

Department of Communication



Empowering Voices: University of Illinois launches new Speakers Workshop

by Lindsey Bruneman

By leveraging the Department of Communication's expertise, the University of Illinois' new Speakers Workshop is furthering the university's mission of producing graduates who exemplify professionalism, authenticity, and leadership.

The director of the workshop, **Laura Stengrim**, brings more than 20 years of experience as a scholar and practitioner in speaking and writing centers. She is tasked with expanding it into a widely used service for the entire campus community.

Stengrim, who spent eight years as the faculty director of the nationally-recognized Speaking Center at the University of Southern Mississippi, rejoins the university (MA, 2003, writing studies; PhD, 2016, communication) as an associate teaching professor in the Department of Communication.

"Since I have connections on campus already, it turned out to be a really good fit," said Stengrim.

The workshop was developed in collaboration with the university and the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences to connect with as many campus units as possible. Inclusion is a key value of the workshop as it strives to create campus-wide opportunities.

So far this year, the workshop has already hosted several events with the University Library, including mental health-themed workshops on overcoming apprehension

and anxiety in public speaking. Regular one-on-one consultations, mock presentations, and faculty development sessions are also offered for more tailored advice.



Laura Stengrim

The workshop's team also collaborated with the Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism to facilitate a workshop aimed at helping first year student-athletes develop professional communication skills. It has also provided programming for Student Affairs' First-Generation Student Initiatives, students in the Grainger College of Engineering, the College of Fine and Applied Arts, and Illinois Extension, among others.

To ensure that the workshop's services are accessible to everyone on campus, they have expanded and set up locations in the Armory building, Main Library, Grainger Library, and the College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences Funk Library. They also offer virtual consultations to make their services more accessible.

"It was a missing piece of the broader campus puzzle," said **Wallace Golding**, a communication doctoral candidate.

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Wallace Golding

In August 2022, Wallace directed the Speakers Workshop's pilot program, then named the Speaking Center, which was created in partnership with the University Library. With support from the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Stengrim and her team are tasked with expanding that program into a student

success initiative aimed at serving the entire university community.



Lauren Johnson

Wallace has been working alongside fellow communication PhD candidates **Lauren Johnson** and **Nicole Campbell** to lead outreach and administrative efforts.

Campbell explained that the workshop strives to provide the essential support that students need to aim high and pursue excellence, reflecting the university's core values.

"We are creating the qualities that are going to help them reach that standard and have success beyond Illinois," said Campbell.

While the workshop offers several services for all members of the campus community, the primary



Nicole Campbell

objective is for students to become confident and authentic public speakers.

"The heart of this kind of work is a safe environment and space for people to express doubts or fear, and also celebrate growth," said Stengrim.

Stengrim explained that the Speakers Workshop is committed to pushing back against traditional assumptions and redefining what constitutes a good speaker. The workshop works to empower people of all backgrounds and increase representation across a broader range of gender, race, and ability in public speaking. It is staffed by a diverse team of graduate and undergraduate peer-consultants from a variety of majors, who participate in ongoing trainings on communication and peer-to-peer teaching and learning.

She hopes for current students to find a strong community, similar to what alumni appreciate from their years on campus — a place for individuals to flourish while making meaningful connections.

The role of the workshop, Golding explained, is not to fit individuals into a mold, but to mold individuals into their strongest selves by building on their existing skills.

"This is about helping students cultivate their own voices," said Golding.

Department welcomes new faculty members



Rebecca Guyette joined the department as an adjunct instructor. Guyette, who earned an MA in communication from the University of Illinois, teaches the new course "Leading Nonprofits" and has spent over two decades working in the local nonprofit sector.



Carol Lombardi joined the department as an adjunct instructor. Lombardi has degrees in communication, psychology, and journalism, and teaches journalism and communication at University of Illinois Laboratory High School.



Matea Mustafaj joined the department as an assistant professor. Mustafaj, who studies communication and media, earned her PhD from the University of Michigan.



Laura Stengrim joined the department as an associate teaching professor and the founding director of the Speakers Workshop at the University of Illinois. Stengrim, who earned both a master's and PhD from the University of Illinois, rejoined the university from the University of Southern Mississippi, where she served as the director of the university's Speaking Center.



Joseph Trujillo-Falcón joined the department as a distinguished postdoctoral research associate in partnership with the Department of Climate, Meteorology, and Atmospheric Sciences. Trujillo-Falcón earned a PhD in risk communication

from the University of Oklahoma and has conducted research for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Weather Service.

Become a mentor

Whether you've had a lot of experience or you're at the beginning of your professional career, you can be a big help to an undergraduate student just by sharing your experience and insights. Our new mentorship program matches undergraduate communication majors with department alumni to help students navigate the transition between college and the professional world.

Got internships?

Communication students eager for real-world experience can earn course credit for internships that put them to work in a supervised learning setting. Employers who partner with us report benefitting from our students' skills and from evaluating on-the-job performance of potential employees.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE about how to participate in these programs, please contact Leanne Cunningham by emailing comm-internships@illinois.edu.



Travis Dixon named David L. Swanson Professor of Communication

By Felipe De La Guerra

In a ceremony hosted by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, communication professor **Travis Dixon** was honored as the new David L. Swanson Professor of Communication.

Dixon, whose research focuses on the prevalence and impact of stereotypes in mass media, was recognized for his exceptional scholarship, mentorship, and teaching throughout his accomplished career.

The professorship honors David Swanson, who was a professor in the Department of Communication from 1972 until he passed away in 2004. Swanson was a pioneering researcher, helping to create the interdisciplinary field of political communication. Known for his wit and dedication to exceptional scholarship and academic ideals, Swanson had a profound and lasting impact on the University of Illinois as a professor and mentor, department head, and associate provost.

Continuing that tradition of groundbreaking scholarship, Dixon's research has been published in leading communication journals, featured in popular communication methods textbooks, and has earned him numerous top paper awards from the National Communication Association (NCA) and the International Communication Association (ICA).

"I know David Swanson would be exceedingly pleased to have such a prominent scholar of media and socially important issues on our faculty, and even more pleased for him to be supported in this way," said department head **John Caughlin**.

Dixon, who also serves as the director of graduate studies in the Department of Communication, received his bachelor's degree in communication studies from UCLA before earning a master's and doctorate from the University of California, Santa Barbara.



Professor Dixon poses with university leadership in his investiture ceremony. From left: Reitumetse Mabokela, Travis Dixon, Venetria K. Patton, and John Caughlin.

Mary Beth Oliver, professor of media studies at Penn State University, described Dixon as a visionary who is passionate about social justice in a field still lacking diversity.

"He is a scholar that truly understands the power of research to expose social injustice, who works tirelessly to be a voice for those who are oppressed, and who envisions a world filled with compassion, respect, and love," she said.

Despite facing adversity throughout his career, Dixon succeeded as a student, scholar, and trailblazer. At UC Santa Barbara, he became the first Black scholar to receive a doctorate from the Department of Communication. At the University of Illinois, he was the first Black scholar to receive tenure and become a full professor in the department. In 2019, he was inducted as the first Black ICA Fellow, one of the highest honors in the field of communication.

Dixon expressed his gratitude, not only for being honored with this professorship, but for the

people who helped him overcome challenges he faced throughout his life and academic career.

"I have tried to be a trailblazer and uplift others — specifically the oppressed and downtrodden — with my work. I want my work to be good and a catalyst for positive social change, and that's what I'm going to use this opportunity to do," he said.

"I want to continue to be an academic explorer, trailblazer and lifter and I ask all of you to hold me accountable and encourage me to help others."

Dixon's impact as a mentor for graduate students was also celebrated. **Marisa Smith** (PhD, '20, communication) shared messages from Dixon's former students and described how his mentorship helped shape her academic career.



In her speech, Marisa Smith shared messages of gratitude from several of Dixon's former students.

Smith, now a professor at Michigan State University, concluded her remarks by stating that Dixon's accomplishments go well beyond what appears on a CV.

"Travis' accolades precede him: 6,989 citations for his phenomenal work, grant awards, countless invited



In his acceptance speech, Dixon recalled the challenges he faced, as well as those who supported him throughout his academic journey.

lectures, ICA fellow, and soon to be David L. Swanson Professor of Communication," she said.

"However, his students and advisees represent what these accolades cannot convey. Travis has empathy; guidance; a loving and affirming spirit; the ability to critique with compassion; an ability to recognize and meet people's needs; the ability to stand in the gap for others and have their back; and, most of all, the ability to sustain support well past when his students have graduated.

"On behalf of your advisees — past and present — thank you, Travis."

Brilliant white male characters more believable, some viewers say in communication professor's study

By Sharita Forrest

Brilliant characters often play key roles in movies and TV shows. However, when they are played by women and people of color, some viewers dismiss them as unrealistic, even if they portray real people and events, a recent study found.

Communication professor **Matea Mustafaj** found that people who strongly endorsed racial and gender stereotypes about intelligence were more likely to believe that stories featuring brilliant Black or female protagonists, such as the mathematicians that helped launch the U.S. space program in the "Hidden Figures," were unrealistic compared with those featuring white male protagonists, such as the Bobby Fischer character in the "Pawn Sacrifice."

Participants viewed clips from American TV shows or movies that featured brilliant main characters and were asked whether they were typical of people with these abilities.

Viewers who endorsed intelligence-related stereotypical beliefs rated white male characters as more typical of geniuses in the broader population than Black people of either sex or white women. These findings were published in *Media Psychology*.

The more strongly that participants believed in intelligence-related stereotypes, the greater their perceptions that brilliant characters

that were white women or Black people of either sex were atypical in real life.

These individuals' perceptions of how common or usual a viewer believed an event or character representation to be strongly predicted whether they found counter-stereotypical characters realistic. However, it did not affect their perceptions of realism with the white male protagonists, Mustafaj and co-author University of Michigan communication and media professor Sonya Dal Cin found.

To assess beliefs in stereotypes about intelligence, participants were presented with photos of 16 different faces and asked to indicate the extent to which each could portray different traits, some of which were related to intelligence, in a TV show.

Some prior studies suggested that entertainment media featuring diverse actors in counter-stereotypical roles offered opportunities to mitigate viewers' existing biases and stereotypical beliefs.

However, the potential to change viewers' beliefs may be undermined if they dismiss the characters or



Matea Mustafaj poses in front of stills from films and TV shows used in the study. (Photo by Fred Zwicky)

the plot as unrealistic. This may be particularly relevant with fictional stories or characters that viewers know are not fact-based, Mustafaj and Dal Cin wrote.

"When people view entertainment media with counter-stereotypical representations that conflict with their beliefs, they will sometimes find ways to discount that information and not incorporate it into their understanding of people in the world in the way that theory might suggest," Mustafaj said.

The researchers also explored whether perceptions that the media intended to persuade them to think a certain way created barriers to changing their beliefs. According to the study, those who embraced stereotypes and viewed clips about characters from nonrepresentative groups associated persuasive intent with the brilliant Black male character only. However, viewers' perceptions of persuasive intent diminished their sense of realism with the white female character only.

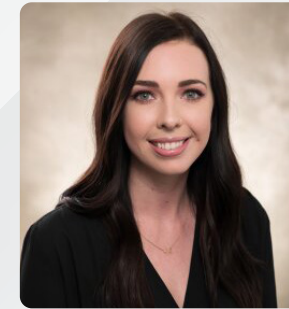
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Graduate student research on abortion disclosure earns NCA's top student paper award



Emily Mendelson

Doctoral students **Emily Mendelson** and **Megan Jacobs Farnworth** were awarded the Donald P. Cushman Memorial Award by the National Communication Association for their essay titled "Disclosure-Related Social Support and Reappraisals as a Result of Sharing Abortion Experiences with Close Others." The award honors the top-ranked student-authored paper from all NCA units that competitively rank papers for programming at the NCA Annual Convention.



Megan Jacobs Farnworth

Their study, in which they interviewed 30 people who had an abortion, found that participants decided whether or not to disclose their pregnancies or abortions based on their anticipated response. Those that needed social support to find abortion-related resources were more likely to share with others, unlike those who feared stigmatizing responses.

"Based on how others responded to these abortion-related disclosures, participants were able to think more positively about their decision to pursue an abortion, and they felt closer to the person they sought support

from, especially those who were helpful and not stigmatizing in their responses," said Mendelson.

"Ultimately, our study emphasizes the importance of providing non-stigmatizing responses when individuals disclose health concerns to others."

Other student projects to receive awards from NCA units this year include:

- **Elinor Fujimoto's** paper "Who (Specifically) is Persuaded by Gain- and Loss-Framed Messages? A Meta-Analytic Comparison of Regulatory Focus and BIS/BAS" in the Communication and Social Cognition Division
- **Wallace Golding's** paper "Of Rights and Land: Tensions in Black Freedom Rhetoric and Restoration After the Civil War" in the Public Address Division
- **Emily Mendelson's** paper "The Communicative Disenfranchisement of Disabled Individuals During Healthcare Appointments: Material Ramifications of Inaccessible Talk and Space," co-authored with Charee Thompson, in the Health Communication Division
- **Ethan Morrow's** paper "Scamming Higher Ed: An Analysis of Phishing Content and Trends" in the Human Communication and Technology Division

Brilliant characters continued

"While a viewer might perceive the inclusion of a counter-stereotypical character as an attempt to influence their beliefs, they may still find the character or story to be accurate," Mustafaj said.

Despite the plethora of entertainment media and greater use of diverse actors in nonstereotypical roles, consumers' likelihood of exposure to content conflicting with their views may not be greater, the researchers found in an earlier study, in which viewers who endorsed gender-based stereotypes about intelligence were

less likely to choose shows that subverted their stereotypical beliefs.

This suggests that the people who might benefit the most from exposure to diverse representations were unlikely to choose to view them, Mustafaj said.



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