

COM GRAD NEWS



Newsletter for the Graduate Program in Communication
at Illinois State University

Coordinator's Corner

By Dr. Aimee Miller-Ott

I want to start by saying that I have been so proud of everyone in the graduate program this semester. We keep hearing about COVID and Zoom fatigue, and I personally have experienced both, and I know from talking to many of you, you have too. The hours online for classes and meetings, and the fears about health decisions for ourselves, families, and friends have definitely taken a toll on us. Then to add all of the other events and stressors of this past year, it is not lost on me that times are hard for us all for many different reasons, and it's enough to make anyone want to stay in bed!

However, that's not what we've done. We kept teaching. We kept learning. We kept meeting. We kept advising. We kept dialoguing. We kept supporting. And at the end, we have 34 graduate students completing the program and graduating this spring. As of today, we have 30 students joining the program in the fall who represent 11 different colleges and universities. We have 12 students coming from countries outside of the United States. Twenty-four students made it through their first year of graduate school virtually; this was not an ideal situation, but nonetheless, they had amazing successes both in and outside of the classroom! Graduate faculty also spent a lot of important time in meetings and at a retreat reflecting on the graduate program, talking about what we do well and discussing strategies for improvement that we plan to start implementing in the fall. We held research colloquia during which faculty and graduate students shared their research. Alumni provided invaluable support by helping students with professional development. (A special thank you goes to Sarah Monsma for all of her event planning this year!)

As this semester and my second year as coordinator come to a close, I reflect back on the support that faculty, students, and alumni provided to each other during this time, and to me as coordinator, and I'm very proud to call the School of Communication my academic home. I truly wish you all a blessed, healthy, safe, and happy summer full of growth and much deserved rest!

IN THIS ISSUE

**WELCOME FROM THE
COORDINATOR**

**WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP
TO THIS SPRING**

**STUDENT & ALUMNI
ACHIEVEMENTS**

**FIRST & SECOND YEARS
IN REVIEW**

What We've Been Up To This Spring

Professional Development Workshops

Ensuring Success, a series of professional workshops started last fall, continued with engaging opportunities in the spring semester. These virtual events featured panels of academic and professional speakers who discussed relevant topics to help graduate students gain important professional development skills and prepare for varied careers.

February's workshop concerned academic conferences and featured a panel of Illinois State professors: **Dr. Megan Hopper**, **Dr. Aimee Miller-Ott**, and **Dr. Roth Smith**.

The March workshop focused on job interviewing. Panelists were communication professionals and program alums: **Adam Brockman**, Instructional Designer/Trainer, Country Financial; **Curt Livesay**, Owner, Dynamite Ag; and **Cathy Oloffson**, Director of Communications & Community Relations, Town of Normal.

The final workshop of the semester in April featured alumni who talked about their unique backgrounds and experiences in the communication field: **Griffin Hammond**, Documentary Filmmaker, Recount Media; **Viraj Patel**, Program Coordinator, Illinois Wesleyan University; and **Dr. Erin Willer**, Associate Professor, University of Denver.

Thank you to our alumni who always give their time and expertise! If you were a student in our program and would like to find ways to share your experiences and advice with our students, please contact Aimee Miller-Ott at aeott@ilstu.edu.

Research Presentation Opportunities

At the Central States Communication Association conference, held virtually from March 23-28, 14 of our graduate students presented their original research, chaired panels, and took home some impressive Top Paper awards in various interest groups. Congratulations to these students, and also to our students who presented and won awards at other conferences throughout the year!



Our newly developed Graduate Research Colloquium series this spring offered a virtual platform for graduate students and faculty to share and discuss their research. Presenters included Drs. Hunt and Zompetti, and graduate students Sarah Monsma, Tyler Pham, Jared Worwood, and Meghan Moreno. Thanks to everyone who attended!

The graduate program was also well represented at the University Research Symposium held virtually in April. Graduate students Alyssa Green, Coy Suprunowski, Tyler Pham, Kaitlyn Sullivan, and Erienne Thedorf presented their research on important topics including COVID compliance, remote work, and politeness in the classroom. Thanks to faculty mentors Drs. John Baldwin, John Hooker, Kevin Meyer, and Lance Lippert for overseeing their projects!

Keeping Students Connected Through the GSA



The Graduate Student Association (GSA) continued to hold virtual events and coffee dates to bring students together outside of class. For instance, GSA held a 'Committee Selection Q&A Session' in January to guide students in the next step of their graduate school journey. "During this Zoom meeting, first-years were able to seek advice regarding the beginning of their thesis and 39-hour project process," said MJ Mason, GSA President.

The March 'Identities in Academia Workshop' provided space for engaging discussion between students and faculty on the influence of an academic environment on shaping and recognizing respective identities. Panelists included Dr. John Baldwin, Dr. Ashley Hall, and Dr. Lindsey Thomas.

As MJ reflected on the GSA board, "Our board is closer than ever and we are looking forward to finishing the school year strong." This year's board members were Annie Kamps (top, left; Treasurer & First Year Representative), MJ Mason (top, right; President), Maddie Witt (bottom, left; Event Coordinator), and Sara Engstrom (bottom, right; Event Coordinator).

GSA is currently holding elections for next year's board.

Student & Alumni Achievements

Alumni Awards

This spring, the faculty selected two of our outstanding alumni to receive awards.

Dr. Roseann M. Mandziuk has received the 2021 Outstanding Graduate Alumni Achievement Award. This award is presented to alumni whose achievements in their field or vocation have received favorable statewide, national, or international recognition; who have received honors from associations or employers; or whose work has proven beneficial to a pronounced segment of society. The current First Vice President and soon to be President of the National Communication Association (NCA), Dr. Mandziuk is a University Distinguished Professor at Texas State University. Her research focuses on images of women, the rhetorical uses of history, and the construction of public memory in museums and monuments. She has co-authored a scholarly book about the rhetoric of Sojourner Truth, published numerous articles and book chapters examining historical and contemporary rhetoric, and served as Editor of Women's Studies in Communication. She has received two Fulbright Scholar Awards, in India and in Poland, and has presented numerous international research lectures. She also was selected as an American Council on Education Fellow.

Dr. Samantha Shebib has received the 2021 Outstanding New Graduate Alumni Award. This award recognizes significant accomplishment and leadership early in one's chosen professional or academic career. A recent doctoral graduate from Michigan State University, Dr. Shebib is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at Utah State University and will be joining the University of Alabama at Birmingham as an Assistant Professor in the fall. In the 5 years since graduating from our program, she has created an impressive reputation as an active scholar, having published 7 research articles, presented more than 20 papers at conferences, and won multiple teaching and research awards.

University Teaching Award Winners

Anjali Patel (pictured below, left), a second year COM master's student and Josh Fitzgerald (pictured below, right), a fourth year Ed.D. student with a COM concentration, both GTAs for the School of Communication, were awarded Outstanding University Graduate Student Teaching Awards. Anjali and Josh were selected from a pool of nominated GTAs representing numerous departments across campus. Awardees are selected for their outstanding contributions to teaching.



Other Important Awards & Recognitions

The COM graduate faculty selected **Anjali Patel** as the recipient of the 2021 Outstanding Graduate Student Award. This award goes to the student who faculty believe demonstrates excellence in teaching, research, and service.

After several rounds of competition, second-year grad student **Kelly Murphy** represented the School in the university-wide Three Minute Thesis Competition during which graduate students presented their thesis research in three minutes. The event was held virtually this year, with participants presenting over Zoom. Kelly's thesis provides information on corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages produced by professional sport teams and the subsequent impact of CSR on organizational success. To learn more about Kelly's research, you can contact her at kemurpl@ilstu.edu.



Second-year grad student **Alyssa Green** (pictured right) was selected as the GradBird Scholar in February 2021, a recognition by the Graduate School for her research focused on creating a COVID compliance health campaign for ISU for the upcoming school year. To learn more Alyssa's research, you can reach her at amgree8@ilstu.edu.

Second-year grad student **Rocky Roque** came in second place in the university-wide Image of Research Competition. For this competition, Rocky created a visual image to represent his research "Mask for Mask? Queer Hook-up Culture during the COVID-19 Pandemic." To learn more about Rocky's research, you can reach him at rroquel@ilstu.edu.



First Year in Review: A Virtual Start

Students who began the Communication master's program in fall 2020 experienced unique challenges in adapting to a completely virtual academic format. They attended seminars over Zoom, worked virtually in their GTA and GA positions, used mediated channels to connect with peers, and conducted research with faculty members who many students hadn't met face-to-face. Sarah Monsma, a second year graduate student and GA for the graduate program, interviewed some of our first year students who shared their thoughts and reflections about completing their first year of graduate school in the middle of a global pandemic.

"Without having peers in the classroom, it can be hard to build relationships or not feel like you're the only one who may not be understanding lessons or concepts," said Ja Tavia Stoot (pictured right, top). "It was definitely very challenging adjusting to online learning," said Jennifer Zheng (pictured right, second from top). "I hear a lot of fun stories from second year grad students and instructors about how fun in-person classes are and the bond that is created in the GTA office. However, I am hopeful and optimistic about next year."



Although they couldn't chat in the hallways of Fell, students still found creative ways to form connections with their peers outside of the classroom. "Facetimes and random Zoom sessions became very frequent," said Jennifer. "After we got closer, we formed a COVID safe bubble where we felt comfortable spending time in-person with a select few." Samantha Schultz (pictured right, third from top) found that fun conversations were able to take place on the Zoom chat bar during class. "I have still gotten to know my peers, but I have realized it can be hard to get to know everyone," said Samantha. "I miss the opportunities to chat with different people before class, but I like that we all as a class conversate before class on Zoom."



Making friends is definitely more challenging from a distance but students found ways to make it happen. Zach Thornhill (pictured right, bottom) initially found it hard to establish personal connections with peers, but was still able to develop close friendships. "I was able to connect with people, get phone numbers, and start online study groups with people I had classes with. These people turned into my best friends in the cohort and we were able to make some lasting connections," said Zach. "We continuously bounce ideas off of each other for studies/papers we are doing. We have also created a support network between ourselves which has helped tremendously."



Despite the challenges of the past academic year, our first year graduate students remained committed to coursework, research, jobs, and for many, teaching their own classes. Dr. Cheri Simonds commented about this first year class, "I am continually impressed with our graduate students' willingness and ability to adapt during a crisis. We were told the day before training that all teaching would go online. The new GTAs took the news in stride and everyone just did what needed to be done!" She continued, "After having never taken or taught a course online, my students showed patience and grace with me. We soon discovered that teaching a graduate seminar synchronously still allowed us to make connections as a class and develop insights throughout the process. I will be forever thankful!"



They demonstrated the flexibility to utilize available resources to stay connected. "Being so far from home, ISU welcomed me with open arms and helped me with my ongoing transition as many of us are going through similar experiences," said Ja Tavia.

Last Year in Review: A Virtual Finish



Second-year graduate students spent the last year adjusting to online learning and are now completing the program in unique circumstances. In contrast to the first-year students' virtual start, graduating students began their journey at Illinois State in-person and were able to initially form close relationships with their peers before transitioning online. They have spent more than a year taking courses and connecting with one another remotely. Sarah Monsma spoke to a few graduating students about their experiences completing the program this spring.

"Our cohort was particularly close, so it's such a shame that we can't really celebrate each other in the way I'm sure we would have sans-pandemic, so it reminds me how separated we all are from one another," said Jacob Valov (pictured left, top). "But, at the same time, it really emphasizes our individual successes. Each of us had a very specific and different journey through getting a master's in a pandemic, and I think that does give the degree a bit of a personal touch." Leia Atas (pictured left, middle) said, "Although the circumstances are different, I'm especially proud of my peers for navigating the program and graduating with their masters during a global pandemic."



Illinois State did not hold a traditional graduation ceremony, but instead opted to allow stage crossings for individual students to attend with four guests. Some graduate students took advantage of this opportunity to celebrate their graduation with family and friends, while others opted for a more low-key celebration. "My version of celebrating will honestly be just taking some time off from everything and enjoying getting an extended break," said Jacob. Anne Amegbeha (pictured left, bottom) reflected that "even though I am elated about how far I have come, I would say that I have huge mixed feelings about graduating in a time as this. In normal times, I would have family and friends come celebrate my feat, so the feeling is different with all loved ones around. But hey, it still does not reduce the importance of celebrating regardless." Leia reflected that "not having a typical in-person graduation will not stop me from safely celebrating this accomplishment and I hope my fellow graduates will do the same. We deserve it!"

Jacob and Anne are enrolling in doctoral programs in the fall, while Leia is relocating to Colorado for work. While some new grads have secured jobs or are preparing for doctoral programs, others are still figuring out their next steps.



Dr. Steve Hunt, Director of the School, commented that "I remain extremely impressed with our graduate students who were able to successfully navigate the last year online. They continued to hold events, represent the School at conferences, and successfully complete their 39-hour projects and theses. Although the last year was difficult, our graduate students navigated multiple pandemics with grace." Dr. Joe Zompetti added that "despite the difficulties of the past year, our graduate students have been phenomenal. None of them who took my graduate seminars took short cuts, they didn't buckle under the challenges, and they remained focused to absorb as much from their graduate experience as possible. I think I can speak for all of my colleagues when I say they have been a real pleasure to have in our grad program, and all of them will be missed terribly!"

If you are interested in making a gift to the graduate program or donating your time or resources, check out our website (<https://communication.illinoisstate.edu>) or reach out via email (Aimee Miller-Ott, Graduate Program Coordinator, aeott@ilstu.edu)