

COPLA CONNECTIONS

FALL 2025

INSIDE THE ISSUE

| | |
|--|----|
| Expert Perspectives | 2 |
| Making Moves | 3 |
| Inside COPLA | 3 |
| Faculty Profile: Nury Stevens..... | 7 |
| Transforming Work Meetings ... | 8 |
| Alumni Spotlight: Jordin Chandler | 10 |
| Alumni Spotlight: Michelle Wolf..... | 11 |
| Panthers on The Rise | 12 |



FROM THE INTERIM DEAN: **THE POWER OF RECOGNITION AND GRATITUDE**

As we embark on another busy semester, I've been reflecting on the importance of recognition and gratitude, two values that sit at the heart of a thriving academic community.

Recently, our college celebrated the recipients of the inaugural COPLA Faculty Excellence Awards. We recognized [Kate Talbot](#) for

excellence in research and [Kaitlynn Gokey](#) for excellence in teaching. These faculty members serve as role models through their teaching and research, showing students and colleagues alike the value of hard work and dedication. Their efforts strengthen our college and help create a culture where learning and achievement are encouraged and celebrated.

Taking time to acknowledge one another's efforts is more than a gesture of appreciation; it is a way of reinforcing who we are as a college. When we pause to express gratitude to colleagues for their work on a committee, students for their curiosity and hard work or staff members for their behind-the-scenes support, we strengthen the fabric that connects us all.

Research in positive psychology offers compelling evidence that gratitude is more than a fleeting feeling. It is a practice that improves our well-being over time. Studies show that individuals who consistently express gratitude tend to experience higher levels of happiness, stronger relationships and even better physical health. Gratitude helps us focus less on what is missing and more on what is meaningful, cultivating resilience and optimism in the process.

As we kick off the new year, I encourage each of us to find a moment to express gratitude, celebrate achievements big and small and recognize the people who make this college such a special place. These expressions of appreciation create a ripple effect, strengthening our sense of belonging and shared purpose.

Thank you for everything you do to make COPLA a community built on purpose, compassion and excellence.

Respectfully,

Lisa Steelman
Interim Dean, College of Psychology and
Liberal Arts



Florida Tech COPLA
College of Psych & Liberal Arts



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EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

TALBOT DISCUSSES HOW A HORMONE FOR SOCIAL BEHAVIOR COULD HELP THOSE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Assistant professor of psychology [Catherine Talbot](#) has uncovered evidence that a naturally occurring hormone could one day change how autism spectrum disorder is treated.

[Her research](#) focuses on primates, including rhesus monkeys, whose differences in sociality mirror those of humans. Some monkeys are highly social, while others are low-social and show deficits similar to people with autism. In collaboration with researchers from Stanford University, the University of California, Davis, and the California National Primate Research Center, Talbot explored whether supplementing vasopressin, a hormone tied to mammalian social behavior, could improve social functioning in monkeys naturally low in social skills.

Monkeys with naturally low vasopressin levels typically struggle with face recognition and rarely respond to social cues. Using positive reinforcement, the researchers trained these monkeys to voluntarily inhale vasopressin through a nebulizer while receiving white grape juice. After treatment, the animals began engaging in prosocial behaviors and their memory for faces improved to match their strong memory for objects. Importantly, the hormone did not increase aggression, a risk previously flagged in rodent studies.

The results suggest restoring vasopressin selectively enhances social cognition in those with natural deficiencies.

"It was really exciting to see this come to fruition after pouring so much work into this project and overcoming so many challenges," Talbot said.

The significance of this discovery is underscored by the growing prevalence of autism. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 36 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. While two FDA-approved treatments exist, Talbot said, they only address associated symptoms rather than the social deficits central to the disorder.

One of Talbot's co-authors has already begun pilot work with human patients, and Talbot expects more clinical trials to follow.

"It may be that individuals with the lowest levels of vasopressin may benefit the most from it—that is the step forward toward precision medicine that we now need to study," she said.

TENGA EXPLORES 'UNHOLY DICHOTOMY' OF 'MIDNIGHT MASS,' EVOLUTION OF THE UNDEAD IN NEW WORKS

[Angela Tenga](#), associate professor of literature, has added to her scholarship on depictions of the monstrous with a new journal article and a co-edited essay collection.

Her article, "[Angel or Vampire: The Unholy Dichotomy of 'Midnight Mass.'](#)" appeared in the April issue of *Horror Studies*. Tenga was the

lead author, working with longtime collaborator Jonathan Bassett, a psychology professor at Lander University in South Carolina. The paper examines the 2021 Netflix series "Midnight Mass."

"'Midnight Mass' depicts supernatural events that provide a catalyst for exploring moral dilemmas and existential challenges," the authors wrote in the abstract. "The heart of the series is its deliberate ambiguity about the ontological nature of the supernatural entity—is it an angel offering a gift of immortality or a vampire bringing a curse of destruction?"

In addition to her writing, Tenga recently co-edited a collection of scholarly essays, "[The Post-Zombie: Essays on the Evolving Undead](#)," published by McFarland Press. Her co-editors are C. Wylie Lenz and Kyle William Bishop.

Featuring pieces such as "Rebel for Life: Has Our Obsession with Zombies Prepared Us for the Reality of Ecological Collapse?" and "You Are Who You Eat: iZombie, Passing and the Role of Food in Modern Zombie Television," the collection "considers recent and contemporary examples of zombies in fiction, literature, popular culture and politics from around the world and makes the case that, because of the evolution of the undead, the zombie remains an important allegorical feature of horror fiction, satire and ideological perspectives," according to the publisher's synopsis.

HUMANITIES FACULTY RESEARCH TALKS

During fall 2025, the humanities program hosted a series of faculty research talks highlighting diverse areas of scholarship across philosophy, literature, history and political science.

The series opened Sept. 8 with philosophy professor [Andrew Aberdein](#) presenting "Virtuous Argumentation and Unendorsed Claims." On Sept. 15, philosophy professor [Kenneth Pike](#) gave a talk titled "Having Children is a Virtue: Toward a 'Proper Value' Account of Procreation."

On Sept. 29, English professor [Melissa Crofton](#) presented "Getting Medieval with David Lowery in 'The Green Knight.'" The series continued Oct. 20 with history professor [Justin Niermeier-Dohoney](#)'s presentation, "On Golden Ground: Alchemy, Economy, and Soil in Early Modern Empires."

On Oct. 27, literature professor [Angela Tenga](#) gave her talk, "Z is for Zombies." The Nov. 3 session featured history professor [Gordon Patterson](#) presenting "The Atomic Bomb's Unlikely Legacy: From Atomic Gardens to Sterile Mosquitos."

The series concluded Nov. 17 with political science professor [Wanfa Zhang](#) presenting "How to Study Great Power Politics Using Scientific Methods? U.S.-China Relations as a Case."

SCAN FOR A FULL LIST OF RECENT FACULTY ACCOMPLISHMENTS:



MAKING MOVES

ANNOUNCING FACULTY SERVICE MILESTONES

Thank you for your service and dedication to Florida Tech and the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#).

- » 20 years • [Patrick Converse](#), professor, SOP
- » 15 years • [Theodore Petersen](#), associate professor, SAC
- » 10 years • [Catherine Nicholson](#), assistant professor, SOBA
- » 10 years • [Darby Proctor](#), assistant dean, SOP
- » 10 years • [Moti Mizrahi](#), professor, SAC
- » 10 years • [Patrick Aragon](#), associate professor, SOP
- » 5 years • [Catherine Talbot](#), assistant professor, SOP

INTRODUCING NEW FACULTY MEMBERS

Welcome to our newest College of Psychology and Liberal Arts faculty members:

- » Matt Towsey is the new director of bands for the music program in the [School of Arts and Communication](#). Towsey earned his doctorate in jazz studies and music composition from the University of Northern Colorado.
- » Frank Webbe, professor emeritus, is a visiting professor in the [School of Psychology](#). Although he formally retired in 2020, he continues to teach classes in neuropsychology and work with clinical psychology doctoral students in their research and writing for publication.
- » Kara Wunderlich is an assistant professor in the [School of Behavior Analysis](#). She is an academic coordinator for the behavior analysis online master's degree program.

INSIDE COPLA



MEISSEN LEADS STUDENTS IN SERVICE AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES ABROAD

The Rev. [Randall Meissen](#), chaplain, [Catholic Campus Ministry](#) director and College of Psychology and Liberal Arts adjunct faculty member, led students on two international experiences that combined service, cultural engagement and personal growth.

Five Florida Tech students—Bailey Astor, Elias Orellana, Matt Barfield, Jacob Ewasko and Aydyn Jones—accompanied Meissen on a humanitarian trip to the Dominican Republic. Last spring, the group worked in the rural village of Los Guayuyos, helping install a gravity-fed water system designed to provide clean water to residents.

The trip was supported by the Catholic Campus Ministry, the [Newman Club](#) and the [Student Government Association](#). Students helped glue PVC pipes, dig trenches and bury waterlines.

The students also spent time with local families and schoolchildren and visited historical sites in Santo Domingo, including the oldest cathedral in the Americas.

"The trip not only brought clean water to a grateful community but enriched the lives of everyone involved through service, cultural exchange and enduring memories," Meissen said.

Later in the year, Meissen led three Florida Tech students—Alan Alcantara, Anthony Tomic and JP Ostapovich '24—on a 550-mile pilgrimage across northern Spain. The group followed the Camino Francés, an ancient route to the burial place of St. James the Great in Santiago de Compostela.

The students began hiking each day before dawn, crossing vineyards, mountain passes and medieval villages, and staying in pilgrim hostels along the way.

Through both experiences, Meissen emphasized service learning and cultural awareness as opportunities for students to broaden their perspectives beyond the classroom.

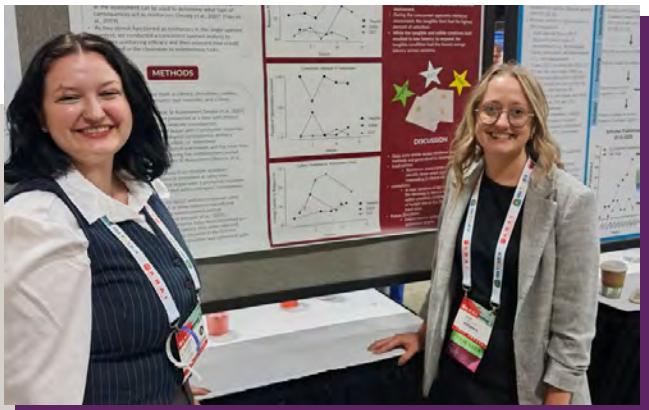


FLORIDA TECH RELAUNCHES OBM SPECIALIST CERTIFICATE

Florida Tech has relaunched its [OBM Specialist Certificate](#), a professional development program offered through [ABA Online](#). The program is designed to equip professionals with practical skills in organizational behavior management (OBM) using the structured SPACE (Scope, Pinpoint, Assess, Change, Embed) Model, a framework for identifying, analyzing and addressing workplace challenges.

The updated format is more accessible than ever. Delivered entirely online, the self-paced program includes five modules corresponding to each phase of the SPACE Model. Each module takes approximately 2.5 to 4.5 hours to complete, and learners have four months of access to all materials.

Participants no longer need to be employed or apply OBM in their current workplace to complete the program. Instead, they engage with case studies and real-world scenarios to practice their skills. The certificate is open to all learners and has no prerequisites, with an optional Foundations Module available for those new to behavior analysis.



STUDENT POSTER NAMED BEST AT CONFERENCE

Lauren Lightner, a master's student in the [applied behavior analysis](#) and [organizational behavior management](#) program, won an award for best poster in September at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

Her poster, "Reinforcer Assessment on a Child with Autism," was co-authored by [behavior analysis Ph.D.](#) students Kira Flynn '24 M.S. and Skye Nelson, along with [Kimberly Sloman](#), associate professor and director of [The Scott Center for Autism Treatment](#).

Upon completion, participants will be able to identify business opportunities in their workplace, design and lead OBM projects and apply evidence-based methods to implement and sustain improvements.

The certificate serves a broad audience. For behavior analysts, it offers Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) continuing education units (CEUs) and teaches practical skills for improving clinical operations, such as training, supervision and billing integrity. For organizational professionals, it provides data-driven tools to enhance systems and performance across industries.

The OBM Specialist Certificate also offers a valuable pathway for Florida Tech alumni—particularly those in business, engineering, aviation and psychology—to expand their professional skill sets and pursue roles in organizational development, leadership development, continuous improvement and change management.

STUDENTS PRODUCE DOCUMENTARY ON LOCAL MUSIC STORE OWNER

Eight senior [communication](#) students—Josh Mearig, Courtney Capar, Preston Houvouras '25, Noah Burke '25, Jolie Jenkins '25, Mackenzie Smith '25, Tia Vagliardo '25 A.A. '25 and Lili Earley '25—created "[More Than Music](#)," a documentary featuring Melbourne business owner Bruce Marion, owner of Marion Music. The long-standing local music shop offers instrument sales, lessons and repair services. Mearig served as the project's director, and Capar served as producer.

The film explores the realities of operating a brick-and-mortar music store in the digital age, where online competition has reshaped how people buy and learn instruments, and highlights Marion's dedication to his craft and his role in supporting the local music community.

Through interviews and on-site filming, the students captured how Marion's passion sustains both his business and the musicians he serves, offering a glimpse at the enduring role of local music shops in today's evolving industry.

"More Than Music" was created as part of the students' [senior design project](#). The documentary is available for viewing on the [6-eleven Productions YouTube channel](#), which showcases student productions from Florida Tech's [communication programs](#).

FLORIDA TECH JOINS MULTISTATE INITIATIVE TO PROVIDE FREE COUNSELING TO FOOD AND BEVERAGE EMPLOYEES

Florida Tech is providing free telehealth therapy sessions to food and beverage workers through its [Community Psychological Services](#) (CPS), joining a growing national initiative to deliver no-cost mental health counseling to the generally underserved industry.

Behind You is a multistate effort run by Houston-based nonprofit Southern Smoke Foundation. The initiative helps food and beverage workers by reducing barriers to treatment, establishing support systems and creating industrywide national dialogue about mental health.

Florida Tech's pilot program kicked off Sept. 1 and is being carried out by advanced [clinical psychology Psy.D.](#) students and psychology professor and CPS director [Scott Gustafson](#).

Florida Tech is one of 14 schools in the country participating and is the only Florida university involved in the initiative.

Behind You operates through university graduate training programs in psychology, social work, clinical mental health and counseling. Clients are connected with clinicians-in-training for up to 20 no-cost sessions.

Gustafson is excited by the opportunity to help support the broad industry, which encompasses agriculturalists, distributors, restaurant, bar and coffee shop workers, food service personnel and more. These workers are part of one of the most underinsured demographics in the country, Gustafson noted, which means they often don't have access to any kind of mental health coverage.

"The fact that we can offer high-quality services—as a catchment area of the entire state—for people who would otherwise go unserved, while training our students in both telehealth and advanced diagnostic and treatment protocols, is just a brilliant solution all the way around," he said.

GOKEY, TALBOT RECOGNIZED IN INAUGURAL COPLA RESEARCH AND TEACHING AWARDS

Florida Tech faculty members [Catherine Talbot](#) and [Kaitlynn Gokey](#) '12 M.S., '20 Ph.D., are recipients of the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#)' inaugural COPLA Faculty Excellence Awards, established to recognize exceptional achievement in teaching and research within the college.

Talbot, an assistant professor of [psychology](#), earned the Award for Excellence in Research/Scholarship for her original contributions to her field, her scholarly impact and her sustained excellence, as well as notable recent achievements—most recently, she contributed to a [study](#) examining the evolution of kissing that drew international attention. Her [research](#) covers the evolutionary and biological mechanisms underlying sociality, face recognition and social processing, autism, behavioral economics and animal welfare.

Gokey, an assistant professor of [behavior analysis](#), earned the Award for Excellence in Teaching for her outstanding instruction, student engagement and impact, and innovative teaching. She leads courses such

as Introduction to Concepts and Principles of Behavior Analysis, Advanced Concepts and Principles of Behavior Analysis, Experimental Analysis of Behavior, Radical Behaviorism and Ethics for Behavior Analysts. She also collaborates with the university's [Behavioral Performance Coaching Program](#), which seeks to enhance competitive esports performance through behavioral science.

"These awards recognize outstanding contributions in research/scholarship and teaching across our college," said [Lisa Steelman](#), COPLA interim dean.

The COPLA Awards Committee was made up of six faculty members representing the [School of Psychology](#), [School of Behavior Analysis](#) and [School of Arts and Communication](#). They reviewed self and peer nominations using a rigorous rubric aligned with the award criteria. They then forwarded recommendations to Steelman for final selection.

Talbot and Gokey will each receive a \$200 stipend to support their continued academic and research endeavors.



FLORIDA TECH RENEWS PARTNERSHIP INTEGRATING MENTAL, PHYSICAL HEALTH TRAINING FOR PSY.D. STUDENTS

After five years of implementing integrative mental and physical health training for Florida Tech [Psy.D.](#) students, the [School of Psychology](#) is renewing its partnership with the institutions that made these learning experiences possible: Winter Haven Hospital Foundation and Florida State University's (FSU) College of Medicine.

The partnership, established by Joel Thomas '97 MBA and assistant professor of clinical psychology [Patrick Aragon](#) in 2020, fosters collaboration between Psy.D. students and students in FSU's medical residency program. It gives doctoral students from both programs a chance to gain unique clinical experience while helping expand access to mental health services in Polk County, Florida.

Thirteen Florida Tech students have taken part since the program was established. Thomas, who retired in 2025, said the program has "dramatically" increased access to care in the community, as Florida Tech students have served more than 2,000 patients since the program began.

In addition to the renewed partnership, the foundation is working with [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#) Interim Dean [Lisa Steelman](#) to add new initiatives, such as a scholarship for Winter Haven Hospital employees to pursue a behavioral health certificate in applied behavior analysis (ABA) at Florida Tech.

The foundation is also implementing an ABA and Autism Spectrum Community Education Program through [The Scott Center for Autism Treatment](#). This initiative will equip families and health care professionals with skills to help children with developmental disorders and to better navigate the health care system.

These programs will ideally help reduce patient anxieties about health care interventions, especially routine treatments, such as dental and annual physical checkups, and promote more positive patient outcomes, Steelman said.



'PSYCHOLOGY SCIENCE MINUTE' HELPS EARN UNIVERSITY AWARD FOR MENTAL HEALTH EXCELLENCE

In August, *Insight Into Academia* magazine awarded Florida Tech a 2025 Excellence in Mental Health and Well-Being Award.

Among 71 schools in the country—and just five in the state—to receive the recognition, Florida Tech offers dozens of mental health resources for students, faculty and staff, including a variety of wellness spaces and activities, counseling support and assistance programs.

In the university's award application, [Student Counseling Center](#) director Robyn Tapley highlighted several campus programs, including the "[Psychology Science Minute](#)".

A quick and engaging weekly radio segment sponsored by [WFIT](#) and the [School of Psychology](#), "Psychology Science Minute" presents relevant, interesting and digestible research to the public, covering topics such as happiness, healthy relationships, the importance of sleep and burnout.

SUPPORTERS GATHER FOR AN EVENING OF HOPE

The 17th annual [An Evening of Hope](#) to benefit [The Scott Center for Autism Treatment](#) brought together supporters from across the Space Coast.

The spring 2025 event featured a three-course dinner, live entertainment from Hot Pink, chance drawings and an inspiring mission moment highlighting The Scott Center's work with children and families affected by autism spectrum disorders.

This year's theme, "Lighting the Way," celebrated the community's commitment to creating brighter futures through service, training and research.

Proceeds from An Evening of Hope support The Scott Center's mission to provide early intervention services for children on the autism spectrum, assist families in need and offer experiential learning opportunities for Florida Tech graduate students in [applied behavior analysis programs](#).

The 18th annual An Evening of Hope will return to campus from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday, April 11, in the [Clemente Center](#).



COPLA STUDENTS SHINE AT 2025 STUDENT DESIGN SHOWCASE

Three students from the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts \(COPLA\)](#) presented research projects in the [Non-COES Majors](#) category at the [2025 Northrop Grumman Engineering & Science Student Design Showcase](#). Their work represented the college's strong contributions to scientific and applied research across disciplines.

["Bug brains: Are discoid cockroach \(Blaberus discoidalis\) substrate preferences fixed or plastic?"](#)

Student: Lauren Lewis '25

Advisor: Associate professor of psychology
[Darby Proctor](#)

Award: Honors College Best in Show

Lewis explored whether cockroach habitat choices are shaped by experience or natural preference. Using 48 cockroaches raised in different environments—pine bedding, coconut fiber and no substrate—she found they consistently preferred pine bedding, suggesting an innate, rather than learned, preference for substrates resembling their natural habitats. Pine shavings, she noted, mimic the texture and structure of leaf litter found in the species' environment.

["Hand & Tail Lateralization in Black-Handed Spider Monkeys"](#)

Student: Madeline Marasco '25

Advisor: Associate professor of psychology
[Darby Proctor](#)

Marasco examined whether hand preferences in spider monkeys correspond with how they use their prehensile tails—an appendage capable of gripping and fine movement—to perform various tasks. Working with nine monkeys at Brevard Zoo, Marasco found that while there was no single pattern across all subjects, individual monkeys displayed strong personal preferences, often favoring one side for the hand and the opposite for the tail. The findings offer insight into how primates develop coordination and motor skills, suggesting that lateralization—favoring one side of the body—might improve stability and efficiency during climbing or feeding.

["The Relationship Between Mental Health Concerns in College Students and Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)"](#)

Student: Kayla E. Davis '25

Advisor: Assistant professor of psychology
[Travis Conradt](#)

Davis' research analyzed the connection between early-life experiences and mental health. Using survey data from 766 Florida Tech students collected over several years, Davis examined how early adversity and current stress influence college students' emotional well-being. Her analysis showed that students who experienced more adverse childhood events also tended to report higher levels of stress, anxiety and emotional distress in college. The results supported the "secondary adversities hypothesis," which suggests that the lingering effects of early hardship can contribute to continued stress and mental health challenges in adulthood.

FACULTY PROFILE

ADJUNCT SPANISH INSTRUCTOR

NURY STEVENS

Originally from El Salvador, Nury Stevens arrived in the United States more than 35 years ago on a Fulbright Scholarship. At the time, she didn't speak English. So before beginning her studies, she was required to complete a six-month language program and pass the Michigan English Test.

"In those six months, I learned to read, write, speak and listen well enough to pass the test and start my bachelor's degree in the U.S.," Stevens recalls.

That determination—and her love of learning—would define Stevens' life and career.

"I've always loved education and the humanities," she says. "Since I was a child, I've loved to study and read."

Now an adjunct Spanish instructor in Florida Tech's [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#), Stevens brings that same drive to her classroom every day.

"I love the students here," she says. "They have dreams and goals, and they're competitive in the best way—always striving to move ahead. Many of my students want to go to law school, become international pilots or work in marine biology. They have ambitions that go beyond the classroom."

Her classroom is a lively, fast-paced space, where students think, move and speak in Spanish. Stevens teaches elementary and intermediate Spanish—courses that introduce both language and culture—using PowerPoint, timers and oral assessments to keep students engaged.

"I have to move quickly in class because I've noticed students' attention spans are short—if I take too long, I lose them. So, I keep things active," she says.

Even in her limited class time, Stevens incorporates cultural lessons through *Vistas*, a textbook featuring panorama and fotonovela segments that explore Latin American countries, cultural traditions and contemporary Spanish storytelling.

Stevens keeps her classes fun and energetic while emphasizing discipline and self-confidence.

"I want my students to have the confidence to speak Spanish because the biggest barrier is a lack of confidence," she says. "Learning a language is a process. One needs consistency and patience. You're not going to earn a degree by just watching soccer or hanging out with friends—you have to sit down and do the work. I would love to instill in my students confidence in their Spanish skills."

For Stevens, the rewards of teaching are deeply personal.

"The most rewarding part of working with students is when they tell me, 'Thank you. I've learned a lot in your class,'" she says. "For any professor, that's the most meaningful thing a student can say. Education is meant to change people's lives."

She also sees language learning as especially vital at a STEM-focused university like Florida Tech.

"Learning another language develops your brain in new ways," she explains. "It builds cultural



“I want my students to have the confidence to speak Spanish because the biggest barrier is a lack of confidence. Learning a language is a process.”

—Nury Stevens

sensitivity, which is essential. NASA, for example, doesn't have only American employees; there are people from Pakistan, India, Vietnam and many other countries. You have to be able to collaborate with them. Knowing another language looks great on a résumé, but beyond that, it helps you understand other perspectives."

Her advice to new language learners is simple: "Don't be a perfectionist. Don't be so hard on yourself—have fun and appreciate the opportunity to learn a new language."

Outside the classroom, Stevens enjoys painting and exploring the arts. Her favorite Salvadoran dish is pupusa—a nod to the country and culture that first inspired her love of learning.

"Where I come from, studying is a privilege, and I can't take it for granted," she says. "A book, a library, a professor—all of those are gifts. When something you love is hard to achieve, it becomes a treasure. A wealthy person might inherit a house; I feel like I inherited a love for knowledge. It's so precious to me, and I'm deeply grateful for it."



FEATURE

TRANSFORMING WORK MEETINGS

STRATEGIES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING COLLABORATION

By Liana Kreamer

I'm sure you've heard it before—maybe from colleagues, leaders, friends or even yourself: "I am dreading my upcoming meeting."

Work meetings often have a bad reputation. People commonly complain about their frequency, the lack of purpose or how tedious they can feel. Memes and phrases like "this meeting should have been an email" have become cultural staples.

Yet over 55 million meetings take place daily in the United States. The average employee spends nearly 10 hours each week in meetings, and for executives, this number jumps to nearly half their working time. If meetings are as unproductive as people claim, consider how much of a CEO's salary is wasted on ineffective discussions!

Rather than seeing this as a hopeless situation, I view it as an opportunity. My research focuses on making work meetings more effective, engaging and satisfying, ultimately leading to better outcomes for individuals, teams and organizations. I call myself a "meeting scientist," studying and sharing best practices for every stage of a meeting—before, during and after.

“My research focuses on making work meetings more effective, engaging and satisfying, ultimately leading to better outcomes for individuals, teams and organizations.”



BEFORE THE MEETING

Meeting success starts with preparation. Research suggests having a clear and purposeful agenda shared in advance is a crucial factor in making meetings more effective. Be intentional about your attendee list—over-inviting can reduce inclusion and participation. Focus on who absolutely needs to be there, and consider listing others as optional participants. Aim to keep meetings as short as possible while still achieving your objectives. Avoid defaulting to the hourlong meeting just because it's standard practice. Designing a meeting requires intention—every element should have a purpose.

DURING THE MEETING

Whether you're facilitating or participating, engagement is key. Actively involve attendees, ask and answer questions and ensure quieter voices are included. Consider using round-robin discussions to ensure everyone has a chance to speak, incorporating interactive elements, like polls or brainstorming sessions, and creating a safe environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

AFTER THE MEETING

The meeting isn't over until next steps are clearly defined. Take five minutes to recap key points, decisions and action items. Assign responsibilities and deadlines to specific individuals—Joe should leave knowing his next task, and Kate should understand when her deliverables are due. All participants should walk away feeling that something was accomplished, they have a clear path forward and their time was well spent.

While these best practices might seem obvious, they're surprisingly rare—75% of managers report never being trained on how to design or lead a meeting, even though they spend a significant portion of their roles in meetings. This lack of training is a missed opportunity to foster more productive and engaging collaboration.

Liana Kreamer is an assistant professor in the [industrial organizational psychology](#) program within the [School of Psychology](#) in the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#). Her research centers on the science behind teamwork, leadership and workplace collaborations, with a focus on work meetings.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHTS

“In order to make a difference, the difference first has to start with you.”

—Jordin Chandler



JORDIN CHANDLER

2025 COPLA OUTSTANDING ALUMNUS VALUES SERVICE BEFORE SELF

When Jordin Chandler '19 learned he had been named Florida Tech's 2025 Outstanding Alumni Award winner for the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts](#), his first thought was simple: "I hope [Anthony Catanese](#) would have been proud."

"I didn't want to disappoint Dr. Catanese," he says of Florida Tech's former president. "He took a chance on me, and this award showed he didn't make the wrong decision."

In 2016, Chandler gave a speech at Florida Tech's [Julius Montgomery Pioneer Award Celebration](#). In the audience was Catanese, then Florida Tech's president, who offered him a presidential scholarship to the university on the spot.

Chandler enrolled in classes later that year, majoring in [humanities-prelaw](#).

[COPLA Interim Dean Lisa Steelman](#) says Chandler represents what Florida Tech stands for.

"Jordin Chandler exemplifies the very best of Florida Tech: leadership grounded in service and a deep commitment to community impact," she says. "We're

proud to celebrate his achievements and to support his ongoing journey of service before self."

Chandler grew up in Melbourne, Florida, raised by his godmother and surrounded by people who looked out for him.

"I've had a lot of people pour into me and help steer me in the right direction," he says. "Even with negative examples around me, there were people making sure I didn't go the wrong way."

That early foundation in community shaped everything that came next for Chandler.

After graduating from Florida Tech in 2019, Chandler planned to attend law school. Instead, a mentor convinced him to try lobbying first.

"I thought lobbying was just backroom deals," he says, laughing. "But I learned it's really about advocacy—about solving problems."

For more than five years, he represented clients ranging from developers and the Brightline passenger rail service to

Health First. One of those clients, Waste Management, later offered him a full-time position as government affairs manager for Florida.

"My job is about relationships," he says. "Working with government leaders, listening to communities and making sure our company's goals line up with public needs."

When asked what investing in the community means, Chandler doesn't hesitate.

"It's about legacy," he says. "It's not about titles or résumés. It's about how people felt after meeting you. Being invested in the community means being unforgettable for the right reasons."

At 28, he's now a husband and father to a 2-year-old daughter, and he's still looking forward.

For Chandler, every chapter ties back to service.

"In order to make a difference, the difference first has to start with you."



Meet Michelle Wolf '18

Michelle Wolf is a Palm Bay, Florida, native. She graduated from Brevard Community College—now Eastern Florida State College—in 2013, then went on to attend Florida Tech and University of West Florida. Wolf has worked in education for the last seven years and currently teaches freshman English and Cambridge general paper at Eau Gallie High School. She has also been working on research in medieval and film studies, particularly looking at David Lowery's film, "The Green Knight." She published her first article in the *South Atlantic Review* in 2023 and is working on a book chapter for publication in 2026.

Residence: West Melbourne, Florida

Florida Tech Degree: Humanities with a concentration in literature, B.A.

Job Title: Teacher at Eau Gallie High School, freshman English and Cambridge program

Impactful Faculty: Melissa Crofton, Lisa Perdigao, Angela Tenga and Alan Rosiene

UP CLOSE WITH... Michelle Wolf

Why did you choose Florida Tech?

I am native to Palm Bay, Florida, and everyone heard about Florida Tech and its reputation as an incredible place for higher learning. A few of my co-workers at the time were Florida Tech students, and I thought, "Just maybe..." and made the decision to apply. I originally got accepted into the biochemistry program and, while I will always love science and technology, my heart was in the humanities.

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

Where to begin? I do not exaggerate when I say that my years at Florida Tech were the most impactful of my life. The rigor, push for excellence, attentiveness of the staff and support across campus made transitioning to my career and, later, research seamless. I continued in my education with a master's degree in English at University of West Florida; I felt comfortable with moving on to graduate studies—even during a global pandemic and 500 miles from home—because I was secure in what I had been taught during undergrad.

Specifically, were there any courses or faculty that had a significant influence on your education?

Dr. Melissa Crofton's course was the first I ever took in the humanities department, and it was her class that reignited my love for literature and the humanities. Dr. Lisa Perdigao was one of my two capstone advisors, my advisor throughout my bachelor's degree and an unending provider of knowledge and support. Dr. Angela Tenga's classes forced me to push the boundaries in literature, film, television, theory and the darkest aspects of humanity. In addition, the late Dr. Alan Rosiene—the second of my two capstone advisors—also was integral to my success. He was a brilliant professor and advisor.

Share your best Florida Tech student memory.

As cliché as it is, walking across the stage and knowing that I just received a degree from Florida Institute of Technology simply cannot be topped. As far as academics go,

I have numerous experiences across both disciplines that have stood out—genetics labs (extracting strawberry genes, anyone?), biology trips to study local aquatic life and, of course, my yearlong capstone project, which continues to be one of my favorite written projects I have ever done.

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

I have been in education for the last seven years and have gained experience in so many different areas—special education, elementary, middle and, now, high school, where I am currently working both in general education and the Cambridge program teaching general paper. I graduated in 2022 with my master's in English from the University of West Florida in Pensacola. That same year, I participated in my first conference with the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA). This paper was published in the *South Atlantic Review* in the summer/fall double issue in September 2023, which still feels unreal! Since then, I have presented at two more SAMLA conferences. In my most current milestone—that I still must pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming—I am working on a chapter for a book Dr. Crofton is editing. I am very excited for this opportunity and cannot wait to see the final product!

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

Take advantage of everything the campus has to offer: Go to the events; visit the botanical garden; meet your classmates at Panther Dining Hall. This time is so fleeting, yet so impactful. Make the most of it, both in and out of the classroom! I cannot stress enough the importance of networking. Take the time to build your professional connections with the faculty, staff and your peers—they can become a wealth of information, support and opportunity that you never thought possible. Above all, be open-minded and curious. Higher education is meant to challenge us and push us intellectually. Keeping that willingness to try and to learn makes you all the more successful and happy.

PANTHERS ON THE RISE

1 PAUL CECALA '85 A.S., '85, was honored at the [2025 Alumni Awards Gala](#) as part of a new initiative celebrating alumni-owned businesses. Cecala is founder of Cecala Career Consultants, a career development and coaching firm that has helped more than 3,000 clients navigate career changes and launch their professional paths.

A certified global career development facilitator and author, Cecala has been coaching since 1999. Before establishing his firm, he spent 12 years in corporate aviation, working for FlightSafety International, K-C Aviation and Jet Aviation and later, serving as vice president of aircraft charter sales for Atlantic Aviation.

In addition to his professional achievements, Cecala remains closely connected to Florida Tech. He serves on the [College of Psychology and Liberal Arts \(COPLA\) Advisory Board](#) and received the [COPLA Outstanding Alumni Award](#) in 2022.

2 PAMELA NABORS

'89 M.S., president and CEO of CareerSource Central Florida, was named the 2025 Toni Jennings Workforce Development Professional of the Year by the Florida Economic Development Council. The award is given annually to recognize the achievements of an outstanding workforce developer in Florida.

In addition to the statewide recognition, Nabors was included in *Orlando Magazine*'s list of the 50 Most Powerful People in Orlando for 2025.

Nabors has led CareerSource Central Florida since 2012, guiding efforts to connect job seekers and employers across the region. With more than 30 years of experience

in workforce development, she has built a career focused on expanding access to opportunity and supporting sustainable economic growth throughout Central Florida.

3 JENNIFER MORGAN

'90 M.S., '92 Psy.D., received the National Academy of Neuropsychology's 2025 Tresa Roebuck Spencer Award for Excellence in Advocacy. The award recognizes individuals who have exhibited dedication and excellence in advocacy for neuropsychology as a science and practice.

Morgan, who practices in Richmond, Virginia, works in an outpatient clinical setting and has been a member of the National Academy of Neuropsychology's Professional Affairs and Information Committee since 2005. She also serves on several advisory groups within the American Psychological Association.

Active in her state psychological association since the late 1990s, Morgan currently chairs the Regulatory Affairs and Healthcare Benefits committees and serves on the Diversity and Awards committees.

4 BETH GITLIN '14 M.S., '19 Ph.D., was recognized at the [2025 Alumni Awards Gala](#) as part of a new initiative celebrating alumni-owned businesses. Gitlin is the founder and principal of BJJ Global Consulting, where she focuses on executive coaching, strategic planning and leadership development.

Before founding her consulting firm, Gitlin served as executive director of the [weVENTURE Women's Business Center](#) (WBC) at Florida Tech. During her tenure, she led the launch of formal mentoring initiatives,

such as [IGNITE 360](#), designed to support women entrepreneurs through guided business growth programs.

Under Gitlin's leadership, weVENTURE WBC earned recognition from the U.S. Small Business Administration as a [Regional Women's Business Center of Excellence in 2015](#). The year before, she was named the SBA's [2014 Small Business Advocate of the Year for Florida](#).

5 ALLY JAIME

'24 M.S., a former Florida Tech scholar-athlete and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fellow, returned to campus to serve as master of ceremonies for the [2025 Alumni Awards Gala](#).

Jaime earned her bachelor's degree in [meteorology](#) with a minor in [communication](#), followed by a fast-track master's degree in [global strategic communication](#). Recognized for her academic excellence, she was named Florida Tech Outstanding Student of the Year in both programs for [2023](#) and [2024](#).

As a [member](#) of the [women's soccer team](#), Jaime balanced her athletic and academic commitments while developing an interest in science communication and environmental resilience. She now works in coastal resilience, continuing to apply her communication and scientific expertise to help protect coastal communities.

6 SAVANNAH WILSON

'23, '25 M.S., was awarded the [Student Leadership Award](#) during the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) convention.

Wilson credits her involvement as project manager for the [Behavioral Performance Coaching](#) (BPC) program with honing

her leadership abilities. The BPC is an interdepartmental collaboration between the [School of Behavior Analysis](#) (SoBA) and [Florida Tech esports](#).

Wilson's role with BPC included overseeing a dozen volunteers working across 20 different projects. She led weekly group meetings, performed private check-ins with struggling students and ensured prompt project updates.

[COPLA](#) instructors and mentors, including [Mark Harvey](#), [Kaitlynn Gokey](#) and [Jonathan Fernand](#), helped shape the experiences that led to her leadership success, she said.

7 MADELINE MARASCO

'25 fresh off earning her bachelor's degree in [psychology with a concentration in animal learning and behavior](#), has joined National Encounters Inc. as a macaw trainer at Disney's Animal Kingdom.

The opportunity came sooner than she expected, Marasco said, because of the competitive nature of the field. But she credits her work in the classroom and animal behavior research under [Darby Proctor](#) and [Catherine Talbot](#) for her success. With them, she gained hands-on experience at [Brevard Zoo](#) and through the university's [Roach Lab](#).

Marasco hopes to continue working in animal care and training, with a long-term goal of specializing in marine animals. She said she chose Florida Tech for its [animal learning and behavior concentration](#)—a program not widely available elsewhere—and for the research and hands-on opportunities that helped launch her career.

