

COPLA CONNECTIONS

SPRING 2026

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CULTURE COUNTS: BUILDING EXCELLENCE FROM WITHIN

In higher education, we often talk about outcomes, such as research productivity, student success and community impact. But as an industrial/organizational psychologist, I am especially attuned to what sits beneath those outcomes: culture.

Culture is not a slogan or set of aspirations; it is the lived experience of our faculty, staff and students. It shapes how we work, how we support one another and, ultimately, what we can achieve together.

In the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#), we are intentionally cultivating a culture of excellence by investing in our people. We believe that when individuals feel supported, resourced and connected to a shared mission, excellence becomes not just possible but inevitable.

Our mission calls us to advance ambitious research and provide outstanding education that connects students to the world through hands-on research, experiential learning and internship opportunities. Delivering on that mission requires more than a vision statement; it requires a strong cultural foundation. That foundation is built through concrete actions that empower our academic community to thrive.

One of the most meaningful ways we are doing this is by expanding support for student research and scholarly engagement. We have increased support for student-led research and capstone projects, enabling students to move from consumers of knowledge to creators of it.

In addition, we are investing in student travel to professional conferences, where they can present their work, engage with broader academic communities and begin to see themselves as contributors to their fields. These experiences are transformative.

They build confidence, sharpen skills and open doors. Just as important, they reinforce a culture that values and supports intellectual curiosity.

We also remain committed to supporting our faculty and staff, recognizing that their teaching, scholarship and dedication are central to our collective success. A culture of excellence does not emerge in isolation; it is co-created through relationships, shared purpose and ongoing investment.

Together, we are strengthening our foundation so we can continue to deliver on our mission and ensure excellence is not just an aspiration but a defining characteristic of who we are.

Respectfully,

Lisa Steelman
Interim Dean, College of Psychology and
Liberal Arts



Florida Tech COPLA
College of Psych & Liberal Arts



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Scan for a full list of
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EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

'NOTHING MATTERS, BOSS' EXAMINES NIHILISM IN THE WORKPLACE



Assistant professor [Patrick Aragon](#) and co-author Zachary Tokar published research examining how nihilistic beliefs influence workplace attitudes, including job apathy and satisfaction.

Their [study](#), "Nothing Matters, Boss': An Analysis of the Impact of Nihilism on Workplace Apathy," appeared in the *American Journal of Applied Psychology*. The research distinguishes between existential nihilism, the belief that life lacks meaning, and individual nihilism, a lack of personal purpose.

Using survey data from 58 working adults, the researchers analyzed how these beliefs relate to workplace outcomes. Results showed a strong positive relationship between existential and individual nihilism, with both linked to higher levels of job apathy. Regression analysis found that the two variables together explained 37% of the variance in job apathy, with individual nihilism emerging as the stronger predictor.

The study also found that younger adults, particularly those ages 26 to 29, reported higher levels of nihilism, while higher levels of education and income were associated with lower levels. Job apathy was negatively correlated with job satisfaction, indicating that employees with a diminished sense of purpose may be less engaged in their work.

The findings highlight the role of personal belief systems in shaping workplace behavior and suggest that intrapersonal factors may play a key role in employee engagement and retention.

HOUVOURAS SHARES STORIES OF 'THE SILENT'



[Applied behavior analysis](#) instructor [Andrew Houvouras](#) explores the lives of individuals with limited speaking abilities in his [book](#), *The Lives of the Silent: Stories of Quiet*

Courage and Connection.

The book centers on people who have historically been overlooked or excluded due to their inability to communicate verbally. Many have lived in institutional or residential care settings, where their experiences often went undocumented and unheard.

Through a series of personal accounts, Houvouras brings attention to their lives, focusing on their resilience, relationships and everyday experiences. The stories illustrate how individuals communicate through behavior and action, offering insight into

the human condition and challenging common perceptions of disability.

Drawing from his professional experience, Houvouras reflects on how these individuals shaped his understanding of behavior, empathy and client-centered care. He presents them not only as subjects of study, but also as influential figures who contributed to his personal and professional development.

LAFOND PRESENTS AT ESPORTS CONFERENCE



In November 2025, Adrienne Lafond, a master's student studying [applied behavior](#)

[analysis and organizational behavior management](#), presented two projects at the Esports Research Network Conference, an annual online gathering of researchers, practitioners and coaches dedicated to advancing evidence-based practices in competitive gaming.

Her presentations reflected the core of the work she and others have been developing with the [Behavioral Performance Coaching](#) (BPC) program in the [School of Behavior Analysis](#).

"Enhancing In-Game Communication in Collegiate Esports: A Behavior-Analytic Intervention Using Discriminative Cues," featured Lafond's research on using behavioral tools, such as discriminative cues and behavioral skills training, to increase productive communication among collegiate athletes playing Valorant, a five-versus-five tactical first-person shooter game. The findings showed immediate and meaningful improvements in team communication systems, demonstrating how behavior science can strengthen coordinated play in fast-paced environments.

Her second presentation, co-presented with fellow master's student Savannah Wilson '23, '25 M.S., was "Behavioral Performance Coaching: Advancing Collegiate Esports Through Behavior." This presentation highlighted the broader BPC model, including communication training, Acceptance and Commitment Training-based performance support, organizational systems design and collaborative work with coaches.

"Bringing behavior analysis into competitive gaming has continued to show me just how much untapped potential exists in collegiate esports," Lafond said. "Our players work incredibly hard, and building systems that support them as competitors and as people is the heart of what we do."

The BPC program is a branch of assistant professor [Kaitlynn Gokey's](#) [EEFK Lab](#), designed to discover, connect and build relationships between Florida Tech's behavior analysis and [esports](#) communities.

MIZRAHI EXAMINES ETHICS OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN NEW BOOK



Professor [Moti Mizrahi](#) explores ethical debates surrounding new technologies in his [book](#), *Playing God with Emerging Technologies: How to Avoid the Traps of Techno-Optimism and Techno-Pessimism*.

The book addresses how public discussions about emerging technologies often become polarized, framed as overly optimistic or overly pessimistic. Mizrahi argues that this binary approach limits meaningful evaluation of complex issues.

To provide an alternative, he introduces a structured framework for analyzing “playing God” arguments—common ethical concerns about humans overstepping natural or moral boundaries. The framework includes an argumentation model and a set of critical questions designed to help evaluate these claims in a more systematic and balanced way.

Mizrahi applies this approach to a range of technologies, including artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and solar geoengineering. His analysis focuses on how societies can better assess the risks and responsibilities associated with advancing technologies.

The book emphasizes the importance of adopting a balanced, critical perspective when considering innovation. Rather than defaulting to hype or fear, Mizrahi suggests that a more measured approach can improve understanding, guide responsible decision-making and reduce the potential for misuse.

PATTERSON EXPLORES HISTORY AND IMPACT OF MOSQUITO CONTROL IN PUBLISHED LECTURE



Professor [Gordon Patterson](#), an expert on mosquito control, presented research at the 91st

Annual Meeting of the American Mosquito Control Association in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His [lecture](#), “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life: A Tribute to John Beidler,” was later published in the *Journal of the American Mosquito Control Association*.

In his presentation, Patterson examined the life and legacy of John Beidler, a key figure in the development of modern mosquito control. Using a framework based on the “length, breadth and height” of a life, Patterson highlighted Beidler’s decades-long career, his contributions to large-scale mosquito control programs and his influence on public health policy.

The work also places mosquito control within a broader historical context, tracing how scientific discoveries transformed understanding of mosquitoes from nuisance insects to carriers of serious disease. Patterson emphasizes the role of sustained research, innovation and collaboration in reducing mosquito-borne threats.

His work also connects historical efforts to present-day challenges. Patterson has recently provided expert insight in media coverage of rising dengue fever cases in Brevard County, where locally transmitted infections have raised public health concerns. He emphasized the role of community awareness and preventive measures, including reducing standing water and limiting exposure to mosquito-prone environments.

TALBOT CONNECTS EVOLUTIONARY RESEARCH TO MODERN PRIMATE BEHAVIOR



Assistant professor [Catherine Talbot](#) is contributing to research and public conversations on primate behavior, examining both evolutionary origins and modern interpretations of social interaction.

In a [study](#) published in *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Talbot co-authored research examining the origins of kissing. The analysis suggests that kissing may date back 16 million to 21 million years to a common ancestor shared by humans and other great apes. The findings also indicate that Neanderthals likely engaged in similar behaviors, supported by evidence of microbial exchange between species.

The study highlights the complexity of kissing as a behavior, noting that it carries potential health risks and is not universal across cultures. Researchers argue that its persistence points to deeper evolutionary or social functions.

Talbot has also applied her expertise in animal behavior to contemporary discussions, e.g., Punch the monkey. In response to viral videos of a young Japanese macaque named Punch, [she provided analysis](#) explaining that behaviors perceived by viewers as bullying are, in fact, typical of primate social development.

She noted that young primates learn social norms, boundaries and hierarchy through these interactions. Although early maternal separation can affect development, primates are highly adaptable and capable of integrating into social groups over time, she said.

INSIDE COPLA

AFRICAN AMERICAN READ-IN FEATURES PERFORMANCES, FOOD AND DANCE

More than 120 people filled the first floor of [Evans Library](#) Feb. 13, immersed in a rich tapestry of stories, poetry and rhythms crafted by African American poets, musicians and artists.

The words of literary and spoken-word giants Maya Angelou, Amanda Gorman and Rudy Francisco echoed in the lobby, recited by students, faculty and community members during the 11th annual African American Read-In.

This year’s event, with the theme “Black History: Deeply Rooted, Still Standing, and Ever-Growing,” evoked a coffeehouse vibe, with performances mostly focused on empowerment and joy. For the first time, the event ended with a line dance featuring students and residents of varying ages and backgrounds.

“We like to think of the read-in as a celebration that is equal parts cultural and educational, remembering the past while recognizing literary and artistic influences on our present and future societies,” said [Rolanda Hatcher-Gallop](#) ’10 M.S., a communication instructor in the [School of Arts and Communication](#) (SAC) and one of the event organizers.

Over the past decade, the read-in has become a cornerstone of the university’s Black History Month observance. It is hosted by the SAC, Evans Library and [Student Life](#) and supported by the university’s [Black Student Union](#).

“The African American Read-In resonates with people on and off campus because it creates a shared space for reflection, celebration and dialogue,” said organizer [Nancy Garmer](#), associate librarian, assistant dean and user experience librarian in Evans Library.

“It connects us through literature, music and culture, reminding us that these stories belong to everyone. Black history belongs to all of us.”





Elsie Sutherland with The Crimson student-run newspaper (left) and Lucas Jones (right) during Free Speech Week festivities

15TH ANNUAL FREE SPEECH WEEK LEAVES LASTING IMPRESSION ON STUDENTS

Lucas Jones swayed his head while watching fellow student Chervelle Pierre sing “Fly Me to the Moon” a cappella in [Evans Library](#) during an open mic showcase that marked the end of Free Speech Week Feb. 20.

“I didn’t even know she sang, so hearing it was an amazing surprise,” said Jones, an [aeronautical science with flight](#) sophomore. The event, he said, was the opposite of the “Live Free or Eat Free” activity he had attended the previous night, where students had given up their First Amendment right to free speech in exchange for a free meal.

He got the message loud and clear, adding that he preferred seeing the various forms of artistic expression during the showcase.

“This event, as a whole, brought me immense joy and gratitude for the freedom of speech,” Jones said. “I never would have gotten to hear so many unique stories and talents as I did if free speech weren’t possible.”

The showcase wrapped up a week of First Amendment-focused activities for the 15th annual observance hosted by Florida Tech’s student-run media organizations in [Panther Media Group](#).

The group includes the student-run newspaper, [The Crimson](#), as well as [Panther Radio](#), [FITV](#) and the university’s literary arts magazine, [Kaleidoscope](#).

This year’s festivities kicked off Feb. 16 with a “free speech wall” demonstration, where students received free cookies for exercising their free speech rights by writing on the wall.

Other activities included a local news panel, featuring journalists from *Florida Today* and Spectrum News 13, and a [keynote speech by Sarah McLaughlin](#), an author and senior writer for the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expressions (FIRE). She spoke on the relationship between free expression in the United States and global censorship.

The talk made a lasting impression on [finance](#) freshman Quinn Olson.

“It made me realize how important free expression is in higher education,” he said.

[Ted Petersen](#), associate professor of journalism in the [School of Arts and Communication](#) and Panther Media Group advisor, said free speech rights cannot be taken for granted.

“McLaughlin’s work, and this entire week of events, is a reminder of that,” he said.

ONLINE PSYCHOLOGY BACHELOR’S DEGREES RISE IN NATIONAL RANKINGS

Florida Tech’s [online bachelor’s degree programs in psychology](#) surged into the top 15 in the nation in *U.S. News and World Report’s 2026 online rankings*.

Florida Tech’s online psychology programs jumped 17 spots since last year and is now tied for No. 12 in the country.

The online programs were evaluated using four categories, with each weighted to represent a portion of the overall score. The categories included: Engagement (35%), which centers on opportunities for student interaction with instructors and classmates, as well as how accessible and responsive faculty are; Services and Technologies (25%); Faculty Credentials and Training (20%); and Peer Assessment (20%), which is based on results from a survey of high-ranking academic officials.

FLORIDA TECH HOSTS BASA CONFERENCE ON LEADERSHIP AND SUPERVISION IN BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

The Florida Tech [Behavior Analysis Student Association](#) hosted BASA Conference 2026: Supervision Training and Leadership Feb. 20.

The virtual conference focused on leadership and organizational structure within the field of behavior analysis, highlighting effective training and leadership practices across a range of professional settings.

Attendees explored topics including teaching complex professional skills to human-service professionals, building and maintaining ethical practices and networks, integrating behavior analysis into pediatric hospital settings and the use of artificial intelligence in behavior analytic work.

The event featured presentations from leading practitioners in the field, including Florence DiGennaro-Reed, Tyra Sellers, David Cox and Ansley Hodges, who shared their expertise and provided fresh perspectives on organizational behavior management.

“The BASA Conference this year was an overall success, and our speakers delivered fantastic and high-quality presentations,” conference organizers said. “Putting on this event was a very valuable experience, and we can’t wait to see what next year’s conference is like.”

REEL READS SERIES EXPLORES LITERATURE AND FILM ADAPTATIONS

[Evans Library](#), in collaboration with the [School of Arts and Communication](#), reintroduced the Reel Reads series, examining the relationship between literature and its film adaptations.

The series of faculty-led panels explores how stories evolve from page to screen, highlighting what elements are preserved, altered or reimaged in the adaptation process.

The series opened Feb. 4 with a discussion featuring [Melissa Crofton](#), [Justin Niermeier-Dohoney](#) and [Angela Tenga](#), who discussed Guillermo del Toro’s 2025 adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The conversation focused on the film’s interpretation of Victor Frankenstein and his creation, as well as themes of ambition, obsession and compassion.

On March 11, Crofton, [Anna Muenchrath](#) and Tenga examined Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. The discussion focused on women’s authorship, comparing Alcott’s portrayal of writing and publication with Gerwig’s interpretation in her film.

The series concluded April 8 with a discussion led by Crofton, Niermeier-Dohoney, Tenga and [Toby Daly-Engel](#) on *Jaws*. The panel explored the lasting cultural impact of Peter Benchley’s novel and Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation more than 50 years after its release.



From left: Jaden Krekow, Julie Krekow, Manuel Salvador Villamor

THREE CADETS COMMISSIONED AS SECOND LIEUTENANTS IN FALL ROTC CEREMONY

Three cadets from the university's [Panther Battalion Army ROTC program](#) were commissioned as second lieutenants in the fall commissioning ceremony Dec. 12, 2025.

Jaden Krekow '25 earned a bachelor's degree in [computer science](#). He was commissioned as an active-duty officer into the Military Intelligence Branch and attended Basic Officer Leader's Course in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Julia Krekow '25 earned a bachelor's degree in [oceanography](#). She was commissioned as an active-duty officer into the Military Intelligence Branch and attended Basic Officer Leader's Course in Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

Manuel Salvador Villamor '25 earned a bachelor's degree in [aerospace engineering](#). He was commissioned into the National Guard in the Signal Branch and attended Basic Officer Leader's Course in Fort Gordon, Georgia.

President [John Nicklow](#) and Lt. Col. [Robert Stillings](#) delivered remarks during the ceremony, as did guest speaker Amir Pishdad Jr., a retired U.S. Navy SEAL lieutenant commander.

"You are now the face of the army," Stillings remarked during the ceremony. "You must earn that title, and you must show your soldiers what it means to be a leader every day."

'CARNEGIE CONVERSATIONS' PANEL SERIES EXPLORES COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

During spring semester, [Evans Library](#) hosted Carnegie Conversations, a two-part interdisciplinary panel series exploring principles from Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

Held Feb. 25 and March 18 in the library's [Digital Scholarship Lab](#), the discussions brought together faculty from across the university, including four from the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#) (COPLA), to examine how Carnegie's ideas apply in academic and professional settings. The series was organized in partnership with the [Student Government Association](#), which provided 100 free copies of the book to students.

The first session, "Communicating to Win," featured COPLA associate dean [Heidi Hatfield Edwards](#) alongside [Kathryn Rudloff](#), executive director of [weVENTURE Women's Business Center](#), and [Tim Muth](#), instructor in the [Bisk College of Business](#). The discussion focused on building rapport, improving interpersonal communication and developing effective networking strategies.

The second session, "How to Influence People Through Civil Argumentation," included COPLA faculty members [Andrew Aberdein](#), chair of humanities; [Marshall Jones](#), professor of psychology; and [Nikki Souris](#), professor of law and society. Panelists explored the roles of respectful disagreement and critical thinking in productive dialogue.

The series aimed to encourage meaningful conversations about communication, civil discourse and the skills needed to engage thoughtfully with others—both on campus and in future careers.

EDWARDS HONORED WITH FACULTY EXCELLENCE WISE AWARD



Professor [Heidi Hatfield Edwards](#) was honored with the [Faculty Excellence Award](#) at the [2026 WISE Awards](#) March 12.

Edwards serves as associate dean in the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#) and head of the [School of Arts and Communication](#). Her research focuses on communication and social issues, including misinformation and disinformation, corporate social responsibility and the societal implications of communication related to health, science and technology.

She was selected for the award for "demonstrating the characteristics that embody the spirit of advancing, mentoring and leading the development of women in the community and workplace."

"I am honored to have been chosen for the award and am particularly grateful for those who nominated me and others who support and help me as I strive to live up to the values and virtues these awards represent," Edwards said.



From left: Katherine Plescow, Julie Costopoulos, Kayla Goldberg, Judge Steve Henderson, Bella Stine, Brittany Bagenstose, Sophia Rougraff

LOUDER THAN WORDS

Florida Tech's Court Assessment Team teaches future forensic psychologists that the quietest clues often say the most—and that hands-on experience speaks volumes.

By Karly Horn

"Who is your favorite Harry Potter character?" is not a question listed in any of the assessments Paige Sciera '24 M.S. was trained to administer during a criminal forensic psychology evaluation.

It did, however, light up the defendant's face and coax his guard down enough to participate in her assessment, which resulted in a clinical diagnosis that connected him to the resources he needed and, ultimately, changed his life.

A fourth-year [clinical psychology Psy.D.](#) student, Sciera is well-versed in the proper procedures and protocols necessary to conduct a thorough and accurate evaluation. She also knows that many of the most illuminating, impactful findings don't come from asking the right questions—or even eliciting the right answers.

They are in the nuance: observing behavior, noticing small details—like a police report reference to a Harry Potter fixation—and knowing when to pivot with patience and kindness. In this line of work, actions—a glance, a breath, a blink—truly speak louder than words.

That insight, she says, comes from [School of Psychology](#) head [Julie Costopoulos](#) and the firsthand, real-world experience she gained as a member of Florida Tech's [Court Assessment Team](#).

WHERE OBSERVATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

The Court Assessment Team (CAT) is a practicum group of clinical psychology Psy.D. students who evaluate Brevard

County criminal defendants for forensic mental health issues.

Crafted and directly supervised by Costopoulos, the team prepares for and conducts the evaluations, then co-authors the final reports to the court.

"The purpose of a competency evaluation is to protect a defendant's rights, so they aren't proceeding to trial when they are not mentally present or held responsible for behavior that was actually the product of mental illness," Costopoulos says. "It's actually a very positive, protective purpose."

Costopoulos created CAT in 2020, when the Brevard County Jail practicum site shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic—a move that posed two problems: the existing shortage of mental health professionals

swelled to new levels, and doctoral students could no longer gain the practical experience required for applying to internship programs, the typical next step.

CAT alleviated both.

While the need for more local mental health professionals remains, Costopoulos and her team have lightened the workload. In its six years, the team has served roughly 100 defendants in the Brevard County court system who otherwise could have been lost in the backlog.

But the team's stellar reputation in the community comes less from quantity than quality.

"In my opinion, defendants get a more thorough evaluation from us because we can afford to take our time," Costopoulos says. "Three hours of testing plus 10 hours of writing—that's a lot of work. But we choose to do it because it's beneficial to the case and it's beneficial to the students doing the work."

PROOF IN PRACTICE

Each semester, four or five students enroll in the CAT practicum, typically in their third or fourth year, once they have completed prerequisites, such as Costopoulos' Forensic Assessment course.

When a judge or an attorney appoints Costopoulos to a case, she and two CAT students begin poring over existing records—police reports, prior arrest records, Department of Children and Families reports and more—to determine what kinds of mental health issues they may be dealing with and which tests they'll likely need to administer.

Then, they meet the defendant for evaluation, often at the jail.

"For many students, it's their first time in a jail, and it's really neat to nurture them through being safe, being cautious and being a comfortable professional," Costopoulos says. "To be effective, they need to be all the things psychologists are: nurturing, kind, supportive and clear. Putting those together can be a challenging balance for new professionals."

During the evaluation, the three take turns conducting a mix of clinical interviews and diagnostic, intelligence and forensic tests involving verbal, written and motor-related

exercises. The assessments help determine factors such as competency, sanity and intentional symptom fabrication or exaggeration, called "malingering."

As the semester progresses, students take on increasing responsibilities. They learn to think on their feet, communicate nonverbally and redirect when necessary—lessons that words in a book or a classroom cannot proportionately communicate, Costopoulos says.



“ Court Assessment Team has helped with my professional, clinical and even personal development so much, and for several different reasons. It's definitely a multifaceted, fantastic opportunity.”

—Paige Sciera '24 M.S.

The pace can be swift, and often, defendants are not particularly pleased to participate. Whether by choice or due to severe mental illness, at times, they simply don't.

"One thing that I was surprised by was how much information you can get from just observing," says Hayley Rodriguez '19 M.S., '22 Psy.D., one of CAT's first two students who helped build the program. "I learned so much from just watching the scene and applying that into a court report."

After concluding their assessments and completing corroborating interviews with victims, witnesses, caretakers, treating physicians, jail deputies and others, Costopoulos and the students divvy up sections and write the report, collectively diagnosing and rendering opinions.

Then, they *all* sign it.

"There aren't a lot of other practicum sites or other universities that allow you to put your name on court reports as a student," Sciera says. "Getting that kudos, that name credit, definitely drew me to Florida Tech over other programs."

EXPERIENCE THAT SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

Sciera isn't the only one.

In fact, the Court Assessment Team, with its faculty-led, hands-on education, is frequently cited by prospective students as a main reason for their application and is consistently described in course evaluations as the single most important training experience during students' time at Florida Tech.

"I don't think I would have matched at the internship site that I did had I not had the Court Assessment Team experience," Rodriguez says. "I had so many hours of testing, court report writing and direct interview experience—it was a huge advantage."

Today, Rodriguez works for the state hospital system in California as a senior psychologist specialist, writing court reports for people who have been found incompetent to stand trial.

"The biggest lesson I learned from Court Assessment Team was how much of an impact the work we do has and how strong of a voice mental health professionals play in the legal setting," she says.

Sciera recently matched for her internship with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, where she'll spend the next year before graduating from Florida Tech in May 2027.

"Court Assessment Team has helped with my professional, clinical and even personal development so much, and for several different reasons," she says. "It's definitely a multifaceted, fantastic opportunity."

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHTS



UP CLOSE WITH... Sarah Schewitz

Meet Sarah Schewitz '08 M.S., '11 Psy.D.

Sarah Schewitz is a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of acclaimed online psychology practice Couples Learn. Named one of the top three online couples counseling services by *Forbes Health*, Couples Learn is dedicated to helping clients break generational trauma patterns by healing attachment wounds and building healthier relationships. Schewitz and Couples Learn have been featured on CNN, Bravo TV, Mayim Bialik's Breakdown podcast and in *The Washington Post*, *Women's Health* magazine and more.

Residence: South Portland, ME

Florida Tech Degree: [Clinical Psychology, Psy.D.](#)

Job Title: Licensed Psychologist and Founder, Couples Learn

Why did you choose Florida Tech?

Florida Tech had exceptional faculty and strong opportunities for couples therapy training, which was my intended area of specialization. I was also drawn to the variety of practicum experiences available and the relatively low competition for those placements compared to other programs. In many Psy.D. programs, students are responsible for finding or competing heavily for practicum sites. At Florida Tech, I was able to consistently access the clinical experiences I was seeking.

How did your experience at Florida Tech prepare you as a professional?

It provided me with a strong and well-rounded foundation. Our training in assessment was more thorough than what I observed at many other programs, which served me well during internship. Additionally, my training and hands-on experience in couples therapy helped me develop into a skilled clinician in that area.

Did any specific courses or faculty significantly influence your education?

Dr. Elmore and his private practice couples therapy practicum was incredibly impactful for me. It was such a unique experience to practice in session alongside him while working directly with couples. He also sparked my interest in Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT), which I later became certified in and continue to use in my work today.

[Dr. Chavez](#) was also a significant influence. She taught me a great deal about Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), was consistently encouraging and played an important role in helping me complete my dissertation. She was always wonderful to work with and learn from, and I'm grateful that she has remained a friend to this day.

Share your best Florida Tech student memory.

I have many fond memories—from watching rocket launches, to singing karaoke at a dive bar, to hurricane parties, to simply spending time by the pool with friends. Another highlight was traveling to Amsterdam with two of my classmates.

What have been the highlights and milestones of your life and career so far?

One of the biggest milestones has been starting and growing my practice, Couples Learn. The practice has evolved through several phases: beginning as a solo practice, expanding into a group practice with five clinicians and, eventually, returning to a solo model that also offers online courses. Each stage brought meaningful growth and learning. At this point, the solo model aligns best with the lifestyle I want, allowing me to focus on my work without managing employees.

What advice do you have for current COPLA students who want to make the most out of their time at Florida Tech?

Seek out a variety of practicum experiences. This not only helps you build a broad and flexible skill set for different job markets but also exposes you to different supervisors and styles of supervision. It's one of the best ways to learn what you do and don't enjoy in clinical work.



UP CLOSE WITH... Finch Walker

Why did you choose Florida Tech?

I was dual enrolled at Eastern Florida State College in high school and received Florida Tech's Presidential Scholarship, which covered the full cost of my tuition. I initially applied for the scholarship because I really enjoyed the psychology courses I'd taken at EFSC, and one of my professors encouraged me to pursue a degree in the field at Florida Tech. While that's the initial track I started on, I ended up switching to the journalism program after my first semester.

How did your experience at Florida Tech prepare you as a professional?

At Florida Tech, I got to develop my journalism skills at *The Crimson* as a reporter, copy editor and, eventually, the paper's editor-in-chief. Not only did I get to practice reporting on a deadline, but I also got to mentor young journalists and help encourage a love of writing in them.

Did any specific courses or faculty significantly influence your education?

I had some wonderful professors—specifically, former instructor Amy Laakman and professor emeritus [John Lavelle](#)—but [Ted Petersen](#) stands out as having had the biggest impact on me as a student and as a journalist.

His enthusiasm for journalism is what really helped my own passion for reporting to develop. My friends and I used to joke that he'd always find a reason to knock a point off of an assignment if it meant not giving you 100%, but deep down, that's part of what I appreciated about him: His feedback was honest but never unnecessarily harsh; he always found ways to point out how a lede could be snappier, how a sentence could be more concise or how an article could be structured differently to better serve the reader. His input helped me develop my own skills and my confidence in myself as a writer, and without him, I don't think I would have thrown myself into journalism the way that I have.

Share your best Florida Tech student memory.

During my time as editor-in-chief at *The Crimson*, two other reporters and I worked over the course of a semester to investigate cases of sexual assault and rape that had not been counted in the school's annual crime reports. It was incredible to see our months of difficult, emotionally heavy work pay off—and to hear people around campus respond to our reporting and the survivors' stories. There was even a small student protest after the article came out, and ultimately, the article led to more transparency in campus crime data reporting.

What have been the highlights and milestones of your life and career so far?

The highlights were probably when I adopted my two cats and my dog, Salem. But on a more professional note, I'm really proud of my coverage over the past year—a story I broke about a Brevard teacher being ousted from the district because she used a student's chosen name without parental permission made international news in April, and things didn't slow down for months.

What followed were rallies and a walkout supporting her, school board meetings filled with people shouting for her reinstatement, a state committee giving her the okay to return to teaching and, eventually, a very lengthy one-on-one interview with her at her family's home. It's been exhausting to cover—and it's still ongoing—but watching my writing gain traction around the world has been an experience I don't think I could have imagined before now.

What advice do you have for current COPLA students who want to make the most out of their time at Florida Tech?

If you're planning to go into a career focused on media or writing, spend your time at Florida Tech practicing skills in all types of media. I knew as a student that I wanted to be a print journalist, but the fact that I took photo, audio and video editing classes continues to be immensely helpful to me now in an industry where journalists are constantly being asked to produce new types of content. Also, join your student newspaper.



Meet Finch Walker '19

Finch Walker is an award-winning reporter who covers education on the Space Coast at *Florida Today*. Throughout the course of their career, Walker has covered a broad range of topics, including school board meetings and board elections, trends in student discipline data, how students with disabilities and their families navigate education, teacher pay, investigations into teacher oustings, Florida's evolving laws surrounding LGBTQ+ students and teachers, student achievement and graduation rates and more. Walker previously covered breaking news in Brevard County and had a brief stint as the charity reporter at *The Villages Daily Sun*. Over the years, they have received multiple accolades for their work from the Florida Society of News Editors.

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Residence: Palm Bay, Florida

Florida Tech Degree: [Multiplatform Journalism, B.S.](#)

Job Title: Education Reporter, *Florida Today*

**Note: Since publication, Walker has accepted a new position with USA Today and is relocating to Pennsylvania.*

FACULTY PROFILE

FELIPA CHAVEZ

For [Felipa Chavez](#), the path to academia wasn't a single decision—it was shaped over time by her upbringing, her community and a deep belief in the power of education.

Growing up in the Bronx, New York, as the daughter of immigrants, Chavez was raised in a household where hard work and learning went hand in hand. Her mother, a single parent, worked two jobs, often leaving early and returning late. But Chavez was never without support. A network of family members reinforced a shared belief that education was the path forward.

"My mom told me, 'My job is to make sure you have a roof over your head and food in the fridge. Your job is to go to school, do well—and not just do well, but do better than we did, and make your way in the world because knowledge is power,'" Chavez said.

That expectation shaped everything that followed. Whether it was her uncle driving to her house from New Jersey after work to help her with her homework or the discipline she developed as a self-described latchkey child, Chavez learned early how to persist through challenges—lessons that remain central to how she teaches today.

As an assistant professor at Florida Tech, Chavez brings that same mindset into her classroom, where learning is active, applied and deeply personal.

As a student, she was often the one friends turned to for advice, though her career path wasn't immediately clear. As an undergraduate at New York University, she double-majored in psychology and broadcast journalism, unsure which direction

to take. It wasn't until the final stages of her senior year—after being accepted into multiple doctoral programs—that she committed to psychology.

"I don't know if I chose psychology or if it chose me," Chavez said. "I was always the one giving advice and helping people figure things out."

After earning her doctorate from the University at Buffalo, she completed a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism postdoctoral fellowship at the Research Institute on Addictions. There, she studied how parental substance use affects parent-child interactions and subsequent early childhood development.

That work laid the foundation for her focus on children and families, including her specialization in Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), for which she is an internationally certified Within Agency Trainer. Much of her research is leading the field in adapting this evidence-based treatment to better serve Black and Latin families—bridging cultural understanding with clinical practice.

Academia allowed Chavez to combine teaching, research and clinical work, and Florida Tech felt like the right fit. Drawn to its close-knit environment, she joined the university in her first academic role.

In the classroom, Chavez blends traditional lecturing with storytelling, using examples from her clinical work and personal experiences to bring concepts to life.

"In my classes, I always emphasize application: We read it in the book, but how do we use it in real life?" she said.



Chavez regularly involves students in hands-on work, including a recent community-based initiative adapting Teacher-Child Interaction Therapy (TCIT) to coaching fundamental basketball skills at local after-school programs. The aim is not only to shape and build athletic ability and foster a healthy lifestyle through engagement with sports, but also to foster youth's development of core ego strength, healthy self-esteem and identity.

Led by [Florida Tech women's basketball](#) player [Lana Ammash](#) as part of her [honors project](#), the initiative combines structured activities with behavioral coaching strategies—giving students the chance to see their learning in action.

She also incorporates protégé learning, a method in which students teach course material to their peers—pushing them beyond memorization toward true understanding.

"My goal isn't for students to remember everything from my class," Chavez said. "It's for each of them to walk away having mastered at least one topic deeply."

Chavez is especially inspired by undergraduate students and their willingness to take risks. She sees teaching as a reciprocal process—one where learning flows in both directions.

"The world is always evolving, and each generation brings its own perspective," she said. "I get insight into their world, and that's exciting."

At the core of Chavez's work is a simple goal: help students become fearless learners, equipped not just with knowledge but with the confidence and critical-thinking skills to apply it in meaningful ways.

"I hope students carry what they've learned into their future roles as parents—raising the next generation in a way that helps build a better world," Chavez said. "I don't know if I'll accomplish this, but I do know that I give everything I have to trying because it matters. My hope is that it will make some small difference for someone, somewhere, at some point—and that's enough."

PANTHERS ON THE RISE



1 NATALIE SELLERS '03 M.S. has been named one of the Top 50 Women Leaders in Healthcare for 2026 by Women We Admire, a national organization that recognizes women making a significant impact across the health care industry.

Sellers serves as senior vice president of communications, community and corporate services at Parrish Medical Center and as executive director of Jess Parrish Medical Foundation. She has spent over 24 years with Parrish Healthcare, where she has helped guide the organization's growth and community presence.

In her role, Sellers oversees strategic communications, community engagement and corporate services. Her leadership has contributed to strengthening the health system's brand and expanding its reach throughout North Brevard.

She is also part of the executive leadership team, helping shape long-term strategy and organizational direction.

During her tenure, Parrish Healthcare became the first health system in the nation to receive Integrated Care certification from The Joint Commission. The designation recognizes a coordinated, patient-centered approach to care delivery.



Photo by Nancy Anderson, Shopper News

2 SARA GILBERT '07 M.S. is expanding access to autism care through the Knoxville Center for Autism Inc., a multidisciplinary clinic she founded to help children reach their full potential

The center, located in Knoxville, Tennessee, provides a range of services, including applied behavior analysis, speech therapy and occupational therapy.

Gilbert launched the center in 2010 by renting a single room. As demand grew, she expanded services and relocated multiple times before opening the current 12,452-square-foot facility in 2022.

Her goal was to create a centralized space where families could access multiple therapies in one location.

"I wanted a facility where parents could bring their child to have necessary therapies under one roof rather than go to the center for ABA, then drive across town for speech therapy," Gilbert said in an interview with Shopper News.

The center also offers the Sprouts program, designed for children who are not yet ready for kindergarten, helping them build behavioral and academic readiness before transitioning to school.

Looking ahead, she plans to expand services to include a full academic pathway and job skills training.

"There's plenty of space here for growth. I would love to see it grow into a place where kids diagnosed with autism can come from kindergarten through high school, including academics.

"I would love to someday include job skills training so the kids can go out into the community and get jobs. I want to give them a fulfilling life of love and community," Gilbert said.



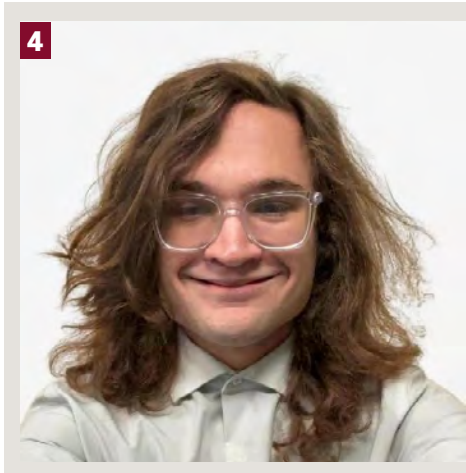
3 MELISSA CHAPMAN '15 started a new role as the intellectual property manager for Emergent BioSolutions Inc., where she manages and enforces the patent and trademark portfolio for the company's commercial and medical countermeasure products.

After earning her [undergraduate degree in psychology](#) from Florida Tech, she went to Eastern Michigan University for her master's degree in higher education. While there, she worked part time as a legal assistant at Dobrusin IP Law.

Through the experience, Chapman remembered how much she enjoyed her [undergraduate law classes](#). That, coupled with her interest in technology and how things work, spurred her to take a chance and enroll at Wayne State University Law School.

She has since built a career in intellectual property law, earning national recognition for her work. Chapman was named to the 2025 edition of Best Lawyers in America: Ones to Watch for both patent law and intellectual property law.

PANTHERS ON THE RISE



4 JUSTIN BRECKENRIDGE '22 has started a new position as the news director at Indian River State College (IRSC), where he oversees IRSC Public Media and its radio station, WQCS 88.9 FM.

In this role, Breckenridge manages station operations while directing news and public affairs coverage across on-air and digital platforms. He leads reporting efforts that include in-depth features and breaking news and works closely with community stakeholders to strengthen IRSC Public Media's presence and expand its reach across Florida's Treasure Coast.

Breckenridge also serves as host of "In Focus – with IRSC Public Media," a program that highlights nonprofit organizations and the work they do across the region. The show features interviews with community leaders and connects listeners with local initiatives and resources.



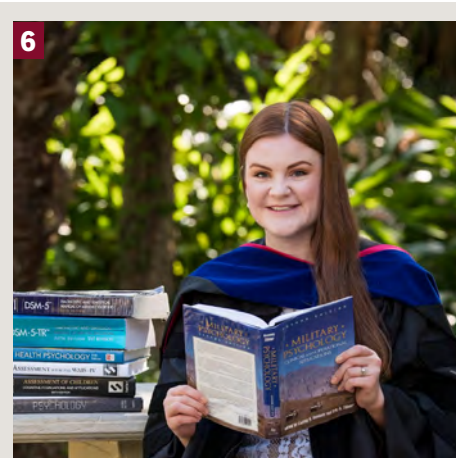
5 KAITLYN BONNER '24 was named one of the top 12 finalists for the 2026 LEAD Brevard 4 Under 40, which recognizes young professionals making a meaningful impact in Brevard County through leadership and service.

Bonner was honored alongside other finalists at LEAD Brevard's annual 4 Under 40 Awards Feb. 13.

She serves as a mitigation specialist at the 18th Circuit Public Defender's Office. The role builds on her previous experience as a mitigation intern with the Brevard County Public Defender's Office. Her work includes conducting client interviews, preparing mitigation reports, coordinating rehabilitation efforts and connecting individuals with psychological resources and referrals.

Originally from Washington state, Bonner chose Florida Tech for its [forensic psychology](#) program, which helped shape her career path in the justice system.

"I believe Brevard's future success depends on building a justice system that strengthens our community and a community that is willing to work to reintegrate those citizens who need our support," Bonner said in a social media post shared by LEAD Brevard.



6 DELANEY GRANKO '25 Psy.D. is beginning her career in clinical psychology while serving as an active-duty U.S. Army captain, following a path she set years ago.

Granko completed her doctoral internship at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu and now serves as a clinical psychology resident. In this role, she is working toward independent licensure, as she prepares to become a behavioral health officer.

Granko said her long-term goal of serving as a psychologist in the military guided her academic and professional decisions. She applied to the Army's Health Professions Scholarship Program in 2021 and was accepted the following year, leading to her commission as an officer.

"I had the dream of being a psychologist in the military for a long time," Granko said. "The biggest reason I chose the Army is that I truly believe I will never have a dull day—there are endless opportunities and paths one can take as a psychologist in the military."

Throughout her time at Florida Tech, Granko completed extensive practicum experiences that helped prepare her for both clinical work and military service. She said the program's training gave her a strong foundation heading into her internship, where supervisors noted her clinical readiness.

"I picked Florida Tech because it has an incredibly strong [Psy.D. program](#). I am always grateful for the decision I made and am appreciative to Florida Tech," she said.