



Academic Affairs Research Impact

Fall 2025 - Spring 2026

Professional Leave

Dr. Chris Greer - Professional Learning & Innovation - College of Education

Dr. Chris Greer used his Fall 2025 professional leave to turn footage from [View Finders](#), his PBS travel series, into free standard aligned lessons for teachers. Dr. Greer created and co-hosts *View Finders* with photographer Paul Daniel. It began on Georgia Public Broadcasting in 2022, but since going national the show reaches more than [55 million](#) homes across America, with season 5 currently in production.



Dr. Greer worked with GCSU's assistant professor of reading, literacy, and language, Dr. Madison Gannon's middle grades class, he produced two complete lessons now live on [PBS LearningMedia](#). Three of those students presented the work with him at the Georgia Council of Teachers of English (GCTE) conference in Macon, Georgia on February 5-7, 2026. He also presented his work to an audience of roughly 500 people at the Imaging USA conference in January 2026 in Nashville, Tennessee, and at the Bild Expo at Javits Center in New York in June 2025.

Georgia College & State University is one of the few universities contributing student-produced content to PBS LearningMedia, putting student work in front of teachers nationwide at no cost. Dr. Greer is now looking to hire a specialist who will help facilitate the educational arm of View Finders and spearhead the communication and logistics when it comes to selecting the video

content, developing lesson materials, and passing all of the content through the checks and balances required before it is active on the Learning Media website.



Dr. Whitney Heppner - Psychological Science - College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Whitney Heppner used her Spring 2026 leave to build a three-phase study on how people respond to success and failure while chasing a goal, specifically whether treating yourself kindly after a setback helps or hurts what you do next. Participants received either self-compassion instructions or standard SMART goal instructions, then logged their daily progress, emotions, and setbacks over a week.

Fifty participants completed the study. Her undergraduate researchers designed the protocols that kept participants engaged and managed the data themselves.

Three of those undergraduate students presented two posters at the [Southeastern Psychological Association](#) annual meeting in New Orleans in March 2026, again at the 2026 Georgia College Student Research Day, and at the psychology department's 2026 PSYC-CON.

Five students are currently on the project team as the study expands toward a final sample and a manuscript, which she will begin once the final sample is obtained. Heppner is also exploring campus workshops on goal-striving strategies.



SAMPLE INFO

- N = 39
- Modal age = 20 years (35.7%)
- Modal race/ethnicity = White (76.2%)
- Modal gender = Female (81%)
- Mean # of daily reports = 4.19 days out of 5 (good adherence)

METHOD

Phase 1:



Phase 2:



Phase 3:



Narcissism predicts “treating oneself” after failure in daily goal pursuit, but only when self-compassionate.

Narcissism predicts self-efficacy for next day goal pursuit, but not when self-compassionate

SMART			
	Treating Self after Success	Treating Self after Failure	Self-Efficacy
Trait Narcissism	0.175	-0.544	.565*

Self Compassion			
	Treating Self after Success	Treating Self after Failure	Self-Efficacy
Trait Narcissism	-0.064	0.645**	0.089

SMART		
	Daily Goal Success	Overall Goal Success
Trait Narcissism	.327	.426

Self-Compassion		
	Daily Goal Success	Overall Goal Success
Trait Narcissism	-.034	-.027

Narcissism predicted neither daily goal success nor overall goal success in either group.

BACKGROUND

- Previous research suggests that self-compassion, an attitude of mindfulness and self-kindness, reduces negative self-evaluations and buffers the effects of failure, supporting adaptive self-regulation (Neff, 2003; Neff et al., 2021).
- Self-indulgent behaviors, or “treating yourself,” can function as self-licensing, allowing individuals to reward past efforts while potentially undermining or supporting subsequent goal pursuit depending on context (Prinsen et al., 2018).
- Personality traits such as narcissism may influence how individuals justify indulgence and maintain self-esteem, potentially moderating the effects of self-compassion on goal persistence (Sedikides & Campbell, 2019).
- The present study examines how self-compassion and narcissism interact to influence whether treating oneself predicts subsequent goal success.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Increase sample size for more power
- More advanced statistical analyses:
 - #1 = performing lagged analysis; use one day's indulgence to predict the next day's goal success
 - #2 = performing multi-level modeling to examine within person correlations from day to day and between person variations by narcissism levels and by goal instruction differences

Dr. Rodica Cazacu - Mathematics - College of Arts & Sciences

Associate Professor, Dr. Rodica Cazacu used her Fall 2025 leave to analyze five semesters of data on group collaboration in core mathematics courses. In her classes, students revised their exams in blue ink during group discussions, leaving a visible record of every change that was made and whether the change was correct.

She analyzed over 600 individual tests from six sections of MATH 1101: Introduction to Mathematical Modeling, tracking every correction students made, whether it moved them toward or away from the correct answer.

The work produced from her research was accepted to a 30-minute session at the [International Conference on Technology in Collegiate Mathematics](#) in Houston in March 2026. She is now preparing a presentation to show her findings on the data she collected.

During her leave, Dr. Cazacu also met with educators in Romania to compare teaching methods, with much of the conversation focused on how AI might be made useful for students.

Her findings are already shaping the way she instructs her class. She implemented extended group collaboration to her Elementary Statistics sections and is now piloting it in MATH 4500 Geometry.



Dr. Samuel Mutiti - Biological & Environmental Science - College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Samuel Mutiti used his Spring 2026 professional leave to develop international research partnerships focused on lead contamination and water quality. Throughout the leave, he continued to direct GCSU's [Aquatic Sciences Center](#) and supervise graduate students.



During his leave, he developed three new research projects on the environmental and health effects of mining:

- A pre-proposal to the Center for Global Development on identifying sources of lead contamination in mining regions
- A second pre-proposal combining plant, soil, and mapping data with machine learning to assess land contamination
- A funded environmental assessment of gold mining in Zambia with Miami University, with fieldwork scheduled for December 2026 - January 2027

Four master's students completed their theses under his supervision during the leave. Since then, two have been hired and one entered a fully funded Ph.D. program. Two received outstanding presentation awards and were inducted into Phi Kappa Phi.

He published two peer reviewed papers, *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 237(9), 556. and *Sustainability*, 18(16), 8127, and was selected to the [Fulbright Specialist Roster](#), which recognizes professional expertise and makes him eligible for short-term assignments abroad helping partner universities with teaching and research.

Beyond his research, Dr. Mutiti made his courses more affordable and accessible. He replaced the \$96 textbook in his Environmental Hydrogeology course with free open educational resources, fully eliminating the cost for students. He also built a groundwater module which was used in Dr. Allison VandeVoort's Spring 2026 Methods in Aquatic Research course.



Key Insights

All four faculty members turned professional leave time into research experiences for students.

- Many students authored or co-authored on reports
- Students co-presented at conferences
- Students designed study protocols and managed research data
- Four graduate students completed their master's theses

The benefits of professional leave extend beyond the individual faculty member, enhancing classroom instruction and enriching the student learning experience.

- Eliminated a \$96 textbook for students
- Introduced new collaborative teaching methods in core math courses
- Created free, standard-aligned lessons for teachers nationwide

The return on professional leave extends well beyond the leave period, yielding long-term benefits for students, faculty, and the institution.

- Manuscripts, grant proposals, presentations, and new research projects from all four faculty are still in progress



Summer Research Fellows

Dr. Taylor Esley - Psychological Science - College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Taylor Esley spent Summer 2026 preparing her dissertation research as a manuscript for publication. The study examines whether conflict in romantic relationships lowers sleep quality by keeping people mentally and physically agitated at bedtime and compares the results for women and men. Her manuscript, "The Role of Attachment and Pre-Sleep Arousal on Associations Between Romantic Relationship Conflict and Subjective Sleep Quality", draws on survey data from 208 adults in committed relationships of at least three months.



When writing the introduction for the manuscript, she added a new question to the study: whether a person's attachment style, meaning how anxious or avoidant they are in relationships, changes how strongly conflict affects their sleep. This addition brings the study in line with new research published since her original dissertation.

Over the summer, Dr. Esley rewrote the introduction around the new research question, selected the control variables for her analysis, and tested the statistical assumptions her expanded model depends on. Adding attachment style made the analysis far more complex, and because few

published studies use this type of statistical design, she consulted with colleagues and outside consultants to learn methods needed to work through the challenges.

She has since sent the updated manuscript to her graduate advisor, an expert in structural equation modeling, to plan the next steps in the analysis. She plans to submit the finished manuscript to the [*Journal of Sleep Research*](#) and will provide an update in her December 1, 2026, progress report.

This work is also shaping a new study in her lab using actigraphs, wrist worn devices that track sleep patterns, which incorporates utilizing unique technology in the classroom.

Dr. Stephanie Opperman - History & Geography - College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. Stephanie Opperman spent her Summer 2026 writing her manuscript, "Adding Meaning and Perspective through Local History: Community Engagement and Experiential Learning in the Undergraduate Classroom". She submitted the manuscript to the peer-reviewed journal [*The History Teacher*](#) on August 4, 2026.

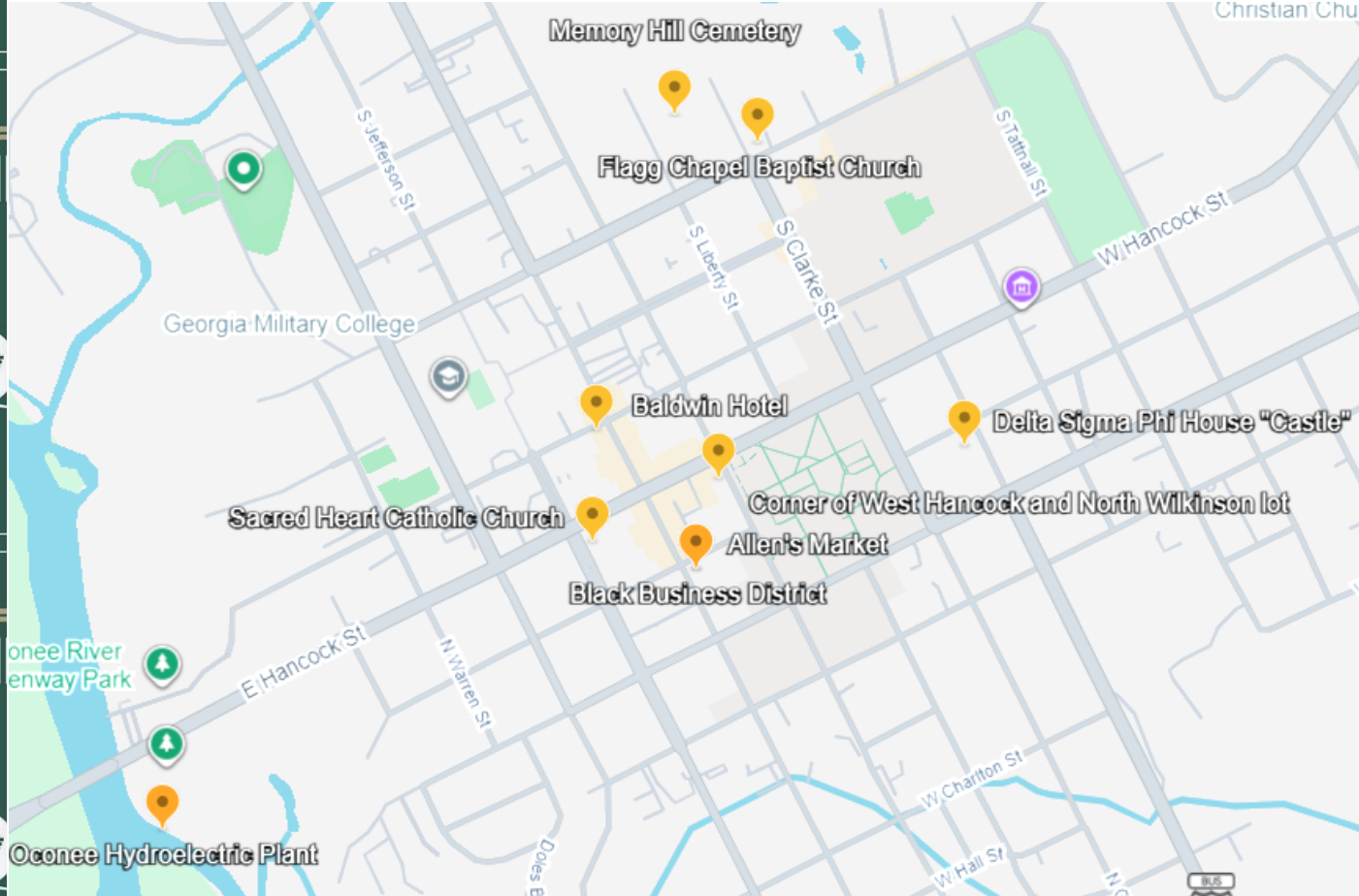


Her article is based on the local history course she taught in Spring 2024 and 2025. Student's learned Milledgeville's history from GCSU faculty and archivists, trained in oral history methods, and visited sites like Andalusia, the Old Governor's Mansion, and the Central State Hospital Museum. Then they interviewed long-time Milledgeville residents about daily life here during Flannery O'Connor's writing career (1951-1964), recording stories that have never been documented.

The course was connected to her National Endowment for the Humanities project grant, "[Flannery O'Connor and Milledgeville: Collecting the Past.](#)" awarded in 2023 in partnership with GCSU's [Flannery O'Connor Institute for the Humanities](#).

In the article, she compares the two semesters and presents the course as a model other instructors can adapt. In the first semester, students were paired with residents who had already agreed to be interviewed and created podcasts of their life stories. In the second semester, students chose historic sites, found residents with memories of those places and interviewed them. Afterwards, they built a class [Google Earth map](#) of their findings.

The projects behind Dr. Opperman's manuscript have already reached audiences beyond the classroom. Student interviews are preserved by GCSU in a [public digital archive](#), and Dr. Opperman created a free online course, Oral History Basics, for anyone looking to start their own similar project. She and students, Charlotte Aexel and Juliann Mackiewicz, presented the work at Flannery O'Connor's Second Century conference in Milledgeville, GA, on September 13, 2024. She also presented it at the USG Teaching and Learning Conference in Columbus, GA, on April 3, 2025.



Dr. Opperman's class Google Earth Map - Spring 2025 semester

Research and Development Seed Grant Program

Dr. Ernie Kaninjing - School of Health & Human Performance - College of Health Sciences

Dr. Ernie Kaninjing is leading a study on how migration history and social circumstances shape prostate cancer care, treatment decisions, and survivorship among black immigrant men from sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. Prostate cancer was the leading cause of cancer deaths among men in both regions in 2020, yet very little research has been done regarding how immigrants from these regions experience the how the U.S. healthcare system impacts those rates.



Dr. Kaninjing's study, "Grounded theory study of the social determinants of migrant health factors impacting prostate cancer care and survivorship among sub-Saharan African and Caribbean immigrant men diagnosed with prostate cancer." is funded by the U.S. Department of Defense and is part of the [inclusive Cancer Care for Research Equity \(iCCaRE\)](#) for Black Men Consortium. Collaborators of the project include Dr. Gladys Asiedu of [Mayo Clinic](#) in Rochester, Minnesota, also Dr. Lorna McNiell and Dr. Curtis Pettaway of the [University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center](#). The study's main funding comes from the U.S. Department of Defense, but the Provost's

Research and Development Seed Grant would help cover the cost associated with hiring the requested research coordinator that the Department of Defense didn't cover.

So far, the team has obtained recruitment data from the [Florida Cancer Data System](#) which covers 45 potential participants from sub-Saharan Africa, 15 from the Caribbean, and with the records for 10 more Caribbean participants pending. They have completed, transcribed, and analyzed 17 interviews with prostate cancer survivors, with the goal of interviewing 80. From these interviews, the team developed two models to explain how these men seek care, make treatment decisions, and experience being a prostate cancer survivor, including pathways that can lead to regret about treatment decisions. Early themes from the 17 interviews include relying on informal care teams of friends and family, making treatment decisions quickly after diagnosis, regretting initial treatment choices, and experiencing social isolation because of treatment side effects.

University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center began recruiting participants on September 8, 2026 and the team plans to add community cancer registries and community organizations as recruitment sources, including Mayo Clinic's community registry. As more interviews are completed, the team will validate and refine the models using them to create better patient navigation and survivorship programs. The work is intended to be a competitive application to the [National Institutes of Health](#).

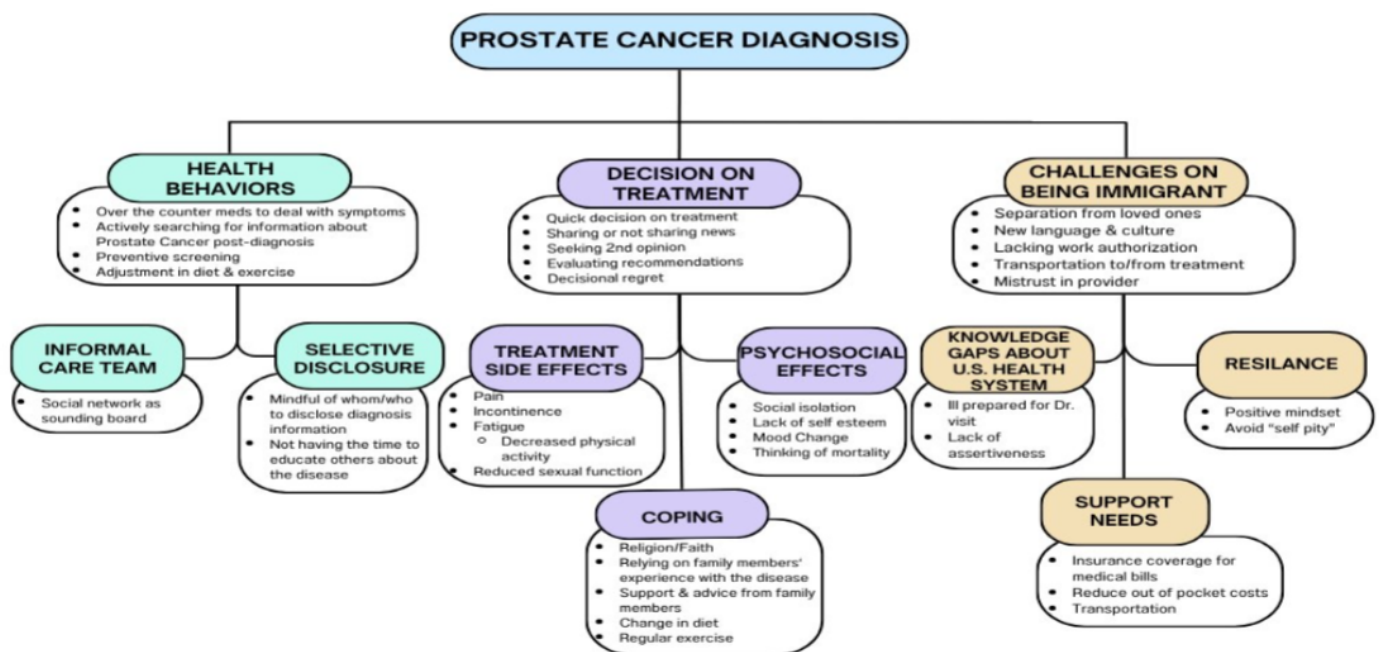


Diagram of an emerging model showing the common pathways after prostate cancer diagnosis based on participant studies so far.

Dr. Dominic DeSantis - Biological & Environmental Sciences - College of Arts & Sciences

Dr. DeSantis is a vertebrate biologist studying the behavior of rattlesnakes and other snakes using accelerometers, radio telemetry, and artificial intelligence. Because snakes are nocturnal and secretive, the technology lets his team record behaviors like eating, striking, constricting, and movements that are nearly impossible to observe directly. He pioneered the accelerometer snake tracking technique during his time at the University of Texas El Paso. Artificial Intelligence is being

used to classify behavior states. What would take graduate students years to evaluate, AI can do in hours.

Dr. DeSantis and his team visit [Cedar Creek Wildlife Management Area](#) in Eatonton, Georgia, twice a week to conduct research by tracking snakes. The 40,000 acre site, which DeSantis and his team have been given special permission to conduct research on, have resulted in tracking 19 rattlesnakes and 3 rat snakes at any given time. During these trips, the team breaks off into pairs, with each pair hiking 10 to 15 miles per visit.



Under Dr. DeSantis's supervision, three graduate students and five undergraduate students worked with Dr. DeSantis on this project, all of which made meaning contributions to the research goals, including:

- **Anna Tipton** - Found that snakes sometimes move along one side of the road for weeks, possibly in confusion due to sensory overloads, before crossing or turning back.
- **Morgan Thompson** - Validated accelerometers for recording rattlesnakes' predatory strikes and swallowing of prey in the wild. This represents the first and only available method for monitoring these aspects of snake behavior.
- **William Tillett** - First to use accelerometers on rat snakes, discovering that they spend about half their time in the trees and require much more energy to hunt than rattlesnakes. Researching how two large snakes like rat snakes and rattlesnakes coexist in the same environment.
- **Jack Powers** - Studying winter behavior in timber rattlesnakes. Dr. DeSantis calls this, "A really important aspect of their ecology that's almost completely overlooked in literature."
- **Danielle Bartlett** - Testing rattlesnakes and pit vipers for a fungal disease that caused significant declines in the snake populations of the Northeast and Midwest. Bartlett is working on pinpointing factors of that area that are associated with the disease in snakes and could help predict declines in local populations.

Dr. DeSantis is currently recruiting M.S. Biology students, since several researchers from his team have already graduated or will graduate this coming fall and spring. He is also training undergraduates on these studies. His team will keep expanding its AI behavior classification and studying more aspects of snake's lives like foraging, time spent underground, and whether sick snakes choose to hibernate alone.



The Academic Affairs Small Grant Program provides seed funding for faculty research, supplies, equipment, software, and travel. A review of 12 faculty grants final reports, prepared by the Center for Teaching and Learning, examined how these awards contributed to research, teaching, students, and the schools represented.

Research Across Disciplines:

- **Communication:** A study on political polarization found evidence that framing messages around shared moral values may reduce resistance to opposing viewpoints and improve how people with different ideologies see each other.
- **Nursing and Health:** Projects tested prevention-focused programs, including reducing eating-disorder behaviors and efforts to improve civility among nursing students.
- **Psychology:** Researchers took their work into schools and communities through social-emotional learning, emotional coaching, and positive psychology projects.
- **Biology and Environmental Science:** Projects included genome sequencing research on where bacteriophages (viruses that infect bacteria) are found in the environment, wildlife movement and conservation studies, invasive species research, and ecological restoration.
- **Business and Accounting:** An experiment examined how communicating with peers and perceptions of their competence affect people's decision making.
- **Humanities:** Archival research in English uncovered new connections involving race, mobility, music, Southern literature, and opened the way to a larger book project.

What the Grants Made Possible:

- **Generated new knowledge** from experimental findings to genomic data to new interpretations of literature
- **Created academic work** including conference presentations, posters, and manuscripts
- **Positioned faculty for future funding** with pilot data and partnerships supporting larger grant proposals
- **Built student research experience** into labs, fieldwork, and archives.
- **Strengthened partnerships** with schools, rural educators, restoration sites, and community organizations

Student involvement was one of the strongest themes across the reports. Students collected data, worked in labs and in the field, conducted archival research, designed lessons, presented at conferences, and helped develop manuscripts. Several projects also led to new course content, instructional materials, or redesigns, bringing the research directly into GCSU classrooms.

Lessons Learned:

- **Pilot funding works** - faculty turned awards into data, publications, partnerships, and funding proposals
- **Collaboration increases impact** - projects with partners reported broader outcomes than solo work
- **Research isn't always linear** - when projects hit setbacks, faculty did well to adapt, and those adjustments often improved their work
- **Impact looks different by field** - a genome, an archive, and a tested intervention are all meaningful results

Small internal grants help faculty turn ideas into evidence and publications, and publications into teaching opportunities or larger research programs. The greatest outcomes often arrive after the grant ends, so a brief follow up months after the final report would be useful to see if there are any new developments.



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