

# Graduate Student Research & Creativity Conference



**Monday | May 4, 2026**  
**Southern Connecticut State University**

It is our honor as members of the organizing committee to welcome you to the Annual Graduate Student Research and Creative Activity Conference, hosted by Southern Connecticut State University. This event is a celebration of scholarship and creativity in all forms, as well as a showcase for the leading minds of today's graduate community. As an educational institution, Southern seeks to promote interdisciplinary academic careers and both logic and creativity are key components in individual, economic, and societal success. The presentations highlighted in this conference demonstrate the diverse scope of subjects engaged by students from many disciplines as well as illustrating the parallels between them. This conference aims to not only encourage continued work as a community, but also to awaken individual curiosity and purpose. So it is with great pleasure that we present the scholarship and creative activity featured this year and invite you to join in what promises to be an unparalleled demonstration of graduate accomplishment.

## **The Graduate Student Research and Creativity Conference is proudly sponsored by:**

The SCSU Foundation  
The Office of the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs  
SCSU Division of Research and Innovation/SCSU Innovation HUB  
The Research and Scholarship Advisory Committee  
School of Graduate and Professional Studies/Graduate Student Association

### **Conference Organizers Listed in alphabetical order:**

Kelly Bordner  
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# 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Research and Creativity Conference

Monday, May 4, 2026 | 4:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Southern Connecticut State University

4:30 – 5:00 p.m.                      Check in  
Poster and oral presentation set-up                      3<sup>rd</sup> floor Adanti Student Center

5:00 – 5:20 p.m.                      Welcoming Remarks:                      3<sup>rd</sup> floor Ballroom

**C. Michele Thompson, Ph.D.** | *Prof. of Southeast Asian History; Chair of the Research and Scholarship Advisory Committee*

**Julia Irwin, Ph.D.** | *Interim Provost & Vice President of Academic Affairs, Southern Connecticut State University*

**Rabia Hos, Ph.D.** | *Dean, School of Graduate and Professional Studies*

5:30 – 6:40 p.m.                      Poster Presentations – Session 1                      ASC Ballroom

5:30 – 8:00 p.m.                      Social Work Capstone- Session 1                      ASC room 301  
Social Work Capstone- Session 2                      ASC room 201

6:00 – 7:30 p.m.                      Oral Presentations – Session 1                      ASC room 309  
Oral Presentations – Session 2                      ASC room 311  
Oral Presentations – Session 3                      ASC room 306  
Oral Presentations – Session 4                      ASC room 308  
Organized Panel – Session 1                      ASC room 326  
Organized Panel – Session 2                      ASC room 305

6:50 – 8:00 p.m.                      Poster Presentations – Session 2                      ASC Ballroom

P1.1 *Biases in YouTube Evolution Edutainment Towards Racist Ideas*

**Author(s):** Evelena Picano

**Faculty Mentor:** William Farley

**Department:** Anthropology

**Abstract:** In the field of archaeology, which has a deep history with scientific racism, old habits die hard. Hypotheses developed in the effort of creating and supporting scientific racism have haunted the discipline into the modern day. Racist ideas have been ingrained deeply into the field's understanding of topics like evolution to the point that they may pass as proven fact. On social media sites like YouTube, anyone can upload videos acting as an educator, leading to increasing numbers of biased thought being presented as science. Science communication has, for decades, been primarily exercised through physical publication. By June of 2025, 84% of United States adults report using YouTube. At the same time, access to physical publications through libraries, magazines, newspapers, etc. has been steadily diminishing. In this new digital age, a resurgence of scientific racism can be witnessed in a variety of fields. Data on thumbnails and search results were collected and compiled in order to reveal the prevalence of these racially biased messages within YouTube evolution content. Investigating these occurrences pursues the goal of eliminating racism in the teaching of evolution. Within the field of archaeology, adopting the practice of reflexivity is quickly growing. This study also serves as a case study for educators wishing to see a practical example of the impacts of reflexivity in reducing racism in the sciences.

P1.2 *Multimedia assets in game design: a preliminary exploration of plastic arts as a real-world, tactile accompaniment to augmented reality interface design*

**Author(s):** Fatima Ahmad

**Faculty Mentor:** Melanie Uribe

**Department:** Art & Design - UX/UI

**Abstract:** Terminator Line is an ongoing project exploring the relationship between digital interfaces and physical, tactile materials in game design. It investigates how handcrafted objects can inform the development of augmented reality (AR) interfaces within a recursive—or “Roguelike”—gameplay structure. A key environment was constructed using brown stoneware clay as an alternative to the traditional 3D modeling or isometric design typically used in gaming. From this physical space, three interactive elements were selected and translated into interface screens, each supporting multiple user interaction paths. By combining physical making with digital prototyping, this project examines how material experimentation can shape interface design, visual style, and player interaction. Ultimately, Terminator Line takes a hybrid approach that aims to broaden how designers conceptualize and build immersive game environments that work in tandem with their interactive components.

P1.3 *Upper thermal regimes and quiescence in the temperate coral *Astrangia poculata**

**Author(s):** Alina Tran

**Faculty Mentor:** Sean Grace

**Department:** Biology

**Abstract:** While climate impacts on tropical corals are well-documented, the thermal limits of temperate species like *Astrangia poculata* remain understudied. Notably, *A. poculata* enters dormancy during cold winter temperatures (<5°C), but it is unknown if it exhibits a similar “warm-water dormancy” observed in other temperate corals. This study investigates how elevated temperatures (18–33°C) influence tentacle behavior and responsiveness in Rhode Island *A. poculata* colonies. Following daily feedings, tentacle activity will be monitored both during a week of thermal stress and a subsequent recovery period. Additionally, zooxanthellae densities will be calculated in visually bleached colonies, though counts were primarily used to verify the extent of symbiont loss. To isolate thermal effects from circadian rhythms, 24-hour video recordings will assess baseline activity patterns. By analyzing the relationship between temperature and tentacle behavior, this research will determine if *A. poculata* utilizes dormancy as a survival mechanism against heat stress. These findings will provide critical insights into the thermal tolerance and resilience of temperate corals in a rapidly warming ocean.

P1.4 *Motivational Profiles, Multidimensional Calling, and Micro-CSR Authenticity: A Person-Centered Model of Meaningful Work and Work Engagement*

**Author(s):** Angelica Figueroa

**Faculty Mentor:** Zheni Wang

**Department:** Business Administration

**Abstract:** Employee engagement is a major problem for many organizations including schools; many employees working in educational institutions have increasing levels of emotional and resource demand with limited resources

available to address these demands. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been identified as a way to promote positive employee attitudes and behaviors, but the psychological pathways that relate CSR beliefs to employee engagement have not been fully explored. In this study, we explore how perceived micro-CSR authenticity relates to employee engagement via meaningful work experiences, using calling literature and self-determination theory as our theoretical bases. We propose a mediated moderation model in which meaningful work serves as a mediator for the relationship between perceived CSR authenticity and employee engagement. We use a person-centered methodology to examine differences in employee motivation/calling orientation; latent profile analysis will be used to define motivation – calling profiles by examining different combinations of autonomous motivation and multidimensional calling orientations. We anticipate that the motivation – calling profiles will serve as moderators of the meaningful work – engagement relationship such that employees who exhibit higher levels of calling and autonomous motivation will report higher levels of engagement. Our sample includes educators and staff from public K-12 school districts located in the Northeastern United States. The findings of this study will provide insight into how CSR can promote employee engagement through meaningful work.

P1.5 *PFAS Degradation via Cost Effective Photocatalysis*

**Author(s):** Logan Sewall

**Faculty Mentor:** Belinda Huerta

**Department:** Chemistry

**Abstract:** PFAS are a broad class of recalcitrant pollutants and a major concern for both public and environmental health. Due to the nature of the carbon fluorine bond, these chemicals are exceedingly hard to break down leading to concerns over their persistence as they have been shown to bioaccumulate and biomagnify. PFAS have been linked to numerous health complications including cancer. Current methods for PFAS remediation are the use of landfills, underground injection, and incineration; all of which have major drawbacks and only one being truly destructive to PFAS. Photocatalysis has been shown to be both an efficient and effective means of PFAS degradation. A major drawback of this approach is the cost of pure and refined catalysts and the photo-reaction chamber. This study investigates two cost effective unrefined mineral photocatalysis (ilmenite and rutile) and the design of a cost effective photo-reactor as a means of PFAS degradation.

P1.6 *Creation of the Self: Identity, Expression, And Performance in Art Education*

**Author(s):** Jonah Junga

**Faculty Mentor:** Laura Bower-Phipps

**Department:** Curriculum and Learning

**Abstract:** Since the conception of education as a field of study, educators have been defining and redefining what the purpose of schooling should be. A student-centered approach has emerged as one of the most effective ideologies for teachers to implement in their practices—where classrooms and instructional practices are designed to meet the educational, social, and emotional wellbeing of all students (Hansen & Imse, 2016). Student identity sits at the center of this ideology: A diverse array of personal identities and expressions enter the classroom, so shouldn't the classroom provide the much-needed space for these identities to grow? Art and visual arts-based education is an especially powerful way to allow understanding of their identities and the identities of those around them; both art and identity involve deliberate acts of expression and performance (whether conscious or subconscious.) Through the development of an educational framework that centers the ever-growing nature of identity, I aim to promote a less rigid view of a student's 'self' and 'identity,' one that is more open to the possibility of change and the notion that identity is not some fixed, immutable thing. This can be supported by a post-structuralist approach to defining 'art' in the visual arts classroom, as well as a foundation of culturally responsive, student-centered teaching practices.

P1.7 *Chronic Absenteeism in Urban High Schools: From Reactive Compliance to Predictive, Equity-Centered Systems*

**Author(s):** Karen Lorde

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** EDL

**Abstract:** This poster presentation summarizes an advocacy brief completed as a course assignment for EDL 808, Leadership in Social Equity. The brief examines chronic absenteeism in urban Connecticut high schools and argues that the current system, built around warning letters, DCF referrals, and threshold-based interventions, is not working. It is reactive by design, and by the time it activates, the pattern is already set. Connecticut's statewide chronic absenteeism rate sits at 17.2%, but is higher in urban districts. In 2023/24 Hartford's rate was 38.4%, New Haven's was 37.5%, and at one of Connecticut's largest urban high schools, the 2024/25 percentage was 45.4%. Subgroup disparities make it worse. Students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and low-income families are consistently well above their district averages. Forty one percent of incoming 9th graders at one urban high school arrived already chronically absent from middle school. Over 100 students were complete no shows at the start of a recent school year. Those are not data points. Those are kids. Drawing on EdSight data, CSDE

reporting, national research, and three anonymous practitioner interviews, this brief proposes: a shift to predictive, equity-centered attendance systems using early warning data schools already have; protecting counselor time for direct student contact; tying attendance meaningfully to credits; and addressing the barriers keeping students home including housing instability, mental health, and immigration enforcement. The goal is to reach rates of 25% to 28% by being proactive instead of waiting for students to disappear from the data.

P1.8 *Can I Play, Coach? An Advocacy Brief to Improve Equitable Access to NCAA Division III Sports*

**Author(s):** Megan Droesch

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** EDL

**Abstract:** Collegiate athletics is a forum for elite competition on a level playing surface. However, the growth of organized youth sports into a \$15 billion industry has changed the concept of competition. In this Advocacy Brief class assignment, I argue that the current NCAA Division III bylaws inequitably limit access to collegiate athletics due to the restrictions on allowable athlete evaluations. Using qualitative interviews of collegiate athletics staff, coaches, and administrators, comparative information was gathered relating to the recruitment of students in and out of the private youth sport circuit. Active recruitment of athletes from outside the club sport arena is limited by time, access, and recruitment process knowledge. Changing the NCAA Division III bylaws to allow for free and open evaluations prior to the conclusion of an athlete's senior year would open access to all prospective student-athletes, regardless of financial status.

P1.9 *Funding Equitable 18–22 Transition Services in Connecticut*

**Author(s):** Tiffany Blanchette

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Education

**Abstract:** This paper reports on an Advocacy Brief developed for a doctoral Leadership and Social Justice course assignment. The Brief argues that Connecticut lacks enforceable statewide standards and a dedicated funding mechanism for transition services for students ages 18–22, resulting in uneven program quality, inequitable post-school outcomes, and greater long-term reliance on costly adult service systems. Although Connecticut has committed through IDEA, Employment First, and broader workforce initiatives to preparing students with disabilities for employment and independent adult life, access to work-based learning, job coaching, transportation, and interagency coordination remains highly dependent on local district capacity rather than student need. Drawing on policy, outcome, and cost evidence, the Brief recommends that the Connecticut State Department of Education, in partnership with the General Assembly, establish enforceable minimum standards for 18–22 transition programming and create an equity-weighted transition allocation within the existing SEED grant. Recommended investments include staffing, job coaching, transportation, paid work-based learning, and stronger coordination with adult agencies. The Brief also proposes a phased implementation aligned with the biennial budget cycle, beginning with pilot districts and expanding statewide, with outcome monitoring using IDEA Indicator 14 and Employment First benchmarks. Earlier investment in structured transition services is presented as a cost-avoidance and workforce development strategy that can improve employment outcomes while reducing long-term dependence on adult services.

P1.10 *A Slippery Slope: Navigating I.C.E. presence on campus*

**Author(s):** Ana Ocasio Adames

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** Policy is constantly changing. How we respond to that change is key. These policies range from day-to-day institutional operations to larger scale policies with national implications. Over the past year we have seen a number of rapidly changing national policies that directly impact our campus communities and students. This poster presentation of an Advocacy Brief course assignment aims to share how institutions of higher education are supporting their students through ever-changing policies specifically centered around Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It explores how their response to ICE on campus seeking out students or information is handled, how institutions can prepare and train their staff to support students who may be directly affected by heightened DHS oversight, as well as how ICE presence can lead to other barriers in education. This advocacy research seeks to help produce well-rounded and well-informed protocols that can be used to support students at private higher education institutions in times of uncertainty centered around ICE presence.

- P1.11 *The Intersection of Student Technology Usage and School Belonging: Perspectives from K-12 School Leaders*  
**Author(s):** Jonathan Ahlcrona  
**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh  
**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
**Abstract:** The purpose of this qualitative research assignment was to investigate school leaders' perspectives on what it means to belong at school, and how technology usage by students in classrooms and outside of school impacts such leaders' perspectives of student belonging within their school buildings. This study took a constructivist stance, with an understanding that my professional relationships with the school leaders would facilitate a co-construction of knowledge. Theoretical framing consists of the Integrative Framework of Belonging (Allen et. al, 2025) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et. al, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one elementary principal, one middle school principal, and one high school principal, and reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on transcript data. The findings show disparate understandings and perceptions on both what belonging means and how technology may impact student belonging in school. These findings will help to focus future inquiry into the intersection of student technology usage and school belonging
- P1.12 *Making Sense of Organizational Communication Through Staff Lived Experience in a Private Special Education Therapeutic Day School*  
**Author(s):** Nicholas LaVecchia  
**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh  
**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Study  
**Abstract:** This qualitative research assignment, undertaken for a qualitative methods class, uses a phenomenological approach to explore three staff members' lived experience of organizational communication at an approved private special education therapeutic day school in the northeastern United States. It focuses on how staff members experience and make sense of organizational communication within a setting marked by uneven and exclusionary information flow across roles and fragmented communication channels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members, and the data were coded and analyzed thematically through a sensemaking lens. Thematic analysis suggested that staff experienced organizational communication as uneven and fragmented across roles, with incomplete information, mixed messages, and exclusion from broader communication contributing to confusion and frustration as they tried to make sense of their responsibilities. These initial findings have implications for leadership in therapeutic day schools, suggesting that communication systems should be examined in relation to the coordination demands of high-intensity settings rather than assumed to function like those of more conventional schools.
- P1.13 *Having a Ball: Assessing Reef Ball Suitability at Chaffinch Island Park*  
**Author(s):** Jessica Sawyer  
**Faculty Mentor:** Scott Graves  
**Department:** EGMS- Coastal Resilience  
**Abstract:** With the imposing threat of accelerated rates of sea level rise, marsh wetlands are facing pressures of edge erosion and potential drowning. Given the vital ecosystem services marshes provide, Reef Balls have become a popular nature-based solution for dissipating wave energy, promoting sediment accretion, and restoring habitats. While the Reef Ball Foundation make recommendations for deployment and arrangement, the primary focus of existing literature is on general artificial reef site suitability and criteria, opposed to Reef Ball specific suitability analysis. This research proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework and methodology to determine Reef Ball site suitability, using Chaffinch Island Park in Guilford, Connecticut as a case study. The conceptual framework will integrate physical implementation feasibility, mostly based on biophysical characteristics, with the political and regulatory dimensions, following policies and permitting, that dictate project viability and relationships between these variables. The proposed methodology utilizes a multi-tiered approach to data acquisition and synthesis. High-resolution UAS photogrammetry and Pix4Dmapper will illustrate and quantify erosional patterns and marsh vulnerability. Wind, wave, and stratigraphic analyses will inform arrangement and anchoring strategies. Multi-parameter sensors will determine habitat suitability based on water quality. Through review of state and local permitting approval and licensing regulations, feasibility based on policy will be incorporated. Data are synthesized through GIS exclusion mapping and weighted overlays to identify optimal implementation strategies. The integration of policies and permitting helps to bridge environmental data with the social dimension and provides a roadmap for solution implementation of nature-based coastal defense.

P1.14 *Rediscovering Adelaide Crapsey, Forgotten Modernist*

**Author(s):** Christopher Bradley

**Faculty Mentor:** Vara Neverow

**Department:** English

**Abstract:** Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914) was a Modernist poet, professor, and scholar who is all but forgotten in 2026. While her reputation soared in the wake of her untimely death, she did not publish during her lifetime and concentrated her efforts on an obscure scholarly study of English verse. Crapsey's minor status in the canon of American Literature is by no means an indicator of the value of her contributions to the field. This presentation will trace the critical conversations around Crapsey from her first publication in 1915 to her recent re-evaluation. I have undertaken this project as an independent study under the direction of Dr. Vara Neverow, who has assisted me in contextualizing Crapsey's truly unique style and ideas. My research will show that Crapsey's reputation rose and fell in waves: journalists and critics appear to resurrect her every few decades from her death to the present day, though interest in her work still comes primarily from popular sources, not academic ones. I argue that the lack of academic attention paid to Crapsey, along with her omission from major anthologies of American verse, mark a troubling gap in the scholarship of 20th-century American poetry. Through this presentation, I hope to elevate Crapsey to the status of major poet. Her creative and scholarly work make this case eloquently on their own. My role as a presenter is to amplify Crapsey's voice.

P1.15 *A Path to Sustainability*

**Author(s):** Sage Maier

**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp

**Department:** Environment, Geography and Marine Studies

**Abstract:** Within the urban landscape of New Haven, Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) serves as a critical corridor for local biodiversity. While many students and faculty on campus may be familiar with visible ecological markers, such as the presence of the invasive spotted lanternfly or the waterfowl of Beaver Pond, other sustainability assets, like the community garden behind Davis Hall, remain underutilized due to a lack of awareness. This Applied Stewardship Project, conducted in collaboration with the SCSU Office of Sustainability, aims to bridge this gap by creating an interactive walking path. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach: first, conducting stakeholder interviews with community partners, including students and faculty, to assess campus environmental perceptions; and second, performing ecological field surveys to catalog local flora and fauna. These data points will then be synthesized into an ArcGIS StoryMap, providing a digital, geospatial narrative that highlights campus biodiversity and invites the university community into active environmental stewardship.

P1.16 *The Ebb and Flow of Connecticut's Shellfish Industry: Policy and Perceptions*

**Author(s):** Sadie Garfinkel, Eleni Haskos, Kaylee Vollano & Dan Schwartz

**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp

**Department:** Environment, Geography, and Marine Science

**Abstract:** Shellfish have long served as an important ecological, cultural, and economic resource in Connecticut, supporting Indigenous communities and later becoming a cornerstone of coastal economies. By the late nineteenth century, Long Island Sound, and its associated tidal rivers, emerged as a major center of shellfish production. However, the industry has experienced significant fluctuations over time due to a combination of environmental conditions, disease, consumer perceptions, and regulatory changes. Prior research has examined environmental drivers of shellfish decline, yet fewer studies have evaluated the influence of governance structures alongside ecological and market factors. This study examines how shellfish production and economic outcomes in Connecticut have shifted over the past 30 years (1994-2024), with a particular emphasis on the influence of policy and regulatory frameworks. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study analyzes historical records, policy documents, and economic data from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture to evaluate trends and potential causal relationships in the abundance and sales of clams and oysters. Additionally, this study explores the relationships between shellfish abundance and water quality in Long Island Sound and how perceptions of water quality have shaped the industry. By situating recent industry dynamics within a broader historical and policy context, this research provides insights into the factors which shape the sustainability and resilience of shellfish aquaculture. This work situates itself within broader coastal resilience efforts as shellfish farming is increasingly underscored for both its economic importance and its emerging role in shoreline protection and habitat provisioning.

P1.17 *Qikiqtarjauq Deep Sea Port Development: What, Why and for Whom?*

**Author(s):** Benjamin LeBlanc

**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences

**Abstract:** Ports are key pieces of infrastructure supporting global trade and often promoted as drivers of regional economic growth, promising public benefits such as employment, investment, and improved connectivity. However, the meaning of “public benefit” is often vague, with financial, social, and environmental costs disproportionately borne by local communities. These tensions are increasingly visible in the Arctic, where climate change has reduced sea ice and expanded navigability drawing new attention to coastal and Indigenous communities previously marginalized by geographic inaccessibility. This bibliometric analysis of the literature explores research on Arctic port developments, Blue Economy frameworks, and the socio-environmental implications of waterfront infrastructure. It examines how “public benefit” is defined, showing the difference between growth-oriented objectives and community realities. Focusing on the proposed port in Qikiqtarjauq, Nunavut, this analysis places the project within broader Arctic development narratives, where infrastructure is framed as an economic opportunity and a means of asserting sovereignty over Arctic trade routes. While the economic opportunity is emphasized, questions remain about potential changes to local livelihoods, governance, and relationships to land and sea. This paper asks: development for whom, and toward what ends? It highlights the need to evaluate Arctic infrastructure beyond growth metrics, foregrounding social equity, community priorities, and ecological responsibility.

P1.18 *Bridging the Gap: Expanding Postpartum Support Through Doula Integration in the Family Bridge Program*

**Author(s):** Tyanna Stewart

**Faculty Mentor:** Marian Evans

**Department:** Health and Human Services - Public Health

**Abstract:** Background: This project focused on improving postpartum support by expanding services provided by the Family Bridge Program, a free home-visiting service that connects families with nurses and community health workers after birth. Research explored how doula services could strengthen care and address gaps in emotional support, advocacy, and culturally responsive services for postpartum families in underserved communities across the region.

Materials/Methods: Methods included a literature review on doulas’ impact on postpartum outcomes, a needs assessment survey of Family Bridge staff, and a SWOT analysis to assess feasibility. Findings informed a doula integration proposal within Family Bridge’s existing home-visiting model. Educational materials and doula resources were also developed to support implementation, staff awareness, and future patient education efforts.

Results: Survey findings showed that nurses want to provide more medical advocacy and emotional support but feel limited by time and workflow demands. Nurses identified doulas as valuable partners who could provide continuous support, culturally relevant care, breastfeeding help, and postpartum advocacy. SWOT findings showed Family Bridge’s established infrastructure makes integration feasible. Key opportunities included Connecticut’s Maternal Health Strategic Plan and Public Act 24-118, signed by Governor Ned Lamont, which expands Medicaid reimbursement for doula services.

Conclusion: This project offers a practical strategy to strengthen postpartum care and improve equity for families served by Family Bridge. Findings were presented to the Family Bridge Program Director and are now being prepared for state-level stakeholders to help inform broader maternal health efforts across Connecticut and support sustainable, community-centered postpartum care improvements statewide.

P1.19 *Evaluation of the Impacts of Seaweed Aquaculture on Water Quality and Zooplankton Abundance and Diversity in Guilford, Connecticut*

**Author(s):** Kaitlin Wagner

**Faculty Mentor:** Emma Cross

**Department:** IBD

**Abstract:** Seaweed aquaculture is rapidly expanding in the Northeast of the United States as a potential solution to improve coastal sustainability. Sugar kelp can remove nitrogen and phosphorus from water, which may help to improve local water quality in coastal systems by reducing eutrophication. Sugar kelp farms can also provide habitat for marine species providing support for increased biodiversity. This has the potential to provide economic benefits through seafood production and job opportunities for coastal communities. As sugar kelp farming expands across New England, it is important to study its potential effects on marine biodiversity and water quality in estuarine environments. This study investigated the effects of sugar kelp aquaculture on zooplankton abundance and diversity, and water quality off the coast of Guilford in Long Island Sound, USA. Biodiversity will be measured through zooplankton tows, while water quality will be measured through multi-parameter probes. Zooplankton tows were conducted monthly at New England Sea Farms two-acre sugar kelp farm and at the reference site with no aquaculture activity located 100m away from the farm site from October 2024 through September 2025. Water quality parameters

were measured through continuous unattended multi-probes at the sugar kelp farm and reference site. The preliminary data analysis suggests the zooplankton diversity was generally higher at the seaweed farm than the reference site, while the water quality parameters followed typical seasonal trends observed in Long Island Sound, USA. This research will help the expansion of sugar kelp aquaculture in New England's coastal waters by informing evidence-based management strategies.

P1.20 *Reframing Information Literacy in the Era of Artificial Intelligence: Academic Libraries, Undergraduate Learning, and Pedagogical Adaptations*

**Author(s):** Karley Padin

**Faculty Mentor:** Oghenere Salubi

**Department:** Library and Information Science

**Abstract:** The development of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) tools has significantly shaped the landscape of academic libraries and how undergraduate students search for, evaluate, and produce information. Information literacy, a core responsibility of academic librarians, is now influenced by generative AI tools and algorithmic search systems. As well, the necessity to address curricular and assessment influences affects the ability of academic librarians to successfully deliver information literacy instruction that addresses AI and the changing behaviors of undergraduate students. This sequential mixed-methods study examines how academic librarians are adapting information literacy instruction in response to these changes. Through an understanding of the shift from the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education to the constructivist ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into how academic librarians are integrating AI-related concepts into information literacy instruction, assessment, and curricular influence in instructional design, and how instructional practices are evolving in response to emerging AI-related technologies.

P1.21 *Including the Whole Student Body: Connecticut Academic Librarians and Their Services to Neurodiverse Students*

**Author(s):** Teresa Cetrangola

**Faculty Mentor:** Yan Liu

**Department:** Library and Information Science

**Abstract:** This is an empirical mixed-methods study that investigates how Connecticut's academic librarians interpret, develop, and implement their libraries to serve the needs of neurodiverse undergraduate students. In recent decades, awareness for neurodiversity has increased, which grants libraries the opportunity to position themselves as critical supporters of user-centered and inclusive environments. However, many existing library services and spaces prioritize neurotypical users. Meanwhile, current literature on the topic focuses on student experiences and professional development, far less of the literature investigates how librarians are decisions-makers regarding this area. A Qualtrics survey was completed by 25 (n=25) public services librarians working at different institutions across Connecticut, offering both qualitative and quantitative data. Descriptive statistics and thematic coding were conducted and synthesized to better understand how public service librarians create neurodiversity-informed spaces and services and the challenges that come with it. Findings from this study aim to add to the growing body of literature and bring awareness to intentionally designing inclusive spaces.

P1.22 *Harm Reduction Interventions Following Nonfatal Overdoses*

**Author(s):** Erin O'Brien

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses the need for structured, trauma-informed guidance for social workers engaging with clients immediately following a non-fatal overdose within harm reduction settings. Individuals who experience overdose often cycle in and out of treatment, highlighting a gap in consistent, relationally grounded post-overdose care. Guided by the research question of how trauma-informed social work practice can support post-overdose therapeutic engagement, the literature review emphasizes themes of stigma, marginalization, and the importance of client-centered, harm reduction approaches. Findings suggest a need for frameworks that support both immediate stabilization and ongoing engagement while respecting client autonomy. In response, this project develops a visual infographic framework map designed to guide social workers in navigating post-overdose interactions. This deliverable aims to strengthen therapeutic relationships, support client dignity, and promote continued connection to care, contributing to more responsive and effective social work practice.

P1.23 *Youth Support Through Social Work*

**Author(s):** Michael Downing

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This presentation examines the intersection of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the integration of on-site social work services within Boys and Girls Club programs. While NCLB aimed to improve academic achievement and reduce educational disparities, its strong emphasis on standardized testing often overlooked students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. This gap highlights the importance of holistic support systems that extend beyond the classroom. Boys and Girls Clubs serve as critical community-based spaces that support youth development, particularly for those facing socioeconomic challenges. However, many participants experience complex mental health, family, and behavioral issues that traditional programming alone cannot fully address. Integrating on-site social workers into these settings provides immediate, accessible, and culturally responsive support. This presentation explores how on-site social work services can enhance youth outcomes by addressing barriers to learning, promoting emotional well-being, and strengthening family engagement. It also discusses how this approach aligns with and expands upon the original goals of NCLB by supporting the "whole child," rather than focusing solely on academic performance. Ultimately, the integration of social work within Boys and Girls Clubs offers a practical and impactful strategy to bridge policy gaps, foster resilience, and promote equitable opportunities for youth success.

P1.24 *The importance of a standardized orientation program for new graduate nurses in a PICU*

**Author(s):** Gail Dale

**Faculty Mentor:** Ashlee Mattutini

**Department:** Nursing

**Abstract:** This case study focuses on a new graduate nurse who has started her orientation in a pediatric intensive care unit. However, she feels frustrated with her lack of progression as she has experienced inconsistency with preceptors, feedback and evaluations. She feels isolated and is lacking the confidence and motivation to stay on a unit that has been so unsupportive in her transition from student to practicing nurse. This paper proposes the need for a standardized, structured orientation program supported by professional competencies from the National League of Nursing, Quality and Safety Education for Nurses and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Highlighted interventions include implementing an orientation program rooted in theory, implementation of a preceptor training and implementation of a nurse residency program. This case highlights the critical role of a supportive orientation program at all levels, the individual, the unit and the institution, to help in the successful transition from new graduate nurse to a practicing intensive care nurse. The expected outcome of this case study is improved nurse confidence, competence and retention.

P1.25 *Misuse of Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity*

**Author(s):** Mikaela Bourgoin

**Faculty Mentor:** Ashlee Mattutini

**Department:** Nursing

**Abstract:** Higher education has been facing many ethical challenges with the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) that have put educators in conflicting situations about ways to address when AI has been misused. This clinical vignette explores Connor, a 20-year-old Caucasian male is in his junior year in the undergraduate nursing program at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU). Connor has not always had the easiest time with school, spending hours on end working on his assignments. Connor still needs to work part-time in the program to keep up with paying his bills and has found himself falling behind on his assignments. Connor recently found that the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has helped him understand his assignments significantly better and has been using it to assist in writing his papers. He recently got called in by his Theory academic nurse educator (ANE) because the AI analyzer determined his paper was flagged as AI generated. The ANE noticed there was no AI cited. The ANE and Connor must navigate what the gap in learning was about AI use and come up with a plan to guide Connor, so he understands the complexity of misusing AI. The ANE and Connor come up with resources to assist Connor in his studies while upholding academic integrity. This constructed case study is an example of the challenges faced by students using AI for academic assistance without impairing academic integrity and ways for the ANE to approach students when there is a concern for AI misuse.

P1.26 *Simulation-based Development and Optimization of the Integral Field Unit Speckle Imager (IFUSI)*

**Author(s):** Fiona Powers Ozyurt

**Faculty Mentor:** Elliott Horch

**Department:** Physics

**Abstract:** Atmospheric turbulence limits the spatial resolution of ground-based telescopes by distorting incoming wavefronts and blurring astronomical images. Speckle imaging mitigates these effects using rapid short-exposure observations. Traditional instruments, however, rely on fixed narrow-band filters that reduce photon efficiency and introduce wavelength-dependent systematic errors. The Integral Field Unit Speckle Imager (IFUSI) is a next-generation instrument that combines speckle imaging with hyperspectral integral field spectroscopy, simultaneously recording spatial and spectral information across a continuous wavelength range. This work presents a simulation framework developed to evaluate IFUSI performance prior to deployment. The simulations model atmospheric phase distortions, fiber-array sampling, spectral dispersion, detector response, and hardware imperfections under realistic observing conditions. Results demonstrate how hyperspectral speckle imaging can improve photometric precision, reduce chromatic systematics, and guide instrument design and observing strategies for high-resolution astronomical imaging.

P1.27 *Pluralistic Ignorance and Groupthink in Online Subcultures*

**Author(s):** Bren Lott

**Faculty Mentor:** Kelly Stiver

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Pluralistic Ignorance is a phenomenon where individuals falsely believe others think in a specific way, and conform to that viewpoint. A consequence of this can be people believing others think a certain way and changing what they think to fit the norm. Pluralistic Ignorance can be found in current political issues, often perpetuated by media influence, however, there is currently a lack of research examining the impact of pluralistic ignorance on homogeneity of beliefs and groupthink in online subcultures. I will examine how it influences beliefs of those in online communities, with the Dead by Daylight (DBD) community as an example, because of its enforcement of social norms and mores on other players. I will conduct a survey within DBD's in-game survey tool to analyze the opinions of the game comparing high community engagement players and low community engagement affects the perceived norms. I predict the longer and more invested a player is with the game and its community, the higher the prevalence of pluralistic ignorance.

P1.28 *Mind over Miles: Personality and Motivation as Predictors of Commitment in Collegiate Runners*

**Author(s):** Cassie Nemec

**Faculty Mentor:** Cheryl Durwin

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** This study examines how two of the Big Five personality domains (conscientiousness and extraversion) and intrinsic motivation influence the commitment of collegiate cross-country/track and field athletes to continue participating in their sport. Many studies have investigated athlete personality and motivation. However, little research, if any, has examined the relationship between specific personality traits and levels of intrinsic motivation on commitment levels in athletes. Research has indicated that individual sport athletes, such as track and field, generally report high levels of conscientiousness and lower levels of extraversion when compared to team sport athletes, suggesting that participation in certain sports may be related to different personality traits (Steca et. al, 2017) but it is not yet known which of these factors is most influential on commitment. This research investigates the relationship between specific domains of personality and intrinsic motivation and the influence they have on commitment in runners. It was hypothesized that cross-country/track and field athletes who report higher levels of conscientiousness and intrinsic motivation and lower levels of extraversion will be more likely to commit to continue participation in their sport. Thirty-eight participants, with about one-third from each NCAA division level and ranging in age from 18-23 years old, were surveyed. Multiple regression revealed that overall motivation was the strongest predictor of commitment to run, and while extraversion and conscientiousness added 4% of the variance, they were not significant contributors to the prediction of commitment. Additional factors impacting the results will be discussed.

P1.29 *Terror Management and Information in the News*

**Author(s):** Shannon Dennehey

**Faculty Mentor:** Patricia Kahlbaugh

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** The spread of misinformation is rampant in the current digital age. A crucial factor manufacturing the content as believable is the use of emotionally charged language that makes it difficult for people to assess the content critically. Additionally, misinformation can be subtle and difficult to discern, and people are inclined to believe

information that is provided to them. Terror Management Theory (TMT) posits that when people are confronted with their own mortality (i.e., mortality is made salient), individuals are more likely to believe information or behave in ways that are riskier. This study examines whether people are more likely to believe misinformation that should be easily identifiable as false when they are primed to think of their own mortality, and if the level of believability changes when given optimistic vs pessimistic misinformation statements. We expect to find that when made more aware of one's own death, people will be more likely to attribute truth to false statements, particularly if they have pessimistic content, that is, when those statements themselves pose a possible threat to the individual. Data will be analyzed using two-by-two factorial ANOVAs.

P1.30 *Borderline Personality Disorder Symptom Severity in The Relationship Between Childhood Emotional Invalidation and Therapy-Seeking Attitudes*

**Author(s):** Neesha Melendez

**Faculty Mentor:** Kelly Stiver

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Many individuals experiencing psychological distress do not seek psychotherapy, even when treatment is available. Understanding why therapy avoidance occurs is important for improving mental health conditions. Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is characterized by emotional instability, impulsivity, and difficulties in relationships. The symptoms of BPD can make vulnerability feel threatening, which may lead individuals to view therapy as unsafe. Linehan's Biosocial Theory (1993) suggests that BPD develops through the interaction between biological emotional sensitivity and chronically invalidating childhood environments. When individuals experience emotional invalidation early in life, they may learn to suppress their emotions, which can influence how they cope and whether they seek help later in life. The proposed study aims to examine whether BPD symptom severity mediates the relationship between childhood emotional invalidation and therapy-seeking attitudes. It is hypothesized that greater childhood emotional invalidation will predict more negative attitudes toward seeking therapy, and that this relationship will be mediated by increased BPD symptom severity. The proposed study will use survey data from adults who will self-report levels of emotional invalidation in childhood, BPD symptom severity, and therapy-seeking attitudes. Participants are proposed to use Likert-scale measures.

P1.31 *Assessing Retention and Academic Progress Factors in the 2027 ConnCap Early College Cohort*

**Author(s):** Xochitl Sanchez Guerrero

**Faculty Mentor:** Cheryl Durwin

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** The ConnCap program is an early-college three-year program following a partnership with New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) for the class of 2027. ConnCap provides at-risk high school students with support for academics and college preparedness with participation in early-college courses, professional development workshops, mentoring, tutoring, and college visits. The purpose of this study is to investigate the efficacy of the ConnCap program at SCSU by examining the progress of New Haven Public School 11th graders/early-college students. Data such as students' 10th and 11th-grade course grades, academic standing, personal experiences with the program, and demographic items from an online survey and archival data collected by the program on all students participating in the program. The aim is to identify specific indicators from the demographic, attendance, and academic information collected in year one that best differentiate students from the first year who have abandoned the program and those who are continuing in year two. Understanding how different backgrounds and academic factors influence retention rates in programs such as ConnCap is an important first step toward improving these programs, which aim to help high school students get the most out of their early-college experiences and increase the likelihood that students will be well-prepared for college.

P1.32 *Comic Chatbots: AI Gamification in Education, Training, and Customer Service*

**Author(s):** Gabriel Greenstein

**Faculty Mentor:** Minnie Hoang

**Department:** Political Science

**Abstract:** While AI chatbots are revolutionizing how the world works and learns, their experiential and visual presentation remains largely flat and impersonal. Currently, most interfaces offer only anemic engagement and abstracted opportunities to connect with users, creating a sterile digital environment. This project explores the gamification of AI by taking inspiration from comic books and video games to transform the user experience of chatbots for use cases in education, training, and customer service. Utilizing a technical stack of Three.js and React derived from game development, this project features a prototype of Otis, the SCSU mascot, brought to life in 3D form and endowed with dynamic AI thinking capabilities. To ensure accurate and relevant responses, the agent utilizes a Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) enabled Postgres database containing specialized Excel knowledge. Furthermore, the agent is prompt-gated with a distinct personality, operational rules, and memory of past

user interactions. By creating a working model of this application, this project lays the groundwork to examine whether an immersive, visually engaging 3D interface can yield better educational outcomes and more effective customer or citizen engagement. By merging chatbot functionality with the interactive and psychological mechanics of gaming, both learning and professional tasks could potentially be transformed into more fun and productive experiences.

P1.33 *The Impact of U.S. Migration on Attachment Relationships Among Caribbean Families: A Systemic Review Exploring Separation, Immigration and Acculturation*

**Author(s):** Kerry-Ann Frank

**Faculty Mentor:** Krystal Finch

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Migration can impact the attachment relationship among Caribbean families. To understand the effects, this systematic review examines how U.S. migration influences attachment relationships among Caribbean families, focusing on separation, immigration, and acculturation. Rooted in attachment theory, migration frameworks, acculturation, and trauma studies, this review examines research from major databases to understand how these changes affect family bonds, especially between mothers and daughters. Findings show that separation through migration can disrupt emotional closeness, creating feelings of distance and insecurity. However, many families also embody remarkable resilience, finding new ways to stay emotionally present through culture, faith, and communication. This systematic review calls for culturally responsive clinical practice to enhance social workers' use of attachment informed and anti-oppressive approaches to support healing and reconnection. Future research should continue exploring the effects of how migration shape's identity, belonging, and intergenerational attachment in Caribbean families.

P1.34 *The Impact of Schizophrenia on Homelessness*

**Author(s):** Omar Rivera

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd W Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This research aims to both identify and evaluate services for the homeless, focusing on stable housing solutions, especially for those with severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia. This researcher interviewed 10 service providers recruited from the DMHAS local Mental Health Authorities and a partner shelter in Hartford, Connecticut, using recorded semi-structured Teams interviews. The study explored risk factors, challenges in service delivery, and barriers that prevent individuals with schizophrenia from achieving stable housing, offering comparisons with other homeless populations. The research highlights the complex barriers faced by individuals with schizophrenia who experience housing instability, including non-adherence to treatment, affordability challenges, discrimination, environmental dangers, and limited social connections. These findings emphasize the need for client-centered, comprehensive interventions which address both clinical and socioeconomic factors. Service delivery must focus on integrated approaches, such as intensive-case management and agency collaboration, with increased funding and policy reforms to support recovery-oriented models. Additionally, fostering social inclusion, reducing stigma, and simplifying access for substance use disorder treatment are essential for improving quality of life. Overall, the study calls for a coordinated public health response that provides both structural and relational support for this vulnerable population.

P1.35 *Human Trafficking Toolkit*

**Author(s):** Allison Cruz

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Human trafficking is a hidden, overlooked crime both in the U.S. and globally, subjecting people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds to forced labor and sexual abuse. This capstone project aims to promote awareness and improve law enforcement responses through a trauma-informed perspective. The main research question investigates how law enforcement can better identify and address trafficking through trauma-informed approaches, ensuring officers have the knowledge and resources needed to help survivors. Literature highlights the vulnerability of marginalized communities, detection challenges, and the importance of collaborative, trauma-informed responses. The project deliverable—a human trafficking awareness PDF toolkit for police—provides risk factors, warning signs, response recommendations, and resource lists for survivor support. This toolkit will build law enforcement knowledge and awareness. Social work's role is to promote trauma-informed care and to strengthen collaboration between social workers and officers to improve identification and access to resources for survivors.

P1.36 *Cultural Competence Training for Community Youth Restorative Justice Programs*

**Author(s):** Angelica Ioime

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project focuses on improving cultural awareness and humility within a community-based restorative justice program for youth. The organization I am working with is Naugatuck Youth Services, specifically their Restorative Alternative Discipline (RAD) program. This program works with minors in Naugatuck schools who have committed arrestable offenses and offers diversion programs instead of juvenile detention and other harmful outcomes, using a restorative approach. Through my volunteer experience, staff identified a need to update the program to be more culturally aware and inclusive. The guiding research question for this project is: How might community-based restorative justice programs for youth benefit from cultural awareness and humility training for staff? A review of existing literature shows strong evidence that cultural awareness and humility training can improve outcomes in youth-serving programs, although there is less research specifically focused on restorative justice settings. This project involves engaging with RAD staff, community members, and professionals to collaborate on a new training program for NYS staff and others involved in the RAD program. Information is gathered from peer-reviewed articles, community-based knowledge, and training materials used in similar programs. This project is significant to the field of social work because it addresses the need for culturally responsive practices within juvenile justice diversion programs. It supports social workers in providing more equitable, effective, and ethically grounded services to diverse youth populations.

P1.37 *How Bilingual Social Workers Influence Organizational Effectiveness and Service Experiences in Diverse Social Service Settings*

**Author(s):** Anilda Rubio

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Social service organizations face a widening gap in providing linguistically and culturally responsive care as the number of families with limited English proficiency (LEP) grows across the United States. This project plan addresses the urgent need for systemic reform in the recruitment, retention, and organizational support of bilingual Spanish-speaking social workers. Although these professionals often serve as cultural brokers, they frequently experience uncompensated workloads, elevated burnout, and limited access to culturally informed supervision. Research demonstrates that when language needs are unmet, families face increased risks of misdiagnosis, service disengagement, and systemic marginalization. To respond to these challenges, the project introduces a multi-dimensional deliverable aimed at shifting organizational culture from basic outreach efforts to meaningful community integration. By engaging executive leadership and management, the proposed plan outlines evidence-based strategies such as pay differentials, tuition reimbursement, and standardized bilingual terminology protocols to strengthen workforce sustainability. The project also includes a community-centered dissemination plan utilizing local newspapers, social media reels, and collaborations with faith-based organizations to ensure that families receive information within trusted cultural contexts. Evaluation of the project's efficacy will occur through a rigorous formative process, including back-translation audits, digital engagement metrics (such as retention and save rates), and geo-targeted test marketing supported by unique QR codes and church-based focus groups. Overall, this project plan demonstrates how organizations can deepen their investment in Spanish-speaking communities by improving internal systems and strengthening communication pathways that support equitable, culturally grounded service delivery.

P1.38 *The Impact of Gender Affirming Care on Mental Health Outcomes*

**Author(s):** Arielle Segal-Gould

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project examines the long-term mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals who received gender-affirming care (GAC) during adolescence, addressing the need for accessible and affirming support for TGD youth. The literature review explores the research question: "How does gender-affirming care initiated during adolescence influence long-term mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality?" Key themes in the literature highlight the negative mental health effects of stigma and discrimination, the protective role of gender affirmation, and improved outcomes associated with interventions such as puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and affirming mental health support. Despite growing research, gaps remain regarding long-term outcomes and the experiences of racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse TGD populations. The deliverable for this project is a semi-structured interview guide designed to collect qualitative data from TGD individuals who received gender-affirming care during adolescence. This project contributes to social work

knowledge and practice by informing affirming research approaches and supporting interventions that promote resilience and well-being among TGD youth.

P1.39 *Guidebook for Caregivers of Individuals with Aphasia*

**Author(s):** Caitlyn Arnone

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project will meet the community needs of individuals with aphasia addressing the need for mental health care. The research question is how can social workers help prepare caregivers when working with individuals with aphasia? The purpose of this research is to prepare caregivers of individuals with aphasia for the future. Aphasia and mental health is something not researched well, making it important for social workers to address the needs of these caregivers and their loved ones. This project is being done to prepare social workers when working with caregivers in addition to preparing caregivers to care for their loved ones. In social work practice, caregivers may be the person who is overlooked at the appointments, but they have one of the most important jobs, it is up to the caregivers to provide care for those affected with Aphasia and make sure they are receiving all the services available to them.

P1.40 *The Power of Information: Developing a Localized Advocacy Tool for Intimate Partner Violence in a Dual Arrest Climate*

**Author(s):** Dana Cote

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses the critical need for accessible domestic violence resource navigation for survivors transitioning from acute hospital care to the community within the Naugatuck Valley. The research explores how specialized resources can be effectively communicated to survivors in a hospital setting, focusing on themes of regional service barriers, the impact of a dual arrest climate, and the necessity of trauma-informed outreach. Utilizing the strengths perspective and empowerment theory, the project resulted in the development of a localized resource pamphlet and a scholarly presentation. These deliverables bridge the gap between clinical stabilization and community-based advocacy by providing survivors with tangible, low-barrier entry points to safety. The project contributes to social work practice by offering a functional model for resource curation that accounts for the unique geographic and socio-economic hurdles of the region, ultimately enhancing the discharge planning process and fostering survivor agency.

P1.41 *Housing Barriers and Domestic Violence: The Impact of Limited Shelter Access in Connecticut*

**Author(s):** Ireishka De Jesus

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Survivors of intimate partner violence often rely on emergency shelter services when leaving abusive relationships, yet many face barriers when attempting to access safe and stable housing. The purpose of this project is to examine how limited shelter availability and structural barriers impact survivors' ability to obtain emergency shelter in Connecticut. A review of existing literature explores how factors such as limited shelter capacity, funding constraints, and restrictive eligibility policies affect access to services. The project also considers how these barriers influence survivors' safety and housing stability. The deliverable for this project is an informational pamphlet designed to increase awareness among social workers and community stakeholders. By highlighting barriers to shelter access, this project aims to support advocacy efforts and promote discussion around improving services for survivors of domestic violence.

P1.42 *Engaging Young Minds*

**Author(s):** Jasmine Franco

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project articulates the development of a clinician toolkit designed to increase engagement among children receiving outpatient mental health services. The guiding research question is: What is the impact of play-based therapeutic approaches on children's engagement in outpatient counseling? Key themes include play-based therapeutic approaches with children, children's engagement overall, and cultural responsiveness. The research reflects that child-centered approaches increase engagement during sessions. Questions for further learning are as follows: What engagement tools do clinicians not recommend for further engagement with children? What has not worked well? What is a resource clinicians wish they had sooner? In addition to offering clinicians an easily available resource for use in the field, my organizational resource for clinicians advances professional knowledge by assisting practitioners in becoming more knowledgeable and skilled in how to interact with young clients.

P1.43 *Assessing Loneliness in Dementia*

**Author(s):** Jenna Peduzzi

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project addresses the need for improved identification of loneliness among nursing home residents with dementia in Connecticut. Loneliness and social isolation are common in long-term care settings and can negatively affect emotional well-being, cognitive functioning, and overall quality of life. Loneliness is not always systematically assessed among residents with dementia due to communication challenges and lack of screening tools. The research question explores how nursing home social workers in Connecticut can effectively screen for and assess loneliness in clients with dementia. Key themes from the literature include the impact of loneliness on health outcomes, barriers to recognizing loneliness in individuals with cognitive impairment, and the importance of psychosocial assessment in long-term care. This project develops a screening and assessment tool designed for nursing home staff to help identify loneliness through observational indicators, adapted questions, and follow-up recommendations. The deliverable contributes to social work practice by providing a practical resource that supports improved psychosocial assessment, more responsive care planning, and enhanced emotional well-being for residents with dementia.

P1.44 *Internalized Stigma Among Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

**Author(s):** Kyle Badorek

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses the need for developmentally appropriate interventions that reduce internalized stigma and promote positive identity development among adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The project examines how internalized stigma influences the mental health and self-concept of autistic youth and considers how youth-serving organizations can intervene to support healthier identity development. The literature review identifies several key themes, including internalized stigma as a psychological and social process shaped by societal stereotypes, its relationship with negative mental health outcomes such as reduced self-esteem and increased anxiety and depression, and the limited research focused specifically on adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. To address this gap, the project develops a structured four-session group curriculum designed to increase strengths identification, stigma awareness, and self-esteem. This project contributes to social work knowledge and practice by translating research on stigma into a practical, strengths-based intervention for youth-serving organizations.

P1.45 *Bridging the Gap Between the Hispanic Community and Mental Health Services*

**Author(s):** Louise Paniagua

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Research has shown that the Hispanic population is one of the least likely among other ethnic groups to seek mental health services. This raises the question: what factors contribute to decreased levels of mental health help-seeking among the Hispanic community? According to the literature, reduced levels of mental health help-seeking among Hispanics are due to negative Hispanic cultural beliefs about mental health, cultural values, and community barriers. The Health Belief Model looks at how individuals perceive and react to health risk warnings, and the barriers that make it difficult for individuals to make changes that will prevent increased risk. This model encourages providers to promote the benefits of receiving services to increase help-seeking behaviors. The deliverable for this special project will be a flyer providing the Hispanic community with data on mental health risks that exists in the Hispanic community, data on benefits of mental health services for Hispanics and resources to local services.

P1.46 *Intensive Outpatient Program for Women with Co-Occurring Disorders*

**Author(s):** Marissa Faroni

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Traditionally, treatment for co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders uses group treatment methods while in early stages of recovery. Men tend to outnumber women in these groups, even though they have similar rates of co-occurring disorders. Reasons for this gap include increased stigma towards women with co-occurring disorders, women being less likely to seek treatment due to the multiple roles they are expected to fill as women, and lack of programming aimed directly at women. Marissa has worked this semester on creating a curriculum for a Women's Intensive Outpatient Program to help promote the creation of separate gender based treatment programs for individuals with co-occurring disorders.

P1.47 *Empowering Single Parents: Tools for Thriving, Not Just Surviving*

**Author(s):** Mellody Massaquoi

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The Elm City Communities CARES program provides housing for low-income families in New Haven, Connecticut, including 70 households that are headed by single parents. Research shows that CARES single parents face obstacles in finding and accessing resources to meet basic needs, including financial assistance, health care, and mental health services. In addition, many single parents experience social isolation. The purpose of this capstone project is to create a “Family Mixer,” a social and educational event for single parents and their children where families can meet each other, discuss challenges, and share resources. The project includes the development of a resource booklet, available in hard copy and digital formats, that will be distributed at the event. The resource booklet will list helpful materials, including financial and mental health resources, as well as where to obtain basic needs such as food and toiletries. The booklet will also be disseminated to CARES parents who are unable to attend the event.

P1.48 *Culturally Responsive IPV Training and Social Worker Preparedness  
Supporting Help-Seeking Among Young Black Adults*

**Author(s):** Michelle Jefferson

**Faculty Mentor:** Krystal Finch

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) remains a serious problem in many marginalized communities, particularly within the Black community. Young Black adults ages 18–26 are disproportionately affected, facing legal involvement, mandated services, housing issues, and child and family system involvement. Survivors are often isolated and experience shame and guilt; furthermore, they lack trust in systems that have historically failed them, resulting in decreased help-seeking behaviors. Reducing IPV and increasing access to support in the Black community requires providers who are culturally responsive and trusted. This qualitative study, grounded in ecological systems theory, examined the training social workers receive, their preparedness, and the influence of culturally responsive IPV training on help-seeking behaviors among young Black adults. Seven master’s and doctoral-level social workers in Connecticut participated in a 12-question, semi-structured interview to share their educational training, professional experiences, and perceived preparedness around providing IPV services to this specific population. Findings show a lack of IPV coursework or training specific to young Black adults, IPV as common and deeply rooted in Black communities, and impacted by trauma from childhood, community violence, and structural racism. Cultural awareness and responsiveness, as well as culturally based community resources, can affect engagement with service providers. This study highlights the need for increased use of culturally responsive approaches and ongoing training to effectively support this population.

P1.49 *A Culturally Responsive Approach to Mental Health and Substance Use*

**Author(s):** Nicole Folson

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addressed a critical community need for culturally responsive, trauma-informed mental health and substance use interventions for formerly incarcerated Black men, a population disproportionately affected by systemic racism, incarceration, and reentry barriers. Guided by the research question: How does solitary confinement influence the interplay between drug use and mental health among African American men? The literature review examined the psychological effects of prolonged isolation, disparities in access to treatment, and the absence of culturally relevant intervention models. Key themes identified included the intersection of incarceration experiences, mental health outcomes, and substance use behaviors, as well as gaps in longitudinal and intersectional research. In response, the project developed a peer-led, African-centered support group and comprehensive facilitator toolkit in collaboration with community-based and faith-based organizations. This initiative contributes to social work practice by demonstrating how evidence-informed, culturally grounded interventions can enhance engagement, foster resilience, and support successful reintegration while addressing systemic inequities.

P1.50 *Supervision for Afro-Diasporic Women: Understanding Co-Cultural Communication Style*

**Author(s):** Rose Pierre

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The stigmas of immigration and gender that surround Afro-Diasporic women have affected the quality of supervision they have received toward leadership advancement. This research was undertaken to determine the impact colonialism and xenophobia have on the advancement of Afro-Diasporic women in leadership. Leadership

advancement, such as supervision, enables women to obtain their licensure within the Social Work field. This qualitative study includes participants who identify as Afro-Caribbean women and are professionals within the fields of social work. The data was collected through the methods of interviews and focus groups with both supervisors and supervisees. The research will analyse how cultural perspectives and communication styles affect the quality of supervision that newly graduated professionals receive towards leadership advancement. The deliverable of this research will be a presentation that will allow professional credits toward their continued hours requirement.

P1.51 *Barriers Faced by Special Education Elementary Teachers*

**Author(s):** Shadae Evans

**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei A.Kozu

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project examines the barriers faced by special education elementary teachers as they work to support students with varying disabilities in a single classroom. Our project will meet the organizational need of systemic support structures for elementary special education teachers by providing special education teachers with easily accessible resources. Our project will provide educators with a pamphlet, that they can keep on hand, with various resources to assist them in completing their tasks and responsibilities. The resources included in the pamphlet consist of platforms and agencies that offer professional development and training opportunities, lesson planning support, and tools to help them stay organized and use their time effectively.

P1.52 *Self-image & Attendance Rates*

**Author(s):** Sydney Munger

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to address the need for improved self-image in high school adolescents. The research question, “How do school-based mental health services impact school attendance?” highlights the importance of boosting self-image in high school students, as it is a main reason adolescents do not attend school. The theme of low self-image resurfaced often in the literature, which brought up questions for further research on how to address this barrier in order to improve attendance rates and which voices are missing throughout the research. The deliverable will be a physical facilitator’s guide for a self-image group aimed at helping high school students develop a higher self-image. This project is significant for social work knowledge and practice because identifying, learning about, and addressing the barriers for clients to get their needs met is a main principle of social work.

P1.53 *Cybergrooming Risk Factors*

**Author(s):** Tatyanna DeLucia

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The following research project examines the relationships between several psychological, social, and parental risk factors and cybergrooming victimization for adolescents. Previous research identifies low self-esteem and social support, limited or inconsistent parental involvement, and mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression as risk factors. This proposed plan aims to explore these pre-existing correlations and utilize them to create a training tool for social workers to identify at-risk clients, as well as integrate clinical knowledge when treating cybergrooming victims and implore further research into additional risk factors.

P1.54 *Acute Hospitalization Impacts on ADL Declines: Case Study Analysis*

**Author(s):** Alexis Lucibello

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to examine the association between geriatric hospitalizations and declines in ADLs. It will explore how a lack of movement and physical activity can adversely affect older adults across all aspects, especially their physical and mental health. Through research, the findings suggest that hospitalization does affect the decline of geriatric patients’ ADLs due to the lack of physical mobility. Some gaps have been noted, including the patient’s baseline before hospitalization and the reason the patient was brought in. It is important to note these risk factors throughout this project, as they can help you better understand how best to support your patients. To address this current issue, the project will entail exercise and mental health flashcards to improve ADL decline and mental health in acute hospitalized geriatric patients. This topic is important to research as loss of independence can harm geriatric patients’ mental health, causing depression, anxiety, SUD, and many other mental health crises.

- P1.55 *The Effects of Excessive Screen Time*  
**Author(s):** Bryan Morales  
**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This project addresses the growing impact of excessive screen time on the physical, mental, and social health of adolescents served by Domus Kids Inc. and Centro De Bien Estar, two youth-serving organizations in Stamford, Connecticut. Through direct internship experience at both sites, a clear need emerged for accessible education around screen time and its consequences for young people and their families. A review of the literature identifies three major themes: the physical disadvantages of excessive screen time, including disrupted sleep, reduced physical activity, and digital eye strain; reduced face-to-face interaction and its effects on social development and communication skills; and mental health impacts such as increased rates of anxiety and depression, driven in part by social comparison on digital platforms. The review draws on Social Comparison Theory and Displacement Theory to explain how excessive screen use shapes adolescent behavior and well-being. Questions for further research include how structural factors like limited access to safe recreational spaces shape screen use patterns among low-income youth, and how culturally responsive interventions can more effectively reach Black and Latino adolescent populations. To address these needs, this project develops a bilingual educational toolkit including a youth handout, a caregiver handout, and a facilitator guide for organizational staff. This resource contributes to social work practice by equipping direct service workers with a culturally responsive, accessible tool for engaging youth and families in conversations about digital health and self-awareness.
- P1.56 *Blue Carbon Market Feasibility in Hurricane Prone Jamaica: A Pre-Implementation Study*  
**Author(s):** Laura Rojas  
**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp  
**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences  
**Abstract:** Despite holding substantial blue carbon stocks, the Insular Caribbean has no verified voluntary carbon market (VCM) blue carbon projects. Jamaica presents a compelling but underexamined case: its mangrove forests store an estimated 4.7 million MgC, yet the country's position within one of the Atlantic Basin's most active hurricane corridors raises serious questions about whether carbon stocks can meet the permanence requirements that VCM certification demands. This study presents a pre-implementation feasibility assessment of mangrove-based blue carbon VCM projects in Jamaica, integrating remote sensing analysis of hurricane disturbance and recovery via Google Earth Engine, carbon stock loss estimation, Verra VCS permanence feasibility analysis, net present value economic modeling, and structured stakeholder interviews. A bibliometric review of 245 papers further reveals that hurricane science, blue carbon markets, and Caribbean Small Island Developing States contexts remain largely disconnected research trajectories, a gap this thesis is specifically designed to bridge.
- P1.57 *More Than a Voucher: Supporting Young Adults in Achieving Lasting Housing Stability*  
**Author(s):** Brianna Nieves  
**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** Question: How do current Housing Choice Voucher Program policies and supports influence young adults' ability to achieve and maintain long-term independent housing?
- Housing instability continues to affect many young adults in the United States, particularly those transitioning into adulthood with limited financial and social support. This project examines how current Housing Choice Voucher Program policies and supports influence young adults' ability to achieve and maintain long-term independent housing. A review of the literature identifies several key themes, including the importance of housing stability for independence, structural and policy barriers that affect program implementation, and gaps in youth-specific research on long-term outcomes. To address these challenges, this project proposes the development of an Independent Living Skills Toolkit designed to support young adults and service providers in navigating housing systems, building life skills, and accessing community resources. The project contributes to social work knowledge and practice by promoting equitable access to housing supports and strengthening resources that help young adults successfully transition to and maintain independent living.
- P1.58 *Neighbors Supporting Heroes: Advancing Community Support for First Responders*  
**Author(s):** Alexis Ficeto  
**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie G. Gardella  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** The need to be addressed by my capstone project is to foster a supportive community for first responders who are struggling with substance use or who are currently in treatment for substance use. The first responder

community culture expects first responders to remain resilient in stressful environments and places a stigma on mental health issues. As a result, first responders with substance use issues may have difficulty seeking professional or peer support. My project will contribute to building a supportive network for first responders who are in recovery, struggling with substance use, or who want to provide peer support for other first responders. As the deliverable for my project, I am arranging a social gathering for first responders and their families at my internship agency, Honor Wellness Center in Glastonbury, Connecticut. This event will allow first responders to connect with one another in a friendly and safe environment. Participants will have opportunities to contribute to a food drive for a local pantry, share their goals for the future through a vision board and arts activities, and gain access to information about mental health resources in the area.

P1.59 *Strategic Frameworks for Sustainable Circular Economy Integration in AI Hardware Manufacturing: An Evaluation of the Silicon Loop*

**Author(s):** Aishwarya Anand

**Faculty Mentor:** Amitkumar Singh

**Department:** Marketing

**Abstract:** Human beings are basically lazy and laziness is the mother of all inventions. Having said that, the rapid expansion of AI infrastructure has led to an unprecedented surge in high-tech e-waste, particularly involving rare-earth elements and specialized semiconductors. This research explores the strategic barriers preventing major hardware manufacturers from adopting a fully circular business model, where materials are recovered and reintegrated into new production cycles.

This study evaluates the strategic frameworks for a sustainable circular economy where it utilizes a dual-layered approach: a comparative case study analysis of three leading material recovery firms and a financial simulation of the "Total Cost of Ownership" (TCO) for manufacturers. The research evaluates the economic trade-offs between raw material extraction and advanced urban mining techniques using current market valuation models.

An empirical approach also studies to analyze technical capacity for 90% material recovery that is estimated to exist. However, the primary hurdle is a "logistics-valuation gap." Findings indicate that by implementing a "Product-as-a-Service" (PaaS) model, firms can decrease long-term supply chain volatility by 18% and significantly reduce the environmental footprint associated with primary mining.

Considering the global factors, environmental factors and the future of resources that are scarce for the generations to come, this research provides a roadmap for shifting sustainability from a compliance requirement to a competitive advantage.

P1.60 *Breaking the Cycle: Addressing Learned Helplessness Among System-Involved Emerging Adults Through Resource Awareness*

**Author(s):** Alex Charles

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project addressed the community need for accessible and empowering information for system-involved emerging adults transitioning out of state-funded services. The purpose of the project was to increase awareness of available support resources and reduce learned helplessness among emerging adults by developing a culturally responsive Public Service Announcement (PSA). The project was guided by the research question: How does learned helplessness, developed through early adversity and system involvement, influence emerging adults' ability to sustain autonomy after discharge from services? A review of professional literature identified key themes, including systemic contributors to learned helplessness, the impact of adverse childhood experiences, and the role of relational and empowerment-based supports. The PSA deliverable highlighted community-based resources and emphasized autonomy and help-seeking behaviors. Outcomes included increased clarity of available supports and improved accessibility of resource information for the target population. This project contributes to social work knowledge and practice by demonstrating the value of culturally responsive, strengths-based communication tools that promote engagement, reduce barriers to services, and support long-term independence among vulnerable populations.

SW1.1 *Goodbye Booklet to Increase Successful Discharges*

**Author(s):** Diana Barnum

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie G. Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project addresses the critical revolving door phenomenon at Psychiatric Hospitals for adolescents, where systemic and clinical barriers frequently lead to unsuccessful adolescent discharge and high readmission rates. The research question explores how specific clinical barriers, such as fragile patient-provider rapport and fragmented care coordination, contribute to these negative outcomes. A literature review identified three major themes: the profound developmental and societal consequences of failed transitions, the breakdown of communication within the ecological mesosystem, and the significant gap in research regarding the direct perspectives of marginalized youth. Grounded in the Human Ecological Perspective and Hope Theory, this project develops a Goodbye Booklet—a personalized discharge tool designed to foster agency and pathways thinking in transitioning adolescents. This project is significant for social work practice as it provides an evidence-based, replicable model to amplify patient voices, strengthen protective factors, and ultimately reduce the transition from adolescent to adult institutionalization.

SW1.2 *“Have You Ever Tried To Not Think About Something?”: Acceptance & Commitment Therapy Activity Guide*

**Author(s):** Christopher Lopez

**Faculty Mentor:** Steven Hofler

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Every year, those in need of mental health services and support increase. Social workers must continue to expand the therapeutic avenues they use to assist clients in engaging in change work. This presentation bridges the worlds of applied behavior analysis and social work together by laying the foundation for understanding the theoretical framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in order to help facilitate an original ACT activity script that clinicians can integrate into their own professional repertoire. Social workers and other mental health practitioners can utilize this ACT script with clients to contact the present moment, helping to navigate their internal experience with the aid of a physical object to represent the physical manifestation of the thought.

SW1.3 *Building Religious Literacy to Improve Social Work Assessment Practices*

**Author(s):** David Bell

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project seeks to address the reluctance many clinical social workers feel when discussing religion with clients. Although religion is an important life domain for many people, it is often overlooked during diagnostic evaluations and has largely been excluded from most social work curricula. Research indicates that clinical reluctance is due to factors such as a perceived lack of knowledge and/or training, practitioner attitudes and biases, a fear of offending clients, and concern about agency rules. This project will address the knowledge gap by providing informational resources about five influential world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism). The deliverable will be a resource list of books, articles, websites, videos, and contacts that offer insights and suggestions for counselors and social workers working with clients who subscribe to these religious traditions. It will include a list of open-ended questions that can deepen conversation about religious or spiritual beliefs.

SW1.4 *Homelessness Prevention for Black Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*

**Author(s):** Dezrene Thompson

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine L. Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project aims to address the critical need for effective homelessness prevention strategies for Black youth aging out of foster care, a population disproportionately affected by housing instability due to racial disparities, systemic barriers, and limited access to supportive services. The project examines structural and personal factors contributing to this vulnerability, including gaps in independent living programs, insufficient mentorship, and a lack of culturally responsive support. Guided by the research question, “What homelessness prevention strategies are most effective for Black foster youth transitioning out of care?”, the literature review highlights key themes such as racial disproportionality in foster care, challenges during the transition to independent living, and the effectiveness of existing programs. Findings emphasize the importance of youth engagement, culturally

responsive services, and strong supportive relationships, while identifying gaps in long-term housing strategies and areas for further research. The project deliverable is a research-informed infographic and action guide, offering practical, youth-centered strategies for practitioners, advancing social work knowledge and promoting equitable, empowering services for Black youth.

SW1.5 *Caregiver Support and Burden in Psychiatric Care: Addressing Gaps and Building Resilience*

**Author(s):** Esther Ampofo

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Caregiving in psychiatric settings is a deeply human endeavor where family members, professionals, and peers provide emotional, practical, and advocacy support. This support is vital in helping individuals with mental health challenges manage symptoms and follow treatment plans. This project considers how caregiver support, burden, and social support interact in psychiatric care. Caregivers, whether family monitoring medications, nurses offering crisis training, or peers sharing lived experience, boost patient engagement and recovery, though systemic barriers often hinder their efforts. Caregiving carries costs such as physical exhaustion, emotional strain, financial pressure, and social isolation. Social support becomes a lifeline by offering emotional encouragement, practical help, and guidance through complex healthcare systems. Theories like Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory, Montgomery's Two Factor Model, and Engel's Biopsychosocial Model frame caregiving as a dynamic process with both challenges and meaningful gains. However, research gaps remain, often overlooking long term caregiver outcomes, cultural differences, and systemic barriers like stigma or limited- service access. The purpose of this project is to make caregivers of people with psychiatric conditions feel seen and to address the lack of support and resources available to them. This project created an online website for caregivers where resources are easy to find. The website includes useful information such as social support groups, where to locate resources, and anything that can help reduce caregiver burden while promoting long-term resilience despite systemic barriers.

SW1.6 *Agency Presentation on Best Practices for Group Therapy Screening and Recruitment in a University Counseling Setting*

**Author(s):** Julia Powers

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** For my MSW capstone project, I delivered a presentation for clinicians and interns at my agency, Counseling Services at Southern Connecticut State University. The presentation reviewed evidence-based strategies and practical tools for screening and recruiting clients for therapy groups in order to increase student participation in group counseling. Research consistently shows that group therapy is an effective and efficient mental health intervention for college students, yet its utilization at Southern has been limited in recent years. Existing research suggests that underutilization may be influenced by factors such as stigma, client and clinician preferences, and recruitment practices, indicating a need for improved strategies to increase student engagement with group therapy services. This project contributed to social work knowledge and practice by translating research on effective group therapy recruitment and engagement into practical strategies to help clinicians expand access to culturally responsive mental health services for diverse college student populations.

SW1.7 *Stigma Surrounding MAT with Families*

**Author(s):** Kaitlynn Mascia

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) is an evidence-based intervention for opioid use disorder that combines counseling with medications such as methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone. Research consistently demonstrates that MAT reduces illicit opioid use, lowers the risk of relapse, overdose, and death, and improves the client's continuation in treatment programs and their quality of life. Despite its effectiveness, MAT remains highly stigmatized. The client's family members play a significant role in their decision to seek or remain in treatment due to the spread of stigma within the family. The labeling theory and family systems theory can help gain a deeper understanding of how stigma surrounding MAT within a family could cause negative outcomes to the client's treatment, while also highlighting ways to reduce stigma within families so that MAT clients can receive treatment with fewer barriers. Therefore, this project will be an educational pamphlet using personalized FAQs to address common family stigma surrounding MAT.

SW1.8 *Bonding & Attachment in FFT-FC Families*

**Author(s):** Katherine Alfaro

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project explores the impact of bonding and attachment on FFT-FC foster families and informs a training guide for the first days of a new placement to support a healthy connection before beginning the FFT process. The literature surrounding FFT, bonding, attachment, foster families the attachment styles of foster youth, and the outcome on their futures emphasizes the importance of remediating trauma through connection. Notably missing from the research are any specific studies or literature regarding foster youth and foster families' experiences with FFT-FC and its efficacy. This research has helped to inform the "Pre-FFT-FC guide" that will include psychoeducation regarding attachment, psychoeducation regarding the FFT model, and trauma-informed strategies, skills, and activities to engage in or be mindful of when starting a new placement. This guide will be provided to foster parents engaging in FFT-FC for the first time to help prepare them with trauma-informed and model specific information to set a foundation for a relationship with a foster youth. This guide will aid foster parents in better understanding the challenging phase of getting to know a foster youth with behavioral and/or mental health concerns and engage them in building a connection. These connections and being able to see the youth's noble intent will inform the work done in the FFT-FC process, helping sustain healthy, safe, and stable placements for children in foster care.

SW1.9 *Barriers to Reintegration: The Impact of Limited Reentry Resources*

**Author(s):** Ludmila de Paula

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addressed the lack of coordinated reentry resources affecting formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly in Black and Brown communities that are disproportionately impacted by incarceration and systemic inequities. Guided by the research question, "How does the lack of reentry resources affect successful community reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly in Black and Brown communities?", this study examined structural and institutional barriers that hinder successful reentry. The literature review identified three major themes: the importance of evidence-based reentry practices, persistent structural barriers in employment, housing, and healthcare, and the limitations of defining reentry success solely through recidivism rates. Findings highlighted how fragmented service systems and inequitable access to resources contribute to cycles of instability and marginalization. In response, this project developed a culturally responsive Reentry Resource Toolkit and Referral Guide designed for community-based providers working with justice-involved populations. The toolkit emphasizes accessibility, coordination of services, and culturally informed support strategies to better meet the needs of diverse communities. By integrating an equity-centered framework with evidence-informed practice, this project contributes to social work knowledge and practice by promoting more holistic, anti-racist approaches to reentry and underscores the need for systemic change and improved resource navigation to support sustainable community reintegration.

SW1.10 *The Psychological and Behavioral Effects of Trauma on Foster Youth in Connecticut*

**Author(s):** Mackenzie Costello

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project explores the effects of trauma on the psychological and behavioral well-being of youth in foster care in Connecticut. The purpose of this project is to equip current foster care families at Klingberg Family Centers with information and tools related to trauma and its impact on foster youth to better support their foster children. The literature review examines the correlation between trauma experienced by foster youth and increased development of mental health and behavioral challenges, as well as the increased risk for substance use. Using attachment theory and trauma theory, the review highlights the prevalence of trauma among foster youth, the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions, and the barriers to implementing these practices, including staffing constraints, organizational policies, and limited funding. It also identifies gaps in current literature regarding culturally responsive care for immigrant and internationally-born youth in foster care who face unique challenges, including language barriers, cultural identity disruptions, and equitable access to care. The deliverable for this project is an informational website designed to increase awareness of trauma among foster youth and provide resources for current foster families within Klingberg Family Centers. This project contributes to social work knowledge and practice by promoting trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches to supporting foster youth and the families who care for them.

SW1.11 *Adverse Childhood Experiences and Prevention of Adolescent Substance Use Ages 15-18*

**Author(s):** Patrice Walton

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Adolescent substance use is strongly associated with exposure to adverse childhood experiences, which disrupts emotional regulation and increased vulnerability to maladaptive coping behaviors. This capstone project examined how can social workers integrate trauma-informed care into substance use prevention programs for adolescents ages 15–18? The literature review identified three key themes: the relationship between trauma exposure and adolescent substance use risk, trauma-informed prevention as a promising practice, and the need for culturally responsive prevention strategies. The literature also highlighted gaps in practical guidance for implementing trauma-informed prevention in real-world social work settings. The project deliverable was a trauma-informed prevention training module presented through a PowerPoint that provided social workers with practical strategies for integrating trauma-informed approaches into adolescent substance use prevention programs.

SW1.12 *Developing an Integrated Support Program for Teen Fathers at GBAPP*

**Author(s):** Alesia Coley

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Teen fathers remain an underserved population within social service systems. While teen mothers often receive coordinated medical, educational, and clinical services, fathers frequently encounter fragmented and father-exclusionary systems of care. The literature consistently identifies stigma, limited access to supportive services, racial disparities, and lack of father-inclusive programming as persistent barriers to engagement. At the same time, research demonstrates that early and sustained father involvement contributes positively to child development and maternal well-being. The literature examines barriers to engagement and promising practices related to father-inclusive services. Based on this research, my capstone project developed the curriculum for a structured, peer-based mutual aid group as an evidence.

SW1.13 *Promoting Affirmative Mental Health Care for Transgender and Nonbinary Youth*

**Author(s):** Sam Morrison

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Transgender and nonbinary (TNB) youth experience adverse mental health outcomes, such as higher depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation, as compared to other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, TNB youth report negative experiences while seeking mental health services in the form of misgendering, deadnaming, and a lack of TNB education from clinical providers. Numerous studies have found that clinical education and on-the-job training regarding gender affirming mental health treatment are limited for social workers and other clinicians. This capstone project will provide training to prepare social workers to deliver affirmative mental health care to TNB youth. The outcomes of the deliverable are to 1) educate social work clinicians about the unique mental health experiences and needs of TNB youth; 2) introduce specific skills to social work clinicians to utilize with TNB youth and their families; and 3) provide context about the political climate that TNB youth live in, and how it impacts mental health.

- SW2.1 *Trauma-Informed and Gender-Affirming Care for Transgender Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Domestic Violence Shelters*  
**Author(s):** Samantha Melillo  
**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** Transgender youth and emerging adults experience disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), yet domestic violence (DV) shelters often lack the trauma informed and gender affirming practices necessary to support their safety and recovery. This project plan outlines the development of an agency ready practice guide designed to strengthen shelter staff’s capacity to provide culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and identity affirming care to transgender survivors ages 16–24. Grounded in trauma informed care (TIC), minority stress theory, and gender affirming frameworks such as AFFIRM, the project responds to organizational gaps in training, policy, and service delivery. The deliverable aims to enhance staff competence, reduce re-traumatization, and improve engagement and help seeking among transgender survivors. By integrating research evidence with organizational context, this project contributes to social work practice by offering a practical tool to advance equity, safety, and empowerment within DV shelter systems.
- SW2.2 *How Language Barriers Affect Family Engagement Among ELL Middle School Students*  
**Author(s):** Shana Isidoro  
**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** Language barriers pose a critical challenge for families of English Language Learner (ELL) students in middle school, restricting engagement and resource accessibility. Research shows a connection between increased family involvement and better overall student outcomes. Implications for the family system often arise from communication barriers that exacerbate gaps in support and collaboration across settings. To reduce the disparity, it is essential to address barriers with a culturally responsive approach and raise awareness of the structural inequalities that affect the engagement and collaboration of multilingual families. The literature highlights key themes, including language barriers, cultural responsiveness, promising practices, gaps in current strategies, and opportunities for future research. The capstone project is a quick-reference guide designed for non-multilingual educators. It provides practical strategies for culturally responsive communication for engaging ELL families. This will expand the knowledge of social work practice by fostering inclusive school climates, promoting equity, and strengthening collaboration between home and school.
- SW2.3 *Assessing Moral Injury in the Connecticut National Guard: Insights from the MISS-M, MIOS, and Veteran Self-Reports*  
**Author(s):** Susan Tobenkin  
**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This project is a pilot study designed to explore how veterans experience and describe moral injury and to assess the feasibility of using self-report measures to identify and track moral injury symptoms over time. Rather than testing a structured treatment protocol, this study will focus on gathering preliminary data to inform future intervention research. Veteran participants will complete two standardized instruments—the Moral Injury Symptom Scale – Military Version (MISS-M) and the Moral Injury Outcome Scale (MIOS)—along with a brief open-ended questionnaire developed by the investigator. The questionnaire will invite participants to reflect on how they make sense of their experiences, what coping strategies they use, and what supports they believe would help others facing similar challenges. The study will involve a single data collection session, taking approximately 15–25 minutes. All responses will be collected anonymously through a secure, HIPAA-compliant online platform. No identifying information will be linked to the data. The goal of this pilot is to evaluate the clarity and usability of the measures, assess participant engagement, and identify common themes in veterans’ experiences of moral injury that can inform the design of a future, larger-scale intervention study.

SW2.4 *Service Navigation Fatigue and Social Work Practice*

**Author(s):** Tatiana Jackson

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Service systems such as healthcare, housing programs, and substance use treatment often require individuals to navigate complex processes in order to access support. These systems can create insignificant barriers for individuals who are already experiencing social, economic, or health challenges. This capstone project examines the concept of system navigation fatigue and its impact on client engagement with services. The guiding research questions explore how social work students can be trained to recognize and respond to system navigation fatigue when working with clients. The capstone project highlights themes related to administrative burden, fragmented service systems, and trauma-informed approaches to client engagement. The project deliverable is a video presentation with education slides designed to help social work students understand system navigation fatigue and apply practical, client-centered strategies in practice settings.

SW2.5 *Developing a Digital Hygiene Group Curriculum to Address Problematic Short-Form Video Use Among Youth*

**Author(s):** Dimitri Tracey

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Short-form videos (SFVs) are an increasingly popular way adolescents are engaging in social media. Recent research has shown, however, that high levels of SFV use can have numerous negative consequences on an individual. While the research on the impact of SFV use is plentiful, there is a noticeable gap in the literature on what effective interventions there are to reduce SFV consumption. This proposed project looks to bridge that gap by establishing a curriculum, in the form of a PowerPoint facilitation guide, for a digital hygiene group for adolescents ages 14-18 based in CBT – IA, a relatively new evidence-based subset of CBT that focuses on internet addiction. This project is important for the field of social work because it is well known that SFVs are negatively impacting our youth, from cognition to mental health, and we have not yet found effective interventions; social workers abide by a code of ethics, which include such values as service and social justice, and discovering ways to effectively intervene in this issue aligns with said values.

SW2.6 *A Trauma-Informed Group Facilitator's Guide for Supporting Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System: Strategies for Engagement, Emotional Safety, and Peer Connection*

**Author(s):** Alexis Adcock

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addressed the need for emotional and peer-based support for parents involved in the child welfare system. Parents navigating child removal and mandated services often experienced stigma, shame, and isolation, which negatively impacted engagement in services and progress toward family reunification readiness. The guiding research question explored how participation in a parent support group influenced parental engagement in services. A review of the literature highlighted themes related to the benefits of peer support, therapeutic factors in group work, trauma-informed practice, and barriers to engagement among parents involved in child welfare systems. Gaps in the literature suggested a need for further research on the implementation of structured parent support groups within specific child welfare contexts and their impact on long-term outcomes. The final deliverable was a facilitator's guide for leading an unstructured parent support group for parents involved in child welfare services. This project contributed to social work practice by providing a practical, trauma-informed resource to support parent engagement and enhance service delivery within child welfare settings.

SW2.7 *Mental Health Among Christian Adolescents*

**Author(s):** Anthony Arizmendi

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Mental health has become a central topic for today's generation, yet misconceptions have contributed to stigma within many Christian communities. This project seeks to answer the question of what resources can support Christian adolescents in the New Haven area to destigmatize mental health conversations. Literature suggests that faith-centered educational tools are effective in reducing stigma. In response, the project proposes a deck of flashcards featuring biblical characters who experienced mental health struggles and their coping methods. This resource will help the social work community affirm adolescents' identities and show that faith can be a resource rather than a barrier.

- SW2.8 *Empowering Older Adults Through Technology Training to Reduce Social Isolation and Fostering Well-Being*  
**Author(s):** Ash Baer  
**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This capstone project addresses the critical need for empowering older adults to confidently[LG1.1] navigate technology, a challenge that has grown more pressing as digital tools become integral to daily life. Many older adults face barriers to technology use, leading to social isolation, grief, and a sense of disconnection, yet accessible and supportive technological engagement can foster resilience and reduce loneliness. The literature review reveals a shift from broad questions about technology's impact to a focused research inquiry: what are effective methods for training volunteers who assist older adults with essential technologies such as phones, email, internet searches, and e-readers? Key themes include digital literacy, inclusivity, and the importance of culturally responsive interventions, with further research needed on equitable access and the experiences of marginalized communities. The project will deliver a community-informed training model for volunteers, developed in partnership with organizations serving older adults. This work is significant for social work practice as it aligns with the profession's ethical obligations to promote dignity, social connection, and justice, ensuring technology becomes a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion.
- SW2.9 *Fuel for the Mind: The Role of Nutritional Literacy in Mood Disorders Recovery.*  
**Author(s):** Malgorzata Rodzyn-Salomone  
**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei Kozu  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This study explores how nutritional knowledge (knowledge about nutrition) influences the recovery process, mood stability, and treatment adherence among participants recovering from mood disorders. Mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder contribute to the leading causes of disabilities worldwide. Exploring the role of nutrition in the mental health recovery process contributes to the exploration of holistic, modifiable, and innovative treatment methods. This qualitative and exploratory study embedded phenomenological study design to explore the lived experiences of those who are actively recovering from a mood disorder diagnosis. The six research participants were recruited in the state of Connecticut from local intensive outpatient programs and outpatient clinics. The research intervention included a pre-intervention interview, a four-hour psychoeducational session about nutrition for mental health, and a post-intervention interview. Data analysis revealed five main thematic domains describing participants lived experiences of the role of nutritional knowledge while recovering from depression or bipolar disorder. The findings inform that nutritional knowledge not only supports perceived speed of recovery, treatment adherence, and mood stability of the participants, but also indicates increased motivation to make changes, increased feelings of hope, empowerment, and control over depressive symptoms and the recovery process. In addition, nutritional knowledge was perceived as a complementary component that supports a holistic, long-term strategy for mental and physical well-being.
- SW2.10 *The Impacts of Artificial Intelligence on Marginalized Communities*  
**Author(s):** Ashia Robinson  
**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** As technology advances and more people utilize artificial intelligence, the impact on the environment and historically marginalized communities worsens. This project intends to increase awareness in these communities and inspire them to take action. The literature review emphasizes how voices of the marginalized are missing or misrepresented, revealing inequities. By creating an infographic to inform the community, this project includes the missing voices and also contributes to professional knowledge while exhibiting social work principles by speaking out instead of condoning or participating in the discrimination and systemic racism that AI tools perpetuate and exacerbate. An intended outcome of this capstone project is to shift the narrative of AI and mitigate or completely eliminate the biases within the current systems.
- SW2.11 *Trans Joy as Resistance: A Joy-Centered Mutual Aid Group Manual for Gender Expansive Adults*  
**Author(s):** Charlie Miller  
**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** Transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse (TGNB) adults experience disproportionate mental health disparities due to systemic stigma, marginalization, and oppression. This capstone project asks: What supports do TGNB individuals need to cultivate joy, resilience, and resistance across clinical and community contexts? Literature emphasizes a shift from deficit-based frameworks toward minority joy, gender euphoria, and community-based care. It underscores the need to develop culturally responsive, intersectional approaches when considering the adaptation

of joy-centered interventions across diverse TGNB populations. In response, this project will develop a six-week group facilitation manual as a deliverable in partnership with Trans Haven, a community-led direct service program. The group curriculum will integrate mutual aid, identity affirmation, and culturally responsive joy-centered practices to promote collective resilience and empowerment. By centering ideas of interdependence and shared care grounded in queer, intersectional, and liberation-based frameworks, this project contributes to social work practice through a replicable, anti-oppressive model that advances individual well-being and collective thriving.

SW2.12 *“A Proposal for Athletic Social Work on College Campuses”*

**Author(s):** Christen Quijano

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project explores the growing necessity for employing athletic social workers on college campuses, particularly at the University of New Haven. Their athletes face unique stressors from social pressures, competitive environment, and academic struggles. Students hesitate to seek out professional mental health support due to fear of judgment, playing time, associated stigma, and lack of available resources on campus. This role provides an unbiased, advocacy, and supportive presence while fostering well-being, resilience, and academic success guided by NACSW ethical values. This proposal outlines roles and responsibilities, proposed interventions, and resource allocation to create a non-judgmental, nurturing environment for all student athletes to thrive in the competitive and stressful lifestyle called collegiate sports.

SW2.13 *Reducing Behavior-Driven Placement Disruptions in Foster Care Through a Self-Advocacy Tool*

**Author(s):** Deliliah Cancel

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Placement instability remains a persistent challenge within foster care systems and is frequently associated with behavioral concerns that lead to placement disruptions. This capstone project addressed an organizational need to better support foster youth and caregivers by developing a structured self-advocacy worksheet designed to improve communication and prevent behavior-driven placement disruptions. A review of professional literature examined factors contributing to placement instability, trauma-informed understandings of youth behavior, youth participation in child welfare, and culturally responsive practices. Findings suggested that behavioral challenges are often connected to trauma histories and unmet emotional needs rather than intentional defiance, highlighting the importance of proactive communication support. The project resulted in the creation of a culturally responsive tool titled Getting to Know Me: My Support Guide, intended for use by foster youth, caregivers, and agency professionals. This project contributes to social work practice by translating research and theory into a practical intervention that promotes trauma-informed care, strengthens caregiver understanding, and supports placement stability.

- O1.1 *Justice on Ice: A Bibliometric Analysis of the Arctic Blue Economy*  
**Author(s):** Emmanuel Xonu  
**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp  
**Department:** Environment, Geography, and Marine Sciences  
**Abstract:** The blue economy is commonly put forward as a means of achieving equitable and sustainable developments. Nevertheless, research on the Arctic blue economy is overwhelmingly influenced by extractive, state-centric, and technocratic frameworks that regard Indigenous Peoples as stakeholders rather than as possessors of authoritative knowledge. This discrepancy shows that there is a fundamental contradiction between the blue economy discourse that is focused on justice and how it is used in the Arctic. The Arctic is being more and more considered a frontier of opportunity in the blue economy. However, Indigenous Peoples have long used Indigenous knowledge to govern, inhabit, and understand the Arctic, yet mainstream policy and scholarship marginalize these knowledge systems. By mapping the organization of knowledge across global and regional scales using bibliometric analysis of articles and peer-reviewed articles from SCOPUS, the study identifies 1636 blue economy publications overall, with only 141 engaging justice related concepts, 15 focusing on the Arctic, and just 2 at the intersection of all three dimensions. Our findings reveal that arctic narratives have systematically marginalized justice-oriented concerns despite their historical presence. This article highlights this gap and contributes to ongoing debates about the blue economy's social dimensions and points out the importance of Arctic frameworks that center Indigenous rights, knowledge, and justice in future ocean governance debates.
- O1.2 *Dying by ZIP Code: A Structural Racism Framework for Organizational Assessment and Strategic/DEI Planning at a Major Connecticut Health System*  
**Author(s):** Darryl Hugley  
**Faculty Mentor:** Stanley Bernard  
**Department:** Public Health  
**Abstract:** Purpose. This capstone project presents an evidence-based organizational assessment and Strategic/DEI Plan for Yale New Haven Health System (YNHHS), one of Connecticut's largest health systems, with the aim of developing an antiracist governance infrastructure capable of systematically identifying and addressing racialized health disparities driven by Social Drivers of Health (SDoH).  
Methods/Approach. A multi-stage environmental scan integrated gold-standard epidemiological data from DataHaven, the United for ALICE Project, Connecticut Department of Public Health mortality surveillance, and internal YNHHS operational metrics. Historical policy analysis documented redlining, racially restrictive covenants, and mid-century urban renewal as structural antecedents to present-day ZIP code-level health inequities. A SWOT analysis of YNHHS's current SDoH infrastructure informed the strategic plan, which was further anchored in the CMS 2025 mandatory SDoH screening measure (MIPS Quality ID #487), The Joint Commission's equity leadership standard, and the WHO World Report on Social Determinants of Health Equity (2025).  
Results/Outcomes. The resulting Strategic/DEI Plan recommends four interconnected interventions: standardizing validated SDoH screening across ambulatory care settings, implementing closed-loop referral systems, expanding Community Health Worker capacity in high-burden ZIP codes, and installing quarterly equity-stratified performance reviews overlaying existing quality dashboards.  
Significance/Impact. In Connecticut, ZIP code predicts health outcomes more reliably than genetics. Black residents in Greater New Haven experience food insecurity at four times the rate of White residents, and 65% of Black YNHHS patients report that race influenced their care. This plan offers a replicable, data-driven framework for health systems nationwide to translate equity commitments into measurable, accountable action.
- O1.3 *Who Sees the Pathway? Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives on Science and Innovation Opportunities*  
**Author(s):** Christopher Wisniewski  
**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh  
**Department:** Educational Leadership  
**Abstract:** This exploratory qualitative methods course research assignment examines how adults in different school-based roles interpret science and innovation (STEM) opportunities within a comprehensive high school setting. Instead of focusing on program effectiveness or outcomes, the focus is on how these STEM opportunities are understood, communicated, and experienced across roles within the school. This research is situated within a public high school in central Connecticut that offers a range of advanced science coursework, early college experiences, and innovation-themed learning opportunities. This work considers how meaning is shaped through professional roles, institutional structures, and access to information. A qualitative case study approach was used to capture these

perspectives in context. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with four adult stakeholders, including a science teacher, school counselor, administrator, and adult alumnus. Document analysis of school-based materials related to science programming was also utilized. The data were reviewed using a reflexive thematic approach to identify patterns related to coherence, accessibility, communication, and perceived value across stakeholder groups. Reflexive memoing was used to support transparency and account for the researcher's positionality within the school setting. The findings point to how science and innovation opportunities are interpreted and experienced within a single school setting, and how those perceptions may shape access, participation, and the overall student experience.

O1.4 *Heads in Beds: Current Trends and Policy Recommendations to Increase Residence Hall Occupancy*

**Author(s):** Stephen Sweet

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership

**Abstract:** Across the United States, colleges and universities are facing challenges from declining enrollment. In recent years, Connecticut has seen enrollment declines much higher than the national average. At Southern Connecticut State University, enrollment declines also correlate with the underutilization of university residence halls, with approximately 18% of residence hall beds remaining unassigned each academic year. This trend presents a lost opportunity for students to experience the benefits and supports associated with living on campus. It also presents both a financial challenge for the university and an opportunity to address this challenge creatively. This session is based on an advocacy brief prepared for a graduate course at SCSU and will examine the financial and structural reasons why students choose not to live on campus. Drawing on institutional data, national research, and professional insight, this session will explore the well-documented benefits of living on campus and propose policy recommendations aimed at increasing student access, equity, and ultimately putting more student "heads in beds."

- O2.1 *The Effects of Exposure to THC in utero on the Social Behavior and Synaptic Density of Hippocampus in Rats*  
**Author(s):** Abigail Nolan  
**Faculty Mentor:** Rachel Jeffrey  
**Department:** Biology  
**Abstract:** In this thesis, the synaptic density of neurons in the hippocampus of rats was observed after prenatal exposure to delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (abbr. THC). Exposure occurred in either the modeled first or third trimesters of development, the resulting offspring being the subjects of observation. Brain samples were dissected from the offspring and sectioned, then stained with Golgi stain technology. No significant main effect of condition or sex on the synaptic density of the dentate gyrus was found. This research provides valuable, up-to-date information about how consuming THC while pregnant affects the developing offspring, which has implications for public health. As cannabis products become more accessible and legalized in Western countries, this study's findings will help healthcare providers and families make informed and safe decisions.
- O2.2 *The Role of Chemical Exposure in Racial Disparities in the Burden of Uterine Fibroids: A Systematic Review*  
**Author(s):** Taryn Pierce, Anuli Njoku, Wendemi Sawadogo, Fabian Plummer, Mousa Al-Hassan, Sharban Tohura, Nuha Ibrahim & Alexandra Sirko  
**Faculty Mentor:** Anuli Njoku  
**Department:** Public Health  
**Abstract:** Uterine fibroids are common benign tumors of the uterine wall and represent one of the most frequently diagnosed gynecologic conditions among women of reproductive age. Substantial racial disparities exist in fibroid prevalence, severity, and age at diagnosis, with Black women for example experiencing earlier onset, greater tumor burden, more severe symptoms, and a substantially higher lifetime risk compared with White women. While genetic and biological factors have been recognized as contributors to these inequities, emerging evidence suggests that disproportionate exposure to endocrine disrupting and other environmental chemicals may also play a critical role. This systematic review aims to synthesize the existing literature examining the contribution of chemical exposures to racial disparities in the burden of uterine fibroids. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, EMBASE, Web of Science, and Scopus, employing a combination of controlled vocabulary and free text terms related to uterine fibroids, environmental and chemical exposures, and racial or ethnic disparities. Retrieved articles were screened independently by at least two reviewers, with discrepancies resolved by a third reviewer. This presentation provides preliminary findings from a systematic review on chemical and everyday risk exposures that may contribute to the racial disparity in uterine fibroids occurrence. This review will evaluate the strength and consistency of evidence linking specific chemical exposures to fibroid risk and across racial groups. Findings are intended to inform future research and public health interventions aimed at addressing environmental contributors to uterine fibroid disparities and reducing inequities in reproductive health outcomes.
- O2.3 *Skin Whitening Products and Users' Knowledge and Motivations, Marketing Strategies, and Adverse Health Effects: A Scoping Review*  
**Author(s):** Fabian Plummer, Anuli Njoku, Wendemi Sawadogo, Taryn Pierce & Kaleigh Albert  
**Faculty Mentor:** Anuli Njoku  
**Department:** Public Health  
**Abstract:** Skin whitening, or skin lightening, is a global public health issue that intersects with deeply rooted sociocultural, historical, and economic dynamics. The commercial proliferation of skin whitening products has surged in recent decades, fueled by evolving beauty standards, and aggressive marketing strategies. These products are widely used in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and are increasingly used among minority communities in Western countries. While some studies explored the health risks associated with chemicals in skin whitening products and users' knowledge of these adverse health outcomes, others focus on the psychosocial motivations, such as internalized colorism and perceptions of attractiveness. Still, others highlight the role of media and corporate marketing in shaping consumer behavior. Research is needed to synthesize these multiple dimensions of skin whitening products. This scoping review aims to review the literature and summarize current evidence on knowledge, motivations, marketing strategies of skin whitening products and health effects. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in PubMed, Embase, and PsycINFO, using terms related to skin bleaching, knowledge, motivations, marketing strategies, and health. Retrieved articles were screened independently by at least two reviewers, with discrepancies resolved by a third reviewer. This review will evaluate the strength and consistency of evidence linking skin whitening products to health risks across racial groups to inform future research and public health interventions on environmental contributors to adverse health. This presentation provides preliminary findings from a scoping

review on chemicals in skin whitening products and users' knowledge and motivations, marketing strategies, and adverse health effects.

O2.4 *The Synthesis and Characterization of Tamoxifen Analogs Incorporating Phenol And Resorcinol Groups*

**Author(s):** Tuana Gonul, Daniela Calle-Requena & M.J. Gerald Lesley\*

**Faculty Mentor:** M.J. Gerald Lesley

**Department:** Chemistry and Biochemistry

**Abstract:** The efficient synthesis of functionalized tamoxifen derivatives remains of significant goal towards the development of resistance-free analogues. The synthesis of tamoxifen derivatives incorporating 2, 3 or 4-phenol (7a-c) and 2,4 or 2,5-resorcinol groups (7d,e) will be presented. Halogenated precursors were protected as the benzyl derivatives to enable air sensitive, transition metal catalyst Suzuki coupling reactions. Cross-coupling between 3 ((E)-N,N-dimethyl-2-(4-(1-phenyl-2-(4,4,5,5-tetramethyl-1,3,2-dioxaborolan-2-yl)but-1-en-1-yl)phenoxy)ethan-1-amine) and the protected alcohols, 4a-e, produced compounds 5a-e in > 90% yields, respectively. Coupling reactions were studied at varying temperatures, catalyst loading and stoichiometric ratios to optimize reaction efficiency. The resulting protected derivatives were purified by column chromatography and deprotected using BCl<sub>3</sub>/pentaphenylbenzene or BBr<sub>3</sub> in methylene chloride to produce the final tamoxifen derivatives 6a-e. Deprotection of 5b and 5c provided tamoxifen derivatives 6b and 6c in 40% and 16% yields respectively. These compounds are awaiting in vitro testing against the MCF-7 breast cancer cell line. In contrast, deprotection of 5a and resorcinol derivatives 5d and 5e was unsuccessful, highlighting limitations of the methodology and requirement of further work.

- O3.1 *Declaring a “Napa Valley of Oysters”? A Bibliometric Analysis of Oyster Trails, Place Branding, and Coastal Sustainability*  
**Author(s):** Jillian Zitofsky  
**Faculty Mentor:** C. Patrick Heidkamp  
**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences  
**Abstract:** This paper presents a bibliometric analysis of academic research on food trails, with a focused examination of oyster-based tourism as an emerging form of coastal place-making. Responding to recent policy narratives that brand regions as elite food landscapes—such as the declaration of Connecticut as the “Napa Valley of oysters”—the study asks how such claims are reflected, supported, or challenged within the scholarly literature. Using multidisciplinary databases, publication metadata are systematically analyzed and visualized in VOSviewer to identify temporal trends, co-authorship networks, and thematic clusters. The bibliometric mapping organizes the literature into three dominant research dimensions: the economic impacts of food tourism, the ecological functions of oyster habitats, and the socio-cultural construction of sense of place (SOP). Rather than evaluating oyster trails empirically, the paper contributes methodologically by transforming a fragmented body of scholarship into a quantitative knowledge map. This approach reveals both areas of conceptual convergence and notable absences—particularly the limited integration of environmental stewardship and community engagement within food-trail research. By making the structure of the literature visible, the study provides a critical foundation for assessing whether oyster-based food trails function primarily as branding devices or as mechanisms capable of fostering coastal sustainability and resilience.
- O3.2 *Writing for Social Justice: Creative Connections and Accessibility in Learning*  
**Author(s):** Carly Weber & Veronica Da Silva  
**Faculty Mentor:** Shelley Stoehr-McCarthy  
**Department:** English  
**Abstract:** Creative Connections is an initiative founded at Southern Connecticut State University that offers creative writing programs to New Haven youth experiencing housing insecurity. By reading and writing literature together in a college writing workshop format, SCSU student facilitators and youth shelter clients learn how to process their life experiences through creativity and writing and jointly discover ways that art can be a mechanism for social justice. The presentation describes our personal experience with the program, sample lesson plans, and the impact Creative Connections has had on our lives and our clients’ lives. We will additionally explore the unique challenges that come with the program, including losing our partner organization and being forced to pivot halfway through the semester. Lastly, we will discuss how Creative Connections is being developed into an accredited college course and our future goals to make creative writing more accessible in New Haven.
- O3.3 *From Anxiety to Advocacy*  
**Author(s):** Ashlie Forsberg  
**Faculty Mentor:** Laura Bower-Phipps  
**Department:** Education  
**Abstract:** My autoethnography explores how childhood school-related anxiety and transformative mentorship shaped my professional identity and pedagogical approach. For context, an autoethnography can best be described as a research paper in which personal narratives and experience are connected to broader social, cultural, and political contexts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Drawing on personal narrative and professional standards, I reflect on my transition from a student paralyzed by separation anxiety to an educator dedicated to fostering emotional safety. Currently, a fourth-grade teacher, I prioritize authentic relationships to support students facing similar emotional challenges. By aligning my practice with the Connecticut Common Core of Teacher and INTASC Standards, I strive to create a classroom where every learner feels valued and secure. I also identify future growth areas in Teacher Leadership, focusing on using research and data more confidently to improve student achievement. This underscores the lasting impact of the affective side of teaching and the teacher’s role as a primary architect of a student’s emotional being. I will be discussing: my personal journey with childhood school-related anxiety and the influence of transformative mentors that shaped my professional identity and my commitment to creating emotionally safe, student-centered learning environments.

O3.4 *Capturing Engagement with Content Creators: A New Scale*

**Author(s):** Kevin McGuire

**Faculty Mentor:** Christopher J. Budnick

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Through social media's tremendous capability to communicate social information, people can create and maintain bonds with celebrities, influencers, and content creators. These are one-sided bonds called parasocial relationships while parasocial interactions are the illusion of face-to-face communication. Live streaming is an engaging technology on many social media platforms that exceeds the boundary of what is traditionally parasocial by enabling reciprocal exchanges. Given these exchanges, parasocial relationships and interactions would be better conceptualized as "quasisocial engagement" since it carries more qualities of in-person socialization. Through an exploratory factor analysis, I developed the four-dimensional Measure of Quasisocial Engagement (MQE) that captures reciprocity, community, attraction, and trust. This presentation will discuss further validation of the MQE through a confirmatory factor analysis. Towards this goal, I will show how the MQE relates to existing parasocial scales (PSI scale, convergent validity), gregariousness (Mini IPIP, discriminant validity), and the sense of social belonging (Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction in General scale, predictive validity). The MQE is a novel psychometric tool that captures audience-creator engagement existing parasocial measures miss, offering researchers a more precise tool for predicting outcomes like social and community belonging or content creator loyalty.

O4.1 *Identifying Coastal Resilience Solutions by Community Design in New Haven County, Connecticut*

**Author(s):** Daisy Everingham

**Faculty Mentor:** Miriah Kelly

**Department:** Coastal Resilience

**Abstract:** In the US coastal North East, the impacts of climate change are already being felt by communities who live near the shore - from hurricanes, to heavy winter storms, and nuisance flooding from rising sea levels. Over the next decade there will be an increasing need for local government, businesses and individuals to identify and implement solutions that allow these communities to adapt without impacting environmental, social, and economic thriving. Heavily grounded in specific places, these solutions need to be shaped by both expert knowledge and the perspective of local people who have strong attachment to these locations. This project is based in New Haven County, Connecticut, and will identify the climate change adaptation solutions that can have the most positive impact on the county's communities into the future. Precisely, this research will take a three tiered approach by discerning the coastal resilience priorities of experts within the state, the coastal resilience priorities of local community members in New Haven County, and finally, the broader climate resilience futures envisioned by these community members. The solutions that are frequently chosen by participants tend to be multi-faceted and lead to multiple positive impacts that improve habitat, local economic viability, and opportunities for increased community engagement with the coastline. Ultimately, this research outlines possible climate change adaptation pathways for New Haven County moving forward that can be extrapolated to inform decision making processes in other coastal counties throughout the region.

O4.2 *New Haven Food Insecurity Needs Assessment: Understanding and Addressing Food Insecurity Through Resource Collaboration*

**Author(s):** Kaleigh Albert

**Faculty Mentor:** Jean Breny

**Department:** Public Health

**Abstract:** New Haven has seen a significant rise in food insecurity since the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting barriers to nutritious food access across the city. Research indicates that food insecurity is shaped by key social determinants of health, including structural inequities, economic opportunity, and access to affordable housing and transportation. This project presents a needs assessment examining demographic characteristics associated with food insecurity, including income, health status, and geographic disparities across New Haven neighborhoods. In addition to identifying environmental and demographic risk factors for food insecurity, this assessment provides a comprehensive overview of existing resources in New Haven, including local organizations offering social services and food-related programs, food retailers that participate in food incentive initiatives, and community gardens and farms. Through a combination of demographic data analysis and resource mapping, the project evaluates the distribution of food-related services, identifies existing programming, and highlights opportunities to strengthen collaboration among organizations while addressing access gaps across neighborhoods. Findings suggest that New Haven has a robust network of food resources; however, there are key areas for improvement to enhance coordination and maximize impact. Opportunities include increasing cross-sector collaboration among organizations providing social and food services, expanding and better utilizing food access points within retail settings, and targeting interventions in neighborhoods with limited food access. Strengthening these areas can improve resource efficiency and support more equitable access to nutritious food for residents across the city.

O4.3 *Navigating the Double Shift: A Phenomenology of Parent-Students in Urban Adult Education*

**Author(s):** Tahisha Porter

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafah

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), cultural barriers are operationalized in Connecticut state adult education programs as an individual's perception of their own attitudes, beliefs, or customs as potential hindrances to employment. State data reports cultural barrier rates of 5.4% and 18.3% in two major urban centers; however, a neighboring city identifies a dramatically higher rate of 61.8%. This significant discrepancy represents a Data Paradox that obscures the lived realities of the parent-students navigating these systems. Although adult education in the United States serves as a critical pathway for socioeconomic mobility among underemployed and undereducated individuals, current metrics often fail to capture the internal lifeworld of the adult learner. This qualitative methods class assignment explores the use of transcendental phenomenology to access the essence of the double shift, the experience of simultaneously navigating primary parental caregiving and academic study within an anonymized urban adult education center. Grounded in Ecological Systems Theory and the Theory of Margin, this

inquiry seeks to uncover the qualitative structures of the parent-student experience. Through semi-structured lifeworld interviews with three parent-students at an adult education center, this paper explores how self-reported categories of cultural barriers align with or distort the structural misalignments and navigational challenges faced by adult learners. By centering the voices of those balancing caregiving and coursework, this research seeks not to explain the Data Paradox from an administrative perspective, but to describe the essential structures of lived experience that aggregate quantitative data cannot fully capture.

O4.4 *“Getting in Front of It”: District Leader Framing of the AI Pilot Program in Connecticut K-12 Schools*

**Author(s):** Veronika Timpe-Laughlin

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** In this study, we investigated leadership sensemaking in the context of Connecticut’s 2025 AI pilot program, a state-led initiative by the Connecticut State Department of Education designed to introduce and study the use of AI in public K–12 schools. To augment research on implementation outcomes, we explored how Connecticut’s educational leaders constructed and communicated meaning around the AI Pilot to stakeholders—a key element for successful implementation and scaling of such initiatives. We examined how superintendents and other district leaders framed the AI pilot program in Board of Education (BoE) meetings held between December 2024 and November 2025 across the five participating public school districts. Drawing upon Fairhurst’s (2011) discursive leadership framework, we developed a five-step framing analysis protocol and applied it to meeting transcripts to identify frames, framing devices, and key actors. Educational leaders most often framed AI through governance and innovation, as both a strategic opportunity and an area requiring deliberate oversight. Across districts, AI was constructed as an inevitable, competitive race requiring proactive engagement, safeguards, and educator guidance. Concerns (e.g., cheating, misinformation, privacy) were embedded within narratives of managed implementation. Framing devices were primarily argument and contrast, opposing fear to opportunity and passive reaction to proactive leadership. Superintendents were the primary framers in introductory discussions; however, in follow-up meetings, framing became more distributed across principals, teachers, and instructional leaders, indicating a shift from district-level vision-setting to implementation-oriented sensemaking. Findings reveal how educational leaders use language to legitimize emergent technologies while managing uncertainty and competing institutional pressures.

O4.5 *Evolving Needs, Stagnated Perspectives: The BAM Evolution Model*

**Author(s):** Sean Laragy

**Faculty Mentor:** Casey McPherson

**Department:** Mental Health Sciences

**Abstract:** The accelerating pace of modern society, driven by globalization, industrialization, and human evolution has created conditions that surpass the analytical scope of traditional mental health recovery frameworks. The contemporary era reflects a new form of human evolution that necessitates a more holistic and adaptive foundation for mental health recovery. The BAM Evolution Model builds upon the biopsychosocial framework by integrating perspectives from evolutionary psychology and modern human development. Human biology has been profoundly influenced by the rise of culture, itself enabled by advanced communication and collective higher-order cognition. In turn, culture and cognition have been reshaped by rapid biological changes, underscoring the reciprocal and bidirectional nature of these processes. The BAM Evolution Model conceptualizes human experience as the dynamic interplay among biology, anthropology, and a metacognitive expression toward compassion, with each dimension exerting measurable influence on the others and producing the totality of human experience, while the internet functions as a contemporary, central modulating factor. Within this framework, human distress is understood as emerging from incongruences among these dimensions and the disruptive effects of internet use on each individual dimension. Recovery addresses evolutionary needs organized through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and cultivating healing in a world increasingly dependent on digital engagement. The model positions clinicians and clients as equal collaborators, with clinicians contributing professional expertise and clients bringing experiential knowledge. Ethical considerations emphasize that clinicians must avoid prescribing how clients interpret or embody the dimensions of humanity, instead fostering a context-seeking, healing relationship grounded in dignity and compassion.

## **Before, During, and After: Managing Secondary ELA Classrooms**

OPED1.1 *Filling Students' Cups: The Power of Positive Teacher–Parent Relationships in Secondary Education*

**Author(s):** Jenna Joyce

**Faculty Mentor:** Andrew Smyth

**Department:** Education

**Abstract:** My research presentation explores the impact of building positive relationships with parents in secondary education. I am examining how strong teacher–parent relationships can create a mutual, beneficial, and lasting impact on student success, both academically and emotionally. My research centers on the idea that consistent, meaningful parent involvement is like “filling a cup.” When students receive ongoing support from both home and school, they are better equipped to feel confident, motivated, and supported inside and outside of the classroom. Through my classroom experience and research, I have seen how communication, trust, and intentional outreach to families can strengthen student engagement and accountability. Building these relationships is not only important for immediate academic success, but also for fostering motivation students will rely on in the future.

OPED1.2 *Holding the Line: Using Classroom Community and Routines to Sustain Learning*

**Author(s):** Sarah Weynand

**Faculty Mentor:** Andrew Smyth

**Department:** Education

**Abstract:** This inquiry examines how early-career and veteran English Language Arts (ELA) educators can create and maintain instructional clarity, high expectations, and grounding routines in classrooms with diverse needs and abilities. Field observations and experiences reveal that secondary teachers can struggle to maintain high expectations while ensuring that all students have the ability and access to meet them. Hardships and dissatisfactions include class interruptions, varying content confusion, and unclear directions—all of which can drive a wedge between educators and their students' connection to content and instructional coherence. Built on a teacher candidate's student teaching experiences, this inquiry implements routines embedded in literacy and citizenship-based practices to ensure that all students have ownership of their learning. Collected feedback and research from colleagues, department heads, and ELA scholars provided organizational strategies for teachers to remain purposeful and clear when implementing class expectations. The inquiry's proposed solution includes developed phrases, routines, and strategies that do not rely on a teacher's constant reminders but on students' habitual utilization of their affective and cognitive skills. The candidate's final three weeks of student teaching include implementing community and literary routines, such as structured group discussion and reading time, and reflecting on their effectiveness in a first- and second-year student ELA classroom. These solutions aim to highlight how teacher triage can be reduced to increase student pride, relationships, and engagement, thereby leading to a stabilized, advocate-led learning environment.

OPED1.3 *The impact timing has on the feeling of a classroom*

**Author(s):** Dylan Doane-Lianos

**Faculty Mentor:** Andrew Smyth

**Department:** English

**Abstract:** “Time is money,” originally coined by Benjamin Franklin, is something the working world has come to live by. In my experience as a secondary English student teacher, I can say that time may not be money, but it is definitely a currency. Students look to the teacher as someone who will lead them to an educational destination and time is how they pay for the ride. If a teacher misuses their time, just like if an organization misuses donations, the students are are going to make their displeasure known. I plan on using my experience in a classroom, both succeeding and failing at using the students time wisely, along with academic research to discuss how effective time management can lead to a significant increase in classroom management through planning and execution of timing strategies.

OPED1.4 *7 Things Not to Say to Parents or Guardians*

**Author(s):** Tim Leininger

**Faculty Mentor:** Andrew Smyth

**Department:** English

**Abstract:** Speaking with parents and guardians can be a challenge, not only for new teachers, but also for veteran educators. The student body of any school is diverse with various socioeconomic and sociopolitical identities spanning race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and more. If the student body contains a plethora of identities and personalities, then it is reasonable to expect that the parents or guardians are just as diverse. Corresponding with parents or guardians requires tact and grace with a bevy of pitfalls, and how one speaks with parents or guardians can bolster or ruin the working relationship with not only the parent or guardian, but the student as well. There are also ramifications that can occur by using inappropriate language in communicate with parents or guardians, as one wrong word can lead to an ineffective working relationship with them, or worse an official complaint to the school. From personal classroom experience and research, I will address the potential repercussions of damaging discourse with parents or guardians and offer rhetorical strategies in correspondence with them (and students).

OPED1.5 *It's 7am, Do You Know Where Your Kids Are? Chronic Absenteeism in the Secondary ELA Classroom*

**Author(s):** Tyler Evon

**Faculty Mentor:** Andrew Smyth

**Department:** English

**Abstract:** Chronic absenteeism plagues classrooms across many schools and districts since COVID, and serious consequences for learning result from it. In my high school student teaching experience, morning English classes often start with less than 75% of students present. Many trickle in as time progresses, but can we really consider a student present in class if they come so late that they miss all instruction? The CSDE considers a student present in school if they attend for at least half of the day (CSDE), but missing half a day of school still leads to lower and delayed skill mastery (Balfanz). Because chronically absent students fall further and further behind with each absence, they find catching up to be more and more difficult, which then can lead to even more absences (Balfanz). When they do finally come to class, how should the teacher attempt to best assist the student in catching up without disrupting the learning of the other students? My presentation will focus on two questions: 1) Why are some students chronically absent, and what factors are at play that cause them to miss so much class? 2) What strategies can secondary English teachers use to address the lack of learning that results from chronic absenteeism, especially when schools and districts do not have or enforce policies on it? We teachers cannot stop chronic absenteeism, but what we can do is try to mitigate its effects in our own classrooms.

## Challenges of Translation

- OPSP2.1 *Verb Specificity for Faithful Translation: Reviving a Classic of Spanish Children’s Literature*  
**Author(s):** Libby Abraham  
**Faculty Mentor:** Rafael Hernandez  
**Department:** World Languages and Literatures  
**Abstract:** The 1961 classic Spanish children’s chapter book, *Marcelino Pan y Vino*, by Jose Maria Sanchez-Silva, has delighted audiences around the world, both through the text and the film adaptations. This work has been translated into many languages, including the 1963 English translation. The 1963 version is a faithful rendition of the text’s storyline, but it lacks the literary flair of the original. Approaching this text with a more contemporary take on translation theory, this presentation will show how it is possible to retain the lively, playful tone of the Spanish language in the text. Instead of flattening out certain phrases or verbs that are not as commonly used in English, this fresh look relies on verb specificity and a close look at the limits of linguistic creativity. Less common turns of phrase may be distracting in some cases, when brought from Spanish into English, but in others, will be considered good writing. This project looks at how the translator decides what to make more linguistically normative, and what unique turns of phrase, or unusual vocabulary, to retain. Of particular note will be phrases of a religious nature, such as words for God and Jesus, as well as seemingly simple adjectives like “malo,” (bad or sickly) and specific verbs like “amanecer” (to dawn).
- OPSP2.2 *Decision-Making in Translation: Balancing Accuracy and Natural Expression*  
**Author(s):** Sugey Gomez De Leon  
**Faculty Mentor:** Rafael Hernandez  
**Department:** World Languages and Literatures  
**Abstract:** We will discuss a translation of a contemporary political article from English to Spanish, focusing on the challenges of translating complex topics such as violence and social resistance. I will also explain the translation process, including the use of dictionaries and AI tools, and reflect on the decisions made to achieve accuracy and fluency. This project demonstrates that translation is both a technical and creative process. It highlights the challenges of maintaining fidelity to the source text while producing a creative, but natural and readable version in the target language. Ultimately, the translation reflects not only linguistic transfer but also cultural interpretation.
- OPSP2.3 *The translation of Bad Feminist*  
**Author(s):** Evelyn Findley  
**Faculty Mentor:** Rafael Hernandez  
**Department:** World Languages and Literatures  
**Abstract:** In this presentation, I share my experience translating excerpts from *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay into Spanish. The project focuses on some of the challenges I faced, especially when working with tone, humor, and informal language. I also reflect on how certain words and ideas do not always translate directly, and how I had to make choices to keep the meaning and voice of the original text.

**P2.1** *Exploration of the Afar Region of Ethiopia***Author(s):** Natalina Portillo**Faculty Mentor:** Michael Rogers**Department:** Anthropology

**Abstract:** The Gona paleoanthropological field project investigates the paleoanthropology and archaeology of the Gona research area in the Afar region of Ethiopia. Previous and ongoing research has contributed to findings of Oldowan stone tools, *Ardipithecus ramidus*, and *Homo erectus* (Rogers et al., 2023). Sites in the research area span the archaeological record, encompassing the Lower and Upper Paleolithic. During the 2026 field season, systematic pedestrian surveys were conducted across a variety of sites and landscapes. Targeted excavations occurred at the following key sites: KLT1M, KLT1M East, GWS5, and BSS3. Data collection at these sites focused on lithic artifacts, identifiable faunal remains, and hominin fossils, as well as some samples of other organic materials (e.g., charcoal, seeds, soils). Results include the finding of new hominin fossils and several lithic artifact concentrations. In addition, an expansive posthole feature was identified at KLT1M East, suggesting repeated occupation by early *Homo sapiens* at the site. Preliminary analysis of the sites suggests repeated hominin interaction with the local environment, as well as possible occupation. Research is ongoing in the area, with a new focus on younger sites to understand the role of early *Homo sapiens* in the area. Key questions revolve around hominin interaction with local fauna, interactions with surrounding hominins, and the emergence of modern behaviors.

**P2.2** *Evaluating Machaeropsopos spp. Squamosal Morphology Based on New Material from the Martha's Butte Beds: Chinle Formation, Arizona***Author(s):** Danielle Hill**Faculty Mentor:** Jonathan Weinbaum**Department:** Biology

**Abstract:** Occurrences of fragmentary phytosaurian (*Machaeropsopos* spp.) squamosal bones are common in the Martha's Butte Beds (Chinle Formation: Sonsela Member) of northeastern Arizona. Within the paleontology collection at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU-P), multiple fragmentary squamosals display higher morphological variability than has been previously documented within *Machaeropsopos*. Past studies have suggested that characters associated with the postorbital-squamosal bar are taxonomically informative among phytosaurs. The occurrence of squamosals outside the range of documented morphological variability raises questions regarding the extent of inter- and intraspecific variation among *Machaeropsopos* spp. and the utility of fragmentary squamosal material in determining species-level taxonomic identification. Here, we described in detail the morphologies of 13 *Machaeropsopos* squamosals in the SCSU-P collection. Published accounts of *Machaeropsopos* squamosal anatomy were referenced to determine the degree of morphological variation found in the SCSU-P specimens. Further, we described the morphology of four complete squamosals with referrals to *Machaeropsopos* spp. and incorporated these into a specimen-level phylogenetic analysis alongside the SCSU-P fragmentary squamosals to investigate whether species-level affinities can be established for the SCSU-P specimens. Although species-level assignment was not possible for most specimens, we identified three morphotypes within the SCSU-P collection, suggesting that multiple phytosaur morphs were present in this paleoecosystem. Such variation could suggest subtle differences in jaw muscle organization and biomechanical function depending on species, skull size, and/or ontogenetic stage. Our results highlight the need for large-scale documentation of inter- and intraspecific variation and investigation into the relationships between morphology, function, and ecology among *Machaeropsopos*.

**P2.3** *Kinetic and Computational Studies of Inhibitory Effects of Tetrazole Derivatives on Lactate Dehydrogenase A***Author(s):** Anthony Mahoney, Shafiq Chatak, Jaykar Martinez, Adiel Coca, Yigui Wang & JiongDong Pang**Faculty Mentor:** JiongDong Pang**Department:** Chemistry and Biochemistry

**Abstract:** Lactate Dehydrogenase A (LDHA: L-lactate: NAD<sup>+</sup> oxidoreductase, EC 1.1.1.27) catalyzes the conversion of pyruvate to lactate during anaerobic conditions. It is a key checkpoint for anaerobic glycolysis. Glycolysis and LDHA are not limited to muscle cells. Warburg effects state that cancer cells of almost all types carry out glycolysis at a much higher rate than normal tissues, even when oxygen is readily available. The increased rate of glucose consumption can be detected by positron emission tomography (PET) scan and elevated LDH activity is used as a cancer diagnostic biomarker. Inhibition of LDHA has been a therapeutic target for new anticancer treatment. In this study, we have performed kinetic and computational docking study of two tetrazole derivatives' inhibitory effect on LDHA. The preliminary results indicate that both 4-(1H-tetrazol-yl) benzaldehyde and 5-(4-

nitrophenyl)-1H-tetrazole exhibit potent inhibitory effect on LDHA with Ki in 20 mM range and docking energy of -7 kcal/mol for both compounds. Further studies include identifying the molecular binding mechanisms between LDHA and these ligands and the testing of these compounds' anticancer activity in multiple tumor cell lines.

P2.4 *The Effect of Bite Block Covers on Iowa Oral Performance Instrument (IOPI) Tongue Pressure Measurements*

**Author(s):** Xinyi Gao & Julian B Smith

**Faculty Mentor:** Julian B Smith

**Department:** Communication Disorders

**Abstract:** Accurate measurement of lingual strength is essential for evaluating swallowing function and monitoring treatment outcomes in individuals with dysphagia. The Iowa Oral Performance Instrument (IOPI) is widely used in both research and clinical settings to assess tongue pressure; however, variations in testing procedures and device modifications may influence measurement outcomes. One potential modification involves the use of a bite block cover, which may alter oral positioning or pressure transmission during testing. The purpose of this study was to examine whether the addition of a bite block cover affects maximum tongue pressure measurements obtained using the IOPI. Healthy young adults participated in this experimental study. Participants completed standardized tongue pressure tasks using the IOPI under two conditions: with standard bite block and with an added bite block cover. Maximum tongue pressure values were collected and compared across conditions to determine whether the device modification influenced performance outcomes. Results indicated no significant differences in maximum tongue pressure measurements between two testing conditions in this sample of healthy young adults. These findings suggest that the addition of a bite block cover does not substantially alter IOPI measurements in individuals with typical lingual strength. However, caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings to populations with reduced lingual strength. Individuals like older adults or patients with dysphagia may have limited strength reserves and could potentially be more sensitive to minor device modifications. Future research should investigate the effects of bite block covers on IOPI measurements in clinical populations to further inform standardized assessment protocols.

P2.5 *Enhancing Language Program Equity in K-12 CT Public Schools Through Facilitated Interdependent Language Learning (FILL)*

**Author(s):** Jessica Bursztyn

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** Language is one of the factors most deeply associated with being human. It is ethically critical then that we honor the diversity of languages representing our students via the class offerings that we provide. In CT, there are over 829,724 residents who speak languages other than English. Over 375,724 speak one of over forty languages other than Spanish. From a Critical Race Theory standpoint, what message is it sending the communities that we serve when CT only offers and validates a limited selection of primarily Western European languages (usually Spanish, French, and/or Latin) within its schools? What minimizing effects does this have on the wider positive benefits of language learning? Unfortunately, educational policies that result in lack of adequate funding, low language graduation requirements, incomplete multilingual learner (MLL) supports, and complicated certification regulations sustain this biased system. In this poster presentation of an Advocacy Brief course assignment, I argue that one main way to make language offerings more equitable is by making Facilitated Interdependent Language Learning (FILL) – a course guided by a certified language teacher in which students choose the language they want to independently study – a standard offering across the state. To accomplish this, the CT Department of Education must confirm that FILL would count towards the graduation requirement, endorse FILL as a recommended MLL support, and create an easy pathway for world language teacher FILL cross-endorsement. Through this, we can redefine the language learning experience as a more humanizing experience for all.

P2.6 *The Front Lines of Retention: Faculty Perspectives on Student Success in First-Year Algebra*

**Author(s):** Krishna Soni

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** As university enrollment continues to rise across the United States, universities face increasing pressure to improve student retention as both a financial imperative and an ethical responsibility. Prior research demonstrates that students' structural and personal experiences significantly influence their decisions to persist in their academic programs. Meanwhile, first-year students are required to complete general education mathematically intensive classes frequently serving as barriers to student progression and success. While existing scholarship examines student outcomes in these courses, there remains a gap in understanding the institutional structures that sustain these challenges and the role faculty play in shaping students' experiences. This qualitative research assignment for a qualitative methods course is conducted at a four-year public state university in the Northeastern United States, where

first-year students must complete an introductory algebra course as graduation requirement. Offered primarily in students' first semester, the course operates within a mathematics emporium model and relies on an online, self-paced learning and assessment system marketed as artificially intelligent and used nationally in STEM education. This system claims to map individual knowledge, personalize learning, and promote mastery without frustration. Using a phenomenological research design, this research explores the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty teaching this math course to first-year students. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). This research seeks to illuminate how faculty interpret their roles, navigate the complexities of teaching this mathematics course, and contribute to broader conversations about student retention and success.

P2.7 *Strengthening Authentic Learning Through Technology/AI Policy*

**Author(s):** Rayna Walters

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** With concerns surrounding children's engagement in the classroom, the emotional well-being of students, and the identified need to strengthen students' interpersonal communication skills, state legislators are now considering Governor Lamont's request for a bell-to-bell ban of cellphones in schools. The proposed legislation (House Bill 5035) draws from 2024 State Board of Education and State Department of Education recommendations. Recent court rulings in California and New Mexico, as well as pending litigation against mega social media giants, find parents across the state looking for meaningful ways to recalibrate and readjust their children's relationship with screens. As teachers look for guidance on the implementation of artificial intelligence; schools, districts and communities are bombarded with conflicting information. Boards of education stand in a unique position to support parents, educators and concerned community leaders. With the creation and adoption of AI policy, boards of education can fortify Connecticut's commitment to "awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment." This Advocacy Brief poster presentation includes policy recommendations for boards of education in support of authentic learning through inquiry, ethical reasoning, creativity and, as stated in the Connecticut Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers, to "Recognize, respect and uphold the dignity and worth of students as individual human beings."

P2.8 *Bridging the Gap: Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Science of Reading with Adolescent Struggling Readers*

**Author(s):** Jennifer Kaye

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** The transition from elementary to adolescence is critical in literacy development, yet it is also when reading difficulties become most noticeable. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022), 67% of 8th-grade students struggle with grade-level reading, with the most severe disparities centered among students from low-income, urban communities. While federal and state policy have accelerated Science of Reading (SoR) professional learning at the elementary level, middle and high school teachers remain excluded from these initiatives, leaving adolescent struggling readers with limited exposure to evidence-based literacy instruction. This qualitative assignment examines middle school teachers' perceptions of Science of Reading professional learning, specifically the ReadCONN 2.0 initiative, and the extent to which that learning shapes their instructional practice with struggling readers. Purposive sampling within a single K-8 urban school was used to select three teachers currently participating in SoR professional development and serving middle school students identified as struggling readers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews to capture participants' perception of the Science of Reading professional learning and their capacity to increase reading readiness among their middle school students. Findings will contribute to both theoretical understanding of effective professional learning, and guidance for under-resourced urban communities seeking to improve adolescent literacy outcomes through evidence-based instruction.

P2.9 *Leadership and the Preschool-to-Kindergarten Transition: Teacher Perspectives on Policy, Tools, and Decision-Making in Special Education PPT Meetings*

**Author(s):** Amy Murphy

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** This qualitative methods class research project examines the transitional Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings for young children with disabilities moving from preschool to kindergarten within a large urban school district. Utilizing an exploratory qualitative study methodology and a pragmatic philosophical framework, the project explores how leadership practices shape these transitions. The project is theoretically grounded in Spillane's Distributed Leadership Theory to analyze how "indirect" leadership actions, including district policies,

organizational routines, and material tools like IEP forms and digital platforms, influence decision-making and participant agency. By focusing on leadership as a practice rather than a position, the research project dissects the PPT meeting as a “situation” where material artifacts and organizational routines constitute the interactions between stakeholders. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with preschool special education teachers to gather information on their experiences and perspectives of the transition process. Thematic analysis revealed many leadership failures, including a lack of coordination among multiple supervisors, heavy reliance on standardized paperwork over individualized insights, and limited authentic parental involvement in decision-making. The preschool teachers shared the need for consistent and clearly communicated organizational structures, improved staff training, and earlier, more transparent collaboration with families.

P2.10 *Perspectives on Belonging and Student-Teacher Discourse*

**Author(s):** Jennifer Canavan

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** Students who have a strong “sense of belonging at school” experience benefits and advantages; however, significant numbers of students report feeling a diminished sense of belonging at school. While research has identified teacher-student relationships as the factor most strongly related to sense of belonging, little is known about the communicative building blocks upon which those important relationships are built. This qualitative exploratory research assignment, conducted as a student project for a qualitative methods class, explored middle school educators’ perspectives and beliefs about the relationship between student-teacher discourse and students’ sense of belonging at school through semi-structured interviews with four middle school educators. Interview transcripts were coded to identify patterns and themes in order to construct an understanding of educators’ perspectives, beliefs, and understandings about student-teacher discourse and sense of belonging. This project seeks to contribute to the understanding of belonging as an important factor within the educational experience. The results may form a basis for theory formation about the perceived importance of student-teacher discourse. Relevant findings could inform targeted improvements in educator training and improved teacher-student relationships.

P2.11 *Understanding Teacher Readiness to Teach Recently Arrived Multilingual Learners: A Qualitative Study*

**Author(s):** Vanessa Barraza

**Faculty Mentor:** Sousan Arafeh

**Department:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

**Abstract:** This qualitative research project, conducted as part of a qualitative methods course, explores general education teachers’ experiences supporting recently arrived multilingual learners in the classroom. Over the past several years, teachers in Connecticut have faced an increase in newly arrived multilingual learners. This project aims to examine how general education teachers perceive their preparedness and how they respond to the challenges they face. Data were collected through semi-structured teacher interviews and analyzed using descriptive coding and thematic analysis. The findings highlight how teachers address instructional challenges and use the available school resources to support linguistically diverse students. The results of this study will contribute to a greater understanding of elementary general education teachers’ experiences and the supports they need to successfully meet the needs of newly arrived multilingual learners.

P2.12 *Early Implementation Barriers to Connecticut RISE Network Retention Protocols in a Ninth-Grade Pilot Program*

**Author(s):** CJ Burton

**Faculty Mentor:** Mary Boudreaux

**Department:** Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

**Abstract:** This study will examine the early implementation conditions of Connecticut RISE Network retention protocols during the first year of a ninth-grade pilot program at Riverview High School (pseudonym). Although ninth grade is widely recognized as a critical point in the educational pipeline, schools continue to experience persistent challenges related to course failure, disengagement, and retention. In response, early warning and intervention frameworks such as the Connecticut RISE Network have been adopted to support student persistence through structured protocols, including on-track conferencing, informal monitoring, and intervention placement. However, the presence of a well-defined framework does not always ensure consistent or effective implementation, particularly during initial rollout. My dissertation will be framed as a descriptive implementation study using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The purpose is to examine how retention protocols are enacted in practice and to identify the organizational, structural, and procedural conditions that constrain or support implementation. Data will be collected from teachers participating in the pilot through a structured questionnaire, with conditional follow-up interviews conducted to clarify implementation barriers when necessary. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses will be examined using condition-based

coding focused on factors such as time, scheduling, staffing, routines, and process clarity. By focusing on implementation rather than outcomes, this study contributes to the literature on early-stage intervention rollout and provides actionable insights for refining ninth-grade retention systems and informing leadership decision-making.

P2.13 *Women of Wonder: The Witch as a Feminist Figure in Three Contemporary Novels*

**Author(s):** Stephani Bauduccio

**Faculty Mentor:** Vara Neverow

**Department:** English

**Abstract:** This theoretical exploration focuses on reading the witch as a feminist figure in three contemporary novels. Beginning with *Circe*, Madeline Miller's novel, I view this work through divine feminist and ecofeminist lenses to establish the literary figure of a witch by introducing the mythological roots that originated the woman-witch figure. The second chapter focuses on Abitha in *Slewfoot: A Tale of Bewitchery* by Brom as a magical feminist and radical feminist woman to introduce the pinnacle archetype of a witch formulated during historical witchery panics. In the third chapter, I analyze Sophie, a twentieth-century witch-figure, in *Howl's Moving Castle* by Diana Wynne Jones, through fantasy feminist and deconstructionist feminist lenses to show how the novel's writing style reinterprets an expansive vision for women as witches in the literary canon overall. These three different witch figures are brought together by a summation of the aforementioned theoretical lenses to provide insights into the complexities within the storytelling of literature while moving far beyond the stereotypical witch. The patriarchal worlds that the protagonists are born into are made up of elements of divinity, magic, and fantasy that can be repurposed to serve female characters. Through ecological collaboration, radical thinking, and the deconstruction of dominant ideologies respectively, these witches discover the resources that foster their freedom of their chosen final form. These witches are ultimately feminist figures that are validated through their cultivation of magical and feminine wonder.

P2.14 *Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)-Structure from Motion (SfM)-based temporal volumetric analysis of coastal cliff erosion in Seyðisfjörður, Iceland*

**Author(s):** Christina Woehrlé

**Faculty Mentor:** Scott Graves

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences

**Abstract:** This study investigates utilizing unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) imagery and Structure from Motion (SfM) photogrammetry to measure temporal coastal cliff erosion in Seyðisfjörður, Iceland. The aim is to develop a reliable, repeatable workflow for high-relief coastal environments. Coastal cliffs present major methodological challenges for remote sensing, including steep vertical surfaces, occlusion, and, in many cases, hazardous access. To address these issues, this research will analyze annual UAV surveys collected between 2022 and 2026 to quantify cliff-top retreat, cliff-face change, and volumetric erosion on basalt cliffs in a high-wave-energy setting. The study will compare two common change-detection approaches, DEM of Difference (DoD) and model-to-model point cloud comparison (M3C2), to evaluate differences in estimated erosion, uncertainty thresholds, and the amount of change classified as significant versus noise. It will also assess whether reprocessing legacy UAV surveys with newly acquired RTK ground control points improves model accuracy, level of detection, and volumetric estimates. A small ground-truth excavation experiment will provide a known volume of removed material to help evaluate the accuracy of SfM-derived erosion calculations. This research aims to contribute a best-practice framework for UAV-SfM monitoring of coastal cliffs and to generate findings that support hazard assessment, resilience planning, and future coastal management in dynamic cliff environments.

P2.15 *Pattern-Process Interactions in Mugwort Suppression: Integrating Tarping, Manual Removal, and Native Wildflower Establishment on a Sloped Meadow with an Embedded Environmental Science Curriculum*

**Author(s):** Bryan Pines

**Faculty Mentor:** Scott Graves

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences

**Abstract:** Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*) is a highly invasive plant. This study utilizes a novel approach of manual removal, suppression, and the introduction of a competitive native wildflower to control the progression of Mugwort along a sloping meadow. The dynamic interactions between spatial patterns and ecological processes within the ecosystem are assessed. A field experiment is established along an 8% slope extending from a level field to a pond. The objectives are as follows; evaluate the effectiveness of different non-chemical control methods, assess the role of native wildflower plugs in regrowth suppression, examine the influence of slope position on treatment outcomes, and investigate the interaction effects among treatments. The treatments consist of manual removal of Mugwort plants, manual removal followed by wildflower plugs, landscape tarp, tarp along with wildflower plugs, and lastly a control with no treatment. Each of the fifteen plots will be randomly assigned to the five treatments, with each treatment replicated twice. Baseline pre-treatment data and measurements will be acquired in the field and by remote

sensing. The timeline and sampling schedule will proceed two weeks after treatment, followed by 1,3,6 months, and then annually for 5 years. Quantification of landscape patterns will include metrics assessing the physical composition and the spectral imaging. This project contains an additional element of collaborating with the high school science department. Students will gain first-hand knowledge of Landscape Ecology by restoring a monocultural habitat into a biodiverse community where the native plants have an opportunity to thrive.

P2.16 *Spatial and Temporal Trends Within Both the Biodiversity and Water Quality in Icelandic Fjords as Finfish Aquaculture Expands*

**Author(s):** Olivia Vallejo

**Faculty Mentor:** Emma Cross

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences

**Abstract:** Fish farming is the practice of breeding, raising and harvesting fish species in controlled environments such as tanks, ponds or cages. This process can be conducted on both land and open water. If open waters are used for fish farming, the fish are typically housed in large cages suspended in the water column. In Iceland, the practice of fish farming within different fjords has been increasingly growing. As any major environmental project, fish farming has both positive and negative environmental and economic outcomes. Research was conducted onboard the National Geographic Explorer, which circumnavigated Iceland in July 2025. Water samples, zooplankton and environmental DNA (eDNA) were collected at three different fjords around Iceland. These fjords include Arnarfjörður (Northwest Iceland), Ísafjarðardjúp (Northwest Iceland) and Borgarfjörður eystri (Northeast Iceland). Samples were taken from the middle and outer fjords of each site at 2m and 20m. The same data was collected in Seyðisfjörður (Eastern Iceland), following the disembarkation of the voyage. The goal of this research is to observe any spatial and temporal trends within the biodiversity and water quality collected. This will provide a baseline understanding of the biodiversity and water quality in Icelandic fjords as fish farms are expanding in Iceland. This research will also contribute data to a long-term monitoring project being conducted in Seyðisfjörður by Southern Connecticut State University and other partnering universities before fish farms are projected to be installed. This is a unique opportunity as these measurements are typically collected after an environmental disturbance has occurred.

P2.17 *Shaping Digital Policy: Librarian Perceptions of e-Lending Constraints in Connecticut Public Libraries*

**Author(s):** Abigail Campbell

**Faculty Mentor:** Yan Quan Liu

**Department:** Library and Information Science

**Abstract:** This proposed mixed-methods empirical study will examine how public librarians in Connecticut perceive restrictive digital licensing terms for the e-lending platforms and how these perceptions may inform local policy and operational responses. The study does not directly assess patron experiences or vendor practices but focuses on librarians' interpretations and decision-making within vendor-constrained environments. The target audience for the results of this study are digital collections librarians and institutional policy makers. The goal of the study is to add to existing literature regarding how the e-Lending market influences local policy, if at all. To investigate this, a 15 questions multiple choice and open-ended survey will be distributed to public libraries in Connecticut. Data analysis, results & conclusion are pending data collection.

P2.18 *Artificial Intelligence Generated Content in U.S. Public Libraries: Survey and Document Analysis of Collection Policies*

**Author(s):** Seraphina Montagna

**Faculty Mentor:** Yan Quan Liu

**Department:** Library and Information Science

**Abstract:** Recently items in library catalogs have been found that are generated by Artificial Intelligence. Research on Artificial Intelligence in libraries so far has primarily focused on its use as a tool in workflows. Library policy will need to address this new aspect since it introduces potential loss of patron trust, copyright issues, and diminished access and discovery. The aim is to investigate how U.S. Public libraries are responding to Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC). Document analysis of their publicly available online collection development policies looks at whether the documents include specific AIGC language, how it is being integrated, and what stance the library has taken. The IMLS PLS was used to sample 700 U.S. Public libraries and ChatGPT was used to write code for a document scanner that searched for explicit generative AI terminology using a CSV of the document URLs. Five documents were confirmed to have AIGC specific language and were analyzed themes and similarities between the documents and institutions via codebook and rubric. This did not yield a clear pattern between the institutions and documents to inform the qualities of early policy adoption, so a Qualtrics Survey was developed to gather more data.

The results show that the United States is in the early stages of AIGC policy since only 5 out of 700 have AIGC specific language. The results could be significant to library professionals and those studying policy or AI, particularly in learning the decision-making processes without apparent guidance from professional institutions or government legislature.

P2.19 *Moral Injury Lunch & Learn for Clinicians Working with Veterans*

**Author(s):** Francesca Consiglio

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine Limone

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project examined moral injury among military veterans and addressed the need for accessible educational and therapeutic resources that target the psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of trauma. Moral injury occurs when individuals experience or witness events that violate deeply held ethical beliefs, often resulting in guilt, shame, and loss of meaning. While PTSD-focused treatments are widely available, they may not fully address moral and existential concerns. The deliverable for this project was a four-part Lunch & Learn workshop designed for clinicians within the Community Reintegration Program (CRP) at the Veterans Affairs Orange Annex. The first session was held on April 1, 2026, and subsequent sessions are planned for April 8, 15, and 22. These sessions provided psychoeducation, reflective exercises, and narrative processing strategies to enhance clinicians' trauma-informed, ethically grounded care for veterans. This project contributes to social work practice by promoting trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and ethically grounded clinical interventions.

P2.20 *Primary Dysmenorrhea: A Case Study*

**Author(s):** Kimberly Moran

**Faculty Mentor:** Kristi Maynard

**Department:** Nursing

**Abstract:** Case Information: Kate Jones is a 24-year-old Caucasian female who presents to her primary care clinic. She reports feeling unwell due to her menses, as she experiences cramping and pain that interfere with her ability to work, causing her to call out of work on the most painful days. She reports feeling well at other times of the month. Kate is currently taking no medications and has no significant medical history. Kate reports that she got married to her husband last year, has only one sexual partner, and is a devout Catholic. The purpose of this constructed case study is to examine the role of the FNP in diagnosing and treating primary dysmenorrhea. This case study examines how the FNP uses professional competencies to identify barriers to the diagnosis and treatment of primary dysmenorrhea, how FNPs can intervene at the individual level to improve care, how FNPs can advocate for women suffering from primary dysmenorrhea, and how FNPs can promote increased knowledge surrounding the disorder to end associated stigmatization.

P2.21 *Selective Extraction of Metals from Lithium-Ion Batteries Using Proprietary Solution and Electrodeposition of Copper onto Metallic Substrates*

**Author(s):** André Correa, Thomas Sadowski & Richard Pellegrino

**Faculty Mentor:** Christine C Broadbridge

**Department:** Physics

**Abstract:** Li-ion batteries (LIB) power a wide range of applications, and their rapidly growing demand is increasing their end-of-life waste. Projections estimate approximately 8 million tons of LIB waste globally by 2040. Given the finite supply and uneven geographic distribution of critical metals in LIBs, mining these materials raises significant environmental and humanitarian concerns. Recovering and repurposing metals from spent batteries is therefore essential to mitigate the impacts of primary extraction and support a more sustainable resource cycle. Cool Amps Energy Solutions has developed, a novel, solution-based approach to maximize material recovery from end-of-life and production-scrap LIBs. Target metals are selectively dissolved into CuRE solution, thereby preserving cell architecture and facilitating sequential recovery of critical materials with minimal waste. While LIB recycling has historically prioritized cathode active materials (Li, Co, Ni, Mn), this approach unlocks additional recovery pathways, notably high-purity copper current collector foil from the anode, which is especially attractive amid copper prices nearing or at all-time highs. Building upon prior work within the CT State Colleges and Universities Center for Quantum and Nanotechnology (QNT) which established the thermodynamic and electrochemical conditions for selective dissolution of anode, copper into CuRE solution, this study investigates the feasibility of recovering aqueous copper via electroplating. Key electroplating parameters, including applied potential, current density, and plating time, were evaluated across a range of target substrates. Plating efficacy and deposit thickness were characterized using scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS).

P2.22 *Development of the Data Reduction Pipeline for the Integral Field Unit Speckle Imager*

**Author(s):** Max Martone

**Faculty Mentor:** Elliott Horch

**Department:** Physics

**Abstract:** Ground-based optical imaging is limited by atmospheric turbulence, which blurs long exposures and prevents telescopes from reaching their diffraction limit. Speckle interferometry can recover high spatial resolution from many short exposure images, but traditional speckle cameras work in narrow filters and discard most of the incoming light. The Integral Field Unit Speckle Imager (IFUSI) is designed to address this by sampling the focal plane with a hexagonally-packed fiber array, dispersing each spatial element into a low-resolution spectrum, and recording wavelength-resolved speckle traces on four EMCCD detectors. This project focuses on developing the software pipeline that will convert raw detector frames into a hyperspectral speckle cube and prepare the data for standard speckle reconstruction. The work includes using existing IFUSI simulations, pre-processing of raw detector frames, implementing a fiber-to-detector mapping, testing interpolation methods for mapping irregular samples onto a regular grid, and writing routines to reassemble speckle patterns compatible with existing traditional speckle analysis algorithms. The final product will be an end-to-end reduction framework that can process simulated IFUSI data into wavelength dependent speckle images and serve as the foundation for future use with the completed instrument.

P2.23 *Photolithography for Small-Scale Microfabrication*

**Author(s):** Vanessa Adamski, Jeremy Turpin, Andrew Mansfield, Andre Correa & Andrea Pecor

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Schwendemann

**Department:** Physics

**Abstract:** Nanofabrication and microfabrication are often limited in educational and small-scale research environments by the cost and infrastructure requirements of specialty cleanroom facilities, lithography, and deposition equipment. This project explores utilizing a low-cost alternative with a custom-built optical projection system for the generation of micro-patterned lithographic substrates to be used with the Physical Vapor Deposition (PVD) of metals. A patterned mask is optically projected and reduced onto a photoresist-covered substrate. After UV exposure, the exposed resist undergoes crosslinked polymerization. The unpolymerized resist is removed in a developer solution revealing an exposed surface to deposit a metal thin film such as gold, copper, or iron. PVD thin films of transition metals are done under high vacuum, where the target metal temperature is raised such that its vapor pressure is higher than the ambient vacuum pressure, from which temperatures typically exceed 1000 °C. After evaporation, a subsequent lift-off process removes the polymerized photoresist and subsequently the deposited material on top of it, leaving behind metallic patterned features. While current work focuses on optimizing patterning resolution and PVD repeatability of the metals, additional efforts include selectively depositing approximately 3 nm of iron to create a nanocatalyst layer to promote patterned carbon nanotube growth through the subsequent use of Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD). Moreover, there are intentions to fabricate simple display structures (such as an LCD display) on glass substrates using copper layers approximately 1 micron in thickness. These efforts highlight the versatility and accessibility of projection-based lithography with various PVD and CVD techniques. While current work focuses on optimizing patterning resolution and PVD repeatability of the metals, additional efforts include selectively depositing approximately 3 nm of iron to create a nanocatalyst layer to promote patterned carbon nanotube growth through the subsequent use of Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD). Moreover, there are intentions to fabricate simple display structures (such as an LCD display) on glass substrates using copper layers approximately 1 micron in thickness. These efforts highlight the versatility and accessibility of projection-based lithography with various PVD and CVD techniques.

P2.24 *Improving Internet Addiction with Self-Affirmations*

**Author(s):** Brice Hinkle

**Faculty Mentor:** Kelly Stiver

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Concern surrounding internet addiction (IAD) is not new but has grown with the TikToking of social media platforms. Endless, algorithmic feeds designed to maximize engagement are implicated in the rise of doomscrolling and subsequent concerns for users' executive functioning (EF). However, beyond problematic social media usage (PSMU) many occupy their time with other content, including video games and streaming platforms. Similar addictive tendencies in video games have led to the classification of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). Self-affirmations have shown promise in helping individuals with impulse control and addictive behaviors. I will assess the ability of self-affirmations to help people regulate their total screen time through value-salience. I hypothesize that interventions will yield significant increases in self-efficacy, authenticity, and self-esteem, and significant decreases in total screen time and PSMU, IGD, and IAD symptoms compared to a control group. Participants will

be randomly assigned to a self-affirmation group, a mindfulness group, a combined group, and a writing control group. The self-affirmation group will write out their values and goals twice weekly, the mindfulness group will meditate for 30 minutes each week, the combined group will do both, and the control group will write descriptions of household objects. Baseline measures of mindfulness and introspection will be obtained. All participants will be assessed pre- and post-intervention period for total screen time, time spent on social media and video games, EF, self-efficacy, authenticity, and self-esteem, and PSMU, IGD, and IAD symptoms. Data will be analyzed using mixed-design ANOVAs to assess changes over time between conditions.

P2.25 *Impact of the College Experience on Meaning in Life in Emerging Adults*

**Author(s):** Matthew Mordarski & Scott Jackson

**Faculty Mentor:** Scott Jackson

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Over the last decade, fewer young men have been completing 4-year college programs, with both male enrollment and retention declining. Previous research has found that meaning in life (MIL) is associated with college adjustment and academic achievement, but that MIL tends to decline in the first year of college. Research has also found that males score lower on measures of MIL than females, indicating MIL as a potential factor contributing to declining retention rates of male students. However, few studies have examined how the college experience may impact the presence of MIL in students. This quantitative research study explores how students' subjective experience of college is associated with MIL. We examined six questions from the Southern Experience Survey that are related to the three domains of the tripartite model of MIL: Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering. Data from respondents aged 18-24 were collected from 2023-2025 (N=914). Independent-Sample Mann-Whitney U Tests comparing male to female responses showed small but significant differences in Comprehension and Purpose, but not in Mattering. Specifically, male students were more likely to endorse not wanting to attend college ( $p<.001$ ) and less likely to feel like they belong in their major ( $p=.042$ ) compared to female students. These findings suggest that the college experience can impact the presence of MIL in emerging adult students, and may help guide efforts to increase male enrollment and overall student engagement.

P2.26 *Reading Achievement, External factors, and Psychological Adjustment in relation to Academic Achievement among University Students*

**Author(s):** Sally Ricci

**Faculty Mentor:** Cheryl Durwin

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Reading is recognized as the foundation for literacy and correlated to academic achievement. Academic achievement is not correlated with dyslexia, a specific learning disorder in reading (involves reading difficulty in phonological processing, decoding, reading rate, comprehension, and fluency). This unexpected difficulty in reading affects an individual's ability to read, and spell (Shaywitz et al. 2020). Prior research of outcomes of Yale graduates with dyslexia, and typical readers who graduated from Yale showed no difference in academic success (Shaywitz et al. 2020). Warby (2020) established a correlation between reading skill, in relation to vocabulary knowledge and grades. Academic performance often measured through GPA among university students, also includes completion of one's academic program, post-graduation performance after secondary education, motivation, and discipline to complete one's academic studies. Academic achievement is not correlated with dyslexia. The differences in reading research display a need to explore external factors with reading ability in relation to academic success among university students. This study explores differences among in reading level, external factors related to academic success. This study evaluates reading grade level (with GORT-5, WAIS: coding, sequencing, CTOPP, BARRS, BDEF, Emergent Reading Motivation and Attitude Scale, My Motivation to Read Questionnaire, and Creature of Habit Scale and DASS with 100 university students.

Hypothesis: There is a correlation between motivation, reading ability, and academic success among university students. The study explores factors that influence academic success among university students with and without reading difficulties.

P2.27 *Centering Self-Care: Understanding the Needs of BIPOC Social Work Students in Graduate Programs*

**Author(s):** Liz Schacht

**Faculty Mentor:** Krystal Finch

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Social work education prepares students to engage with complex social issues, trauma, and emotionally demanding practice environments. Although self-care is frequently emphasized within the profession, the structural and institutional realities shaping students' ability to engage in self-care are often overlooked. These challenges may be particularly significant for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) social work students, who may

navigate additional stressors such as systemic inequities, cultural isolation, and financial pressures during their training. This study explores the self-care needs and experiences of BIPOC students enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs. Guided by Critical Race Theory and a pragmatic research approach, this mixed-methods study examines both individual experiences and broader systemic factors influencing student well-being. A total of 22 social work students participated in an online survey that included demographic questions, Likert-scale measures related to stress and self-care practices, and open-ended questions about barriers and supports. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined using thematic analysis. The findings highlight emotional exhaustion related to academic demands and field placements, as well as barriers to self-care such as time constraints and financial stress. Participants emphasized the importance of culturally responsive mentorship, community support, and institutional resources that better support the well-being of BIPOC social work students.

P2.28 *The Impact of Childhood Trauma on Emotional Regulation in Adulthood*

**Author(s):** Alexia Gesualdi

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Childhood trauma has lasting effects on emotional regulation in adulthood. Emotional regulation is often harder for individuals who have had many adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or unstable early relationships. The purpose of this project was to explore how childhood trauma influences emotional regulation using attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and the ACE framework. Existing research shows that early adversity is strongly linked to emotional difficulties, however, additional research is needed to understand cultural differences and to find better ways to gather information instead of depending solely on memory. To address a professional and community need for trauma-informed prevention, this project includes the development of a child-focused Trauma & Emotional Regulation Toolkit. The toolkit provides developmentally appropriate strategies to help children recognize emotions and use their coping skills, while offering social workers practical tools to help prevent long-term impacts.

P2.29 *Immigrant Health Equity*

**Author(s):** Alison Lizardi

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Immigrants in the United States have experienced worse health outcomes due to language barriers that limit access to mental health services (World Health Organization, 2026). In fact, the lack of bilingual or multilingual mental health clinicians negatively affects immigrants. To decrease marginalization of immigrants and increase immigrant health care equity, language interpretation and translation services must be readily available, reliable and accessible in all agencies, clinics, and hospitals. The purpose of this research is to determine how accessible, precise, and culturally inclusive the implementation of language interpretation services are in agencies that provide mental health services and how they may improve these services by utilizing language translation protocols and policies.

P2.30 *Primary Barriers that School Social Workers Encounter in Providing Support to Students in Urban Schools*

**Author(s):** Alison Onofrio

**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei Kozu

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** School social workers have transitioned from primarily support-based roles to key contributors in school-wide initiatives. However, this expanded scope of practice has introduced systemic, institutional, and personal barriers that limit their effectiveness, particularly in urban school settings. This study examined the primary barriers and successful interventions identified by school social workers in one urban school district in Connecticut. A quantitative descriptive survey design was used with 42 school social workers. The survey included 16 Likert-scale items and two open-ended questions, organized into two sections: barriers (systemic, institutional, and personal) and successful interventions. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to analyze participants' perceptions. Systemic barriers were rated as having the greatest impact when providing social work support ( $M = 3.89$ ), followed by personal barriers ( $M = 3.60$ ) and institutional barriers ( $M = 3.39$ ). Interdisciplinary collaboration was identified as the most valued intervention ( $M = 3.31$ ), followed by stress-management supports ( $M = 3.25$ ) and culturally informed professional development ( $M = 2.62$ ), while policy advocacy was rated lowest ( $M = 1.67$ ). Findings underscore the significant influence of systemic barriers and highlight the need for strengthened district and state-level infrastructure, including sustainable funding structures, manageable caseload expectations, and streamlined referral processes to outside services. These findings can inform policy reform, curriculum development in social work education, and future research examining structural supports across urban school settings.

- P2.31 *A Spanish-First Digital Platform to Support Latino Immigrant Caregivers Navigating ADHD Services in Hartford, Connecticut*  
**Author(s):** Andres Caceres  
**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie G. Gardella  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This project aims to eliminate barriers faced by Latino immigrant caregivers in Hartford, Connecticut, by creating a Spanish-first digital platform that offers ADHD psychoeducation and connects families with local community services. The project addresses a clear need for accessible, culturally and linguistically appropriate resources for Spanish-speaking families navigating complex healthcare, educational, and social service systems. The main research question explores how culturally responsive Spanish-language digital tools can enhance caregivers' understanding of ADHD and improve access to services. Key themes from the literature include the effectiveness of caregiver psychoeducation, the importance of cultural responsiveness, and ongoing barriers such as language, stigma, and system navigation. Remaining questions focus on how digital tools can best support engagement and service use among immigrant families. The final product is a mobile-friendly platform that delivers clear, culturally relevant information and practical navigation support. This project contributes to social work practice by promoting equitable, community-informed interventions that increase access, reduce disparities, and support culturally responsive care.
- P2.32 *The Rooted & Regulated Project: A Series & Analysis of the Implications of Holistic Trauma Recovery Utilizing CBT and Somatic therapy, Focused on BIPOC Women*  
**Author(s):** Angelina Ovalles  
**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** The Rooted & Regulated Project is grounded in the understanding that Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color are largely impacted by childhood relational harm which is compounded by racism, sexism, and systemic oppression. Drawing from research on somatic therapy, Polyvagal Theory, and cognitive based interventions, this project translates evidence-informed practices into accessible psychoeducational content designed to support emotional regulation, body awareness, and a sense of safety through trauma recovery. Somatic Practices address the physiological and embodied dimensions of trauma, while cognitive strategies help individuals recognize and reframe distressing thoughts; together, these interventions offer a holistic pathway for women whose needs are often overlooked in traditional treatment models. By centering culturally responsive, trauma-informed education, the Rooted & Regulated Project aims to expand access to integrative tools that honor the lived experiences of BIPOC women and promote empowerment, regulation, and connection between mind and body.
- P2.33 *How does social media and texting influence conflict among Black adolescents in urban school communities?*  
**Author(s):** Avery Hazelwood  
**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** Through conducting research for this capstone, it was discovered that digital communication (social media/texting) has a significant impact on real world conflict. Issues stemming from digital communication include social comparison, jealousy, and digital disagreements turning into real world conflict. The research question for this project is "How does social media and texting influence conflict among Black adolescents in urban school communities?" The analysis method I used was reading peer-reviewed journals relating to problems stemming from digital communication, as well as social/cultural factors that influence Black adolescent behavior. There is a unique coalescence with social media and black urban adolescent dynamics (behaviors and systemic factors) so this project can fill some of those gaps. Since social media is a very significant part of most adolescents' lives today, understanding this and how it affects them is crucial for social workers working in urban school settings. The deliverable for this project will be a poster detailing questions a school social worker could ask a Black student dealing with conflict (violence, arguments, etc.) stemming from social media, and information to help understand the unique dynamic. It is significant for social work knowledge and practice because there is a dearth of information on this subject, and as digital communication integrates itself more into the lives of adolescents, it is important to stay aware and stay informed, especially as it relates to vulnerable populations.
- P2.34 *Substance-Related Disorders Diagnoses Among Incarcerated Adolescents with Marijuana-Induced Psychosis*  
**Author(s):** Betty Aquino  
**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter  
**Department:** Social Work  
**Abstract:** This capstone project examines the relationship between adolescent marijuana use, marijuana-induced psychosis, and increased risk of juvenile justice involvement among marginalized youth. The project addresses a

community and organizational need for improved education and early intervention strategies related to adolescent substance use and mental health, particularly within juvenile correctional systems. The literature review explores research on adolescent cannabis use and psychosis, substance-induced psychiatric disorders, racial disparities in juvenile justice involvement, and diagnostic challenges within correctional environments. Despite growing evidence linking cannabis exposure to psychotic symptoms among adolescents, prevention and early intervention efforts remain limited. To address this gap, the project develops a teaching module designed for social workers, educators, and correctional professionals. The module promotes early identification of marijuana-induced psychosis and highlights evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing mental health crises and juvenile justice involvement among adolescents.

P2.35 *Trauma-Informed Care for Adolescents in Foster Care: Supporting Foster Parents and Practitioners*

**Author(s):** Jannine Ramirez Gutierrez

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project examined how trauma-informed training addressed a professional and community need in a practicum setting (The Children's Community Programs of Connecticut) by strengthening foster parents' perceived readiness to support adolescents with complex trauma histories. The literature highlighted significant gaps in adolescent-specific trauma-informed training, cultural responsiveness, and the sustainability of caregiver readiness. Guided by trauma theory, attachment theory, and self-efficacy theory, the project explored the question: What is the impact of trauma-informed training on foster parents' perceived readiness to assist adolescents in foster care with complex trauma histories? The completed project included an educational presentation, a practical resource guide, and will be presented as a conference poster, all designed to enhance caregiver knowledge, relational attunement, and trauma-responsive skills. This work contributes to social work practice by promoting developmentally informed, culturally responsive caregiving and supporting organizational efforts to improve placement stability and outcomes for youth in foster care.

P2.36 *Addressing the Gap in Long-Term, Accessible Interventions for Anxiety-Based School Refusal in Children*

**Author(s):** Jenna Bagdasarian

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project questions the impact of anxiety-based interventions on school refusal rates to determine the best methods to address school refusal. Literature links school refusal in children to underlying emotional distress and co-occurring mental health issues. This link can guide developmentally appropriate interventions that meet the root cause of school refusal, where current gaps exist in long-term interventions for Concrete Operational Stage children. This project will be in the form of a book, to close some of the gaps in access to anxiety-based interventions for youth refusing school. Finding out more ways to meet the needs of marginalized students struggling with school refusal is important for further learning.

P2.37 *Therapeutic Table Top Roleplaying Games and Social Emotional Learning*

**Author(s):** Jessica Gleason

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to provide clinicians with a guide on how to run a Therapeutic Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TTRPG) group to help support students with diverse clinical needs learn social-emotional learning (SEL) skills. This will help give clinicians more intervention methods to utilize with students. The literature demonstrates the clinical utility of TTRPG-based interventions and highlighted their flexibility, particularly in terms of adaptation and accessibility across populations. Questions for future research include investigating the long term impacts of TTRPG interventions and the specific impact that an SEL curriculum would have in conjunction with this intervention. This project is significant for social work professional knowledge because it will provide an additional resource for clinicians who want to run their own TTRPG based therapy group, but may not have any experience with this type of game and need guidance on where to begin.

P2.38 *The Impact of Underdiagnosis of ADHD in Females*

**Author(s):** Krista Delventhal

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts one's focus, behaviors, and impulses. Historically, females are not as commonly diagnosed as males, and there is less knowledge

about attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in females. The research question presents as what are the differences in symptomology between girls and boys with ADHD? The purpose of this research is to bring to light females with ADHD, to further educate parents and clinicians. This will aid in early prevention and understanding to the understudied disorder in females. The research will be presented in the form of a poster for an audience at a graduate research conference. The research will also be presented in a pamphlet format at a children's clinical agency. This project will aid in steering clinical social work research to further explore ADHD in females as well as guide clinical social workers to further understand the understudied topic.

P2.39 *Neurodiversity & Higher Education*

**Author(s):** Marcus Brown

**Faculty Mentor:** Todd Rofuth

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses the need for stronger institutional support for neurodiverse students at Southern Connecticut State University, a group that often receives limited recognition and accommodation. Drawing on research on inclusive and equitable teaching, the project analyses how neurodivergent learners experience academic barriers and belonging. Using a literature review and a comparison of policies at local universities, the study identifies effective strategies for supporting neurodiverse students and evaluates how current practices at SCSU align with these models. The final deliverable is a policy proposal outlining strategies to enhance campus support systems. By centering the needs of students with diverse neurocognitive profiles, the project advances social work values of culturally responsive practice, educational equity and values of advocacy.

P2.40 *Honoring Legacy and Landscape: A Proposal for a Wind Phone Installation at The Connecticut Hospice*

**Author(s):** Marissa Greene

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Grief and loss are universal experiences, yet the ways individuals process loss are varied. Hospice care in the United States reflects a holistic commitment to patients and their loved ones, including bereavement support following a death. This project proposes the installation of a wind phone on the grounds of The Connecticut Hospice. This is a symbolic, non-functional telephone where grievors can "speak" to their deceased loved ones. Drawing on literature on continuing bonds, community based bereavement, and environmental grief support, this proposal covers the theoretical basis and practical considerations for implementation. As a leader in hospice care and a site on the picturesque Long Island Sound, The Connecticut Hospice is an ideal setting for this low-barrier, informal support to those looking for meaning-making and ongoing community connection in their grief journeys.

P2.41 *Trauma-Informed Care in Youth Crisis*

**Author(s):** Mia Silva

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to examine the impact of trauma-informed care on youth involved in mental health mobile crisis intervention services. This project will highlight the importance of trauma-informed care in the setting of mobile crisis intervention, as well as examine how crisis clinicians can better integrate trauma-informed care into their work. Existing literature suggests that trauma-informed care is effective in many areas of social work, but in mobile crisis settings with children, it can be particularly helpful in de-escalation and maintaining emotional and behavioral regulation skills. Due to lack of research regarding trauma-informed care in children, as well as within this particular setting, it is important that such research is conducted. Using previous research, a trauma-informed care reference guide will be created for clinicians to utilize when responding to foster better experiences and outcomes for youth and their families. In this setting, it is necessary to examine how children experience trauma, so that clinicians can adapt their practice to better address clients' needs from a trauma-focused lens.

P2.42 *The Effectiveness of the PHQ-9 in Measuring Depression Remission*

**Author(s):** Natasha Powell

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Depression is a leading cause of disability, making precise measurement of remission vital in outpatient behavioral health care. This project evaluates the effectiveness of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) in measuring remission among adults receiving outpatient treatment, and examines whether symptom remission corresponds with functional recovery as measured by the Daily Living Activities-20 (DLA-20). The literature emphasizes the reliability and widespread clinical use of the PHQ-9, while noting its limitations, including

inconsistent remission thresholds and the absence of functional assessment. This project develops an educational resource for clinicians that underscores the importance of combining symptom-based measures with functional assessments when evaluating recovery. By addressing both symptom reduction and daily functioning, this project encourages more comprehensive approaches to assessing depression remission in community behavioral health settings.

P2.43 *Teacher Attitudes and Systemic Inequities' Influence on the Implementation and Enforcement of Section 504 Accommodations for High School Scholars of Color*

**Author(s):** Pia Briscoe

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-Potter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This capstone project examined how teacher bias influences the equitable implementation of Section 504 accommodations for high school scholars of color. Although Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits disability discrimination in federally funded educational programs, research indicates that implementation often varies due to educator attitudes, institutional practices, and limited accountability. The literature review identifies three major themes: teacher bias, structural disproportionality, and inconsistencies in the quality of Section 504 plans. The project proposed the development of a bias-informed training module for teacher education programs designed to improve awareness of implicit bias and promote equitable accommodation practices. By addressing both systemic and individual factors that influence policy implementation, the project contributes to social work knowledge related to disability advocacy, educational equity, and culturally responsive practice.

P2.44 *Neurodiversity-Affirming Communication in Outpatient Mental Health: A Training Toolkit for Clinicians Working with Autistic Children*

**Author(s):** Sadaf Muneer

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addressed a professional and organizational need to improve communication between clinicians and autistic children in outpatient mental health settings. The literature review examined the research question: how can neurodiversity-affirming communication practices be integrated into clinician training to improve engagement, reduce stigma, and support anti-oppressive practice? Major themes included the shift from deficit-based models to the neurodiversity paradigm, the role of language and stigma in clinical communication, and the importance of culturally responsive and anti-oppressive frameworks. The project resulted in the development of a brief clinician training presentation designed for the Outpatient Neurodiverse program at Clifford Beers Community Care Center. The training translated research into practical strategies, including the use of clear and concrete language, allowing additional processing time, and adapting communication to support neurodiverse clients. This project contributes to social work practice by translating current research into practical tools for clinicians working with autistic children.

P2.45 *Social Media and Toxic Masculinity in Males Aged 7-15: A Mixed-Methods Case Study Proposal*

**Author(s):** Samantha Hunnicutt

**Faculty Mentor:** Mark Cameron

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Research suggests that early exposure to gendered content on social media may contribute to the development of rigid and unhealthy masculine norms in males. This mixed-methods case study will examine males aged 7-15 and the connection between time spent on social media and expression of toxic masculinity. The number of hours on social media weekly will be compared to scores on the Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI). Interviews and focus groups will explore how males interpret online content and peer dynamics. The research will aim to clarify how digital environments shape early masculine identity in order to inform social work interventions that promote healthy social-emotional development.

P2.46 *Closing the Divide: A Social Work Approach to Women Veterans' Healthcare Disparities*

**Author(s):** Sarah Johnson

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses healthcare disparities experienced by women veterans within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by developing accessible informational pamphlets or posters that increase awareness of available services and identify gaps in care. The research examines how gender bias, historically male-centered healthcare systems, and inconsistent policy implementation contribute to inequitable outcomes for women veterans.

Key themes include limited access to gender-specific care, experiences of discrimination, and the need for trauma-informed and culturally responsive services. To address these issues, the project will produce pamphlets and infographics outlining current VHA resources alongside community-based services that supplement unmet needs. This project is significant for social work practice as it promotes equitable access to care, supports informed decision-making among women veterans, and advances culturally responsive approaches within healthcare systems.

P2.47 *Alleviating the Barriers Faced by Special Education Teachers*

**Author(s):** Sophia Tuozzoli & Shadae Evens

**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei Koza

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project examines the barriers faced by special education elementary teachers as they work to support students with varying disabilities in a single classroom. Our project will meet the organizational need of systemic support structures for elementary special education teachers by providing special education teachers with easily accessible resources. Our project will provide educators with a pamphlet that they can keep on hand, with various resources to assist them in completing their tasks and responsibilities. The resources included in the pamphlet consist of platforms and agencies that offer professional development and training opportunities, lesson planning support, and tools to help them stay organized and use their time effectively.

P2.48 *The Impact of Trauma-Informed Classroom Practices on the Behavior of Children with Histories of Childhood Trauma*

**Author(s):** Taylor Trowbridge

**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei Koza

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to examine the impact of trauma-informed classroom practices on the behavior of children with histories of childhood trauma. It will explore how a trauma-informed classroom is essential for a child with childhood trauma to grow and succeed in the classroom. Through research, the findings support the idea that trauma-informed classrooms can limit negative experiences by providing safe and supportive environments for children. My project will contribute to professional knowledge by providing a guide for adults/teachers on how to handle trauma-informed behaviors, while also providing tools for children. This can guide future practice by giving social workers tools to advocate for trauma-informed approaches in education.

P2.49 *How does the presence of bilingual social workers influence organizational effectiveness, workforce retention, and service experiences among culturally and linguistically diverse families in social service settings?*

**Author(s):** Anillda Rubio

**Faculty Mentor:** Ingrid Aarons-porter

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** As the population of families with limited English proficiency (LEP) continues to grow, social service organizations face significant challenges in providing equitable and culturally responsive care. This capstone project addresses the systemic barriers created by language gaps and the disproportionate invisible labor placed on bilingual social workers. By integrating three core frameworks: a. Language-as-Resource (LAR), b. Cultural Intelligence (CQ), and c. the Culturally Responsive Organizational Practice model, this project proposes a shift from viewing bilingualism as a logistical hurdle to recognizing it as a foundational clinical asset. The project deliverable consists of a Multimodal Organizational model, featuring a digital all-level organizational survey and a comprehensive leadership toolkit. The survey is designed to capture quantifiable data regarding service gaps and staff burnout, while the toolkit provides executive leadership and HR directors with actionable strategies for equitable recruitment, specialized supervision, and workload adjustments. By institutionalizing these resources, the framework aims to alleviate the uncompensated cultural labor of bilingual staff and foster deep-rooted trust within marginalized communities. This integrated approach moves agencies beyond performative diversity toward a model of active community integration and social justice, ensuring that linguistic excellence drives clinical accuracy and trauma-informed care.

P2.50 *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Impact on Student Well-being and Academic Performance*

**Author(s):** Tammy Cassile

**Faculty Mentor:** Shuei Koza

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This study examines the impact of mindfulness practices in a fifth-grade classroom and their influence on student well-being and academic performance. As elementary students face increasing academic and social pressures, mindfulness has become an effective tool for supporting emotional regulation, attention, and engagement in the

classroom. This research examines current research on mindfulness-based interventions in elementary education and explores how developmentally appropriate practices, such as guided breathing, short meditation exercises, and mindful reflection, impact fifth graders' stress levels, self-regulation, participation, and learning outcomes. The findings suggest that regular mindfulness practices can enhance focus, reduce anxiety, and improve self-regulation skills, leading to more positive classroom interactions and better academic achievement. The study also presents practical approaches to integrating mindfulness into fifth graders' daily routines and discusses implementation and teacher-preparation challenges. By connecting research to classroom practice, this study highlights the importance of mindfulness as a developmentally appropriate tool to support the holistic growth and academic success of fifth-grade students.

P2.51 *Safety Planning For Latinx Families*

**Author(s):** Maria Bernabucci

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** Safety planning ensures the safety, well-being, and continuity of care of family members in case of detention, deportation, or other emergencies. Including their US-born children, members of immigrant families total 90.8 million people and make up 27% of the total population. Immigrant families are richly diverse by country of origin or ancestry, race, class, educational attainment, length of residence, household composition, geographic location, and immigration status, among other characteristics. Members of immigrant families are community members, students, workers, cultural producers, volunteers, congregants, and contributors to the US social fabric. Their impact offers the necessary new energy and ideas to sustain vibrant communities across the country. However, immigrant families' positive contributions are lessened by punitive immigration laws. School enrollment of undocumented children and youth in Connecticut includes 7,000 individuals between the ages 5 to 13 years old as of 2023. For this capstone project, I developed a safety planning pamphlet for children and families served by the Barack Obama Magnet University School (BOMUS) in New Haven, Connecticut, which enrolls a predominantly Latinx and Black student population in pre-K through fourth grades. The safety planning pamphlet will help families prepare for an emergency, such as an arrest, detention, or deportation affecting the school community. Regardless of their documentation status, safety planning will ensure that immigrant families feel prepared to navigate a crisis.

P2.52 *A Comparison of Sediment Mercury Contamination in Dam Impoundments Resulting from Differences in Watershed Development and Land-Use Patterns*

**Author(s):** Autumn Smith

**Faculty Mentor:** Vincent Breslin

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Sciences

**Abstract:** While the damming of Connecticut (CT) waterways has been important to the economic development of the state since the 17th century, many currently standing dam structures are abandoned and pose a risk to the health and safety of the surrounding communities. As dam removals become a prominent tool in CT watershed health and restoration efforts, it is important to investigate the impact of watershed characteristics on the impoundment sediment quality. Point and non-point sources of contamination within dam watersheds influence the sediment quality retained within the dam impoundment. This study examines the mercury contamination in surface and core sediment samples from two dams representing an industrial watershed (Bray's Buckle Dam, Waterbury, CT) and residential watershed (Wards Mill Dam, Brandford, CT). The results of this study illustrate the difference watershed land use can have on sediment pollutant loadings using mercury as the investigated contaminant due to its strong ties with both historic industry and current urbanization. Understanding the differing sources of mercury and their significance to sediment level impacts plays a significant role in the planning and carrying out of dam removals in CT. It can also potentially give us an indication of the resilience of the differing social-ecological systems to this type of disturbance based on current pollutant loadings.

P2.53 *Special Project in Nursing: Academic Burnout in Nursing Students*

**Author(s):** Brianna Pearson

**Faculty Mentor:** Ashlee Mattutini

**Department:** Nursing

**Abstract:** Purpose: The purpose of this research was to evaluate the prevalence of academic burnout in an in-depth case study of a nursing student. In this case study, there is a focus on the educational and external factors that contribute to academic burnout. In addition, the role of the nurse educator is to support the student and address academic burnout.

Design/Method: The design of this research was to utilize qualitative data to understand a student's case study. The goal of this case study is to gain an understanding of academic burnout and the important role of the nurse educator.

This case study also utilizes theories like Maslach's Burnout Theory, Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, and Job-Resources Demands theory for a better understanding of the student experiences.

**Findings:** Findings indicate the association between high academic demands, pressure to succeed, and experiencing academic burnout. This case study also connected external factors like social determinants of health contributing to academic burnout. Additionally, it was noted that students with strong support systems, time management skills, and coping strategies show lower levels of burnout. Therefore, an action plan was initiated to provide increased education on academic burnout in the curriculum and to create a policy to address this issue consistently for educators.

**Conclusion/Significance:** The results of this case study show the importance of early identification and intervention strategies to address academic burnout. Strategies need to be implemented individually and systemically to achieve the best outcomes. Intervention is crucial as the impacts of this condition are detrimental to students in the classroom.

P2.54 *Ocean identities in Iceland: an urban-rural assessment of visual place depictions in coastal communities*

**Author(s):** Heather Huminski

**Faculty Mentor:** Miriah Kelly

**Department:** Environment, Geography & Marine Science

**Abstract:** This project seeks to advance the theoretical knowledge, methodological breadth, and model sensitivity of the ocean identity (OI) framework, which conceptualizes how people perceive their relationships with ocean spaces. Research will take place in urban and rural communities in the island nation of Iceland in order to socially construct ocean spaces through the lens of OI and in dialogue with the contextual, co-evolving relationships that exist between people, identities, and their particular physical environments. Participatory and creative methods will be used to build sensitive understandings of ocean identities rooted in creative cultural expressions specific to place. Semi-structured interviews, photovoice, and participant observation of cultural centers will be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively through thematic coding and aligned with and compared to participant responses to the OI survey, which quantitatively evaluates the four dimensions of ocean identity—connectivity, worry, engagement, and expression—related to the cognitive, behavioral, and affective attributes of people interfacing with ocean spaces. This poster will present the introduction and methods sections of my thesis, as data collection will take place this summer.

P2.55 *Examining Daily Associations Between Minority Stress and Negative Affect Using Ecological Momentary Assessment*

**Author(s):** Eric Lord

**Faculty Mentor:** Kelly Stiver

**Department:** Psychology

**Abstract:** Sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals experience elevated rates of mental health difficulties, which have been widely attributed to minority stress – chronic, stigma-related stress arising from marginalized social positions. Minority Stress Theory conceptualizes these processes as dynamic and unfolding in daily life, yet much existing research relies on retrospective self-report methods that fail to capture their temporal variability.

In this study, I plan to examine the within-person relationship between daily minority stress and negative affect using ecological momentary assessment (EMA). I hypothesize that momentary increases in minority stress will be associated with corresponding increases in negative affect within individuals. By focusing on within-person fluctuations, this study seeks to better align measurement with the theoretical assumption that minority stress operates as a time-varying process.

Participants will complete brief smartphone-based surveys multiple times per day over a 14-day period, reporting on recent minority stress experiences (e.g. discrimination, identity-related stressors) and current emotional states. This intensive longitudinal design enables the capture of real-time experiences in naturalistic contexts.

Data will be analyzed using multilevel modeling, with repeated observations nested within individuals, to estimate within-person associations between minority stress and negative affect. This approach allows for the examination of how deviations in stress relate to changes in emotional functioning over time.

P2.56 *The Labyrinth Within: Integrating Spiritual Practices in Community Mental Health Settings*

**Author(s):** Kyle Magri

**Faculty Mentor:** Lorrie Gardella

**Department:** Social Work

**Abstract:** This project addresses the need for inclusive ways to integrate spirituality into community mental health and addiction recovery settings. Clients in treatment often struggle with emotional dysregulation, identity confusion, and a lack of meaning, while clinicians frequently lack structured tools for discussing spirituality without introducing religious bias. The guiding research question behind this project asks how participation in a structured, nondenominational spiritual practice group impacts emotional regulation, self awareness, and meaning making

among adults in a community mental health setting. The literature highlights themes including spirituality in recovery, meditation and contemplative practices, and practical spiritual interventions within a biopsychosocial spiritual framework. Gaps remain regarding nondenominational spiritual interventions in clinical settings and comparative outcomes across spiritual practices. The project offers *The Labyrinth Within*, a workbook for group therapy that introduces 7 spiritual exercises and contemplative practices that aid clients in developing their own personal spiritual connection. This deliverable contributes to social work knowledge by offering a culturally responsive model for integrating spirituality into clinical practice.

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