to the individual districts, and the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) is tapping UW–Madison researchers for help creating an equitable, law-compliant policy that supports teaching and learning. Grace Skiba, a graduate student in the La Follette School of Public Affairs, is on the team that will make a recommendation to the district. Here are three factors researchers are considering as they develop a policy.

The Teachers

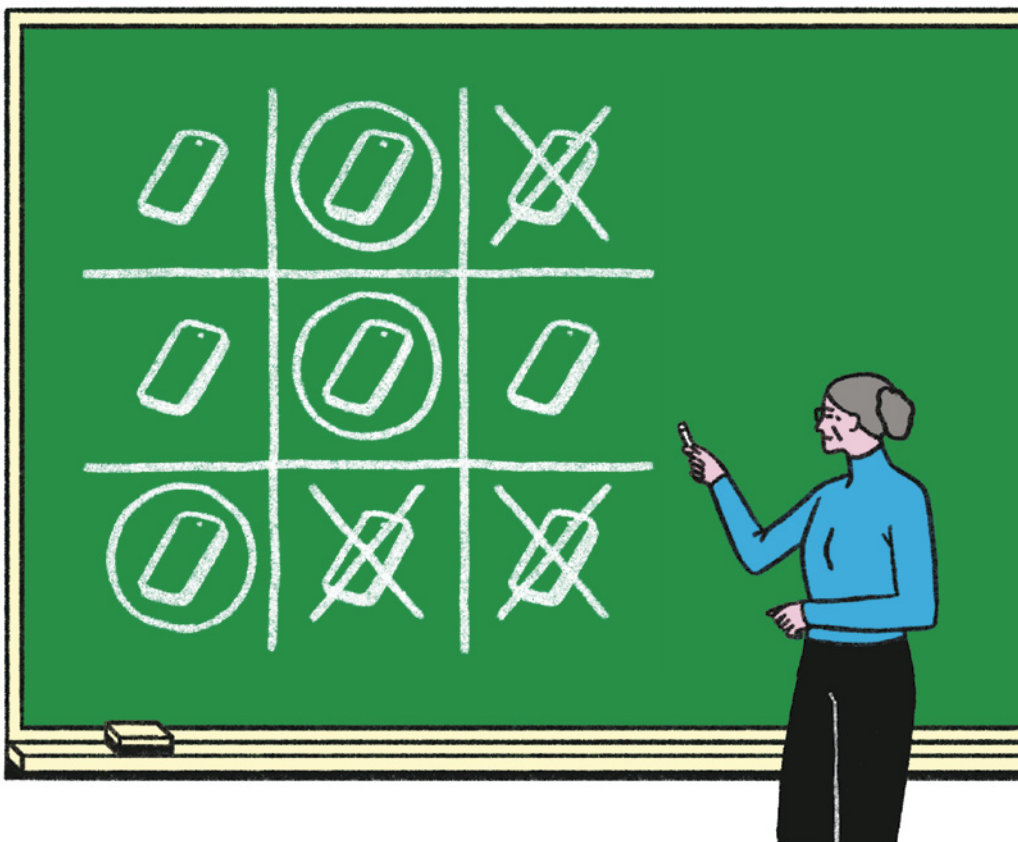
Without a district-wide policy, the burden of managing phone use in class currently lands on the teachers. That's why the research team is interviewing administrators and teachers to get their perspectives. Consistently they've heard gripes about class disruption not only from phone usage, but from the time taken to discipline it. "That puts a lot of pressure on teachers," Skiba says. "And depending on what kind of teacher you are, there's a wide range of how much you want to discipline your students about phones."

The Students

School is meant to provide students with the skills they need for life, and one of the skills the district has expressed interest in teaching is how to use phones in responsible ways. Some students are looking for better strategies to regain focus in class. "Some students who answered the district survey felt they might be able to focus better in class if phone use was limited," Skiba says.

The Practice

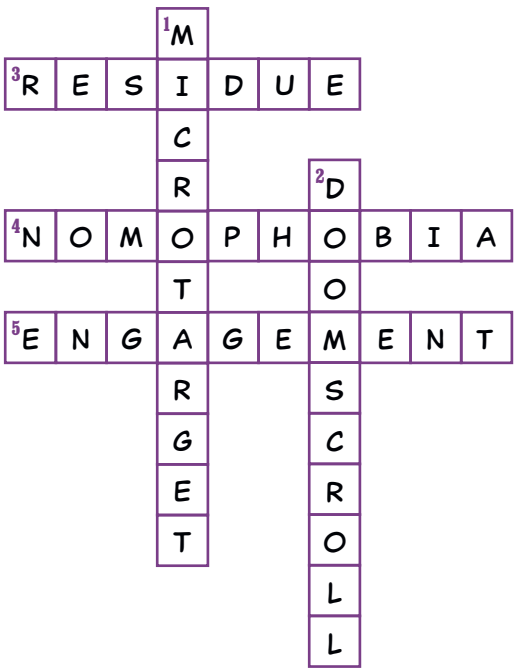
Other districts around the country have developed their own policies, and UW–Madison researchers have the benefit of reviewing what does (and doesn't) work. They'll look at new technology that has been developed to solve this problem, but they'll also factor in whether the technology is cost effective and easy to implement. "This is going to affect a lot of people, and phones are a sensitive topic," Skiba says. "Policy recommendations are really only worthwhile if they are feasible."



2

Have a Word

A quick guide to the language of the attention economy



DOWN

1 **The use of user data to show personalized ads**

2 **Compulsive scrolling through worrying content on social media or news sites**

ACROSS

3 **Attention _____: cognitive drag caused by switching between tasks**

4 **A new kind of anxiety over not having access to a mobile phone or cell service**

5 **Metrics used to measure and sell attention**

4

Chat, Are We Cooked?

A psychologist addresses claims that our attention spans are shrinking.

C. SHAWN GREEN'S FIRST BIG BREAK AS A PSYCHOLOGIST started with an unexpected discovery in the '90s: People who play fast-paced action video games saw growth in their perception, attention and cognition. As the Mark and Ilene Laufman Family Professor and Chairperson for the Department of Psychology, he has continued to study the way different stimulants impact cognitive learning and neuroplasticity. Here's what he has to say about smart phones, social media, constant connectivity and more ways technology is affecting our brains.

Have you heard that the average American attention span is shorter than a goldfish?

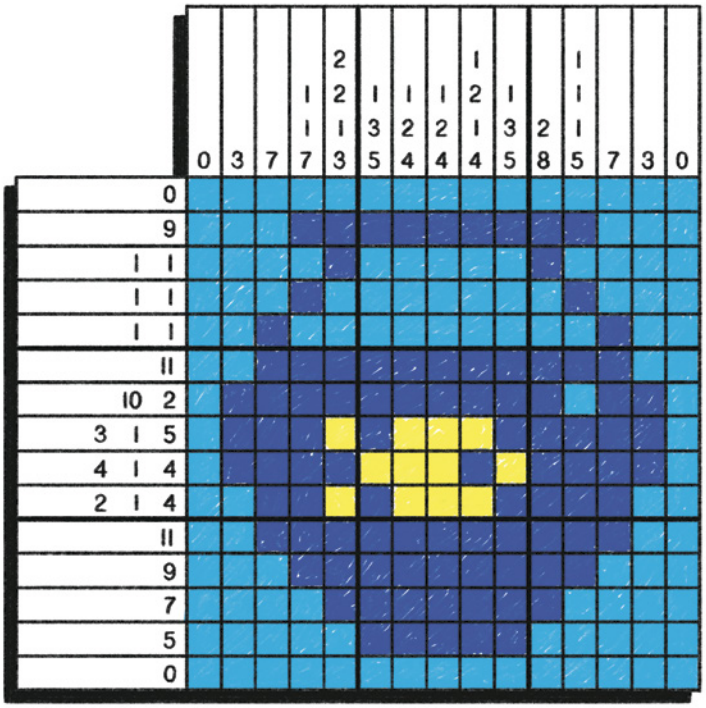
This one always makes me laugh, because (A) No, it's not, and (B) I don't even know how you would measure the attention span of a goldfish. But people have these concerns, and that happens pretty much any time there's a change in the media landscape — we get this big swath of technophobia. Often when people are talking about shrinking attention spans, they bring up that dwell time on websites has gone down. But I don't think that means people are incapable of staying on websites longer, it means that they are becoming really good at deciding what they want to devote their attention to.

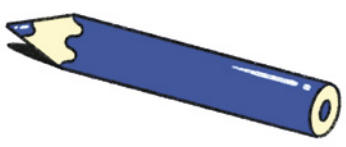
How is modern technology impacting our ability to learn and focus?

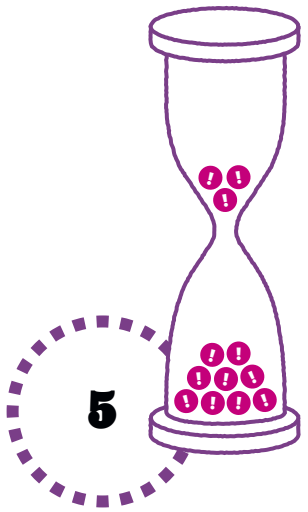
Modern technology is putting pressure on our capacity to process information quickly and simultaneously, especially in cases of media multitasking. When I'm sitting at my desk, there are six different things that can ping me at once. This stresses those systems and forces me to get better at them and be adaptive to the environment I'm in. In general, people are good at learning new skills, so when there is an environment that requires them to exercise those skills, they improve.

If someone is feeling their attention span challenged, what can they do?

Think of your attention span as a pie: You have a certain amount of attention that you can devote, and anything that takes away from that means there's less for you to access. So, for example, if you feel a phantom pocket ring [when you feel your phone vibrating, but there's no notification], that means you're devoting some amount of attention to where you keep your phone, and that is attention you can't access for other tasks, like reading a textbook or listening to an instructor. Distractions like these are consistently problematic, but what counts as distractions for people can differ. You have to know yourself and what types of things allow you to focus or take away from your attention.





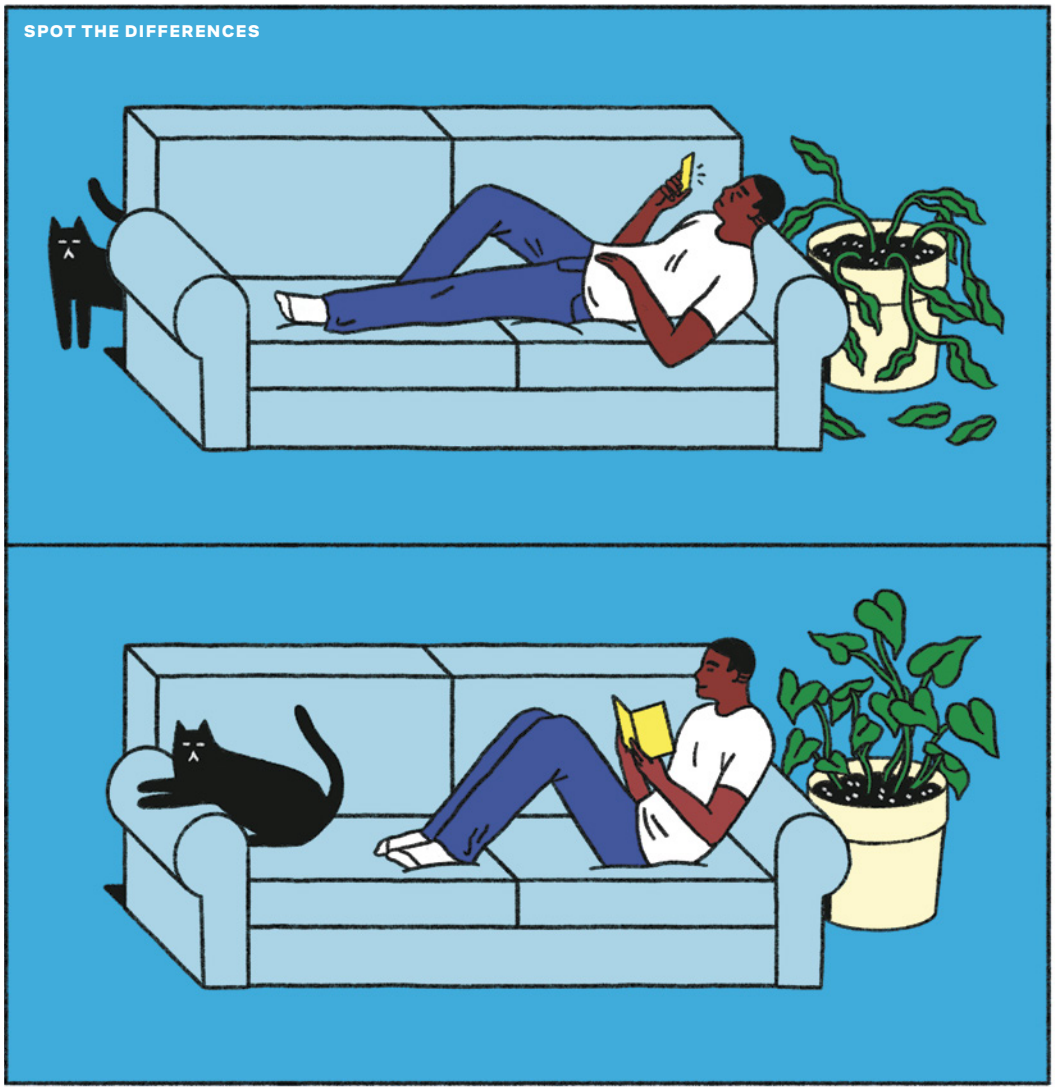


5

24 Hours Without Media

This journalism class requires a digital detox.

COULD YOU GO A FULL DAY with no phone, no internet, no TV? That's the challenge Hernando Rojas, the Helen Firstbrook Franklin Professor of Journalism, assigns to students in his "Introduction to Mass Communication" course. He has been giving the assignment for almost a decade, and students describe it as life-changing. Even though they take the challenge seriously, most don't make it more than five hours — but don't worry, they don't flunk. The grade comes from a first-person reflection of the experience, answering when it got hard, why they did or didn't give up, and whether they feel dependent on technology. "Even for students who don't make it, I think knowing you aren't able to resist technology for 24 hours is a lesson in and of itself," Rojas says, adding that you don't have to be a student to try the challenge.



Brick by Brick

These entrepreneurial alumni designed a solution to our doomscrolling problem.

TJ DRIVER ('22) WAS DONE WITH HIS SMART PHONE. He was grieving the free time he lost to Instagram and frustrated with how easily he could override app blockers. The solution? He thought it could be a flip phone.

"I looked into it, and it was so impractical," says Driver, who's a Wisconsin School of Business alumnus with a certificate in computer sciences. "I was living in Chicago at the time, and I couldn't be in the city with a flip phone. I needed to take the train and get Ubers. Plus, I'd have to pay for two phone plans."

He aired out these frustrations regularly to fellow Badger Zach Nasgowitz ('21) during their many business brainstorms. The pair had caught the entrepreneurial bug when they were undergrads at UW–Madison, taking advantage of programs like Discovery to Product (D2P) to learn the trade. After graduation, they hoped to start a business together.

"We were following the conventional advice to look inward at our own lives and try to find a problem that we could solve," says Nasgowitz, an L&S grad who majored in economics with a certificate in computer sciences. "The thing that kept coming up as a big one was our phones."

This time they built a working solution: Brick. The product they designed is a physical device roughly the size of a pack of sticky notes with a magnetic back to fasten to your fridge, laundry machine or another inconvenient spot in your home. Users tap their phone to it to block distracting apps, websites and notifications. Everything is handled through an app, which is customizable so that users can control what they consider a distraction. But once you've tapped your Brick, you have to be near the device to tap out and free your phone. So if you left it behind to grab coffee with a friend or do work at the library, you'll have to wait until you get home to scroll TikTok. But even if you just leave it in another room, the physical need to get up and walk to the kitchen works as a stronger deterrent than switching off "Do Not Disturb" mode.

"It's important that people realize that we are not anti-tech," Driver says. "Yes, our devices are constantly vying for our attention in bad ways, but we can also use them in positive ways. I can read any book ever written with this thing in my pocket. I can FaceTime with any person I've ever met at any time. There are things that we certainly want to overcome, but the exciting part is that the same devices that steal our attention also give us opportunities to use them in immensely positive ways, and that's what we're trying to push for with Brick."

They had 1,000 signups before the product even hit the market, and today they're racking up a loyal following, including celebrities Lorde and Stephen Colbert. And now they're looking to the future to see how their startup can continue to support people in their fight to reclaim their time.

"There are these trillion-dollar companies that have thousands of engineers and the smartest PhD behavioral scientists, and their entire goal is to maximize the amount of attention they can take from you," Nasgowitz says. "What would it look like to be the opposite of that? Hopefully someday we'll have engineers and scientists, too, but our goal will be to maximize the time you spend on what matters to you." ■

GREEN LIGHTS

Environmental stewardship comes in many forms. From reporting on thawing permafrost in the Arctic to restoring prairies in Wisconsin to lobbying politicians for change, these L&S alumni are showcasing how to make a difference.

BY ARCHER PARQUETTE

PLANTING SEEDS

THE RESTORATION ECOLOGIST

Have you heard of *Silphium laciniatum*? It's more commonly called a compass plant, and when Evelyn Williams (PhD'12) talks about it, she lights up. She speaks with both the assuredness of an expert and the enthusiasm of a newbie who just discovered something incredibly cool.

Williams is a restoration ecologist with Adaptive Restoration LLC, a job that has her traveling across Wisconsin restoring prairies and other lands that have been altered by human intervention. It's intense work that operates on a timetable of decades. After years of human intervention — industry, agriculture, the introduction of invasive species — the land requires serious science, serious effort and serious time to return to what it once was. She's burning overgrown prairies, carefully applying herbicide to remove invasive species, planting native species, and sometimes simply putting on gloves and weeding.

That brings us back to the compass plant, *Silphium laciniatum*, a native species in the central and eastern U.S. whose bright yellow flowers you'll see in prairies that haven't been altered or harmed by invasive plants. When Williams was an undergrad studying biology at Minnesota's Carleton College, she learned about the plant in-depth: its drought-resistant 15-foot roots, the way its leaves point north and south to avoid the noonday sun.

When she graduated, she didn't know exactly what she wanted to do for a career, but she did know one thing: "I wanted to get to know a plant as well as I had gotten to know the compass plant."

That brought her to UW-Madison's College of Letters & Science, where she earned a PhD in botany and plant biology. Her first week of class, she went out in the field with another student, Mike Healy (MS'09), to do a vegetation survey, not realizing that the chance meeting would change the course of her career.

After graduation, Williams worked at the Chicago Botanic Garden for nine years as a conservation scientist and researcher, studying species of conservation concern. It was intellectually stimulating, but she missed the more visceral engagement she had at Carleton — working with chainsaws, smelling a prairie burn on open air, pulling and planting.

"I really wanted to be back in the field," she remembers. "Then a friend of mine said, 'Hey, you remember Mike?'"

Healy had started Adaptive Restoration based in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, and was looking for a restoration ecologist. Williams reached out, and the fellow Badger hired her.

For the past five years, she's worked with private landowners, nonprofits and other organizations to restore land, planning and developing strategies to bring these places closer to what they were centuries ago.

"Restoration is a hopeful science," Williams says. "You know you're not going to see the results until 20, 30, even 50 years later, and restored sites still aren't exactly the same as a site that was never disturbed. It's a long-term process, and it drives home the importance of conserving the precious natural places we already have."

TAKING ROOT

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALIST

When a piece of plaster fell from the ceiling of the Memorial Union, it changed the course of Alec Luhn's career. The freshman undergrad with an undeclared major was wandering through a course fair, when the taped-off plaster on the carpet blocked his path. He wound his way around it and then found himself in front of he Russian program's booth. The folks behind it soon convinced him to join their First-Year Interest Group (FIG).

Twenty years later, Luhn ('10) spent more than a decade in Russia as a journalist, reporting extensively on climate change and its effects in the arctic and across the globe. He fled the country with his wife, BBC journalist Veronika Silchenko, after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and today he is an environmental reporter for the *New Scientist* and a freelance reporter covering climate change and the environment.

His globe-trotting career started at *The Norse Star*, the student newspaper of Wisconsin's Stoughton High School. At UW–Madison, he completed journalism, history and a Russian language major sparked by that career fair.

He wrote one of his earliest stories on the environment for *The Badger Herald*, when he investigated the Charter Street Heating Plant near campus. At the time, the plant burned coal, and the Sierra Club was advocating to have it shut down.

What happened after his graduation was almost as fortuitous as that broken piece of plaster — Luhn found a job listing at *The Moscow Times* for a business reporter. When he landed the gig at the English-language independent newspaper and flew to Moscow, his Russian degree came in handy.

Over the next decade, he covered Russia for multiple outlets, including *The Nation*, CBS News, *The Guardian* and Vice News. During the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian War, he was on the front lines, driving out to report on the conflict as shells went off around him. Most of his work covered geopolitics, such as two interviews with Russian resistance leader Alexei Navalny, but he increasingly saw a bigger, global story in climate change.

In 2016, he went to the Arctic to cover a story about a shaman who was fighting Russian oil drillers encroaching on Indigenous lands. He later returned to the Arctic to cover the thawing of the permafrost due to warming — more than 100 buildings had collapsed or been demolished because the permafrost beneath them was giving way.

"Back in 2016, climate change was already having these effects — seeing it firsthand really opened my eyes," he says.

In 2022, Luhn and his wife moved to Istanbul and then London, where he now writes for the *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* and has launched his own Substack, *Ice Mushroom*.

When rivers in Alaska began to turn orange due to permafrost thaw releasing metal and acid from the soil, he traveled there with a group of scientists to report on the alarming degradation and its effects on the Indigenous population. More recently, he has covered efforts to solve climate change through carbon removal technology, as well as attempts to re-freeze sea ice in the Arctic and cool the planet.

"How do we do something about climate change in a world that continues to pump more and more carbon into the atmosphere?" Luhn asks. "There's more attention toward radical solutions and controversial approaches. This is the biggest story that humanity is dealing with."

Growing up in St. Paul, Minnesota, Leah Terry ('23) treasures memories of the Boundary Waters: canoeing vast lakes, hiking forested trails, watching the starry night sky from a secluded campsite. The pristine nature she unthinkingly loved as a child, she later realized was there because people protected it and made it available for her. Those memories are now the fuel for a career that sees Terry protecting lands just like those as the government relations coordinator for Defenders of Wildlife, a nonprofit conservation organization in Washington, D.C.

When Terry arrived at UW–Madison, the world of lobbyists and policy reform was far from her mind — she initially applied with a major in theater. Not quite sure what she wanted to do, she switched to political science and interned with a state representative, eventually adding a communication arts major.

An internship the summer before her senior year brought her to D.C., where she was a domestic policy intern with the Alliance to End Hunger. She wrote a white paper filled with policy suggestions to expand Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Watching the team of professionals use those suggestions in their work, she saw for the first time how she could make change.

"That was my first time seeing how advocacy works on the federal level," Terry says. "It was this spark that told me, 'You should follow this.'"

After graduation, Terry moved to D.C., where she worked for a nonprofit, Network for Public Health Law, for a little more than a year. Her work gave her the chance to research climate adaptation strategies and access to green space, and she realized that her interest in public policy and her early love of nature might have a perfect intersection.

"I realized that I wanted to focus on environmental work, specifically conservation," she says. "I want to fight for other people to have access to nature and wildlife like I've had."

That brought her to Defenders of Wildlife in 2024. The nonpartisan group advocates for the protection of wildlife and the conservation of natural lands. As the government relations coordinator, Terry supports a team of lobbyists and other policy pros working to conserve nature, preserve habitats and protect endangered species and other wildlife. The organization grades members of Congress on their conservation records and logs legislative attacks on bills such as the Endangered Species Act.

Terry also helps organize an annual fly-in, during which about 20 activists — from the organization's more than 2 million members — come to D.C. to meet with representatives and senators and advocate for wildlife protection. "It's incredibly inspiring to hear these people's stories and learn why they come from all over the country for this," Terry says.

"Everyone I work with has a similar story to me about why they care about wildlife," she says. "They had the chance to experience it growing up, and that love was instilled as a core value in them. Expanding access to wildlife is the root of how we expand the conservation movement. If you're making sure young people in future generations can access these same things, that's how we get people to care long-term." ■

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SOURCES

NEW GROWTH

THE ADVOCATE

BRIDGE

BUILDERS

Researchers across the College of Letters & Science are tackling the tough questions of our time. But to get results, they need support. That's where CRISP comes in. The L&S Collective for Research Impact and Social Partnerships bridges the gap between researchers and the industry, community and government partners who will help fuel the next generation of discoveries.

BY AARON R. CONKLIN

Gloria Marí-Beffa knew it was a missed opportunity.

The year was 2022, and the College of Letters & Science associate dean for research had just received a call for grant proposals from the National Science Foundation (NSF) offering the chance to apply for more than $160 million in funding to leverage research that could create engines of economic development. Instead of celebrating, she winced. The College lacked almost all the necessary partnerships, point people and connective infrastructure to meet the program requirements and qualify for consideration.

"We didn't have partners that we could reach out to," recalls Marí-Beffa, who is also a professor of mathematics. "And that's when I started thinking, we need infrastructure to help with this. We had always left it up to the professors, and there's no way professors can take on these big, large projects."

Fast forward four years, and the picture has shifted dramatically. Marí-Beffa took the miss seriously, using it as a spark to build the Collective for Research Impact and Social Partnerships (CRISP), a growing team aimed at building bridges between campus researchers, industry partners, community organizations and governmental entities that could result in crucial funding opportunities.

The timing was critical or, as Marí-Beffa puts it, "lucky." The CRISP team began laying its groundwork and building partnerships a year before federal research grants from bedrock agencies like the NSF and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) began getting slashed or canceled entirely. Suddenly, universities across the country needed to find private funding to support public research.

"Everybody was pivoting to foundations and other types of private funding," says Marí-Beffa. "We were ahead of the game, because we had just put together this group of people to do exactly that."

> WE DIDN'T HAVE PARTNERS THAT WE COULD REACH OUT TO.
>
> AND THAT'S WHEN I STARTED THINKING, WE NEED INFRASTRUCTURE TO HELP WITH THIS.
>
> **Gloria Marí-Beffa**
> Former L&S Associate Dean for Research

PHOTO: ALTHEA DOTZOUR

LEFT
Physics professor Mark Eriksson (right) talks quantum with Lt. Gen. William J. Hartman, the former acting commander for U.S. Cyber Command.

RIGHT
SoulFolk Collective researcher Curtis O'Dwyer (left) sits down with participant and former Wisconsin State Assembly member Jason Fields (right) and a reporter from a Madison TV station to talk about how this research could make a difference for the Madison community.

PHOTO: JESSICA LEE STOVALL

TEAMING UP

CRISP launched with the hiring of Dave Schroeder, a military intelligence officer in the Wisconsin Army National Guard. Schroeder hit the ground running, using his government know-how to connect computer science researchers with national cybersecurity efforts. His work resulted in UW–Madison hosting the first-ever academic talk held by the U.S. Department of Defense Cyber Command on a college campus and multiple partnership opportunities for researchers in L&S. Schroeder's efforts were so successful, he was recently named UW–Madison's Director of National Security Initiatives.

Kyle Joseph, CRISP's associate director for business engagement, was the next puzzle piece. Immediately, he saw a massive opportunity in the fast-moving world of quantum research. The speed and scope at which quantum computers and sensing devices can process algorithms is critical to everything from developing new drugs and creating stronger cryptography to improving mapping and medical diagnostics. Solutions in these arenas are not only good for the public, but also a significant business opportunity for those ready to invest. Plus, UW–Madison has the leading experts on the topic, including several in the Department of Physics. CRISP's impact and influence was instrumental in the recent hiring of Ona Ambrozaite, the new executive director of the Wisconsin Quantum Institute, a centralized hub in the Department of Physics aimed at streamlining and supercharging quantum efforts on campus and beyond.

> "THAT'S AT THE CORE OF WHAT CRISP IS TRYING TO DO: CONNECT THE RESEARCHERS TO THOSE WHO WILL BE USING IT ONCE IT'S FULLY DEVELOPED."
>
> **Kyle Joseph**
> Associate Director for Business Engagement

"We are leaders in this research, and there are funding opportunities that could support growing the research and the impact it could have," says Joseph, who has a deep history with entrepreneurship and corporate innovation. "That's at the core of what CRISP is trying to do: connect the researchers to those who will be using it once it's fully developed."

While the opportunities seem boundless, there are also significant challenges. Unlike our neighboring state Illinois, which for years has had an extensive quantum-focused infrastructure supported by both industry and state tax dollars, Wisconsin's network is far more nascent. Joseph is busily building relationships with groups like the Wisconsin Technology Council to begin changing that equation.

"The Council's new president, L&S political science alumna Maggie Brickerman ('08), is working closely with us to help drive the coordination of companies interested in advanced technology in Wisconsin," says Joseph. "We are collaborating with multiple partners on opportunities to take a more strategic approach to driving industry engagement with next-generation technologies, securing more large-scale funding opportunities, and growing our regional ecosystem as a whole."

Quantum isn't Joseph's only focus. He's been looking for partnership opportunities across the College. This includes working with the new Public Tech Media Lab in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, a new entity created by Professor Tomás Dodds to help newsrooms ethically deploy and use artificial intelligence and open-source

> [WE'RE TRYING TO] TAKE THE PIECES AND MESH THEM TOGETHER SO THAT NOT ONLY IS THE SCIENCE BEING DONE BUT IT'S DONE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL AND STATE COMMUNITIES TO REALLY ELEVATE THEIR NEEDS, DESIRES AND FUTURES.
>
> **Erin Bailey**
> Associate Director for Community-Engaged Research

tools. He's also helping the Department of Communication Arts stand up the Creative Futures Lab, a consortium of media companies who may be interested in working with faculty and students.

HARNESSING THE HUMANITIES

Many universities focus on science- and product-based research with the aim of bringing key scientific discoveries to market more efficiently. CRISP's vision is broader, in that it also seeks to incorporate other parts of L&S, including the humanities and social sciences.

Faculty members have a long history of partnering with community organizations. For example, Madison's Center for Black Excellence and Culture has worked with both the Center for Healthy Minds, a psychology research lab focused on well-being, and the newly established SoulFolk Collective, a research group with the mission of understanding and bettering the Black Madison experience. Other L&S researchers — including faculty members from the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures and the Department of Communications Arts — also have long-standing partnerships with community organizations.

Honoring these community connections is where Erin Bailey ('09, MS'17, PhD'24), an alumna with a background in human ecology, comes in. As CRISP's associate director for community-engaged research, her role is to bolster existing community relationships and create new pathways for collaboration. Her work is done first and foremost through a humanistic lens.

"We're open for communities to say, 'I have a question about my community, and I think there might be somebody there that could help,'" Bailey explains. "My job is to help them find that person. What we're really trying to do is take the pieces and mesh them together so that not only is the science being done, but it's done in partnership with local and state communities to really elevate their needs, desires and futures."

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Marí-Beffa retired from her associate dean for research role earlier this year. Michael Morgan, a professor of atmospheric and oceanic sciences with a strong history of federal experience, including time in a leadership position at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), has stepped in to direct CRISP into its next phase of development.

Morgan sees CRISP as a key priority for L&S, and he wants to keep it front and center — not just because he wants the ability to capitalize on critical funding opportunities, but because of the opportunites that come with developing solutions in collaboration with communities, government programs and industry partners.

"I recognize in the landscape that we're working in now, where federal funding is potentially contracting, that there's always uncertainty," Morgan says. "We need to make sure that CRISP is connecting L&S researchers with federal agencies, industry, philanthropy and community leaders to address society's most urgent challenges. Through these collaborations, CRISP embodies the Wisconsin Idea." ■

PHOTO: HOPE KELHAM

Each year, Alexander Shashko polls his students on who they would induct into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Oh no! The mushrooms escaped. Find out how on page 6.

That's Rock & Roll

Every spring, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame announces its nominees, and fans immediately begin debating who deserves induction. But behind the headlines is a large and eclectic voting body that includes musicians, critics, industry insiders — and a historian from the College of Letters & Science. Alexander Shashko ('94), an L&S alumnus and full-time lecturer in the Department of African American Studies, has been one of those voters for about a decade.

"History gets written not just by historians, but by institutions that decide what we remember," says Shashko. "The Hall helps shape how we think about the history of popular music. It's imperfect — any award for art is subjective — but it keeps the conversation going about which artists mattered and why."

When the ballot lands in his inbox, Shashko has a researcher's approach for deciding who will get his vote. He makes playlists, revisits albums and reads up on the careers of artists and how their work has impacted music in the long term.

"As a historian, I probably emphasize influence more than fame or commercial success," says Shashko. "To me the story isn't just what an artist accomplished in their own career, it's also what they helped create afterward."

And for a bit of added fun, he polls his students to find out who they would induct if the decision was up to them. The results are always a little unexpected. Read the full Q&A with Shashko and see who the students picked at **go.wisc.edu/halloffame26**.

MAPPING THE WISCONSIN IDEA

READ HOW L&S IMPACTS EACH OF WISCONSIN'S 72 COUNTIES AT **GO.WISC.EDU/LS72.**

JACKSON COUNTY

Local governments are faced with numerous emerging priorities, and it can be challenging to focus on long-range planning when there are daily needs. That's where graduate students pursuing urban and regional planning degrees were able to help out in Jackson County. They worked collaboratively with county staff to develop a strategic plan, which was officially approved last year.

DODGE COUNTY

Maggie Claussen, a junior double majoring in information science and political science, was part of a team that partnered with the City of Beaver Dam to support the city's human resources department. They wrote 76 job descriptions to help prepare leadership to find the right fits for their job openings.

LA CROSSE COUNTY

The City of La Crosse reached out to the La Follette School of Public Affairs for ideas on how to use urban green spaces as a heat mitigation strategy. Researchers analyzed the local policy and area heat island effect to come up with a recommendation that combines the use of tree canopy areas and pocket park expansions to support the city's goals.

Professor of Chemistry **Tehshik Yoon** became the third L&S professor to win a 2026 Samsung Ho-Am Prize. Yoon was honored for ushering in a new era of green chemistry by developing an innovative methodology for organic synthesis.

Theresa Delgadillo, Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of English and director of the Chicanx/e & Latinx/e Studies Program, received the Modern Language Association's prize in United States Latina and Latino and Chicana and Chicano Literary and Cultural Studies for her book *Geographies of Relation: Diasporas and Borderlands in the Americas*.

Jean-Luc Thiffeault, chair of the Department of Mathematics, was named a fellow of the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM). Thiffeault was recognized for inventive approaches to the modeling and characterization of mixing, chaotic and complex flows, microorganism transport, braids and dynamical systems.

The Great Divide

They witnessed the Civil Rights Movement. They lived through the Vietnam War. And in the story of their journey from high school to older adulthood, there may lie critical clues to the fractured political polarization the United States is experiencing today.

Katherine J. Cramer ('94), the Natalie C. Holton Chair of Letters & Science and the Virginia Sapiro Professor of Political Science, went back and re-interviewed participants in a a three-decade-long study that tracked the evolving political attitudes and behavior of a group of students who graduated high school in 1965 and transitioned into an era of massive social upheaval for the United States. For the project, she collaborated with Larry M. Bartels, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University, and the result is a book titled *The Politics of Social Change: From the Sixties to the Present Through the Eyes of a Generation*.

The cohort of students from around the country, most of whom were white, had last been interviewed in 1997. When they spoke with Cramer and Bartels, they were in their 70s. The conversations revealed that, contrary to the widely held notion that individuals become more conservative politically as they age, for this group their beliefs settled in at a much younger age.

"The data suggests to us that a lot of those things were in place before they ever graduated from high school, which is contrary to the way we think about political divisions now," Cramer says. "We think Donald Trump came in and divided the country, and we find actually these divides have been growing since at least 1965."

Keeping the Peace

The University of Wisconsin-Madison ranked No. 1 on the Peace Corps' 2026 Top Volunteer-Producing Colleges and Universities list. With 3,466 alumni serving since 1961, Badgers have traveled the globe to give back to communities all around the world.

Recent grad Lincoln Sankovitz ('25) is one such volunteer out in rural Benin. The economics grad and Milwaukee native is working to build sustainable agricultural systems.

"I love getting dirty digging tomato plots with my work partners, but the most gratifying moments are always the ones that I happen upon naturally in my community," Sankovitz says.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LINCOLN SANKOVITZ

Economics alumnus Lincoln Sankovitz is serving as a sustainable agricultural systems volunteer in Benin.

Kristin Eschenfelder will serve as the Interim Dean for the College of Letters & Science.

In the Interim

Dean of the College of Letters & Science Eric M. Wilcots has been tapped to serve as the Interim Chancellor for the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As Dean, Wilcots has championed the value of a liberal arts and sciences education, prioritized the undergraduate experience and encouraged researchers to tackle the tough questions of our time.

"I am both humbled and honored to be asked to serve in this leadership role at such a consequential time in UW-Madison's history," says Wilcots, who is also the Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy.

While Wilcots is in Bascom Hall, the Interim Dean of the College of Letters & Science will be Kristin Eschenfelder, the L&S academic associate dean and associate director for the School of Computer, Data & Information Sciences. Her vision involves integrating the human and ethical aspects of technology, computing and data into the curriculum, thereby ensuring that students across diverse fields — from the humanities to the social sciences — can gain both functional and critical literacies.

MORE L&S NEWS AT **LS.WISC.EDU/NEWS**

The Good Neighbor

From a sociology degree to the National Academy of Medicine, Mario Sims makes sure community members always have a seat at the table when discussing public health.

BY SCOTT A. CARTER

PHOTO: JOHN DAVIS

For Mario Sims (MS'93, PhD'97), the path to public health didn't begin in a laboratory or a clinic, but in the neighborhoods that shaped his earliest questions about place and wellness. Born in Compton, California, and raised in a lower-middle-income community, Sims was drawn to understanding how the social forces embedded within his neighborhood shaped people's lives and health outcomes.

The types of questions Sims asked as a youth have a long history, including the landmark study of Black life, health and inequality published by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1899, *The Philadelphia Negro*. Sims first encountered Du Bois' work in high school and was immediately drawn to the types of probing questions Du Bois asked more than a century ago. Du Bois' work investigated how neighborhood conditions influence outcomes, questions that felt deeply personal to Sims.

"This comprehensive study motivated me to want to study the community I'm from," says Sims.

Sims, a distinguished professor and graduate faculty director of the Master of Public Health program at the University of California Riverside School of Medicine, has seen his career unfold at the intersection of sociology, medicine and public health. But a single principle has guided his work throughout: Meaningful progress on health equity requires communities to be partners in the science, not subjects of it.

Sims came to the University of Wisconsin–Madison to pursue a PhD in sociology, focusing on medical sociology and demography, which looks at population health. Working alongside late preeminent scholar Franklin Wilson, most recently the William H. Sewell–Bascom Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Sims studied how neighborhood location influenced health and socioeconomic

outcomes across five metropolitan areas. The work reinforced a core insight that would follow him throughout his career.

"The description of your neighborhood — whether it is poor or affluent — shapes what your social and economic outcomes are likely going to be growing up in these types of environments," Sims says.

Sims' curiosity about how social questions impact medical outcomes would find its fullest expression when he was recruited to the Jackson Heart Study, the largest and most comprehensive study of cardiovascular disease among Black Americans. Based at the University of Mississippi Medical Center and funded by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) and National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Jackson Heart Study has followed more than 5,300 participants since 1999 to better understand the causes and consequences of heart disease. When Sims arrived, the term social epidemiologist had not yet been widely used.

"They started calling me a social epidemiologist," he says. "I said, 'Well, I'm a sociologist who's interested in health from a medical standpoint.'"

With the Jackson Heart Study, his work focused on how stress, discrimination, neighborhood conditions and other social and psychosocial factors contribute to cardiovascular disease disparities. From the outset, community partnership was essential to the study's success. Given the long history of medical exploitation and distrust within underrepresented communities, researchers knew that participation could not be taken for granted.

"Contrary to people's thoughts about hesitancy, community members came out," Sims says. "It's because we developed relationships, which took time, and included participants at the table of decision making."

Community members were not treated as secondary partners, but as collaborators. That approach built trust and momentum. Sims would remind participants that the study had their best interests at heart, and the fact that it was run by scholars who lived in their community and looked like them encouraged participation.

Churches, fraternities, sororities, nonprofits and local organizations became vital partners, helping the study take root and grow. That community connection also reshaped the science itself. Sims recalls participants asking researchers to move beyond deficit-focused narratives.

"They were saying, 'We know that death follows stress and discrimination, tell us something good. Tell us something positive.'"

That feedback pushed Sims to study not only risk, but resilience — optimism, positive outlook and health-promoting behaviors that might buffer the effects of stress and discrimination. Over time, Sims rose to leadership roles within the Jackson Heart Study, eventually serving as chief science officer, interim director, principal investigator and chair of its steering committee. His work also had impact nationally. As chair of the American Heart Association's social determinants subcommittee, he helped lead a 2020 presidential advisory on structural racism and cardiovascular disease.

The report framed structural racism as a public health problem and a fundamental driver of health disparities and health inequities. In recognition of this and other scientific contributions in the field of cardiovascular epidemiology, Sims was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in 2022, an honor he attributes largely to his work in Jackson. In 2023 Sims was the recipient of the Inaugural Devah Pager Distinguished Alumni of the Year Award by the UW–Madison Sociology Department Board of Visitors.

After nearly two decades, Sims felt ready to build something new. He returned to California where he helped to launch a master's program in public health. He is also laying the groundwork for a new, multiethnic cohort study in Inland Southern California, one that builds on the Jackson Heart Study model while reflecting the region's diversity. Despite funding challenges and shifting political climates, Sims remains hopeful. After years of studying the impact of social determinants on cardiovascular disease inequities, his current work increasingly highlights the power of positive psychosocial factors on cardiovascular health.

"We're starting to show that the positive side of things can help mitigate some of the negative," he says. "Optimism, healthy behaviors and supportive environments can promote cardiovascular health, longevity and healthy aging."

For Sims, the lesson remains clear: Meaningful public health research begins — and succeeds — with the community involved.

"When you bring people to the table as true partners, they take ownership," Sims says. "And that's what makes this kind of work last." ■

"It's because we developed relationships, which took time, and included participants at the table of decision making."

MARIO SIMS
Distinguished professor and graduate faculty director of the Master of Public Health program at the University of California Riverside School of Medicine

Dan Erdman regularly visits the Unitarian Meeting House, a building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built by his father, Marshall Erdman.

PHOTO: PAULIUS MUSTEIKIS

By Design

Frank Lloyd Wright and Marshall Erdman were the visionaries who laid the groundwork for Dan Erdman's career. Now he's cementing their legacy with a professorship that will support teaching and learning for the next generation of students.

BY ALLI WATTERS

When Dan Erdman ('80, EMBA'99) looks at a beautiful building or work of art, he asks himself, "What makes it great?" It's a unique way of thinking he picked up during his time as an undergrad studying art history at UW–Madison. But art history was never his plan. He just took so many architectural history classes during his time in college that the degree requirements aligned by the time he was ready to turn the tassel and graduate.

Anna Andrzejewski's students tour a home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

PHOTO: MARLITA BEVENUE

"I tried to audit a class from an architectural history professor, Narciso Menocal, when I was still a student at Madison West High School," Dan says. "He turned me down big time. But I came back to do it the right way, and I took every class he offered."

The interest in architecture should come as no surprise, because Dan spent his upbringing surrounded by beautiful buildings. As a child, his family attended Saturday night soirées at Taliesin, home for 50 years to Wisconsin's most famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright (x1890). The home Dan grew up in was also designed by a Frank Lloyd Wright protégé, Madison architect William Kaeser, and built by Dan's father Marshall Erdman ('48). Together Wright and Marshall were behind the design and construction, respectively, of the Unitarian Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, a sun-soaked church that Dan still visits regularly to this day.

The Erdman family connection with Wright started with a problem. Wright had designed a beautiful building for his home church with panoramic windows, beamed ceilings and stone finishes. But the church couldn't afford to build it. Not willing to give up his vision, Wright connected with a professor of labor economics at his almost-alma mater, the University of Wisconsin. (Wright never did quite finish his degree.) The professor happened to have had Dan's mother Joyce Erdman ('46, MA'47) in his class and drew the connection to Marshall. At the time, Marshall was early in his career as a builder. But then Wright came knocking on his door with a question: "Baby, do you want to become famous?"

And the rest is history. Marshall built the church within the budget, and the Unitarian Meeting House has become a historic landmark honoring Wright's legacy. And as promised, that job launched Marshall's career to new levels and grew the reputation of his construction company. Today, Dan is honoring Wright's impact on his family's history by funding the Frank Lloyd Wright Professorship in Modern American Architecture within the Department of Art History to create new resources for learning and research.

"My father always said that everything he had ever earned, he owed to Frank Lloyd Wright," Dan says. "It felt fitting that I could close the circle and give back to Wright in a sense, by putting his name on this professorship."

The combination of Marshall's passion, Wright's influence and an art history education has proven to be a power-packed toolbelt for Dan to draw from in his own career, and he's had success as a real estate developer. Perhaps the project he's most proud of is one that his father left unfinished when he passed in 1995. Marshall had a new urbanism dream for his Middleton Hills development to become a walkable neighborhood with a commercial area that fit everyone's needs with access to stores, cafes and restaurants. Dan ushered the project to the finish line after his father's passing, and it has become a beloved home to people who value the village design and one of the great modern examples of new urbanism.

"My father wanted to do something good for this community, and I wanted to do right by my father," Dan says. The project was a success, even catching the attention of UW-Madison's inaugural Frank Lloyd Wright Professor of Modern Architecture, Anna Andrzejewski. "It was really visionary. Marshall's idea and Dan's involvement in developing the commercial district have led to a thriving area today." ■

On Site

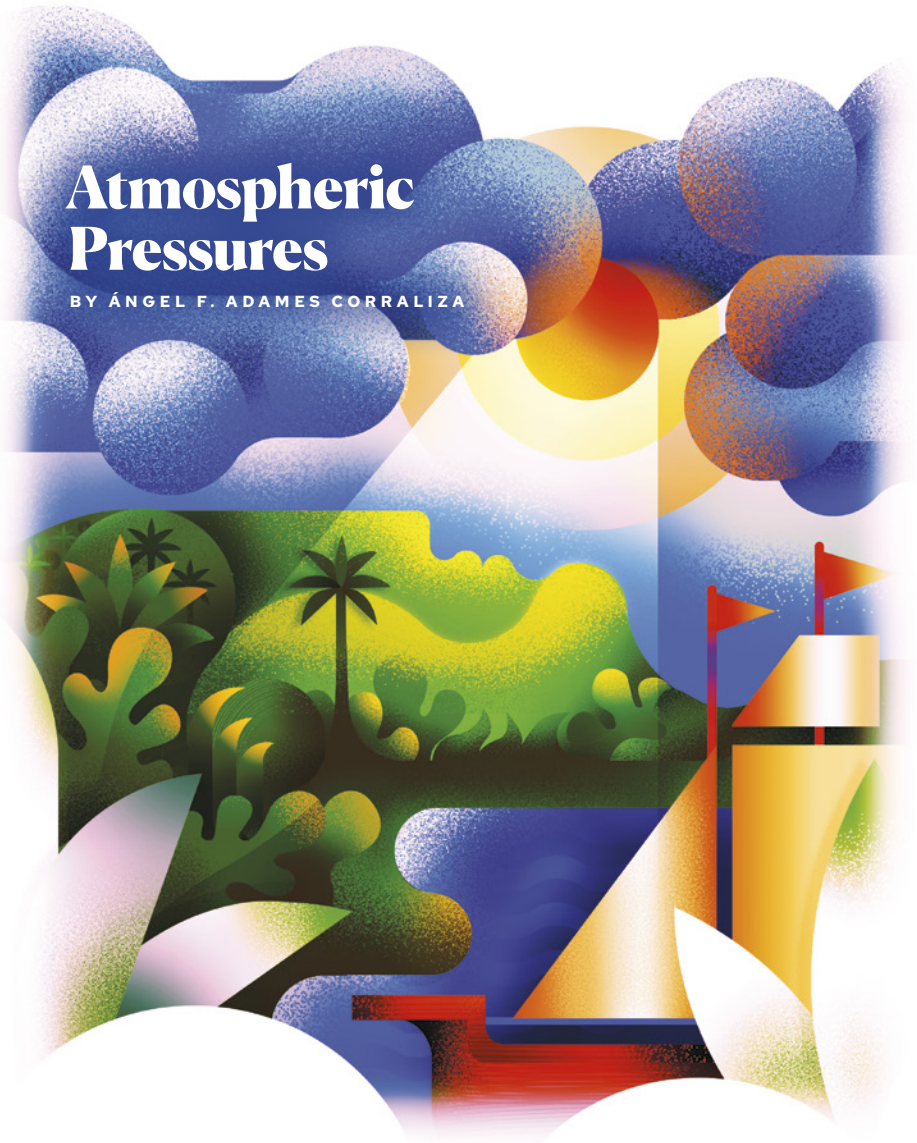
Often there are as many students on the waitlist as there are on the roster for Anna Andrzejewski's Frank Lloyd Wright course. The course was always transformative, but new resources provided by Andrzejewski's Frank Lloyd Wright endowed professorship have made it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"This gift allows us to go see buildings and experience them," Andrzejewski says. "Watching these students' eyes as they move through a Frank Lloyd Wright space, you can see them understand his work in a new way."

Andrzejewski reminds her students that Wright's designs were a direct response to his fascination with modern events, and it's part of what has made his work so timeless. He lived during a time of suburbanization and mass production, and his custom builds pushed against this by drawing in each property's surroundings.

"In an age where we're on our phones all the time, it's these in-person experiences that help us understand things on a deeper level," Andrzejewski says. "Students tell me all the time that they not only look at Frank Lloyd Wright buildings differently, but all buildings differently."

Join Anna Andrzejewski's students on a tour of a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home at go.wisc.edu/lswrighttour.



Atmospheric Pressures

BY ÁNGEL F. ADAMES CORRALIZA

What were some of the most popular science stories of 2025? My colleague Mayra I. Oyola, the Ned P. Smith Distinguished Chair of Meteorology, and I discussed some of them during our radio show at Madison's Community radio station, WORT. Uranus's new moon, the impact of vaccines on Alzheimer's onset, 3D images of an embryo, among many others. All these stories have a wow factor that makes you feel like we are turning on the lights in a dark room, only to realize the room we are in is much bigger than we imagined.

Ángel F. Adames Corraliza is the Ned P. Smith Distinguished Chair of Climatology and an associate professor of atmospheric and oceanic sciences at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

I've always thought of my research in tropical weather and climate as novel and thought-provoking, but too esoteric to be of interest to the public. And then the MacArthur Foundation called. In the span of a few weeks, I talked to radio shows, podcasts and news reporters. They all wanted to know one thing: *What was it about the tropics that drew the attention of the MacArthur Foundation?*

I was met with amazement, as I described how different the processes that drive tropical phenomena are compared to the weather that Madisonians typically experience in the midlatitudes. Temperatures don't fluctuate as much, so cold fronts don't form in the tropics. Instead, you get big blobs of moist air that are often accompanied by heavy rain. These big blobs can be the size of continents, like the Madden-Julian Oscillation, or the size of states, like easterly waves. All of this happens in the same latitude band that also hosts hurricanes, El Niño and monsoons. Unlike the sunny paradise that many imagine, the tropics are an area where rich and diverse weather and climate phenomena take place. But there's still so much more to learn. If our knowledge of midlatitude weather and climate were described as an encyclopedia that gets revised regularly, then our knowledge of the tropics would be a book draft — we're still figuring it all out.

But why are we? Some say that tropical meteorology is inherently more complicated, and there is truth to this. But arguing that the complexity is the only reason our knowledge remains incomplete disregards an important historical context. Most tropical countries were subjected to colonization under the imperial rule and morality of those based in the midlatitudes. As a result, most tropical countries met the same fate: lands stripped of their resources and Native populations wiped out or enslaved. The outcome of colonial rule was poverty, instability and death. Its echoes are still felt today, long after the colonizers "left."

In the aftermath of colonization, midlatitude meteorology was able to flourish while tropical countries lacked the resources to make their own advancements. That is, until War World II forced the Allies to engage in battle over the tropical Pacific.

ILLUSTRATION: MARIA CORTE

In desperate need of knowledge, the U.S. turned to Puerto Rico, where many breakthroughs in tropical meteorology paved the way to accelerated progress. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. reliance on Puerto Rico for tropical weather knowledge was not some sort of utopian partnership; it was deeply extractive. We — the people who were born in the tropics — were mostly left in the dark, barred from participation and assumed by some to be incapable of understanding the complexities of our Earth. It is no wonder that today, most progress in the field is instead attributed to scientists from the very countries that colonized us.

Most Puerto Ricans don't know the importance of their island in the development of tropical meteorology. I studied atmospheric sciences in Puerto Rico and was never taught this! Yes, the knowledge eventually became public, but there was never any effort to engage with these communities, to share this knowledge. This history is *also* the story of tropical meteorology, and it tells us that our early quest to understand the tropics is inextricable from the staggering injustices it perpetrated. If this story seems familiar, it should. It is one that is ubiquitous across the sciences and easy enough to uncover, if you are willing to look. They all tell us an ugly truth about how science has — and continues — to be done: We liken new knowledge to a light that illuminates the darkness but refuse to look back at the abyss we have created on our way to that understanding. We do this to our own detriment.

After I received the MacArthur award, I've had a lot of time to reflect on my work and how to communicate it to the public, and that has made me open my eyes. I thought my work was not on the caliber to be newsworthy, but it always was. I question more how the history I just described shapes our perspective on what is considered a scientific breakthrough, and that has shaped the story I want to tell people about the tropics. I want a story that dares introspection, that makes you reflect on where we are today as a civilization and where we could go if we choose thoughtfully. That is what we need right now. And you know what? There are far more people than we imagine who are ready to listen. ■

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Last Word

The IceCube Neutrino Observatory is the first detector of its kind, designed to observe the cosmos from deep within the South Pole ice. The research center is operated by UW–Madison and is supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation to collaborate with scientists around the world. A new upgrade at the field site allows more precise measurements of neutrino properties, making it the world's premier neutrino experiment. "Seeing the refurbished drill come back to life again 15 years after IceCube's original completion is truly remarkable," says Albrecht Karle, a professor of physics and principal investigator of the IceCube upgrade.

PHOTO: ILYA BODO (ICECUBE/NSF)