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About Us:

The Provost is committed to the development and success of faculty, academic staff, and students in Wayne State's 13 schools and colleges and views student and faculty/staff success as inextricably linked. With this vision in mind, Faculty Impact is aimed at celebrating faculty successes and encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations that inspire junior colleagues and students to persist and be successful in their endeavors.

Faculty Impact

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Countering Stereotypes



I hope you all have had a meaningful and fulfilling academic year! I have attended many recognition events during the last month and have genuinely enjoyed watching students, staff, and faculty come together to celebrate each other's successes and accomplishments. We must also recognize that some in our community have faced discrimination and stereotypes that diminish their contributions. It is for this reason that this last Faculty Impact newsletter of the academic year celebrates accomplished scholars who are doing work that counters the negative stereotypes that some of our students, peers, and communi-

ty members encounter. Not only is this research and scholarly activity aligned with the mission of Wayne State University but it is also aimed at creating a more equitable and inclusive world. Enjoy this newsletter and many best wishes on your spring/summer activities!

- Keith E. Whitfield, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs



Champion of Queer Rights

By Kelsey Husnick

Dr. Simone Chess is dismantling the stereotype that early modern literature is about “dead white men,” and showing students that such texts can be relevant, and even radical.

“By teaching about people of color, people with disabilities, queer and trans people across history, and by making sure that multiple and overlapping identities are represented in the texts I assign and part of the conversations we have in class, I hope that I’m helping dismantle the idea that only some types of people matter, in premodern literature, sure, but also in higher education,” said Chess, an associate professor in the English department and affiliate of the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Program. She’s the associate chair and director of undergraduate studies in the English department, and teaches courses on race in the Renaissance and queering the Renaissance, along with courses in Shakespeare and British literature and culture more broadly.

Her research focuses on the very recently emerging subfields in early modern trans studies and early modern disability studies. In her book, *Male-to-Female Cross-dressing in Early-Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (2016) Chess focuses on transfeminine cross-dressers in early modern texts of all genres, and argues that queer and trans genders in the early modern period were often relational and beneficial. She’s also in the midst of writing and editing other works on trans studies, and about disability,

queerness, and adaptive technologies in the early modern period.

“By contributing to these fields as an author and an editor, I hope I’m helping to push the boundaries of the fields and making room for new theories and methods that are in conversation with contemporary movements for equity and social justice,” she said.

But Chess’ work transcends both the classroom and research. Her service work is focused on advocacy for the Wayne State LGBTQIA+ community: She’s been an advisor for JIGSAW, an undergraduate student organization called Joining Intersectionality, Gender, and Sexuality at Wayne since 2008, and she’s the advisor for GQa, the queer graduate student organization. She also co-founded QWSU, the queer faculty and staff organization which is advisory to Marquita Chamblee, the Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion.

Over the last decade, Chess has worked with the Dean’s Office and the Office for Multicultural Student Engagement, to help create traditions on campus, such as Coming Out Week, held in October, and the Pride and Rainbow Graduation in April, which celebrates the accomplishments of queer and ally students while also highlighting university awards with a focus on

gender and sexuality. Chess has also pushed for policy and resource changes, such as the preferred name system and bathroom mapping and



Chess with her children, who are 8, 5, and 9 months. She said, “I am very busy on and off campus! But when I’m not working, I enjoy spending time with my partner and children, and also travelling to be with family in California and New York.”

signage initiatives.

“My work in service is all about helping our university live up to its commitments in equity and inclusion,” she said. “We have work to do in making our campus safe and welcoming for queer, gender nonbinary, and trans students, and efforts like Pride and Rainbow Grad help shift our campus culture toward those goals.”

All of this work earned Chess one of this year’s inaugural Wayne State Champions of Diversity and Inclusion Awards. This recognition, part of the Spirit of Community awards, is meant to honor faculty, staff and students with an established and successful record in creating and sustaining a diverse, inclusive and welcoming campus.

“I feel honored to have my work recognized by the Champions of

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Diversity Award, but I know that my contributions are only part of a larger whole,” Chess said. “I love working with faculty, staff, and students from across the university toward our common goals. I see next steps for us in working on bathroom access—especially in the main teaching buildings—more equitable housing, and more trans-inclusive healthcare. I am moved to see traditions that I helped start take on lives of their own and grow.”

Chess said she hopes the university will continue to put institutional support behind this kind of work, which enriches individual lives and the entire campus community.



When Boys Dance

By Keena Neal

Growing up as a child dancer in the 60s and 70s; Dr. Doug Risner did not believe he could pursue dance as a career.

“Majoring in dance at that time was something males did not do, so I was going to be a pediatrician,” said Risner.

But for Risner, dancing was no mere profession: “It was a calling,” he said.

Ultimately, his calling led him to a 20-year professional dance career, his position as Professor of Dance and Distinguished Faculty Fellow in the Department of Theatre and Dance, and his prolific research into the intersections between dance and gender.

“So, more recently, I’ve begun identifying myself as a sociologist of dance training and education, because I’m especially interested in looking at dance through lenses of gender, equity, asymmetrical power relationships and marginalization,” said Risner.

His research investigates the stereotypical assumptions about males who dance: “That they are all gay, that dance is for girls, that only ‘sissies’ and ‘faggots’ dance, among others,” according to Risner.

A large part of the stigma male dancers experience is due to the highly-feminized nature of Western concert dance, e.g. forms such as classical ballet, jazz dance, and modern dance. Risner’s goal is to change predominant views that dance is solely a feminine exploit.

Recently, his seminal book, *Stigma & Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance*, inspired the award-winning documentary film *Danseur*, which premiered at the Lincoln Center Film Society in New York City in 2018. Risner served as a research consultant for the film, which explores the stereotypes associated with male ballet dancers.

The film brought Risner’s research to a broader audience, and helped filmmaker Scott Gormley to understand his own son’s struggles as a male dancer in the world of ballet.

Risner’s research explores not only why males are discouraged from dance, but ways to mitigate the social stigma and negative stereotypes associated with male dancers. He hopes to illustrate dance as a form of empowerment



Distinguished Faculty Fellow, Professor of Dance, and Namesake of The Doug Risner Prize for Emerging Dance Researchers. “Stereotypes can change... when new information changes that particular groups’ most distinctive trait.”

Photo: Courtesy Doug Risner

and liberation for male dancers, as well as a means to challenge what masculinity means in Western societies. He does note some movement on that front. He says there’s been an increase in the number of male dance majors and he also notes the popularity of television programs such as “So You Think You Can Dance” as one pop-cultural example, that may expose the larger public to male dancers.

Yet, Risner’s work is far from done. He just completed a book of case studies on aspects of humanizing dance pedagogy and is working on an update to his 2009 study, *Stigma & Perseverance*, in which he hopes to finally answer a lingering question: Why do males stop dancing?

No matter the question, Risner’s research goals are clear: To study dancers and the profession he loves, to guide the next generation of dancers, and to change larger perceptions of the profession.

“So, researchers like myself, present new evidence that represents the stereotype group in a new way, which then can help reshape people’s extreme views about the stereotype group,” said Risner.



In Education, Culture and Language Matter

By Dr. Sandra M. Gonzales

The next generation of teachers will need to cultivate culturally and linguistically responsive learning communities.

Many do not realize that language and culture reinforce positive identity development, parent-child relationships as well as family-school partnerships which foster success. Today's teachers must navigate an under-resourced yet highly demanding terrain often at odds with many scholarly best practices.

I like to challenge students to think about how some languages are stigmatized. We all come from different language communities. We all use our linguistic skill sets in different ways depending on where we are at, who we are with and what we are talking about.

The difference is that some language communities are privileged, while others are stigmatized which creates deficit thinking, that one way of speaking is better and all others are wrong.

We must focus on expanding each child's linguistic skill sets so they can successfully navigate spaces that include communication needed for cross-cultural interactions as well as in the professional and career domains.

My work with Indigenous Mexican elders, parents and families helped to change my world paradigm. As a result, my research moves beyond Westernized educational perspectives towards exploring Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. In the Western World, we often function like there's only



Dr. Sandra M. Gonzales, Associate Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education and Principal Investigator for the College of Education Upward Bound Program.

one way to do things. And then we make sure our students know that way. And if they don't test well, for example, in that way, we fail them. It is a high-stakes environment that does not leave room for cultural expression or diverse ways of thinking or doing.

I view this as a tension between anthropocentric and a biocentric approaches to learning. In an anthropocentric approach, all things on the planet exist in the service of man. When applied to education, this creates a linear-based system where students are seen as individuals, moving along a continuum of increasing knowledge as measured by individual achievements.

In the biocentric framework, all things on the planet exist in relationship to one another. And the goal is not for one of these systems to dominate the other. But the goal in a circular framework is to promote sustainability between systems which includes not just people but also the earth. A biocentric approach permits teachers to take

into account those familial obligations that impact students' pursuit of education.

For example, a teacher could say, "you have to step out to take care of your little brothers and sisters, I totally understand. And, that's really awesome that you're helping your family, like that, let's figure out how to take care of your family while finishing school successfully."

Ultimately, both of these systems are important. We have to create multiple pathways through which our students can be successful. This means having students explore diverse knowledge structures in an increasingly globalized society.

Another important goal in education is for our students to feel good about themselves and their identity and to take care of the earth and each other. Student success is important and there is room to re-imagine what this means.

