Summer 2022

Communiqué: College of Humanities, Arts & Sciences Alumni Magazine, Volume 10, Summer 2022

University of Northern Iowa. College of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences.
Communiqué: College of Humanities, Arts & Sciences Alumni Magazine, Volume 10, Summer 2022

Description
In this issue:

EVERY ISSUE
Message from the Dean ---- 4
Donor Feature ---- 5
CHAS Briefs ---- 38
New Faculty ---- 42
Class Notes ---- 44

FEATURES
Photographing Art ---- 6
Video Games Meet Neuroscience ---- 10
James Webb Telescope ---- 14
Meskwaki Soil Testing ---- 18
Actuarial Science Grad ---- 34

STORIES
Speech Therapy in Africa ---- 22
Diversity in Theatre ---- 24
Curating a Crab Collection ---- 26
Working on a COVID Drug ---- 28
Women in STEM ---- 29
Speech & Debate Success ---- 30
Opera-Singing Sensation ---- 32
Historic NAR Team ---- 40
Benitez Wins Fellowship ---- 43

Keywords
University of Northern Iowa. College of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences--Periodicals;

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Higher Education | Physical Sciences and Mathematics

Publisher
College of Humanities, Arts & Sciences; University of Northern Iowa
Clockwise from upper left: Fiddler crabs await sorting before delivery to the American Museum of Natural History; Debate team members prepare their arguments; An Earth and Environmental Science student shows the results of collecting soil for testing; A therapy session at a Community Care Center in Zambia where alumna Jessica Mwanza works to help children with their speech.
This year has been a particularly special one for our college, as we celebrated 10 years since our founding in the summer of 2011.

Looking back on the last 10 years, I’m incredibly proud of all that we’ve accomplished. Together, our faculty, staff, students, and supporters have created an environment teeming with interdisciplinary collaboration. We have produced outstanding research; broken down barriers; we have challenged ourselves to solve problems creatively; and we have built experiences that have changed our students’ lives for the better.

I’m most proud of our alumni. In the last 10 years, we awarded an incredible 10,000 degrees to undergraduate and graduate students. Across the country, and even the globe, our alumni are making a difference in their workplaces, communities and households.

Every day, I think about what those degrees mean. Every day, there is a CHAS alum who’s getting a promotion at work. Every day, a CHAS alum is a better parent because of the experiences they had in our college. Every day, CHAS alums are working on lifesaving medicines, making world-class music, and building hospitals, houses and office complexes. Every day, I try to take a moment to reflect on the accomplishments of our alumni, students, and faculty. At the end of a challenging day, I find it refreshing to remember the beauty of these achievements.

This issue of Communiqué showcases the unique, inspiring stories of our alumni, our students, our faculty and our programs. You can read how one alumni helped launch the James Webb Space Telescope into space, or see how UNI helped a music student fulfill her dreams of singing opera in New York. Learn about how our undergraduate research programs are making an impact on communities around Iowa, and hear about a new program to bring artists from underrepresented backgrounds to campus in an effort to create equitable theater.

Experiences like these are some of the many reasons I’m proud to work at UNI. When I get to hear about the accomplishments of our students and alumni, I always am happy to know that our outstanding faculty challenged, supported and guided students to their next stage of life.

We have much to be proud of over the last 10 years and much to look forward to. Thank you for being a part of CHAS, now and always.

John Fritch, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences
Applied Engineering Building Moves Forward

In 1974, UNI built a facility to educate future shop teachers. It was considered a national model. Today, our students need a facility to meet the current and future employment needs of education as well as construction and manufacturing, two of Iowa’s most significant industries. The new and modernized spaces will enhance opportunities for collaborative, hands-on learning with industry standard equipment to better serve students. It will also be a facility that will enhance the department’s ability to recruit and retain the very best faculty and staff.

Citing more than $10 million in deferred maintenance, building systems that cannot support the department’s technology-heavy equipment needs and a significant shortage of space for today’s active learning culture, UNI asked the state for support to modernize and expand the facility. Thanks to the lobbying efforts of alumni, faculty, business and industry, the State of Iowa agreed to UNI’s request for $40 million to fund a modernization project will update and expand the facility. The new Applied Engineering Building will serve the needs of today’s students and ensure UNI’s Department of Applied Engineering & Technical Management can prepare Iowa’s industry leaders for tomorrow.

Along with the state budget allocation came a $4.2 million fundraising charge. Fundraised dollars will ensure that UNI will have a fully equipped and outfitted state of the art facility to prepare a skilled, professional workforce that tomorrow needs. Private support will provide the extra measure of excellence for the facility’s unique furnishings, finishes, technology and equipment needs that state dollars won’t stretch to provide. We are 65% of the way toward our goal. When you or your business invest in this project, you are helping to support the next generation workforce. There are a variety of naming opportunities available to recognize your support. Contact Dean John Fritch (john.fritch@uni.edu or 319-273-2725) or Cassie Luze at the UNI Foundation (cassie.luze@uni.edu or 319-273-6360) to learn more about giving opportunities.

“\nThe support of the AEB Modernization project is crucial to ensuring the quality of the facility matches the quality of education UNI Department of Applied Engineering and Technical Management students receive. Together we can realize UNI’s vision of becoming Iowa’s premier educator in these ever-evolving, high-need fields.”

- John Fritch, Dean

Donor Spotlight

Mansfield Charitable Foundation

The Mansfield Charitable Foundation’s gift of $150,000 to the modernization project aligns with the Foundation’s mission of supporting STEM education in Iowa, primarily in areas in and near Tama and Benton counties. Wesley Mansfield was a Nebraska native who had significant business interests in Tama and Belle Plaine. Wesley and his wife Irene provided for the creation of the Mansfield Foundation through their estates nearly 40 years ago as a way of giving back to the communities where they had experienced career success. The Mansfield Foundation has supported other initiatives at UNI, including the McLeod Center, the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center and the Human Performance Center.
Preserving the past, building a future

UNI photography grad finds passion in digital curation
Working with a piece of art by one of these icons could easily be considered a career highlight for many. But for Anastasia Parsons (BFA, ’19), handling these masterworks was just another day on the job.

Shortly after graduating from the UNI Department of Art, Parsons had the unique opportunity to work as a collections photographer for the UNI Gallery of Art. In her role, she spent nearly two years photographing the gallery’s 4,000-object Permanent Art Collection for its digital database.

“It’s crazy to say that I was photographing works by Picasso, or Rembrandt,” Parsons said. “I also handled works from Andy Warhol and Yoko Ono. These are really important pieces of art, so it was definitely a highlight of my time at UNI.”

Parsons says she’s always been interested in the cross sections of art, history and photography, so when the opportunity to combine her passions as a collections photographer arose, she didn’t hesitate.

“Everything sort of just fell into place with this opportunity,” she said.

As an undergrad at UNI, Parsons studied photography, and was involved with the early stages of the museum studies certificate – taking coursework on conservation, collection care and curation. She also interned and held various positions at the UNI Gallery of Art – working her way up the ladder from front desk work to curating her first collection.

During her junior year, Parsons was invited to join the Friends of the UNI Permanent Art Collection and Gallery board as a student representative. Eventually, she was involved in discussions about shifting the Permanent Art Collection from its old database into a searchable format on the gallery’s website.
Of course, this meant that the majority of the 4,000 items in the collection would need to be photographed, organized and tagged, with descriptions written for each entry. With this in mind, the Friends of the UNI Permanent Art Collection and Gallery fully funded a Collection Photographer position, which Parsons applied for, and was eventually awarded.

She spent the next 22 months learning the ropes of her new position.

“Because this was a brand new position, there was a lot of trial and error, and I had to teach myself a lot of things,” she said. “I didn’t start out as a studio photographer. I did mostly natural light work, so I had to relearn how to use studio lighting. A lot of the objects are behind glass frames, so figuring out how to photograph them without glare was tricky, but there’s a fix for everything.”

One of the highlights for Parsons was getting to know the collection better, and getting an inside look at the artists she had studied in class.

“I was so thankful for the opportunity to work so intimately with the Permanent Art Collection,” she said. “I had already learned about object care and management through my classes and work in the gallery, but in my two years as a collections photographer, I learned so much more than I would’ve learned just in class.”

While these priceless works of art might be off-limits for students at other institutions, the UNI Gallery of Art prides itself on trusting students – and recent grads like Parsons – and empowering them to do important work.

“One of the highlights for Parsons was getting to know the collection better, and getting an inside look at the artists she had studied in class.

“I was so thankful for the opportunity to work so intimately with the Permanent Art Collection,” she said. “I had already learned about object care and management through my classes and work in the gallery, but in my two years as a collections photographer, I learned so much more than I would’ve learned just in class.”

While these priceless works of art might be off-limits for students at other institutions, the UNI Gallery of Art prides itself on trusting students – and recent grads like Parsons – and empowering them to do important work.

“We have these objects for the purpose of education. If students can’t learn from the objects, they don’t have a lot of use to us really. In the end, the market value of these objects is not important – it’s the educational value they bring to our students that matters.”

Thousands of photos later, Parsons managed to make it through two thirds of the collection – no small feat.
“Anastasia did such outstanding work, and really, the outcome was better than I could have hoped for,” he said. “We keep adding new objects to the collection – even two additions just this week – so I don’t think we’ll ever fully ‘catch up’ on getting everything digitized. But, Anastasia’s work was invaluable, and I’m really thankful that we had such a great student like her to work on this project with us.”

Currently, Parsons is weighing grad school options, while working as a library assistant at the Cedar Falls Public Library.

“I’d like to go to grad school, either for museum studies and art history or art history and library sciences,” she said. “Working at the gallery and with the permanent art collection was a great experience for me both personally and professionally. I really appreciated being given the freedom to take charge, and self direct the whole project. I was given a lot of trust, and my ideas were respected, even as an undergrad. I think these experiences will definitely play into my future career, no matter what I decide to do.”
UNI alum uses computer science expertise to tackle neuroscience research
Video game developer and UNI computer science alum Felix Gonda helped develop EA’s “Madden NFL,” “FIFA,” and “Medal of Honor,” Steven Spielberg’s “Boom Blox” puzzle game, and Disney’s “Epic Mickey: 2” game.

Now, he’s using his gaming expertise to tackle a new challenge: neuroscience research. Through his work as a Ph.D student at Harvard University’s School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Gonda is conducting research in the area of Connectomics – a field that uses artificial intelligence to build digital reconstructions showing how synapses and neurons connect in the brain.

“The fields of video gaming and neuroscience are obviously very different, but it’s been interesting to see them come together in this project,” Gonda said. “I’m in computer science, and the people I work with are neuroscientists, trained in medical biology. By working together to understand how the brain functions, we can build better algorithms, so it’s beneficial to my field in a lot of ways.”

Specifically, Gonda’s work focuses on proofreading and error detection in these digital reconstructions. “Computation is never perfect, it’s not guaranteed 100 percent,” he said. “We don’t want our scientists to draw conclusions on data with errors. Even if it’s 95 percent accurate, they could still interpret it in a way that they get the wrong conclusion. So, we add proofreading – a human expert between the computer and the neuroscientist. This person fixes the errors in the data. It’s a tedious process, and would take years and years to fix a small dataset, so we’re creating an automation process to fix the errors faster.”

Gonda is drawing on techniques from gaming to solve the issue. Now, instead of looking at all of the data, the algorithm will detect errors ahead of time, so the proofreader only needs to look at the small amount of data containing errors, instead of the whole set.
Another goal of his is to make the database visually interesting and easy to navigate, so the proofreader will be more apt to spend time with the tool like they would with a video game.

In 2020, Gonda’s innovative work earned him a Future Leadership in Computing Alliance Fellowship from the Center for Minorities and People with Disabilities IT and Google Research. The fellowship provides a $25,000 award for his research.

Through it all, from years of working in the video game industry, to going back to school to pursue his Ph.D at Harvard, to his Connectomics work, Gonda says his undergraduate years at UNI have been a fundamental part of his experiences.

“In high school I really enjoyed math, like geometry and trigonometry. Problem solving was something I really enjoyed,” he said. “When I came to UNI, my dad really wanted me to study business, but it didn’t have the level of math that I wanted. Instead, I saw that computer science challenged me and matched the experience I wanted. Computer science gives you a way to build something interactive, and to see it come to life. There’s no greater high than that.”

Gonda says he thrived in the small school environment, and enjoyed being able to conduct undergraduate research.

His advisor, Eugene Wallingford – head of the computer science department – had a particularly strong role in Gonda’s professional development.

“Eugene was always great,” he said. “It was so easy to talk to him if I was having issues, and he was always there to give advice. He was a great mentor to me, and he’s always kept in touch with me after graduation.”

Wallingford, in turn, says: “Felix is the sort of student who makes being a teacher so wonderful. I enjoyed working with him in class and in his research, but the real privilege was getting to know Felix as a person and watching him grow. I’m really proud of all he has accomplished. UNI makes it possible for students like Felix to explore their strengths.”

After successfully defending his dissertation in May of 2021, Gonda was awarded his Ph.D from Harvard, and now holds a position as Visiting Fellow at the institution.

His newest project? A start-up company that is designing professional lighting technology for videographers, live streamers, and video-conference companies. The company, Allumique, is working to build a new camera technology that better represents skin tones in real-time settings.

“There’s a problem that’s existed for a long time where people of darker skin tones are not represented well in digital technology,” Gonda says. “For example, in Zoom, if I don’t have my space lit properly, the default setting doesn’t reflect a darker skin tone properly. It’s a real-world issue that hasn’t been solved, but I’m putting together a team that’s going to work on addressing it.”

After initial research and product-market fit, Allumique was successful in receiving funding from a private investor to develop the technology. Gonda says the team is very excited to receive the funds and is working hard to achieve its next milestone, beta. Looking to the future, Gonda says he will keep pushing himself and searching for the next challenge.

“I’ve always had a burning desire to find the next big thing,” he said. “I’m ready to explore new ideas, and follow my own vision, wherever it takes me.”
Between neuroscience research, video game development, and a start up company, Gonda has built a unique skillset for himself.
REACHING for the STARS

The UNI alum and astrophysicist behind James Webb Space Telescope launch
THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE FINAL FRONTIER ARE ABOUT TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED, THANKS IN PART TO A UNI PHYSICS ALUM.

On the brink of discovery
Since the earliest days of civilization, humans have searched for meaning in the stars and wondered if there is life beyond Earth. Now, we’re moving one step closer to uncovering one of life’s greatest mysteries, thanks in part to the work of UNI Department of Physics alum Christopher Stark.

Stark is an astrophysicist in the Exoplanets and Stellar Astrophysics Laboratory at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. Most recently, he was appointed as the Deputy Integration, Test, and Commissioning Project Scientist for NASA’s James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) – which made history in December of 2021 as the most powerful telescope to ever be launched into space.

The telescope will document the earliest stars and observe galaxies farther into our universe’s past than ever before. The impact of this work could change what we know about the universe forever, and of course, it was no easy feat for Stark and everyone else involved. “Launching was probably the most stressful thing I’ve ever done, but it was also an incredibly exciting and thrilling moment,” Stark said. “It was powerful to see, and you could feel the relief in the room once things started going well. Knowing how many people put decades of their life into this, to have it pay off was really moving.”

Now that JWST has launched, deployed, and had its hexagonal mirrors aligned to work like one large mirror, scientists and engineers are busy calibrating JWST’s scientific instruments for operation. Soon JWST will start its scientific data collection, and top astronomers around the world will compete to make observations using the telescope. “The JWST is going to unveil parts of the universe that were previously hidden,” Stark said. “We’re able to look 13 billion light years away, seeing the faintest galaxies – effectively the first galaxies ever formed. This is our first opportunity to see those parts of the universe – that’s remarkable.”

What Stark loves most about his work, he says, is being able to play a role in scientific advancement in space. “I love problem solving, and that’s really what NASA is all about – solving problems that haven’t been solved before,” he said. “I get to collaborate every day with brilliant, inspiring colleagues. I can think of no better reason to get up and go to work in the morning.”

Finding his calling
Tracing back to his early days, some might be surprised to learn that Stark didn’t have much of an interest in outer space growing up – despite having an abundance of opportunity to do so. “It’s a funny story, really,” he said. “I had every chance growing up to get interested in science and space, and I just didn’t.”

Stark grew up in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, birthplace of famous astronomer James Van Allen, who discovered the Van Allen radiation belts around Earth. “I went to Van Allen Elementary School, and my parents lived in Van Allen’s former childhood home,” he said. “My
dad led the local chamber of commerce and at one point invited a NASA astronaut to give a talk at the town fair. He ended up coming over to our house afterward for dinner and I sat in his lap for a photo and got his autograph.”

While Stark looks back on this with fondness, it wasn’t exactly a transformative experience for him. By the time he got to college, Stark wasn’t really sure of what he wanted to do with his life. He enrolled at UNI to study business – following in his older brother’s footsteps – but it wasn’t where his passion was. Eventually, Stark’s brother encouraged him to take the Physics of Everyday Life course, and that changed everything. “I was instantly enthralled,” he said. “I was learning to see the world in a way that I never had before, and applying math in ways I’d never thought of. So, I switched my major and never looked back.”

The next four years were some of the best of his life, Stark said. “I loved physics and I loved UNI,” he said. “They made a scientist out of me. They gave me all the tools I needed, taught me to think critically and objectively about the world around me, and to break down intractable problems into manageable tasks, which is a lot of what I do now,” he said. “I also had a lot of opportunities to publish papers, give talks, freely explore research opportunities, and find what inspired me. I had all of the opportunities you could imagine as an undergrad.”

Dr. Paul Shand, head of the UNI Department of Physics, was a personal mentor to Stark during his time at UNI. “Dr. Shand was exceptional, and is to this day, by far the best professor I’ve ever met. I don’t think I’m alone in saying that,” Stark said. “I researched with him for a few years, and he helped me — a former business major — navigate a completely unknown career path. Without his guidance, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Shand, in return, says he’s honored to have taught such an exemplary physicist, and person, as Stark.
Stark’s research focuses on design and optimization of missions to detect potentially Earth-like planets. In particular, he studies debris disks – the hazy clouds of dust generated by asteroids and comets around other stars. By looking at the properties of this dust and the interaction between exoplanets and disks, he’s able to infer the presence of planets around other stars.

All of his work has culminated in the launch of not only the James Webb Space Telescope, but also an exciting and fulfilling career. Looking toward the future, Stark says he’s eager to see what the JWST will discover in the furthest depths of the universe, but also what will come after JWST. “I’m very excited about what astronomers will discover a few decades from now,” he said. “That’s a long wait, but there’s good reason to be optimistic.”

Recently, the National Academy of Sciences released a 10-year review of the field of astronomy, and delivered a report to NASA with recommendations for future areas of research. Key recommendations include a future mission to image Earth-like planets around other nearby stars – something Stark strives to help see to fruition.

“Stark’s research focuses on design and optimization of missions to detect potentially Earth-like planets. In particular, he studies debris disks – the hazy clouds of dust generated by asteroids and comets around other stars. By looking at the properties of this dust and the interaction between exoplanets and disks, he’s able to infer the presence of planets around other stars.

All of his work has culminated in the launch of not only the James Webb Space Telescope, but also an exciting and fulfilling career. Looking toward the future, Stark says he’s eager to see what the JWST will discover in the furthest depths of the universe, but also what will come after JWST. “I’m very excited about what astronomers will discover a few decades from now,” he said. “That’s a long wait, but there’s good reason to be optimistic.”

Recently, the National Academy of Sciences released a 10-year review of the field of astronomy, and delivered a report to NASA with recommendations for future areas of research. Key recommendations include a future mission to image Earth-like planets around other nearby stars – something Stark strives to help see to fruition.

“Stark’s research focuses on design and optimization of missions to detect potentially Earth-like planets. In particular, he studies debris disks – the hazy clouds of dust generated by asteroids and comets around other stars. By looking at the properties of this dust and the interaction between exoplanets and disks, he’s able to infer the presence of planets around other stars.

All of his work has culminated in the launch of not only the James Webb Space Telescope, but also an exciting and fulfilling career. Looking toward the future, Stark says he’s eager to see what the JWST will discover in the furthest depths of the universe, but also what will come after JWST. “I’m very excited about what astronomers will discover a few decades from now,” he said. “That’s a long wait, but there’s good reason to be optimistic.”

Recently, the National Academy of Sciences released a 10-year review of the field of astronomy, and delivered a report to NASA with recommendations for future areas of research. Key recommendations include a future mission to image Earth-like planets around other nearby stars – something Stark strives to help see to fruition.
UNI partners with Meskwaki Nation to support food sovereignty initiative
This past year, a group of UNI Earth and Environmental Sciences students partnered with members of the Meskwaki Nation. Their goal was to support its community gardening and food sovereignty initiatives. Led by geology professor Chad Heinzel, the students were tasked with collecting and analyzing soil samples from various community garden plots around the Meskwaki land.

In total, students collected around 80 different soil samples, which are currently being analyzed at a lab on campus. The analysis will determine the overall soil health and composition, helping the Meskwaki Nation improve their soil health and crop yields.

“This is really important to the food sovereignty work we’re doing,” said Christina Blackcloud, food sovereignty coordinator for the Meskwaki Nation. “Gardening, and growing traditional foods such as corn, beans and squash, is a part of our culture. In order to grow, we need healthy soil. This analysis...
MaKayla McDonald will give us a better look at our soil health, and help us make decisions for growing. We’re happy about this partnership, and excited to see the results.”

For the students involved, it’s not only a great chance to gain research experience, but to see the real-world applications of their work. Danny Jacobo, an environmental science major, said he enjoyed being able to put his learning into practice. “I got involved with this project because I wanted to get research experience,” he said. “Instead of reading about different soils in the classroom, I got to get out into the field and touch the soil, sample it, and work with it in the lab. It’s been such a rewarding experience. The Meskwaki contacts we worked with were extremely knowledgeable too. I learned a lot from them.”

Lindsey Hubbell, an environmental resource management major, says she was able to learn a lot through the project, which has sparked her interest in new areas of the field. “Having such a broadly defined major allows me to dabble and gain experience in a variety of fields,” she said. “Because of this, I try to take any opportunity to learn a new aspect of earth science, and this was one of those opportunities. I had never done soil sampling before, so I was excited to gain that experience. Now I can say I at least know how the process works and recognize equipment field experts use. I’m really grateful for these experiences, and for how much I’ve been able to customize my learning experience at UNI.”

The results of the analysis are still in the works, but both parties agree it’s been a great partnership – one they hope to continue. Heinzel, says he feels good about the groundwork that’s been laid, and he hopes that future UNI students will have the chance to continue this partnership.

“One thing UNI excels at is that there’s a lot of support to make sure undergrads have opportunities to bring their learning beyond the classroom,” he said. “This particular partnership is also unique in that no other university students get this opportunity. It’s been a great chance for us to experience another culture, and it’s been unique to see this blend of science and culture coming together in this project.”
Top, pictured left to right: Luke Kapayou, Meskwaki ancestral farming manager; Avis Bear-Bass, Meskwaki youth education coordinator; Christina Blackcloud, Meskwaki food sovereignty coordinator; and Chad Heinzel, UNI professor of geology. Lower left: A sample of dirt is collected for testing. Lower right: UNI Environmental Resource Management major Tabby Robinson takes field notes.
Bridging gaps across an ocean

UNI alumna finds calling helping children in Africa
It wasn’t always Jessica (Cramer) Mwanza’s plan to move 8,000 miles away after college. But she had an interest in mission work, and thanks to a “divine Google search,” her career has led her to the African country of Zambia.

Mwanza graduated from UNI in 2015 with a B.A. in Communication Sciences and Disorders. She continued at UNI to get her master’s degree in Speech-Language Pathology in 2017.

After participating in mission trips during college through the Salt Company, a Christian ministry organization on campus, and taking a class with Dr. Lindsey Squires on language development in low socio-economic populations, she felt called to do work overseas. She discovered the Special Hope Network by way of an internet search and applied for employment. She was hired, sold all her belongings and moved to the Zambian capital city of Lusaka, where she currently resides.

The Special Hope Network is a faith-based organization that trains families, caregivers, educators and community leaders on how to provide quality care and inclusion to children with intellectual disabilities. They run community care centers and organize community outreach teams, all with the goal of improving the life of those children through education and to create a more inclusive society, where individuals with disabilities are welcomed in all areas of life.

Mwanza began serving the Special Hope Network as a speech language pathologist (SLP). She was one of only five SLPs in the entire country of Zambia; for comparison there were more SLPs on the team at her previous job that served three school districts in rural Iowa. In Zambia, she was holding speech therapy appointments at an outpatient clinic, but it meant she could only help 30-40 kids. Now, she’s transitioned into an educational role, where she teaches Zambian care center staff, who will in turn teach the parents and caregivers of the children, increasing the program’s reach and helping more kids.

In order to help with her new position, Mwanza turned to her former professor, Dr. Squires, and her graduate students to develop an early social skills and language assessment tool called the zDAT (Zambian Developmental Assessment Tool). The zDAT will help teachers and parents assess and treat communication delays and assist with better strategies for improving communication and social interaction skills.

The students had to research developmental milestones for sub-Saharan Africa, as there were none established specifically for Zambia. Using a variety of resources, they created the zDAT, and it’s now being translated into Nyanja and Bemba, the two most common languages spoken in Lusaka. “I’m hopeful that this tool will be really practical in helping parents.” Mwanza said. “[Dr. Squires and her students] were a tremendous help.”

As living in Zambia has been quite a transition from America, Mwanza says that one of the things she learned at UNI was how to thrive in a community. She experienced living both in the dorms and with a local family who also hosted exchange students. “That sense of how to live in a community and support each other as a community was a value that I got instilled with while I was at UNI,” Mwanza said, and it has helped her adjust to the different way of life in Zambia. She also credits her UNI professors, with their heart for serving others and class requirements of volunteering, for showing her the vast need for improved communication skills and igniting her passion in that area. “Without those experiences during my years at UNI, I don’t think I’d be where I am today.”
Theatre department’s new artist-in-residence series elevates underrepresented voices

Theatre, at its core, is meant to reflect society – to hold a mirror to the rich diversity of our nation. But it’s something the industry has struggled with historically; something that the UNI Department of Theatre has been working to improve internally over the past several years.

In an effort to elevate underrepresented voices, the UNI Department of Theatre has established a new Artist-in-Residence program, which will bring guest artists from BIPOC and underrepresented groups to interact with students through a single eight-week teaching assignment, involvement on a production team, and direct mentoring of students. “We see this series as a way to bring in people that our students need to connect with,” said Eric Lange, head of the UNI Department of Theatre. “This will give our students access to developing artists and artists from underrepresented groups. At its core, it’s about working towards diversity and equity in our department, and allowing space for voices we don’t normally have the opportunity to hear.”

The new series kicked off this spring with the department’s production of Blood at the Root by Dominique Morisseau. The play examines difficult and essential questions of race and justice, using poetry, music, and choreography to help lift up the script’s important message. To produce this performance, the department brought in its first Artist-in-Residence: Margaret Kemp. Kemp is a professor of theatre and dance at University of California, Davis, and directed the department’s performance of Blood at the Root.

As part of her residency, Kemp spent seven weeks on campus, teaching classes and offering workshops to students. “We’re very lucky to have someone like Margaret join us for this project,” Lange said. “She holds a pretty prestigious posting at UC Davis, and it’s a great opportunity for our students to work closely with a professional of her scale, and to engage in some unique learning opportunities.”

In addition to Kemp, the department brought in a host of other guest artists for the production. Adriano Cabral, assistant professor of voice and movement at the University of Nevada, provided intimacy direction and dialect coaching; Dahlek Brathwaite, an emerging spoken word artist, served as hip hop consultant; Caleb Rainey, a spoken word artist from Cedar Rapids, played one of the roles in the production; Tru Damore, a Waterloo-based choreographer specializing in hip hop dance, provided choreography for the show; and Lyrikal, a local composer from Waterloo, composed the soundtrack for the production. “We’re really excited about all of our guest artists, from around the nation and the local community, who are coming together to engage our students and to be a part of this work,” Lange said.

The department also hosted guest lecturer Lynn Nottage, who spoke at the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center in March. Nottage is a nationally-recognized playwright and a screenwriter whose work often deals with the lives of marginalized people. She is the first and only woman to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice (for her plays Ruined and Sweat). Her plays have been produced widely in the United States and throughout the world.

Nottage and Kemp’s visits were funded in part by the Hearst Endowed Lecture Series. The department’s new Artist-in-Residence Series is funded by the Department of Theatre and the UNI College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences. The Artist-in-Residence series is funded through the next six years, with new residencies every other year, in 2024, 2026 and 2028. The theatre department is also pursuing other initiatives to elevate diversity, equity and inclusion. “We’re really taking intentional efforts to promote these initiatives,” Lange said. “This involves curriculum changes, and working to incorporate practices related to equity in our production process. A lot of the effort comes out of our recently established Equity and Anti-Racism Committee. It’s a multifaceted approach, and something we’re dedicated to continuing our work on.”
Above: Performers in the UNI Department of Theatre’s production of Blood at the Root

Far left: Margaret Kemp, guest director of Blood at the Root

Left: Guest lecturer Lynn Nottage
A lifetime of work was spread across the tables of a basement biology lab in McCollum Science Hall.

Led by UNI biology professor Carl Thurman, one of the world's top experts in fiddler crab biology, a group of four students worked to curate a collection of preserved crabs for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Researchers there will incorporate the collection into the permanent holdings of the museum.

Hundreds of jars filled with thousands of specimens of fiddler crabs bobbed in an 80% alcohol solution, neatly arranged in rows and groups. The jars, collected over an almost 40-year span, will provide both a valuable research experience for the undergraduates and preserve a detailed snapshot of the species for future study.

The specimens were collected by Frank Barnwell, former chair of the department of ecology, evolution and behavior at the University of Minnesota. Barnwell, who was Thurman's advisor while he was earning his doctorate, spent almost 40 years collecting the specimens from the shores of the U.S., Mexico, Costa Rica, Caribbean Islands and Brazil, as well as southern Europe, Africa, Malaysia, the Philippines, New Guinea, Fiji and Taiwan. "Due to the time and effort put into collecting these crabs, the collection is a biological asset of immeasurable value," Thurman said.

Thurman's students painstakingly sorted through more than 7,700 crab specimens — some less than an inch in size. All told, they tabulated 64 species, winnowing almost 1,000 jars down to 566, discarding dry or redundant specimens and cataloging those that remained by count, sex, species and location collected.

When the collection is delivered to the American Museum of Natural History, it will provide future researchers with a detailed snapshot of the land crab population from 1965 to 2000, allowing them to compare the health, range and habitat of the species over time and determine...
the impacts of climate change and human interference on the species. “Land crabs are bio-indicators of environmental health,” Thurman said. “Because each species is specialized and occupies a specific niche, they indicate changes in the habitat that might not be detected by the human eye alone.”

The significance of the work is not lost on Thurman’s students. Two biology majors, sophomore Amber Finke and junior Claire Kipp, worked 40 hours a week in the lab as part of UNI’s Summer Undergraduate Research Program. The team also includes sophomore biology major Samantha Heyer and senior biology major Dee Dee Pitzen, who worked for course credits.

All four students will apply the experience in different ways, but they all noted that the research experience they were gaining — the lessons in rigorous data collection and organization — will be applicable in the future. For Pitzen, the research will help prepare her for medical school — she has plans to take the MCAT later this year. “I want to take part in clinical studies if I do become a physician and this will help me learn about data and how to organize it so it makes sense to the reader,” she said. For Finke, who is interested in pursuing a career in the biomedical field, it is an accomplishment to list on her applications to graduate school. “I’m using this as a stepping stone to figure out what research I’d like to do in the future,” Finke said. “This is also good to have on graduate school applications and things like that.”

The students all agreed that the opportunity to conduct research with Thurman has been invaluable to them. “I have friends at other universities, and they’re taught by graduate assistants,” Pitzen said. “At UNI, we’re taught by professors with Ph.Ds. So I get a lot more one-on-one time with my professors and I know that I’m getting accurate information that I need to succeed.”

At times, the work was tedious, laboriously fishing nickel-sized crab specimens out of jars hour after hour, but Thurman always reminded his team about the importance of their work. “This collection is going to a world class museum, and not many undergraduate students in the U.S. are able to do this,” Thurman said. “They’ll leave an indelible mark on science history.”
UNI alum and process chemist Patrick Fier, ’09, is leading pharma giant Merck’s large-scale production efforts on what could be a life-saving breakthrough: A drug to stop COVID from spreading in people exposed to the virus before they need to go to the hospital.

The drug, Molnupiravir, received FDA emergency use authorization in December of 2021. For those at most risk of developing severe COVID-19, pharmacists can now prescribe one pill twice a day for five days to stop the coronavirus in its tracks — before an exposed, vaccinated or unvaccinated person gets sick enough to require hospitalization. The drug can stop a person who tested positive for COVID from getting sicker. It kills off the SARS-CoV-2 virus by causing errors that prevent the virus from replicating.

Nearly 30 generic drug makers will make a low-cost, generic version of the antiviral pill and distribute it to 105 less-developed countries under a deal backed by the United Nations. “To take [the drug] as a prophylactic could be a huge game-changer, especially as the virus is mutating and potentially escaping immunity,” said Fier, a Bettendorf, Iowa native who now lives in Monroe Township, New Jersey, near Merck’s headquarters.

The breakthrough science with global life-saving potential represents quite a journey for Fier, who transferred to UNI from Scott Community College. He was recently named one of the nation’s top 12 rising stars in chemistry by the American Chemical Society, which called him a “manufacturing magician.” “[His] ability to identify the intersection between what’s important and what’s achievable is uncanny,” Fier’s doctoral mentor, John Hartwig, a chemistry professor at the University of California, Berkeley, told Chemical & Engineering News. “More chemistry is invented by him on Friday afternoons than by most people all week.”

Fier credited UNI Professor Martin Chin with serving as his mentor, showing him how to conduct lab research and organic chemistry, and encouraging Fier to attend graduate school. Chin said he noticed Fier’s attention to detail and problem-solving skill early on. “Pat’s real strength and interest is in organic synthesis,” Chin said. “I have been extremely impressed by Pat’s ability to think of and suggest different synthetic pathways to our target molecule. Pat really loved solving puzzles especially in the synthetic area of making new molecules or improving ways to make existing molecules,” Chin said.

Fier took Chin’s advice, and earned his Ph.D. in organic chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley in December 2014. Yet Fier found himself once again searching for his niche, since most organic chemistry Ph.D.s want to go into academia. His answer came when he read Merck and other pharma companies’ research — and it resonated. He figures out the very complex problems he had always dreamed of solving: How do you take simple chemicals and convert them into a drug? Fier comes up with chemical reactions that convert common things into more valuable things. His expertise proved the perfect answer to the fastest-spreading pandemic of a lifetime.

In June 2020 as COVID-19 spread like wildfire worldwide, Fier led Merck’s high-pressure effort to make Molnupiravir on a large scale — to find a way to produce 500,000 kg each year compared with a typical 500 kg first-run of an active pharmaceutical ingredient for the launch of a new drug. The challenge fit Fier’s strengths perfectly.

As Fier looks back at his UNI experience, he said he appreciates the atmosphere that let students get to know their professors and peers. And as he stepped onto the global stage amid a hugely political issue, he said, “I try not to think about the negative. I focus on those who will need the medicine and will take it.”
Two UNI alumni were honored for their contributions to the field of STEM earlier this year, through an exhibit displayed in and around the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Dr. Jennifer Stimpson (Chemistry M.A., 1996) and Dr. Raychelle Burks (Chemistry B.S., 2001) – both hailing from the UNI Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry – were among 120 select women from around the nation to be recognized in the exhibit.

“Dr. Jennifer Stimpson and Dr. Raychelle Burks left UNI on different career paths that used their chemistry knowledge,” says Bill Harwood, head of the UNI Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. “Jennifer headed into teaching and Raychelle into forensic chemistry in a crime lab. Both are excellent chemists and both are also outstanding creative storytellers, reaching audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Their work helps everyone – from children to policy makers – understand how science in general and chemistry in particular is connected to our lives,” Harwood said. “It is a joy to see where their knowledge, energy and talent has taken them.”

The exhibit, titled “#IfThenSheCan” was on display throughout March of 2022. Part of the exhibit included a 3D-printed life-size statue of each of the 120 women, highlighting female STEM innovators and leaders from around the nation, representing a variety of fields.

A veteran scientist, teacher, and community leader, Stimpson has touched the lives of countless students through her long and decorated career. She has taught both at underrepresented and highly prestigious K-12 schools; was recognized in Oprah’s “O” magazine as a STEM Visionary; and has earned countless national teaching and leadership awards. Now, Stimpson is living out the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize of fellowships for science educators: Being awarded the U.S. Department of Energy’s Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator fellowship. Through her fellowship work, Stimpson has been assigned to work in the U.S. House of Representatives, where she is advancing STEM education policy at the federal level.

From building drug and weapon-detecting tools, to teaching the next generation of chemists, Burks is making her mark in the field of STEM. Burks is an analytical chemist and associate professor of chemistry at American University in Washington, DC. After working in a crime lab for several years, Burks returned to academia, where she and her team worked to design new ways to detect drugs, explosives, and chemical weapons using smartphones. She is the co-creator of the popular speaker series SciPop Talks!, was a regular on the Science Channel’s Outrageous Acts of Science, and recently received the 2020 ACS Grady-Stack Award for Interpreting Chemistry for the Public.
That high placement rate is achieved by both teams, as the speech team has a 100% placement rate of students either working in their field or being accepted to graduate school.

Zoe Russell, a Communication Studies major who graduated in 2014, competed on the speech team all four of her undergrad years and was president of the team her senior year. “My experiences in UNI Speech helped me to get into and thrive in graduate school. At my current job, my experience with UNI Speech came up in my job interview, and I was able to showcase how the communication skills I developed through UNI Speech would serve as an asset in my position,” Russell said.

It is a testament to the talent and adaptability of both teams that they have continued to succeed despite the challenges thrown at them by COVID-19. Both saw competitions pivot over the last two years and be held virtually, but Barfield sees it as another skill the team members gained. “It was a great opportunity for students to practice engaging with people, interacting, speaking and being able to present professionally via Zoom and in a virtual environment,” Barfield said. “With an increasing number of job interviews and meetings held online, students have experience with the technology to help them advance professionally.”

This year things started to return to normal; competitions are a mix of in-person and virtual. But UNI Forensics team members will be prepared either way, ready to compete and ready to be better communicators in life after college. As former speech participant Russell attested, “Being a part of the UNI Forensics was the most formative part of my UNI experience. The skills I learned, the support I received from coaches and the relationships I made helped me to thrive in my personal and professional life.”
Above: Students from the UNI Debate Team

Right: UNI Speech Team participants pose after a competition
MaKayla McDonald, rising opera star and UNI alum, carves out a career in classical music and sets her sights on singing “everywhere.”
MaKayla McDonald’s ascendant career as a classical singer and performer was literally built from the ground up.

The University of Northern Iowa alum and Waterloo native’s first experience with musical theater came as a first-year West High School student, laying out of sight under the bleachers to hold up a microphone for a show choir soloist. Now the dynamic, up-and-coming soprano is winning lead roles in opera houses across the country.

As a Black, queer artist who grew up in poverty, it was a path she never envisioned for herself until arriving at UNI. “I knew very little of classical music before I came to UNI, but I was met with a faculty who was very open to inviting me in,” said McDonald, 28. “It was a challenging program, but I was met with open arms.”

McDonald first connected with the university through UNI-CUE’s Classic Upward Bound program, a relationship that deepened when UNI faculty who saw her high school performances invited her for trial lessons and to shadow them. A college degree wasn’t something she’d considered, but those connections drew her to UNI after high school, where she found great success on stage but also dealt with the tragic death of her father, 34, from a heart attack when she was just 16.

She learned the devastating news on the bus ride home from a performance at the Iowa High School Speech Association’s state competition. With support from her family, McDonald found solace on stage, where her voice could still soar. “It was incredibly heartbreaking,” said McDonald, who later had the name of a song her father used to sing to her tattooed on her left arm. “Every system in place to help people in my father’s position failed.”

One year later, she began auditioning at college theater departments in Chicago and Minneapolis. “What I kept getting met with was — ‘You have a beautiful voice, but have you thought about classical music?’ And I was like, ‘I don’t even know what that is,’” she said.

Those same faculty members she had met through performances encouraged her to enroll in UNI’s acclaimed opera program. McDonald earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in voice performance while working with vocal coaches including Korey Barrett.

She also flexed her academic muscles, writing and presenting a graduate paper on Black Belize-born composer Errollyn Wallen at the 2016 Iowa Musicology Conference. “It was a pleasure to serve as one of MaKayla’s mentors here at UNI, and to witness her development as a singing artist during her time here and during the years since she graduated,” Barrett said. “We at UNI are all proud of this hometown Waterloo native, and I look forward to seeing where her singing takes her in the future!”

After graduation, McDonald moved to New York, where she shared a cramped Brooklyn apartment with two close friends and fellow Panthers. She worked 14-hour days, with shifts at Starbucks and an artist’s cooperative during the day and auditioning at night.

Her first big break came a year later, when she was offered the lead role in “The Story of Harriet Tubman” with Utopia Opera. She was the title character in an all-Black cast, singing alongside artists, some of whom were soloists at the Metropolitan Opera. “I couldn’t believe it — here’s me, the one who came from Iowa singing the principal role in this opera,” she said. “That was the first time that I felt that I really, really saw myself reflected on the stage and felt like I actually can do this.”

“Opera can be elitist. Academia can be elitist,” she said. “I’m seeing now that that ideal is changing, and that you can be fat, you can be a person of color, you can be queer, you can be short. I think the idea of a principal (singer) is going to change, because there won’t be such a thing as one singular ideal anymore,” she said. “So it’s my hope that I can be a firebrand 35 year old, singing everywhere.”
Formula Success

\[
\times 4
\]
To say that Samantha Bennett made the most of her time at UNI would be an understatement.

During her four years at the university, she put in thousands of hours studying for – and acing – professional-level actuarial science exams, interning for an insurance company, volunteering at a community garden, and serving as President of the Northern Iowa Student Government – all while balancing an active social life.
Bennett says UNI and the actuarial science program helped her develop the skills and experiences needed to excel both personally and professionally, while finding new passions along the way. “Actuarial science is a notoriously challenging major. When I first started, one of my professors warned me that I’d be spending most of my time in my room studying while my friends were out. But, I still managed to get out and do a few things,” Bennett joked.

Bennett’s deep involvement on campus started when she volunteered with the student garden her freshman year. After that, she became involved in the sustainability committee, eventually working her way up to Sustainability Director for the Northern Iowa Student Government (NISG).

When former NISG President Elle Boeding (Public Relations, ’21) ended her term, she encouraged Bennett to run for President. “When she suggested I run, I thought ‘that’s funny,’ but she was serious,” Bennett said. “It was never something I envisioned for myself, but it was a great opportunity to improve the lives of other students on campus, and I couldn’t say no.”

“When I first told my friends and classmates about my campaign, I think they were a little worried if I’d have time for everything, but they were all super supportive,” she said. Between the long study sessions and rigorous exams, Bennett launched her campaign for NISG President.

“I’d learned a lot of time management and balance skills through actuarial science, and those really paid off,” she said. “While I was running this campaign I was also studying for my last actuarial science exam, and I think it made me study even harder because I had the mentality that failing isn’t an option. A lot of people get a six or a seven on this test, but I got nine, which is pretty close to a perfect score.”

Bennett landed the role of NISG President, with public relations major Alisanne Struck serving as her Vice President, and the two immediately got to work. One of the biggest things Bennett focused on during her term was advocating for mental health resources for student athletes. “Two of my actuarial science classmates and study partners were student athletes, and if I thought my schedule was rigorous, theirs was even worse,” she said. “They were studying for the same exams as me, completing the same projects as me, but they were also training, and competing and traveling around with long hours on a bus. The level of stress is so high as a student athlete, and I wanted to make sure they had access to mental health resources that fit into their busy schedules.”

Bennett devised a plan to provide focused mental health resources to student athletes, utilizing her mathematical background to analyze a vast array of statistical data in support of her cause. “Directly and indirectly, my actuarial science background led me to this cause that I became very passionate about, and really fueled my work as President,” she said. “I feel really proud of the work I’ve done, and I think we’ve developed a really solid plan that could help a lot of people.”

This spring, Bennett presented her Honors Thesis over her work on mental health advocacy for student athletes, before passing the project on to the next NISG administration.

Looking back on her time at UNI, Bennett says it was the small, supportive campus community that really made a difference for her, and helped her excel. “Even before I was a committed Panther, I got to experience the personal attention that makes UNI stand out,” she said. “During my visit, Syed Kirmami [an actuarial science professor], sat down with me in his office and spent an hour out of his own time telling me about the program.”

That personal attention didn’t stop there either. Bennett said the close connections with faculty and classmates were invaluable to her.
“I’d say Syed has been a really great mentor, and I owe a lot to him,” she said. “He’s continued to advocate for me as much as he could, helping me build connections on campus, connecting me with opportunities. It meant a lot to me, and really made a difference. Before I even showed up to a career fair, he had already told several companies about me. It’s that personal attention I feel fortunate enough to get, and it’s just one of the many ways UNI and professors go above and beyond to help set people up for success. I’ve also formed such a strong support group with my classmates, and made some of my best friends through the program.”

Bennett said UNI is the type of place that makes it easy to pursue opportunities, and to find new passions. “As a mid-sized campus, we have more opportunities than a bigger school,” she said. “Maybe quantity-wise there are more at a larger school, but the quality is better here. You’re more likely to have personal connections with professors, classmates and people on campus that lead to amazing opportunities. I probably wouldn’t have been President at Iowa State, or Iowa, but here, I had that opportunity and I’m really grateful for that.”

“Through my time here, I’ve experienced such personal growth, a sharpening of abilities, and I’ve become a way more confident person,” Bennett said. “Freshman year me is unrecognizable, in the best way.”

Bennett graduated in May of 2022, and will begin her actuarial career at Sammons Financial Group in West Des Moines. When asked what she’s looking forward to, Bennett said she’s ready to relax a little, and enjoy some much-needed downtime. “I’m ready to take it easy, and focus on doing less for the first time in a long time,” she said. “The desire to help people is still there, so I’m sure I’ll find some time to be involved in community organizations, and of course, I’ll still support UNI as an alumni and donor. I’m really happy with how I’ve left things at UNI – in the achievements I’ve made, relationships I’ve formed, and the friendships I’ve built. It’s those things that make me proud.”
UNI grads sweep Art Educators of Iowa awards
The four Iowa art teachers awarded best-in-state status at the 2021 Art Educators of Iowa awards ceremony all had one thing in common—they’re all graduates of the UNI Department of Art. Congratulations to:

• Outstanding Iowa Elementary Art Educator of the Year: Hanna Thuesen of Southdale Elementary in Cedar Falls (BFA Art and Art Ed 2009)
• Outstanding Iowa Middle Level Art Educator of the Year: Katie Christensen of Denison Middle School in Denison (MA Art Education 2021)
• Outstanding Iowa High School Art Educator of the Year: Kelli Gartmen, K-12 art teacher for the BGM Community School District (BA 2015, MA 2021)
• Outstanding Iowa Art Educator of the Year: Amanda Olberding, K-5 art teacher in Waukee (BA Art Ed and Elem Ed 2011, MA Art Ed 2021)

Cedar Valley Degree Links partnership to provide accelerated degree options for Waterloo students
Waterloo high school students will be able to earn multiple degrees in just four years while paying only two years of tuition thanks to a new partnership between the UNI Department of Applied Engineering and Technical Management, Hawkeye Community College and the Waterloo Community School District. The new program, Cedar Valley Degree Links, will allow Waterloo students to select a degree path in construction, manufacturing or graphic technology. The students can take classes at their high school, completing the equivalent of a year of college tuition-free, before spending two years at Hawkeye Community College to earn an associate’s degree. Students could then complete their four-year degree at UNI in just two years, saving them time and money while fast tracking their career.

Honoring this year’s Yager Teaching Award recipients
The 2021 Yager Teaching Award winners are:

• Megan Hamm, High School Science Teacher, Denver High School, Denver, IA
• Meghan Lang, High School Science Teacher, Cedar Falls High School, Cedar Falls, IA
• Lauren Booten, 8th Grade Math Teacher, Ames Middle School, Ames, IA
• Joyce Beyer, Orchestra Teacher, North High School & Harding Middle School, Des Moines, IA

The Dr. Robert E. and Phyllis M. Yager Exemplary Teaching Recognition Award is sponsored by the family of Bob Yager, an internationally recognized science educator and UNI alum. The award is designed to highlight UNI graduates who have gone on to excellence as K-12 teachers in Iowa, and to identify a UNI faculty member’s contribution to their success and the success of the teachers’ students.
UNI CEEE awarded $220,000 Kellogg grant to improve Iowa’s food system

The University of Northern Iowa has received a two-year, $220,000 planning grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to strengthen Iowa’s local food economy. The initiative will be facilitated by the UNI Center for Energy and Environmental Education (CEEE), in collaboration with partnering organizations from around the state. The group will gather input on food system needs from farmers, grocers, schools, and community leaders across Iowa. They will then formulate a plan, with priorities and action items.

New automation degree coming to UNI in fall 2022

In keeping with its commitment to preparing graduates for Industry 4.0, the Department of Applied Engineering and Technical Management has announced the first degree of its kind in the state of Iowa. The new Bachelor of Science in Automation Engineering Technology (AET) was approved by the Board of Regents in February and will be offered in the fall semester 2022. Through a combination of industry-relevant training and hands-on experience, the AET program will help students apply their knowledge of the technology to industry and manufacturing for process control and system review. It will equip students to work in one of the fastest-growing areas of technology with the demand being particularly great in the automotive, metal casting and energy industries.

UNI faculty awarded Humanities Connection Grant

The University of Northern Iowa was recently awarded a highly competitive $35,000 Humanities Connection Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a project entitled “Humanities for Civic Education: Preparing Teachers and Students for Engaged Citizenship.” Through this national grant, a team of faculty from across the university – including the UNI Department of Philosophy and World Religions and the UNI Department of Languages and Literatures – will create coursework and requirements for a 12-hour interdisciplinary certificate, “Civic Literacy and Engagement,” that is part of a new University of Northern Iowa Foundational Inquiry (UNIFI) general education program. This certificate will center the humanities in civic education and will encourage students to explore their obligations as citizens, both in the classroom and outside of it.

UNI School of Music professor is part of a Grammy-winning recording

Suzanne Hendrix-Case, assistant professor of voice & vocology at the UNI School of Music, is among the Metropolitan Opera cast nominated for Best Opera Recording for their 2019 performance of Philip Glass’ “Akhnaten.” She sang the role of Sotopenre, one of the protagonist’s six daughters, in the challenging opera, which is sung mostly in Egyptian. This won’t be the first time the talent coming from UNI’s voice program will be recognized on music’s biggest night. Hendrix-Case joins the ranks of mezzo-soprano Renée Rapier and tenor Anthony McGlaun who are both Grammy-winning alumni.

Speech pathology alum’s work with cancer patients wins national award

Veena Kallambettu (‘13, M.A. Speech Language Pathology) was the sole winner of a prestigious national award for the groundbreaking development of novel clinical programs to improve speech outcomes in patients with head and neck cancer. Now a third-year doctoral student and practicing speech pathologist at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, Veena Kallambettu was recently honored with the Louis M. DiCarlo Award for Recent Clinical Achievement, which recognizes a recipient in the field of Communication Sciences and Disorders each year in the U.S. who has “worked toward advancing knowledge in clinical practice ... in audiology and/or speech-language pathology.”

UNI future teachers, Storm Lake schools and students benefit from new agreement

Future teachers studying TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) at UNI have a new opportunity for their field experience: working with emergent bilingual students in the Storm Lake Community School District. Through a new agreement with the district, Aliza Fones, assistant professor in the UNI Department of Languages and Literatures, observed and mentored 13 UNI students on site at Storm Lake elementary, middle and high schools. This is part of what UNI Teacher Education calls its “Participation Week.” This is a 40-hour, immersive, full week of experience in a classroom—the most extensive placement students have prior to their final semester-long student teaching as they conclude their degrees.
SHIFTING HISTORY, REDEFINING PROGRESS

All-women team produces the North American Review for the first time in its history
The North American Review – the nation’s oldest literary magazine – is housed on the UNI campus, and for the first time in its centuries-old history, it’s been produced by an all-female team.

To say that the issue is historic is an understatement. The magazine is over 200 years old, living a varied and colorful life – featuring the writing of a dozen presidents, from John Adams to Franklin Roosevelt, famous poets like Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, and canonical authors like Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Steinbeck. One thing it has never done though, is feature a production team comprised entirely of women.

The team consists of Managing Editor Emily Stowe, Editors Rachel Morgan and Brooke Wonders, and Art Director Sarah Pauls. They recognize this issue as a mark of history being made. “Editing for the North American Review is both an intimidating and exciting task,” says Morgan. “When the magazine was founded in 1815 in Boston, its mission was to provide America a literary venue to produce work that would rival Britain’s literary traditions. However, women and people of color were left out of the conversation for hundreds of years, so producing this particular issue is a type of invitation toward restorative publishing and risk taking.”

Stowe says she’s proud to be part of the team making history, and finds it amazing to go from days of exclusion, to this issue, which features female contest judges and prize winners, as well as a diverse slate of contributors — not simply by gender, but also by race, nationality, sexual orientation, age and socioeconomic status. The art in each issue is a big focus of Stowe’s as she does the initial selecting of each piece. She notes that it’s a great way to put her art degree from UNI to use.

The past inability of editors to recognize the diversity in America and fight for representation and inclusion in the pages of the magazine is frequently on the minds of the current editorial team. In 2019, they embarked on a rebranding project to take the trajectory of the magazine in a new direction, one that recognizes the need for a wide range of voices to be heard. “The guiding themes that inform the decisions by our current editorial team are: open, eclectic and restorative,” Stowe shares. “We know that historically, the magazine was not inclusive, and we strive to accurately represent our current culture by celebrating diverse voices today.”

Outside of the day-to-day work of reading submissions, hosting readings, selecting art, and meeting deadlines, being housed at UNI allows for the magazine’s production work to serve as a practicum space for students wanting to learn about the literary publishing world. “In Fall 2021, Rachel and I co-taught the practicum and the experiences and training we were able to offer students in that class came directly out of our work together on the Fall 2021 issue,” said Wonders. Morgan adds, “I’m thrilled we’re bringing students, through the practicum, into literary publishing, passing the torch so to speak, and exploring new digital spaces for publishing.”

The cover art for this particular issue, created by long-time cover editor, Gary Kelley, is stunning. Four muses reach behind and in front of one another, overlapping in blues, golds and pale chartreuse. Of course it’s embodying the overture of the issue, women blending into one another, light on their feet. Their hands hold pencils—poised for work, even while they dance. One can appreciate the woman on the far right who looks into the distance—forward, to the turning page, and into the future.

Each editor shared excitement for how their role in its making will shape NAR’s pages for years to come. “Certainly, we carry the magazine’s heavy history, but this is an opportunity to evolve and even provoke new work,” says Morgan. “Our current team of editors has diverse aesthetics, welcomes difficult conversations, and takes the ethics of publishing seriously.”

Now finished and long since mailed, Fall 2021 issues of the NAR are scattered across America. They serve as quiet reminders of history, progress, and the beauty these women have made together. Hopefully, though, there is an issue somewhere, dingy from handling, dog-eared and creased, tucked under the arm of another young woman who sees her own future in its pages.
**New Faculty**

**Riva Nayaju** is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design in the UNI Department of Art. She holds a degree in B.Arch from Khwopa Engineering College, Nepal, and MFA in Graphic Design from Oklahoma State University.

**Carmen Durham** has been named Assistant Professor of TESOL/Applied Linguistics in UNI’s Department of Languages and Literatures. She received a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and Language Education at the University of Maryland.

**Jesse Wilcox** has joined the UNI Department of Biology as Assistant Professor of Biology Education. He earned his Ph.D. in Science Education from Iowa State University.

**Ben Roidl-Ward** was appointed as Assistant Professor of Bassoon at the UNI School of Music. He received his DMA from Northwestern University.

**Sarah Diehl** has joined the UNI Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders as an instructor. She earned her MS in Speech-Language Pathology from Duquesne University.

---

**Retirements**

**2020-21:**
- Charles Adelman, Art
- Phil Fass, Art
- Karen Mitchell, Communication and Media
- Patricia Olthoff-Blank, Communication and Media
- Laura Terlip, Communication and Media
- Jane Gillen, Computer Science
- Joyce Milambiling, Languages and Literatures
- Mark Jacobson, Mathematics
- Evie "Chuck" Pugh, School of Music

**2021-22:**
- JoAnn Schnabel, Art
- James Jurgenson, Biology
- Christian Ogbondah, Communication and Media
- Flavia Vernescu, Languages and Literatures
- Ivonne Cuadra, Languages and Literatures
- Jerome Soneson, Philosophy and World Religions
- Gretta Berghammer, Theatre
- Stephen Taft, Theatre
Nixson Benitez’s efforts to elevate underrepresented voices through the power of journalism have drawn numerous accolades, including most recently being named a 2022 winner of Campus Compact’s Newman Civic Fellowship.

The University of Northern Iowa junior majoring in digital media journalism with a minor in interactive digital studies is one of just 173 students across the U.S. and Mexico awarded the fellowship this year for working to better their local communities. Campus Compact, which is a coalition of college and university presidents across the nation, provides professional and personal development opportunities for all the winners, which have included seven other UNI students in years past. “It’s a really huge honor,” said Benitez. “I’m glad people are recognizing the work I’m doing.”

The Des Moines native, 20, has already made his mark at UNI and across the state by starting a Spanish-language column for the Northern Iowan (NI), helping create the Iowa Association of Black Journalists and being inducted into the Iowa Latino Hall of Fame. Those accomplishments were recognized in the award nomination from President Mark A. Nook. Students may only be nominated for the Newman Civic Fellowship by the president of their college or university. “Benitez is an outstanding student and community leader,” Nook said. “He truly reflects the spirit of this award as demonstrated through his leadership and service as a student at the University of Northern Iowa and throughout the state of Iowa.”

As a first-generation college student whose parents immigrated from El Salvador, Benitez said he grew up not giving much thought to college. His journey to UNI started when he visited campus on a Diversity Day trip while attending Lincoln High School in Des Moines. He left the trip determined to enroll.

At UNI, Benitez was initially interested in pursuing theater but switched to journalism. Various class assignments solidified this decision, including one from cornerstone instructor Debra Young that opened his eyes to the lack of diversity in journalism. “I think it’s super important to highlight the voices of people that look like me,” Benitez explained. “Being in the journalism field means working for the people, giving back to the people and giving power to the people. That is something I’m really passionate about.”

Benitez’s impact on the student paper goes beyond the Spanish column. He is also the executive editor, which is a title that has only ever been held by one other person of color and has never been held by another Latino since the NI’s founding in 1892. Under his supervision, the number of staff writers has doubled and diversified.

When thinking about the future, Benitez has big goals including ensuring the permanency of his Spanish column, getting his master’s degree and someday becoming the executive editor of a local or national newspaper. No matter when he achieves his goals or how they may shift, he plans on doing it all with passion.
1950s


1960s

‘65 James Grier, BA, Hawley, MN, was inducted into the Waterloo West High School Academic Hall of Fame Sept. 10, 2021. He is recognized as a foremost expert on the bald eagle.

‘67 Linda (Lauck) Shoesmith, BA, Bettendorf, is retired and enjoying the senior years with a ukulele club, church and the community. She retired from teaching math at Scott Community College.

1970s

‘71 Steven Ainsworth, BA, MA ’75, Pensacola, FL, entered his 51st year of teaching music to students. He is an adjunct professor at Pensacola Christian College.

‘71 Mary (Larsen) Semler, BA, Hampton, received an Award of Merit for 40 years of leadership in the Franklin County Arts Council. In 1978, she founded the Franklin Chorale, which is an auditioned choral ensemble. It was the featured group at the Waterloo Symphony Christmas Concert, under the direction of Joseph Giunta and was chosen to perform at an ACDA District Convention.

‘76 Willard Smith, BA, Marion, OH, retired in 2018 after 15 years as the career services coordinator at the The Ohio State University at Marion.

‘77 Steve Gogel, BA, Waterloo, retired Dec. 3, 2018, after more than 37 years as an orthopedic physician assistant.

‘77 Connie King, BA, Davenport, retired after 31 years of teaching, the last 17 at Bettendorf High School. She taught English and was the yearbook and newspaper adviser.

‘78 Dick Fridley, BA, Hampton, switched to news after serving as a sports writer and photographer for several newspapers. He is the regional news editor for The Sheffield Press and The Pioneer Enterprise of Rockwell.

‘79 Diane (Dewall) Ballard, BM, Gahanna, OH, is completing her 42nd consecutive year as a music educator, with the last 35 at Gahanna Jefferson Schools. She was the first recipient of the Role of Distinction Award from the Ohio State School of Music in Mar. 2019 with a unanimous nomination from the faculty to recognize outstanding teaching in a public school. In summer 2021 she hopes to be a guest conductor for OSU’s Middle School Concert Band Academy.

1980s

‘80 Sue (Weiss) Green, BA, Cedar Falls, donated a kidney to her cousin Dec. 7, 2020.

‘81 Diane (Eichman) Langner, BA, Ankeny, retired as the benefits manager at Des Moines University after more than 25 years in human resources.

‘82 John Couture, BA, Jacksonville, FL, is a vice president with Bank of America and recently transferred from Kansas City to the Jacksonville office.
'82 Nancy (Koch) Thomas, BA, MA ’84, Saint Charles, MO, used her Spanish degree and certification in international commerce to work with many business professionals in Latin America. She is now a professor.

'85 Troy Becker, BA, MA ’90, MA ’00, ASC ’08, Cedar Falls, was transferred to the department of social work as faculty and curriculum development specialist.

'85 Dan Fick, BA, Coralville, became the chief medical officer for Hy-Vee July 9, 2021. He also remains a clinical professor of family medicine and part of the provider group for the Executive Health Program at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.

'85 Angie (Williams) Looney, BA, Washington, earned an MA in strategic communication from the University of Iowa in May 2020.

'85 Ruth Watkins, BA, Salt Lake City, UT, is president of Strada Impact.

'87 Lynette Phyfe, BA, MA ’91, Winnipeg, MB, after serving as the interim director of the University of Manitoba’s distance education program for three years, she transferred to the department of social work as faculty and curriculum development specialist.

'88 Angie (Demaria) Jones, BA, Knoxville, is the wellness supervisor and head fitness instructor/personal trainer at the Knoxville Recreation Center.

'89 Ann Berns, BA, Prairie Du Chien, WI, received the 2020 Distinguished French Teacher of the Year award from the American Association of French Teachers in Wisconsin and the Teacher Merit Award from the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers in 2017.

'90 Sarah Robinson, BM, Bloomington, IN, earned a doctorate degree in music education from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University Dec. 2019.

'91 Stacey (Clark) Eggleston, BA, Chandler, AZ, is senior vice president of client excellence with AccessHope.

'92 Korina (Dolen) Carlson, BA, MA ’99, La Porte City, received the 2021 Gold Star Award for Outstanding Teaching. She is a 10-12th grade Spanish teacher at Union High School.

'93 Kenton Swartley, MA, Cedar Falls, was named the 2021 NE Iowa STEM Teacher of the year. He is the community partnerships and STEM facilitator for the Cedar Falls School district.

'94 Noreen (Colbeck) Bush, BA, Cedar Rapids, was named the 2021-2022 Iowa Superintendent of the Year by the School Administrators of Iowa.

'94 JC Sanford, BA, Northfield, MN, released his new CD “Imminent Standards Trio, Vol. I” on Shifting Paradigm Records on July 23, 2021. It features Sanford on trombone, Jeff Bailey on bass, and Phil Hey on drums and was funded by a Creative Support Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board.

'94 Jeffrey Weekley, BA, Marina, CA, leads the Research IT team at UC Santa Cruz, where he is also pursuing a Ph.D in engineering.

'96 Scott Doherty, BA, Irvington, AL, was interviewed by the trade magazine The Locksmith Ledger International about how his experience as a locksmith helped him as a podiatric surgeon.

'96 Terri Wiley, BA, Portland, OR, joined the development board committee of Bradley Angle, an organization serving people affected by domestic violence. She is also a development director for Store to Door, an organization serving homebound seniors and adults with disabilities.

'97 Nicole (Lux) Roder, BA, Rock Valley, earned a masters degree in educational leadership from Viterbo University and is the middle school/high school principal at Rock Valley Schools.

'98 Trisha (McMillan) Chambers, BA, MA ’00, Spokane, WA, teaches high school Spanish and travels with students around the world.

'98 Greg Sadler, BA, Newalla, OK, was a candidate for the Oklahoma Senate District 17.

'99 Rebecca (Helm) Wilson, BA, Clive, was named the 2021 Iowa STEM Teacher of the Year for the South Central Region.

2000s

'02 Stacey (Tschantz) Yoder, BA, Hudson, received the 2021 Gold Star Award for Outstanding Teaching. She is a 7th and 9th grade math teacher at Holmes Jr. High in Cedar Falls.

'03 Chris McGahan, BA, Los Angeles, CA, is a spokesmodel for Comfort Republic.

'04 Michelle Nielsen Ott, BA, Peoria, IL, received a number of accolades in 2021: ATHENA Young Professionals Award, 40 Leaders Under Forty, 25 Women in Leadership Award and the Community Leader Award. She is an assistant professor and librarian at Bradley University as of Nov. 30, 2021.

'04 Nick Oswald, BM, Ankeny, was selected by the Iowa Choral Directors Association to have his 9th Grade Bass Clef Choir perform at the 2020 ICDA Choral Showcase.
‘05 Shay (Forsyth) Caley, BA, Denver, was named one of the Cedar Valley’s 20 under 40 by the Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier for 2021. She is vice president retail market manager for Denver Savings Bank.

‘05 Brandon Schoborg, BS, Hudson, was named one of the Cedar Valley’s 20 under 40 by the Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier for 2021. He is executive vice president with Cardinal Construction.

‘06 Jennie Morton, BA, MA ’08, Cedar Rapids, celebrated five years as owner of Herringbone Freelance, which specializes in marketing for engineering and tech firms.

‘08 Mallory (Cink) Mohwinkle, BA, Marion, was named one of the Corridor Business Journal’s 40 under 40 for 2020. She is the director of creative services with TrueNorth Companies L.C.

‘09 Nola (Aigner) Davis, BA, MA ‘11, Ankeny, was named one of the 40 under 40 by the Des Moines Business Record for 2021. She is the public health communications officer for the Polk County Health Department.

‘09 Molly Hanson, BA, Des Moines, was named one of the 40 under 40 by the Des Moines Business Record for 2021. She is the conservation and community outreach specialist with RDG Planning & Design.

‘09 Krystal (Campbell) Mikkilineni, BA, Clive, was recognized by M&A Advisor as an Emerging Leader for 2021, named one of the five 2021 Rising Star Semi-Finalists by the International Women’s Insolvency and Restructuring Confederation and named to the 2021 Class of the American Bankruptcy Institute’s 40 under 40 program. She is an attorney with Bradshaw, Fowler, Proctor, & Fairgrave, P.C.

‘09 Hanna (Mayhew) Thuesen, BA, Cedar Falls, was named the 2021 Iowa Outstanding Elementary Art Educator of the Year by Art Educators of Iowa. She teaches at Southdale Elementary School.

‘09 Michelle Yoshimura-Smith, BM, Des Moines, was named one of the 40 under 40 by the Des Moines Business Record for 2021. She is a vice president and business initiatives consultant with Wells Fargo.

‘09 Alex Davey, BA, MA ’16, Byron, GA, is an environmental health specialist III with the Houston County Health Department.

‘10 Nicki (Valentine) Davis, BM, MM ’12, Cedar Falls, received the Phillip Sehmann Excellence in Teaching Award for the elementary level by the NE Iowa Bandmasters Association. She is the band director for Hansen, North Cedar and Lincoln Elementary schools.

‘10 Joshua Engelken, BA, Des Moines, received his second Des Moines Register Star Award for professionalism in journalism in March 2021.

‘10 Reilly (Zlab) Martin, BA, West Linn, OR, is the US program manager for Open Contracting Partnership and will be running the 2022 Boston Marathon in honor of and to raise money for the pediatric cancer unit at Massachusetts General Hospital.

‘11 Johannah (McCammant) Nanke, BA, Waterloo, received the 2021 Gold Star Award for Outstanding Teaching. She is a 9th and 11th grade English teacher at West High School.

‘11 Stacia Fortune, BA, MM ‘16, Lawrence, KS, earned her doctorate in clarinet performance from the University of Kansas in 2019 and is a professor of clarinet and saxophone at Kansas Wesleyan University.

‘12 Joshua Engelken, BA, Des Moines, received his second Des Moines Register Star Award for professionalism in journalism in March 2021.

‘12 Alyssa (Smith) Seeman, BA, Cedar Rapids, is a graphic support specialist for Cedar Memorial Park Funeral Home.

‘13 Chris Phalen, BA, BM ’13, MM ’18, Storm Lake, is the director of choral activities at Buena Vista University.

‘14 Emily (Rollman) Perry, BA, Alleman, is the graphic artist for NorthPoint church in Johnston.

‘15 Margo (Sturges) Kockler, BA, Clear Lake, is a marketing coordinator for Hot Spring Spas of Iowa and Minnesota.
'15 Paul Ochoa, BA, San Antonio, TX, works for IBC Bank but is still focused on breaking into news media.

'15 Aaron Ottmar, BM, Iowa City, married Alyssa (Adamec) Ottmar on June 13, 2020, in front of their combined families. They started dating after they traveled with the Northern Iowa Symphony Orchestra to Brazil (in 2014 with Dr. Rebecca Burkhardt). In addition, this was shortly after Aaron was studying viola (for his High String Methods class) with Alyssa (for her String Pedagogy class). Both of these classes were with Dr. Julia Bullard (who had paired us together for lessons). For this (and so much more), Alyssa and Aaron are forever grateful for the impact that the School of Music has had on their lives and are forever blessed for their experience at UNI. Go Cats Go and U-N-I Fight!

'15 Andrea Thoene, BA, Ankeny, earned her MBA from Drake University Dec. 12, 2020, and is manager of marketing with Landus Cooperative.

'16 Sarah Baker, BM, Casa Grande, AZ, is in grad school for wind band conducting at Northern Arizona after being a middle school band director for four years.

'16 Tim Ferry, BA, Austin, TX, is a piano teacher and owner/operator of Never Board Games LLC, an independent board game publishing company.

'16 Brianna Lewerke, BA, Minneapolis, MN, is the social media content lead for Locker Room at Betty Labs.

'16 Jake Westpfahl, BA, Waterloo, is an adjunct instructor at UNI, Hawkeye Community College and Wartburg College.

'17 Hannah Burds, BA, Bellevue, is the marketing project manager at Mi-T-M in Peosta.

'17 Kelly Noltner, MM, Cedar Falls, will be performing the role of Chrysothemis in “Elektra” by Strauss with Dramatic Voices Program Berlin in their Summer 2021 virtual program.

'17 Emma (Swensen) Ferry, BA, Austin, TX, is a digital account manager with ATD Partners and manages local band, Hudson Road.

'20 Danielle Anderson, BA, West Des Moines, is a talent acquisition specialist with Worldwide Logistics.

'20 Justin Dahl, BA, Milwaukee, WI, is a digital analyst with BVK, a marketing agency specializing in healthcare, education and tourism.

'20 Cade Olmstead, BA, Ankeny, is a graduate teaching assistant in the department of English at the University of Vermont. He was previously a U.S. Fulbright Researcher at the University of Ljubljana Institute of Philosophy at Slovenian Academy of Sciences Arts.

'21 Katie Christensen, MA, Denison, was named the 2021 Iowa Outstanding Middle School Art Educator of the Year by Art Educators of Iowa.

'21 Mike Lim, BA, Cedar Falls, is an informational technology specialist in the health and medical industry.
Dreams are made here

You have a vision that's uniquely yours, and we have the tools to connect your passion to your purpose.

Wherever your dreams take you, we'll be with you every step of the way, supporting you and connecting you with opportunities to make your vision a reality.