

together

EXPLORING WHAT CAN BE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

FALL 2020 NO. 14



[kə'nekSH(ə)n] noun

1. A joining or being joined; coupling; union
2. A part or thing that joins; means of joining
3. A relationship; association



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CONNECTION

from the dean

Thank you for reading the Fall 2020 edition of the College of Social Sciences' Together newsletter! With the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustices occurring nationwide and devastating wildfires raging here in California, 2020 has been a very difficult year. College of Social Sciences faculty and staff are working hard to create powerful online environments for our students so that they can maintain timely progress to their degrees despite the challenges introduced by these events. All of our classes are online during the Fall 2020 semester. We hope that we will be able to return to in-person classes during the Spring 2021 semester, but we are prepared to continue excellent online instruction if necessary.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced very significant budget problems throughout the California State University (CSU) system, of which San José State is a member. Several CSU

institutions responded to predicted budget deficits by suspending new faculty hiring during the Spring 2020 semester, but San José State decided to continue to invest in building a world-class faculty. In fact, the College of Social Sciences ended the faculty search cycle with 14 hires, the highest number of new faculty in my five years as dean! The main section of Together profiles these new faculty. This year 11 new assistant professors joined us: In Sociology & Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, Amy August, Soma de Bourbon and Yolanda Wiggins; in African American Studies, Jalylah Burrell and Michael Fisher; in Urban & Regional Planning, Kerry Rohrmeier and Ahoura Zandiatashbar; in Psychology, Jacquelyn Brady and Christina Tzeng; and Amanda Stasiewicz in Environmental Studies and Patralekha Ukil in Economics. Three tenured faculty also joined the college: Travis Boyce (associate professor and chair, African American Studies), Paul Knepper (professor and chair, Justice Studies), and T. William Lester (associate professor, Urban & Regional Planning). These new faculty are all engaged in amazing research and teaching activities.

Our two associate deans are also profiled. Ron Rogers has been a fabulous associate dean since 2016, but with the increase in the faculty's Research, Creative,

and Scholarly Activity, the college needed a second full-time dean to support the faculty's efforts. Ron is now the Associate Dean for Academic Programs and Student Success, and in January 2020 Cami Johnson joined us from the College of Business as our new Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Success. Welcome, new colleagues!

The theme of this issue of Together is "connection." I have been very impressed by how our faculty, students and community members are staying connected even though we are sheltering in place and only able to see each other in online spaces. While the media we use to communicate have shifted — everyone is a Zoom expert now! — we will continue to apply our knowledge and skills to work productively as individuals and in groups to solve pressing social problems. Please see the back cover for information about how you can help us with these efforts. We very much appreciate those of you who have helped us in the past, and look forward to both continued partnerships and new collaborations. Thank you!

Walt Jacobs
Dean

The Dean Team



Ronald Rogers came to the Dean's Office in 2016, but he has been part of the College of Social Sciences since 1999, when he joined the faculty of the Department of Psychology.

Camille Johnson joined the Dean's Office in January, but she has been at San José State since 2007 as a professor of management in the Lucas College and Graduate School of Business and in a variety of administrative positions.

The two make up Dean Walter Jacobs' new associate dean team, dividing their areas of concentration into curriculum and student success and research and faculty success.

Rogers is on the student side, as associate dean for Academic Programs and Student Success.

Johnson is on the faculty side, as associate dean for Research and Faculty Success.

Until this year, Rogers was handling both students and faculty. As the number of students and course offerings in the college grew and San José State launched university-wide initiatives, it became apparent that the job had grown and he was spread too thin.

"There have been significant changes in the college in terms of our size, but also in terms of initiatives within the University that we want to be represented in," Rogers says.

When SJSU launched the Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity initiative to increase faculty potential through workshops, training and research grants, "We realized we really needed to have somebody representing the College of Social Sciences in those conversations," Rogers says.

The call to more fully support faculty research came at the same time the Cal State system launched the Graduation Initiative 2025, an ambitious CSU-wide plan to increase graduation rates and reduce achievement gaps for historically underrepresented students.

That initiative is now in Rogers' portfolio. And, with the College of Social Sciences entirely online in the Fall 2020 semester due to

COVID-19, Rogers is also responsible for helping students adjust to a college schedule without in-person classes.

"I'm a big believer in online education and really what I'm a big believer in is giving our students options on their path to graduation and career success," Rogers says.

As a psychologist, Rogers has studied learning and memory, most recently looking at the efficacy of online teaching and learning.

Rogers received a B.A. in psychology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in psychology from Rutgers University.

Johnson has a B.A. in psychology from Carleton College, an M.A. in applied social psychology from Claremont Graduate University and a Ph.D. in social psychology from The Ohio State University.

Johnson has taught in the College of Business with side trips to the College of Education as an interim department chair, the Office of the Provost as chief operations manager and the School of Management as acting chair.

"I'm kind of like grout," Johnson jokes. "I fill in a lot of the cracks."

Now, she says, "My job is to promote the faculty in the college and to make connections with people." With 500 faculty members in 12 departments and subject matters as diverse as microfinance and medieval witchcraft, it is a large portfolio — and one made more difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Johnson had been on the job at the College for six weeks when SJSU closed campus and students and faculty went home. Johnson began a Friday Digest email to all faculty, containing announcements, links to faculty who appeared in news media, tips and advice. She also launched a daily Good News Bulletin filled with faculty-penned COVID haiku or some days just a funny video to cut the stress.

"What drew me to this job is the full title — it's not just research but a broader base for defining faculty success," Johnson says. "It can be teaching, work-life balance, advocacy or being a public intellectual." 🌍

A Man of the Moment

New Chair Travis Boyce wants African American Studies in sync with popular culture

As the fall semester began and Travis Boyce settled in as the new chair of the Department of African American Studies, he contemplated how to incorporate the events of what he calls “the cruel summer” into the fabric of the department.

His cruel summer calendar actually begins in the spring. Feb. 23: Ahmaud Arbery is chased down by three white men in Georgia and shot to death. March 13: Breonna Taylor is shot and killed by police charging into her apartment in Louisville on a no-knock warrant. May 25: Police officers in Minneapolis kneel on the neck of George Floyd during his arrest for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he stops breathing and dies.

The nation erupted into protest against police violence and systemic racism and statues commemorating the Confederacy were toppled — all while the COVID-19 pandemic raged and disproportionately sickened and killed people of color.

In an essay published in *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, Boyce wrote, “As we reflect on this Cruel Summer, popular culture can serve as a powerful lens to understand history as well as our contemporary world.”

Will the turmoil of current events find its way into curriculum and classroom discussions this fall?

“Oh, absolutely,” says Boyce. “When you look at historically how African-American studies and other ethnic studies were founded, it was out of struggle and an era of social protest. The current political movement and current events continue to speak to Black studies and what Black



studies adds to higher education and the narrative of who matters and who doesn't matter.”

Boyce comes to SJSU as chair and associate professor from Northern Colorado University in Greeley, where he was an associate professor in Africana Studies a coordinator of the Africana Studies program.

He replaces Theodora Regina Berry, who left to become dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies and Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at the University of Central Florida.

A native of South Carolina, Boyce studied history at Claflin University, a private historically Black university in Orangeburg. He received an M.A. in history and a Ph.D. in cultural studies from Ohio University.

As a scholar, Boyce has developed a knack for choosing topics before they are au courant.

He is co-author of “Historicizing Fear,” published by University Press of Colorado

in 2020, which looks at how fear of the other throughout human history has been used as a tool to oppress groups.

“The fear and vilification of historically marginalized groups has consequently resulted in laws and policies designed to keep them in a subordinate class. Furthermore, it justifies violence and harm perpetuated against those groups,” he says.

Even though the book took five years to complete and Boyce obviously could not have predicted the election of President Donald Trump, “It's very timely,” says Boyce. “As a matter of fact, my co-editor and I revised the book introduction and centered it on Trump's 2016 Republican National Convention nomination speech. Trump's speech centered the identity of a white, Christian nation slipping away due to Black criminality and illegal Mexican immigration.”

Boyce's current book project, tentatively titled “#MoreThanAnAthlete: Fashion, Social Justice and the Counternarratives of the Protesting Black Athlete,” examines the intersection of race, fashion and media among athletes as far back as the early 1900s, but also finds the issue exploding this summer and fall with professional athletes taking a knee during the National Anthem to call attention to police brutality and racial injustice and NBA and WNBA players wearing “Black Lives Matter” or “Say Her Name” shirts during warmups and on the bench.

“My Ph.D. advisor advised us when you're writing and doing research, always try to speak to what's going on in the present political moment,” Boyce says. “Try to find a way that you can angle that.” 🌐

Justice Studies and New Chair Paul Knepper Find Their Natural Homes

Beginning with eight students in what was known as the “Police School” at what was then called San José State College, Justice Studies has a long and storied history at San José State University. While it has changed its name several times, the department is the first degree-granting program for criminal justice in the United States.

This year, two things about Justice Studies are fresh and new. The department has moved from the College of Health and Human Sciences to the College of Social Sciences. And Justice Studies has a new chair — Professor Paul Knepper.

The department has come a long way since the 1930s, when courses offered included “Police Hygiene” and “Police Typing.” In 1946, a penology major was added for students interested in pursuing careers in probation or parole. In 1964, the department’s name was changed to the Law Enforcement and Administration Department. In 1970 it became the Administration of Justice Department and shifted from strictly training students for law enforcement careers to more of an academic focus on the philosophy of justice and critical analysis of the justice system. Demonstration of typing skills was no longer required, but writing competence was.

Today, the department is large, with 1,200 students and 20 full-time faculty members. It offers two undergraduate programs with four concentrations and two master’s degrees.

Many universities have either a department of criminal justice (the study of institutions) or criminology (the study of crime and criminal behavior).



“Justice Studies is even bigger,” Knepper says. “Justice Studies includes not only institutions and human behavior, but concepts of social justice, legal studies and forensic science. It’s a multi-disciplinary department where we bring contributions, methodologies, theories from different disciplines.”

Knepper is a good example of the breadth of Justice Studies’ reach. He received his bachelor’s degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin — Green Bay, his master’s in criminal justice from the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee and his Ph.D. in justice studies from Arizona State University.

His first job was teaching in a department of political science, then a school of social work and then a department of sociology.

He comes to the College of Social Sciences after 12 years at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, where he was professor of criminology in the School of Law. Since 2013, he has been visiting professor of criminology at the School of

Criminal Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland, where he is using archives from the United Nations to study historical transnational approaches to investigating human trafficking and terrorism.

“Now I’m back in Justice Studies, my natural home,” says Knepper. “It’s very exciting for me to be part of what I started doing originally.”

Knepper’s goals for the department include furthering the B.S. and M.S. degree programs and pursuing the development of a professional doctorate in the college or a Ph.D. in conjunction with the University of California.

This summer, the department faculty wrote and posted a statement on the department’s website that acknowledged systemic racism and condemned police violence.

“In the Department of Justice Studies,” it said, “we are committed to examining our curriculum, resources, and practices to become even more aligned with social justice values and anti-racist practices.”

Current events — such as the nationwide debate about policing and race — are important to the department and the faculty, Knepper says. “Within our department, faculty have different expertise, different experiences and different views about what needs to be done. I like to think we can demonstrate how to move forward on these different issues even when we disagree.” After meeting the faculty and learning about their backgrounds and their interests, Knepper was thrilled to be invited to join the department. “It’s truly a privilege for me to be at SJSU,” Knepper says. “It’s a very exciting environment to be a part of.” 🌍

Twelve New Faces, Lots of New Ideas

It's no surprise that **Amy August**, a new associate professor in the Department of Sociology & Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, has focused her scholarship on sports and education.

August, an Illinois native, competed in gymnastics from childhood through college, where she earned an athletic scholarship to the University of Illinois at Chicago, then taught high school English and coached in gymnastics before turning her focus to academia.

"Obviously, a natural interest in sports has always been there for me, and gymnastics across the levels," August says. "I study education, sports, families and culture more broadly. I would describe myself as a cultural sociologist. I'm interested in cultural environments."

As the first in her family to complete an undergraduate degree, August knows the struggles of students unfamiliar with the culture of college. She went through four majors before settling on English literature at Illinois and worked for 10 years before pursuing a master's degree in comparative human development at the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Minnesota.

Her dissertation research focused on preschool-aged children — one group attending preschool and the other enrolled in a gymnastics program. She was interested in how teachers and coaches classified children and whether teachers and coaches identified talent and promise differently.

Surprisingly, August found that teachers were less focused on whether kids knew their ABCs or could identify shapes and colors and coaches were less focused on demonstrations of strength and agility.

"What I found was that social skills were more important in both settings," August says. The ability to stand in line, follow directions and get along with classmates were most important in determining whether teachers thought students were ready for kindergarten and whether coaches identified students for more elite classes.

While teaching online from her home in Minneapolis this semester, August will also serve as the assistant director of SJSU's Institute for the Study of Sport, Society, and Social Change. 🌟



After seven years as a lecturer in the College of Social Sciences, **Soma de Bourbon** has joined the Department of Sociology & Interdisciplinary Social Sciences as an assistant professor.

De Bourbon, who received her B.A. in Native American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and her Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness Program at UC Santa Cruz, has taught classes in women's studies and Asian-American studies, as well as sociology, and is known for engaging her students in hands-on projects on campus.

Her students have strung up hundreds of shirts across campus, each garment representing a victim of violence, and hung red dresses, each representing a missing or murdered indigenous woman.

De Bourbon, whose ancestry is Blackfeet Indian and French, is also the faculty advisor to the Native American Student Association on campus.

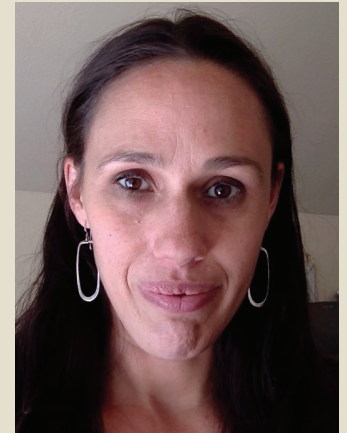
"I love the school and I love the students," says de Bourbon, who is teaching courses on masculinity and femininity and family violence this semester.

De Bourbon was raised in an unstable and violent household and left home when she was 12, finding a job, renting a room and passing the California high school proficiency exam so she could enroll in community college classes.

It was an unconventional start to a career in academia. While at Berkeley and while pursuing her Ph.D., de Bourbon worked full time, in shipping and packaging, waitressing, managing an office and most frequently as a nanny to wealthy families.

"My parents were pretty much drug addicts, and I've had every kind of family violence you can think of," says de Bourbon. "The only gift I would say that my parents gave me would be the gift of understanding suffering. And I have a high ability to understand the suffering of my students."

Her research has centered on the ways in which Native people are viewed as property by whites, through enslavement and detention, lack of enforcement of the Indian Child Welfare Act and cultural appropriation. 🌟



How do we decode spoken language? What role do supervisors play in workplace happiness? Does the green economy help or hurt economies? How can communities come together to fight fire? Those are just a few of the questions new faculty members are bringing to the College of Social Sciences.

Better bosses make happier and healthier employees — and that helps businesses and organizations thrive. And **Jacquelyn Brady**, a new assistant professor of psychology at San Jose State, has the research to prove it.

Focusing on occupational health psychology, “I look at supervisor support and the culture and how they can affect employee health and well-being and how that affects employees’ family relationships and family well-being,” Brady says.

Constructing work environments where employees are happy and healthy isn’t only a moral issue. It’s also good for the bottom line.

“Employers are realizing that you need to have a stake in employee health and well-being if you want your organization to thrive,” says Brady. “When employees aren’t happy, they can be less productive and they also turn over, and it costs a lot to replace employees.”

Brady received a B.A. in psychology from California State University San Marcos, a master’s degree in experimental psychology from Washington State University and her Ph.D. in applied industrial organizational psychology from Portland State University. She spent a year as a post-doctoral fellow at Oregon Health and Science University.

Like many SJSU students, Brady is the first in her family to graduate from college and took a slow road to a four-year degree. After graduating from high school in San Diego, Brady was uncertain what she would study in college and how she would pay for it, so she worked and took classes at a community college before transferring as a junior to Cal State, San Marcos.

The professor in her first psychology class invited her to work in her lab, and from there Brady’s interest in psychology research took off. Brady hopes she can provide the same kind of mentorship at SJSU.

“It’s a wonderful thing to be able to give back to something that you benefited from so greatly,” she says. 🌱



More than once, **Jalylah Burrell** has described her academic field to a seatmate on an airplane and been met with snorts of derision.

“They’ll start laughing — and not in a good way,” says the new assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies. “It’s like, why is that a thing to study?”

Burrell, a native of Seattle who went away to Spelman College in Atlanta as an undergraduate, earning a B.A. in English, is a scholar of Black literature, music and popular culture, concentrating on Black women and humor and hip-hop culture.

“I think people are uncomfortable with laughter and anything that is seen as light or funny, and so there’s this idea that it can’t be a topic of rigorous reckoning,” says Burrell. “In all of my classes one of the things I say to students is that joy is a human right. The idea that joy is contrasted with rigor is one I want to interrogate.”

Burrell is at work on two books — “Capacity for Laughter: Black Women and the American Comedic Tradition,” and “Wrong Ways: The Radical Aesthetics of Hip-Hop.”

Burrell can trace her interest in race, gender and comedy to middle school, when she heard her father laughing out loud while reading “White Boy Shuffle,” Paul Beatty’s coming-of-age novel about a young Black surfer. “It’s hilarious, incredibly funny, incredibly smart. After reading it I thought, ‘I’d like to read something like this by a Black woman,’” she says. “And I had trouble finding it.”

After Spelman, Burrell moved to New York and launched a career as a freelance arts writer, specializing in jazz and hip-hop. She completed an M.A. in Africana Studies at New York University and spent a year at StoryCorps, before pursuing a Ph.D. in American Studies and African American Studies at Yale University.

After completing her Ph.D., she completed two post-doctoral fellowships — at Rice and DePaul universities — before joining SJSU. 🌱



Michael R. Fisher Jr. is spending the year on a postdoctoral fellowship at American University in Washington, D.C., his hometown, and will begin teaching as an assistant professor in the Department of African American Studies at San José State in Fall 2021.



During his fellowship, Fisher will continue to work on a book project, tentatively titled “Black Urbanism: Toward an Afrofuturist Vision of Equitable Development.” The book explores the ways in which urban revitalization efforts often displace and harm poor Black communities, looking specifically at revitalization in D.C.’s Barry Farm neighborhood.

“I’m fundamentally interested in the well-being of Black and poor communities in U.S. cities,” says Fisher. “I’m perpetually interrogating the practices and structures that inhibit human flourishing of these communities and identifying solutions that improve their lives and promote their well-being.”

Fisher received his B.S. and M.Div. from Howard University. He went on to earn an M.A. and Ph.D. in religion, ethics and society from Vanderbilt University. Afterward, Fisher spent a year as a Smithsonian postdoc fellow at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

His research has concentrated mostly on cities in the South and East Coast, and Fisher is eager to expand his inquiry to cities in the West. He is also excited to join the African-American Studies department, particularly during this social moment, in which calls for racial equity and justice have engulfed the nation.

“I think what Black Studies seeks to do and what I seek to do as Black Studies professor is to lift up the stories and the voices of Black communities,” Fisher says. “To show the richness, depth and breadth of Black human experiences.”

Before his career as an educator, Fisher was a public policy advocate on Capitol Hill, working on immigration reform, financial reform and welfare programs. He transitioned to a local nonprofit organization, where he was responsible for the development of the organization’s public policy agenda and advocacy strategy for affordable housing creation and the elimination of chronic homelessness in the nation’s capital. 🌟

Growing up in Hyde Park on Chicago’s South Side, **T. William Lester** came to understand geography and concepts of urban planning almost innately.



“If you grow up in Hyde Park, you’re very quickly made aware of the boundaries of the neighborhood,” says Lester, who this year joined the Department of Urban & Regional Planning, as an associate professor of city and regional planning.

On the shore of Lake Michigan, Hyde Park was a racially integrated middle-class enclave surrounded by poverty in the 1990s.

“It was cloistered and I was always so aware of its boundaries,” says Lester. “I always wondered, why is it this way? That was my avenue into urban planning and urban issues.”

Lester received a B.A. in economics and urban studies from the University of Pennsylvania, a master’s in urban planning from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a Ph.D. in city and regional planning from the University of California, Berkeley.

Prior to coming to SJSU, Lester was an associate professor at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill.

Lester’s research has looked at the impact of minimum wage and living wage policies on urban economic development, issues of neighborhood economic distress and the effects of green economy policies on employment. His papers have focused on urban neighborhoods, urban renewal policies and the history of why American urban neighborhoods look the way they do, segregated by economics and race.

“There’s this central tension in urban planning,” Lester says. “On the one hand, we have a lot of significant social problems that are really concentrated by place. But on the other hand, a lot of the policies to solve those problems have resulted in even more inequality by race and class. So how can we as a society address those wrongs while not making more wrongs?”

Lester is currently conducting research for a book on the long-term impacts of Urban Renewal policies on neighborhood economic development and racial inequality on Chicago’s South Side. 🌟

Kerry Rohrmeier's first academic inquiry focused on Black Rock City, the temporary metropolis erected in the Nevada desert to host Burning Man each year. That broadened to other experimental communities built in hard desert landscapes. Rohrmeier's current research focuses on what happens when development reaches into the desert.



"I'm just fascinated at what happens when development comes to arid lands and how desert regions are changing due to urbanization," Rohrmeier says.

Rohrmeier, a lecturer in the College of Social Sciences for the past seven years, has joined the Department of Urban & Regional Planning as an assistant professor of geography.

Rohrmeier grew up in Florida but was drawn to the landscape of the West. She got a B.A. in science and technology from Sierra Nevada University ("with a strong emphasis in skiing and snowboarding") and an M.S. in biology from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. She worked in planning in Reno before pursuing her Ph.D. in geography at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Her dissertation research was the first time a scholar had examined the Burning Man phenomenon in the context of geography. Since then, her research has turned to less intentional desert development with a focus on what happens when large tech firms expand into desert landscapes.

"I'm specifically interested in connections between the Bay Area and northern Nevada," Rohrmeier says, "and a great example is Tesla's Gigafactory, which is one of the largest industrial buildings in North America."

The site near Reno provides tens of thousands of jobs, but it has made housing prices soar in Reno, Sparks and neighboring communities, put pressure on water resources, roads and schools and created community tensions.

"It changes these communities and these regions in significant ways," Rohrmeier says, "and the decision-makers, the executives who make these decisions, are three hours away in the Bay Area. They don't live in these communities." 🌟

Amanda Stasiewicz is probably the only incoming faculty member in the College of Social Sciences who has been trained to fight a wildfire.



She's never had the opportunity to stare down a raging forest fire, but Stasiewicz has spent her career in academia exploring wildfire management and how various stakeholders cooperate — or don't — to mitigate fire danger and battle blazes when they spark.

She calls it the "human dimensions of wildfire adaptation, or how communities and societies deal with wildfire risk and wildfire management."

Stasiewicz joined the Environmental Studies Department as an assistant professor after completing her master's degree and Ph.D. in natural resources at the University of Idaho.

Stasiewicz grew up on Long Island surrounded by water and studied environmental science at Siena College, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York.

She interned at the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in marine science, studying the risks to whales posed by offshore wave energy converters. In another internship at Brookhaven National Laboratory, she tracked turtles and mist-netted bats. And her study abroad component took her to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands.

"I spent a lot of time at the ocean growing up, and a lot of my interest in the environment was through studying marine biology and water quality issues," Stasiewicz says.

After falling in love with the western landscape, Stasiewicz chose Idaho for graduate studies and drifted into fire management issues after studying the impacts of cheatgrass, an invasive annual grass in the Intermountain West, and seeing how dramatically it fed larger wildfires and taxed the capacity of fire management systems.

Through her work with scientists and communities around endangered species and marine biology, Stasiewicz realized that she was mostly interested in how environmental issues affect communities. "I decided that I really wanted to study people," she says, "and somehow I ended up in fire." 🌟

Christina Tzeng, who joined the Department of Psychology this year as an assistant professor of cognitive psychology, is calling her new research center the Spoken Language Perception Lab.

That is Tzeng's research focus in a nutshell. "I study how we as humans understand spoken language," says Tzeng, a native of Jamaica, Queens.

It is both more simple and more complicated than one might think.

Most of us don't give much thought to listening to a speaker and understand what they say. "It's really quite a feat that we do," says Tzeng. "Spoken language is an extremely complex signal. It conveys a lot of information — gender, age, region of origin. All of that we're encoding alongside the actual words."

When Tzeng enrolled at Columbia University, she was curious about the human mind. But it wasn't until she took some psychology courses and got involved in some psychology research laboratories as an undergraduate researcher that she decided on psychology as a major.

"I had a very keen interest in how the human mind works; who we are, how we interact in the world, how our thoughts affect how we behave," she says.

After receiving her B.A., Tzeng went to Emory University, where she received both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in psychology. She stayed on at Emory as a postdoctoral scholar working in a speech and language perception lab.

One experiment examined how knowledge of who is talking can affect what the listener hears. When provided with information about the talker's relative age, listeners heard identical speech sounds differently as a function of the how old they thought the talker was. "Beak" sounded more like "peak" for listeners who thought they were hearing an older talker. Older people, not coincidentally, tend to pronounce the "b" sound more like the "p" sound.

Asking a research question, devising an experiment, executing it and then analyzing the data is thrilling to Tzeng. "It's a process of discovery," she says. 🌀



The light went on for **Patralkha Ukil** in an introduction to economics class her freshman year in high school in her native India. Her teacher had a knack for explaining abstract concepts and relating them to the human experience.

"I took that class and there was no looking back," says Ukil, a new assistant professor in the Department of Economics. "This 15-year-old girl decided on her career."

Ukil received her bachelor's in economics from the University of Calcutta, her master's in economics from the University of Warwick in England and finished her Ph.D. in economics at the University of Connecticut this year.

And true to her 9th-grade inspiration, she has used economics as a lens through which to understand people's lives.

"When I started doing research, that is when I fully realized that even though we are talking about these stark, unemotional concepts that may not seem very relevant," says Ukil, "I have always focused on research questions that are very real."

Ukil specializes in labor economics, and she has found herself engaging in conversations about her work with people far outside academia, including her Uber drivers.

"I feel blessed," she says "because I work in a field that allows me to do that."

Ukil's master's thesis, which was published, explored the effects of having more than two children on the labor force participation among upper middle-class women in the United Kingdom, finding that one must account for innate differences among women to get an accurate picture.

Her most recent topic has been the intergenerational effects of import competition in the United States on infant health. Using birthweight data, Ukil compared infant health between 1990 and 2000 as Chinese import competition hurt U.S. labor markets.

"Low birthweight is a very strong predictor of poor infant health," Ukil says. "Over 10 years what I found is that those local labor market areas that faced a higher proportion of import competition also experienced declining birthweights on average and a higher proportion of low birthweight babies." 🌀



Yolanda Wiggins, a new assistant professor in the Department of Sociology & Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, has focused her research on a question germane to colleges and universities as they work toward building a level playing field for students of all races and economic backgrounds.



“My specific focus is on how Black college students give back to their families in a variety of ways during college,” Wiggins says, “and how that creates tension and tradeoffs between students progressing in college and students’ involvement in their families.”

In a study of students at a large, predominantly white university in the Northeast, Wiggins found African-American students did not share the typical college experience of leaving family behind and concentrating fully on themselves and their studies.

“What I’m finding is that Black students don’t break away from their families,” Wiggins says. “They’re very much immersed in their families during college and because of that they delay their progression in school or they withdraw from school.”

Involvement ranged from providing their families with financial support to returning home mid-week or on the weekends to help care for relatives.

Growing up in Flint, Mich., and Washington, D.C., “I had a front-row seat to nearly every inequity imaginable,” Wiggins says. She attended West Virginia University, where she earned a B.A. in political science and women’s studies, on an Air Force ROTC scholarship. She decided not to commission as an officer in the Air Force, and instead further her understanding of systemic educational inequality in sociology. She received a master’s and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Wiggins was attracted to SJSU in part because of the university’s awareness of the demographics of students and its programs to help minority and disadvantaged students succeed in college.

“I would love in the future to do a policy analysis of the ways in which white-serving institutions can learn from historically Black colleges in going into communities, understanding family dynamics and supporting family structures to lead to better outcomes for Black students,” Wiggins says. 🌟

Ahoura Zandiatashbar, a new assistant professor in the Department of Urban & Regional Planning, applies his expertise in geospatial data science and mapping to probe the connections between urban planning and public policy and the knowledge economy.



Since leaving his native Iran for graduate study in the United States, Zandiatashbar has developed experience in collaboration with governments, businesses, research organizations, grassroots groups and international agencies and has focused his attention on high-tech zones. What promotes quality of life in these zones? What causes tension and problems with neighbors? What environmental issues could emerge? What are the effects on housing prices, income diversity and social fabrics?

Zandiatashbar’s research employs Geographic Information Systems and data mapping. But rather than refer to himself as a data scientist, Zandiatashbar prefers to think of himself as a scholar of social issues.

“I am alert on social issues in urban environments and find some interesting to empirically test,” he says, “so I frame such social issues in the form of empirical research questions that can be explored with data and spatial analysis.”

Zandiatashbar studied architecture at Islamic Azad University in Shiraz, Iran. He completed his M.S. in architecture-geofutures at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York and his Ph.D. in urban planning and public policy at the University of Texas at Arlington. He comes to SJSU from the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he was a clinical assistant professor.

It’s a natural fit to study the knowledge economy in Silicon Valley, home to tech giants such as Google, Yahoo, Apple, Oracle, Facebook and Twitter.

Zandiatashbar is looking forward to working closely with students in the way his mentors did with him.

“I’m hoping I can become an influential mentor. I had the privilege of having very strong mentors and each of them had very valuable input in my life,” Zandiatashbar says. “So, I’m trying to learn how to be an influential mentor for the next generation.” 🌟

College of Social Sciences

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Janice and Ron Dong Create Opportunities for Underrepresented Students

By giving their rental property to a charitable remainder trust to benefit San José State, retirees Janice and Ron Dong are earning an income knowing they will be creating scholarships for underrepresented and minority students.

“I hope that our gift will help kids go to college – and I hope that SJSU will have support to make them successful,” says Janice, ’64 Elementary Education.

On the Cover

The College of Social Sciences
welcomes 12 new faculty members.

www.sjsu.edu/giving

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Fall 2020

Walt Jacobs, Ph.D., Dean

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