

Connecting

Psychology Alumni Newsletter

ISSUE #7
Spring 2025

Au Sable Hall

Hello Psychology Lakers, as in the past issues of this newsletter, we will first update you with some of the major events/transitions in the department. Then we will feature an alumni career paths panel discussion held last November. Three alumni who came from Washington DC, East Lansing, and Kalamazoo discussed their careers with our current students. Hope you enjoy reading this newsletter and let us know if you would like to be a panelist to share your experience and provide advice to our students in our future panel discussions.

Table of Contents

THANKS TO OUR OLD CHAIR!	1
WELCOME TO OUR NEW CHAIR!.....	2
PASS THE BATON	3
WELCOME OUR NEW FACULTY	4
MAJOR MAKEOVER – LAB REMODEL	4
CELEBRATE STUDENT RESEARCH – STUDENT SCHOLARS DAY.....	5
ALUMNI CAREER PATHS PANEL DISCUSSION	6
FACULTY MEMBERS RECOGNIZED.....	11

Thanks to our old chair!

Dr. Mary Bower Russa has served as our unit head for the past three years. As you can see from the last couple issues of this newsletter, the department has gone through many changes and growth under her leadership. Faculty and students appreciate what she has done in the department. Here is what she wants to tell you:

Hello Psychology Alumni,

2024-2025 was another busy and exciting year in the Psychology Department. We are pleased to have hired two new tenure track professors: Jacob Sawyer (Ph.D. Counseling Psychology) and Ashley Bennett (Ph.D. Social Psychology). They will begin at GVSU in Fall of 2025, and each brings a very valuable background to enrich the department's teaching, research, and work with our students. In other news, in an effort to better support student success in the Psychology major, we will be adding 200 level courses to the psychology curriculum to better scaffold skill development from 100 to 300 level courses. These offerings are planned to begin in Fall of 2026.



We are extremely proud of our School Psychology Faculty (led by Project Director Jamie Owen-Deschryver), who received a highly competitive grant awarded from the U.S. Department of Education! This award of 2.7

million across 5 years focused on training school psychology graduate students to implement high-quality mental health supports with K-12 students in five partner districts in west Michigan. However, along with many other grantees across the country, we received notification at the end of April that the grant will not be continued after the first year of funding, which ends Dec. 31, 2025. This is a major loss for our faculty, our students, and our local community. We commend our faculty (including Jen James, Kristen Schrauben, and Amy Campbell), who spent countless hours obtaining this grant and who are now attempting to rework the project for this very limited timeframe.

As I step down from my Unit Head role, I want to say that I have come to appreciate even more what a privilege and honor it is to be in a department with such amazingly diverse and talented colleagues, and how tremendously rewarding it is to watch our students grow on their journeys through our courses and through majors and minors in the Psychology and Behavioral Neuroscience programs. I take great pride in all that we have been able to accomplish during my three years as Unit Head, and in the positive impacts that I have witnessed on our students, the university, our local communities, and our professional communities and scholarly disciplines during this time.

As I return to my faculty role, I am excited to welcome a new leadership team with new energy and new ideas to help us remain energized as we embrace the challenges and promises that face higher education in the coming years. Chris Kurby is in the Unit Head role effective May 1st, 2025, and Kristy Dean and Glenn Valdez will join him in Assistant Chair roles when the Fall semester of 2025 begins. I know that our great work together will continue, and I look forward to seeing all that is still to come!

All the best to all of you for a happy and restful summer!

Dr. Mary Bower-Russa



Welcome to our new chair!

Dr. Chris Kurby became our department chair on May 1st. Faculty are looking forward to working under Dr. Kurby’s leadership to build a strong department. Here is what he wants to say to you:

Hello Psychology Alumni,

I am very excited to take on the role of Chair of Psychology. I started at GVSU as an Assistant Professor of Psychology in 2010. By training, I am a cognitive psychologist, with a deep interest in learning, comprehension, and memory. Over my 15 years at GVSU, the Psychology Department provided me the necessary support to be successful. I am eager to give back. Among a handful of noteworthy accomplishments, I won the CSCE Distinguished Early-Career Scholar Award, was one of the only faculty in department history to earn early tenure, and published 43 scientific articles. I strive to use my knowledge and research experience to enhance my teaching, and now to the functioning of the department. As the new Chair of Psychology, I will work to inspire innovation and creativity in our faculty to allow them to thrive. When the faculty thrive, everyone prospers: the faculty, the students, the department, the college, the university, and the communities we serve. Working alongside me will be our new Assistant Department Chairs – Kristy Dean, Assistant Chair for planning, assessment and research, and Glenn Valdez, Assistant Chair for advising, enrollment, and curriculum. We all feel activated and are looking forward to getting started.



Dr. Chris Kurby

Pass the Baton

We had a great gathering on March 25th at City Build Brewing Company. The department faculty and staff raised a glass to Mary Bower-Russa, recognizing her fantastic dedication and contributions as our department chair for the past three years. We also gave a big thanks and acknowledged Christopher Kurby for taking on the department chair role at the end of Winter 2025. Cheers to both of them!





Welcome Our New Faculty



Social Psychology Position: Dr. Ashley Bennett

- B.A in Psychology, University of Kansas, 2017
- Ph.D in Educational Psychology, Concentration-Human development, culture, & learning science, The University of Texas at Austin 2023
- M.Ed. in Educational Psychology, Concentration-Quantitative methods, The University of Texas at Austin 2023
- Postdoctoral Scholar, VMware Women's Leadership and Innovation Lab & Stanford Impact Lab Fellowship, Stanford University, 2023-present

Research interests:

- Antecedents and consequences of women's professional mistreatment at micro- (e.g., social interactions), meso- (e.g., organizational climate), and macro-levels (e.g., policy and decision-making).
- How race shapes the nature of women's treatment within organizations, and that certain women play a role in the subjugation of other women.



Clinical Psychology Position: Dr. Jacob Sawyer

- B.S. in Psychology, Central Michigan University, 2008
- M. Phil. in Counseling Psychology, Columbia University, 2015
- Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology (APA-accredited), Columbia University, 2017
- Assistant Professor of Psychology (Tenure-Track), Pennsylvania State University, Mont Alto Campus, 2018-2022
- Assistant Professor of Psychology (Tenure-Track), Alma College, 2022-present

Research interests:

- Factors related to mental health and well-being.
- Earlier work primarily geared towards the examination of mental health outcomes from individuals in marginalized groups using a minority stress theory framework.
- Most recent work examines myths and other misconceptions people have about grief and bereavement.



Major Makeover – Lab Remodel

We are excited to announce that the psychology labs will be undergoing a major renovation this summer. This Au Sable lab transformation aims to create a brighter, more welcoming environment while increasing the space's usability. The new lab space will feature new furniture and fixtures, a designated waiting room for participants, and multiple conference rooms to host lab meetings or conduct group research. There will also be an array of new technology as we replace our existing computers and add an additional 16-person computer lab.

Celebrate Student Research – Student Scholars Day

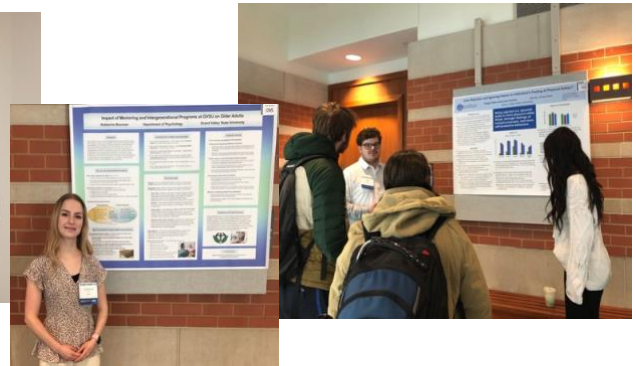
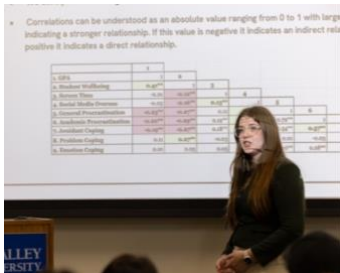
The 29th Annual Student Scholars Day at Grand Valley State University was a huge success! This year's theme was "Redefining Boundaries: AI and the Evolution of Science, Tech, and Culture" and invited participants to examine how artificial intelligence is reshaping knowledge, creativity and truth. In addition to the AI theme, the day showcased research spanning a wide range of topics across the sciences and humanities.

As with previous years, the Psychology Department started its research session by presenting student awards in order to recognize its students' academic, research, and leadership accomplishments.



Mya Hanna, Rachel McGervey, Arnica Sheaffer and Karis Gillen (left to right). Mya Hanna received the Department's Research Excellence Award, while Rachel McGervey was honored with the Academic Excellence Award. Arnica Sheaffer was recognized with both the Provost's Award for Excellence in Psychology and the Robert Henderson Leadership Award. Karis Gillen received the Provost's Award for Excellence in Behavioral Neuroscience. Faculty, family, and fellow students gathered to celebrate these outstanding accomplishments.

Students presented in oral and poster sessions



Students and their research mentors



Student Scholars Day, 2025 was an exceptional experience for students, employers, faculty and community members alike. We congratulate all of our award winners and presenters for their achievements and contributions to psychological science. Their dedication, creativity, and academic excellence inspire pride within the Psychology Department and demonstrate the bright future of psychological research and practice. We look forward to seeing the continued impact our students will have on their communities and society. Some of you may have vivid memories of participating in SSD yourself. Hope these research experiences have been useful in your career.



Alumni Career Paths Panel Discussion

Hosted by the Faculty Alumni Relations Committee, PSYCH Club, and PSYCH Friends, the following three alumni came back to campus to discuss career paths after GV with our current students on November 7th, 2025. They generously shared their experiences both at Grand Valley and while pursuing their careers after graduation. Valuable advice and lessons drawn from these experiences were shared with the students. They also answered a number of questions from our students about their career choices in the near future.

Sarah Dunkel-Jackson

Class of 2006, Researcher and Professor at MSU, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, specializing in autism and developmental disabilities, behavioral consultation child welfare, communication and verbal behavior, functional behavior assessment, and organizational behavior management.



Sarah graduated from GVSU's Psychology/Special Education program in 2006. She said her college career:

"I'm the first person in my family to go to college so I didn't really know about graduate school or the many careers one could have in the "teaching" and "helping" professions. I was lucky enough to have some incredible experiences here supporting children with autism. When I learned about graduate school from my awesome GVSU professors I decided to switch my major to just Psychology so that I could graduate early and get my master's degree in behavior analysis and therapy while still helping children with autism."

Here is what she said about her career paths:

GVSU Autism Practicum → ABA therapist and respite provider → Graduate School → Canada → MSU

"I was lucky enough to have participated in the Autism Practicum here with Dr. Amy Matthews. From this experience, I was hired as an in-home applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapist and respite provider during the Fall and Spring semesters and later I was a paraeducator for the Summer semester. Because of these experiences and my interest in the science of behavior, my professors encouraged me to go to graduate school. After applying, I was accepted to several graduate schools—Kalamazoo seemed too close, NYC (Columbia) seemed too "city" for this country girl, and Southern Illinois offered a full graduate assistantship which paid for tuition and provided a stipend. Off to Carbondale I went."

While in my master's program, I worked at Project 12 Ways where we partnered with the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) to provide support to families who had a history of abuse and/or neglect. This was the most difficult and absolutely best experience I've had because it taught me how to provide consultation in a collaborative and inter-disciplinary manner to consumers who may not initially want support but, for the most part, come to build relationships with you and their children. I was also asked to provide behavioral consultation at various schools in rural Illinois that were looking to enhance their behavioral supports. For example, I worked at the Illinois Center for Autism where we conducted applied research on staff training and organizational behavior management (OBM), and I completed my thesis at a residential facility for adolescents with brain injuries where we focused on self-control and impulsivity. I am so grateful for the different experiential learning opportunities and supervisors to learn from.

As I entered my second year, my professor asked me if I would consider applying to a PhD program. Again, I wasn't sure what that entailed but I applied and got in to several schools. Ultimately, I chose SIU because all my credits transferred, the program would be shorter, I received an assistantship, and I would get to be a TA for some of the master's courses that I would need to retake at the other schools. Plus, I was dating my now husband who was already in the PhD program at SIU.

Once I graduated with my master's degree, I sat for the exam to become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and started and finished my PhD coursework within 2 years. While finishing preliminary exams and preparing for dissertations, my fiancé and I took jobs as BCBAs near Chicago providing crisis services throughout the state. Our advisor then reached out about two PhD-level behavior analyst jobs in Canada. So, we applied and were hired as Associate Clinical Directors for a large children's mental health agency in Ontario. Here, I oversaw transition services for children with autism—supporting transitions into ABA services and out of ABA services into schools. It was great because I continued to conduct research, supervise several future BCBAs, and really build capacity within the province. I also had two free babies in Ontario—we call them our little AmeriCanadians.

After I finished my dissertation (which was tough with two little ones and working a full time job), I received my BCBA-D and was asked to be the Program Coordinator for the Behavioral Psychology program at Seneca College in Ontario. That was awesome and I again got to mentor students from a very diverse background and get them involved in research. Several have even gone on to graduate school!

When our work permits ended, we moved back to the US to be near family in Michigan. I found a job as the Director of Learning, Development, and Research at an ABA company. When COVID-19 hit, my job was eliminated but there was a fantastic research opportunity at Michigan State University with the Research in Autism and Developmental Disabilities (RADD) Lab.

What Sarah told us about her current position:

Today, I work at Michigan State University in the Human Development and Family Studies department and Counseling Educational Psychology and Special Education department. I am a member of the Research in Autism and Developmental Disabilities (RADD) Lab and Early Language and Literacy Investigations (ELLI) Lab. I serve as a project director for several U.S. Department of Education grants and I teach courses in Child Development, Collaboration, Assistive Technology, and Special Education Law. I'm also the director of the SAFE Challenge programs where we provide community-based sports activities for children with disabilities and their buddies. This past May I also took a group of students to Ghana, West Africa for MSU Education Abroad where we supported schools and healthcare centers.

I love my job because it is a mix of research, teaching, and service. I work in an interdisciplinary department that celebrates the strengths each of our backgrounds brings to our projects. I am the only BCBA in my HDFS department but many of our students become RBTs because of their child development skills and knowledge.



Michael Mead

Class of 2014, Program officer at Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) in Washington DC, providing patients, their caregivers, and clinicians with the evidence-based information needed to make better-informed healthcare decisions.

Michael graduated with a Psychology Major and Criminal Justice Minor in 2014.

Here is Michael's career path:

- ⇒ *I knew my sophomore year at GVSU that I wanted to pursue a PhD in psychology, and so oriented my time to building towards that. In the fall of 2014 started my PhD in Health Psychology at North Dakota State University in Fargo. The research program I developed focused on identifying factors that impact sleep and using that information to refine sleep health improvement efforts.*
- ⇒ *After completing the PhD in 2020 I started a T32 postdoc at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in the Center for Circadian and Sleep Medicine. During these two years I enhanced my research skills and expanded my research program to include the relationships between sleep and cardiovascular health, environmental influences on sleep, and sleep health disparities.*
- ⇒ *During this postdoc I met my now wife, and in 2022 we decided to move to Washington DC to work at non profits. I currently work for a research funder.*

How Michael described his current position:

- *In my current role, I work as a Program Officer for an organization that funds comparative effectiveness research, which is the comparison of existing healthcare interventions to determine which treatments work best and for what particular patients. My PhD in Health Psychology, expertise in behavioral health, and knowledge of diverse research methods are extremely important for success in this role.*
- *In my first role with the organization, I managed research awards, developed funding announcements to guide national research efforts, and evaluated research proposals. I was promoted into a new role, in which I manage clinical research networks that facilitate comparative effectiveness studies.*
- *The main reward is I am involved in research efforts on a national scale, which allow me to have an impact on patients' lives. The main challenge is that it is a very fast paced environment in which I need to be able to become an expert in many topic areas very quickly.*

Charles Thomas

Class of 1993, licensed professional counselor, board certified counselor, and certified advanced alcohol and drug counselor. He works at Integrated Services of Kalamazoo, the community mental health service program for Kalamazoo County and is a therapist and owner of Deerfield Counseling in Portage, Michigan



Charles graduated from GVSU in 1993 with a pre-professional psychology major.

Psychology was my only major or minor although I really enjoyed the humanities classes that I took while at GVSU, i.e. photography and music appreciation.

What Charles told us about his career path:

I knew that graduate school was in my future when I was finishing my bachelor's degree. After GVSU, I moved to Kalamazoo to attend Western Michigan University. After receiving my master's degree from WMU, I moved to South Bend Indiana for my first job out of school, which was as a children's therapist. I became licensed as a Limited Licensed Psychologist in 1997. I met the woman who became my wife while living in South Bend. At the time, she was looking for work as a community college English instructor and when she found it at Glen Oaks Community College, we moved to Three Rivers, Michigan. I took a job at what was then known as Kalamazoo Community Mental Health in the children's department in 2000. In 2015, I began to see private insurance clients under a local psychologist and in 2018, I formed my own practice called Deerfield Counseling. Deerfield now has five therapists with a wide range of specialties.

How Charles described his current position:

I have two! My day job is at Integrated Services of Kalamazoo, the community mental health service program for Kalamazoo County. I work in compliance there. My other job is being a therapist and the owner of Deerfield Counseling in Portage. Because insurance billing for Limited Licensed Psychologists requires supervisory attestation, in 2018 I went back to school to qualify as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), an independent license. I now use that license to bill for my services. The LPC combined with a supervisor training course that I completed, also allows me to supervise new counseling graduates. The LPC was critical to my independence.



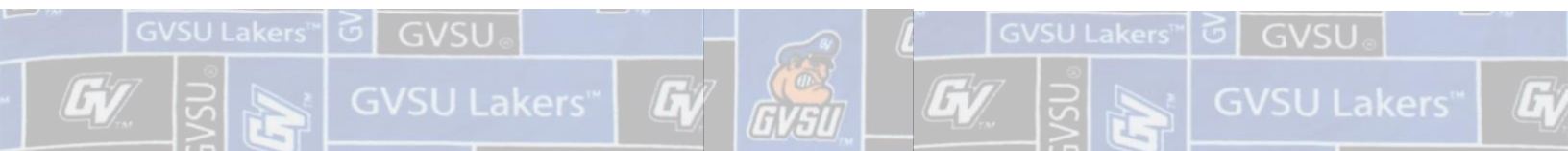
Here are some of the highlights of the panel discussion:

When asked about specific experiences the panelists had at GVSU that had a major impact on them, all of them enthusiastically recalled these experiences have expanded their horizon and helped them see beyond the classroom and build skills.

- *Taking the practicum class.*
- *Talking to their advisors and being inspired.*
- *Conducting research projects with faculty.*
- *A unique aspect of GVSU is the amount of direct time you get with faculty, and they genuinely care about your training and success.*

They also gave some useful advice to the current students:

- *Be curious! Try to learn as much as you can. Join professors' research projects. Become a better writer. You never know when some of these skills will be handy.*
- *Understand that your psychology degree can take you in many directions. Consider degrees even outside of psychology such as MSW. Learn about the many jobs and higher education opportunities that exist for psychology students.*
- *Be open to new courses and internships and opportunities that could enhance your work.*
- *ENJOY your time. Make memories that you will cherish.*
- *Doing the "EXTRA" is smart and makes you more well-rounded. Attending talks and special events, joining a professional organization, taking a course even if it isn't required, or seeking research opportunities are the "extras" that you can do!*
- *If you pursue a PhD, it is crucial to build a support system with other students in your program and/or cohort. It can be an incredibly stressful time (a long time with very little pay), and having support can help you get through those times. These are also friendships that you will likely hold the rest of your life.*
- *Balance and self-care are important—it is tough to always do but know it is important and prioritize when you can. The thing is, if your job incorporates something you love, it doesn't feel like work. Find a job you love. Find a boss that appreciates you. Find people you love. Find hobbies you love. That's how you build a life you love. At all times, be grateful for experiences you can learn from (the "good" and the "bad") and remember who to thank.*



If you are interested in serving as a panelist for our future career paths panel discussions, please email us at psydept@gvsu.edu. In your email, please tell us where you are currently at and what time of the year you are most likely be available (information that will make it easier for us to organize the panel discussions).

Faculty Members Recognized

In February 2025, the following faculty members were recognized by the university:

🏆 The Pew Teaching Excellence Award: **Kristen Schrauben**

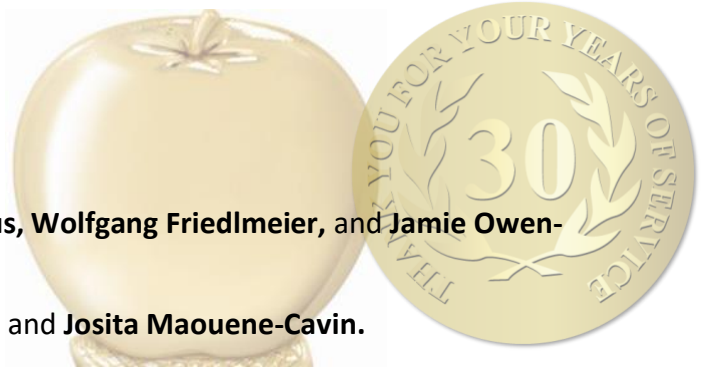
🏆 30 year career milestone: **Xandra Xu**

🏆 25 year career milestone: **Jing Chen and Luke Galen**

🏆 20 year career milestone: **Amy Campbell, Tara Cornelius, Wolfgang Friedlmeier, and Jamie Owen-DeSchryver.**

🏆 15 year career milestone: **Kristy Dean, Amanda Dillard, and Josita Maouene-Cavin.**

🏆 10 year career milestone: **Kristen Schrauben**



Please write to us:

If you would like to be the next panelist on a career paths discussion, or if you have any suggestions on how to better connect our alumni to the department, please let us know by sending us an email at psydept@gvsu.edu. We would love to hear from you!

All the best from the Psychology Department!

Connect with us