The Working Memory
Westminster's Psychology/Neuroscience Newsletter

Welcome!
Alan Gittis, Chair/Professor of Psychology

I’m pleased to welcome you to the second “Working Memory.” I was happy to see that the first edition provoked some of you to get in touch, and I hope to hear from many others.

The news we offer from the psychology department is being delivered in a time of change, renewal and growth of the college. Westminster is rapidly moving up in national college rankings and we are all proud of its positioning of #15 in the country among small liberal arts schools as rated by the Washington Monthly and its entry into Tier I by the U.S. News. We had a record number of applicants to this year’s class and a record number of incoming first-year students. As a result, we have the largest number of incoming psychology majors during my tenure at the college as well as a pleasingly large number of neuroscience majors.

This is also the inaugural year for the new college president, Rick Dorman, who promises to lead the college to even higher levels of academic achievement. However, the college and this department will never lose its personal touch and I trust the articles within convey that to you.

Helping Others through Civic Engagement
Mandy Medvin, Professor of Psychology

In the field of psychology, there is a tradition of applying knowledge for the betterment of others. At Westminster, we see civic engagement as a means for students to recognize their role as members of a larger community, and to understand how ideas and information learned in classes can be used in a larger context. This approach follows a long academic tradition of colleges actively engaged in providing assistance to underserved groups.

Through service learning, classes become involved in community work in a way that enhances individual learning. For example, every psychology student does a 160 hour internship in their junior or senior year. Sites include mental health facilities, hospitals, summer programs for disabled populations, social work agencies, correctional facilities, and university research settings. One of my students conducted observations of a child at a university preschool program for autistic children which resulted in a change in curriculum for that child. She also worked on the university research newsletter, and was paid to continue editing contributors’ work during the school year.

Other service learning opportunities are incorporated as part of class assignments. In my Adulthood and Aging class, students have the option to volunteer in settings which involve elderly populations, keep a journal, and write a paper about their experiences. A student from our psychology-occupational therapy program worked in occupational settings in hospitals with older individuals. Other students volunteered at nursing (Continued on page 7)
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Academic Life after Westminster College
John Petrocelli, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Wake Forest University

Career surveys published in magazines, newspapers, and on the web often list "university professor" within the top-five most desirable professions. After completing my undergraduate studies at Westminster College in 1997, I did not expect that it would take me ten long years to land a "top-five" job. Outside of the medical profession, I have met few people with so many years of graduate study. I recall feeling embarrassed while attending my 10-year high school reunion and having to report to old friends and acquaintances that I was "still in school." However, my long journey of graduate studies was largely a product of simply failing to fully consider the wide range of career possibilities available to majors in psychology. Such ignorance, coupled with intimidation of the GRE, directed me along the less traveled road back to my first academic passion—social psychology.

The roots of my passion for social psychology began with my first course in social psychology, taught by Dr. David B. Gray. I remember becoming fascinated with classic theories such as Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, Bem's self-perception theory, Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance theory, and Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration-likelihood model. However, it was Dr. Gray's research lab that really hooked me—hence my subscriptions to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin since 1999. My only problem before graduating from Westminster was failing to realize that I could pursue a serious career in social psychology. Like many other undergraduates majoring in psychology, I was convinced that I wanted to "help people" as a clinical or counseling psychologist. Unfortunately, it took me five years of graduate studies in counseling psychology (two years in the master's degree program at Slippery Rock University and three years in the Ph.D. program at the University of Georgia) to realize I was on the wrong path. Although my clients and supervisors appeared to like my work, it became increasingly obvious to me that I would grow bored with the clinical profession. Due to the long hours of supervisory responsibilities, even a professor of clinical or counseling psychology can feel very much like that of a clinician. Neither of these careers appealed to me as they once did.

While keeping up with the social psychology literature, it also became increasingly clear to me that the roots of my passion for social psychology were strengthening. Although I had sunk valuable costs—five years of graduate study in the wrong subfield—I was unwilling to spend the next 30-40 years in a career that was only moderately related to what I really wanted to do. Yet, changing my career training after five years of study in counseling psychology presented unique challenges and risks. Completing applications is one thing, but dealing with the stress and uncertainty of the next path of my graduate training was quite another.

The chaos of my "career change" came at a very critical time. My applications to five social psychology doctoral programs were shipped off after approximately 30 counseling psychology internship applications—my final requirement of fulfilling the Ph.D. in counseling psychology at Georgia. However, it turned out that internship matching decisions needed to be finalized at least a month before social psychology programs would even begin to make admission decisions. Essentially, one set of applications were irrelevant. I was forced to make a decision under great uncertainty. Despite the discouragement from friends, family, financial advisors, and even some professors, I removed myself from the national internship matching system during a very critical time. The option of accepting an internship and later withdrawing from it, once accepted by a social psychology program, would have been disastrous for my career and may have even resulted in legal problems! At that time, my life felt like I had placed a $20,000 bet on one number on a roulette table in Las Vegas, but one in which I would have to watch the wheel and wait two months before it stopped. Luckily, when the roulette wheel did stop my eventual advisor Dr. Steven J. Sherman called me on the phone.

As I said goodbye to counseling psychology, and hello to five years of study in social psychology at Indiana University-Bloomington, I recall feeling that my career had finally begun. During my earlier days in Indiana, I found that I had placed the right bet. I have also come to realize that my first five years of graduate study were really not sunk costs after all. In fact, I believe that my earlier studies...
The Preschool Lab recently received a grant from the May Emma Hoyt Foundation for $27,500 to purchase new ADA-accessible playground equipment.

Serving children with special needs is an important part of our preschool program and the new structure will be especially important for children with physical disabilities. Newer playground safety standards will also be met with the design and layout of the equipment.

Much of the credit goes to our teachers, Diana Reed and Debi Roud, and to Tom Taylor, development officer, for their work on this project.

The new playground enhances the Westminster Preschool Lab’s role as a NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) demonstration preschool for the region. Installation of the new structure was completed by the start of the fall session. The children are enjoying the new playground!

Information from the equipment manufacturer:

Villa Commercial Playground Equipment: Green Playground Solutions
Exciting play waits around every turn for children exploring the Vista. Climbers can get their kicks on the Boarding Net and Rock Climb, while thrill-seekers zip down the Double Slide and corkscrew down the Curly Climber. Children wanting quiet shelter can sit on a bench under the Playhouse Roof and when playmates call, they can join them by walking over the Wobbly Walk.
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Webster Wanderings
Sandra K. Webster, Professor of Psychology

Many of you know that I taught as a Fulbright scholar in Nigeria back in 1989-90 and then again in South Korea in 2000-01. This summer I was asked to present about those experiences at two conferences: the Improving University Teaching conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, and the American Psychological Association meeting in Boston. The picture is of me standing in front of the cannon, Mons Meg, at Edinburgh Castle. The theme of both of my presentations was the paradox that often presents itself to people when they have to live in a culture different from their own, but that examination of the paradox can be useful to understand our own cultural common values as well as those of our host.

Below are some of the conclusions that I presented in my APA poster. Westminster students have their own culture, so these ideas apply to them just as much as they did to my Nigerian and South Korean students.

• Content, teaching methods and learning activities should be adapted to the cultural context.
• Students can adapt to new learning styles with proper motivation and instruction.
• There are many ways for students to learn with and without technology.
• It is easier to teach with a textbook that avoids culturally specific references and idioms.
• Students are the best informants about their culture, their values and their learning styles.
• When doing research outside your own cultural milieu it may be necessary to adapt the research topic.
• Western ethical guidelines do not automatically apply in other cultural contexts, especially with regard to informed consent and incentives.
• Collaboration with a member of the other culture at all stages of the research improves the quality of the research and helps to avoid potential insensitivity.

Academic Life after Westminster College
(Continued from page 2)

No longer a graduate student, but now a professor of undergraduate studies in psychology, I can truly appreciate the invaluable time and direction extended to me by my former Westminster College professors. A career in teaching and research is truly a wonderful experience. Today, I find it interesting that my life in academics has changed yet remained the same. “Docere est discere: studium permanet – To teach is to learn: the pursuit remains constant.”

Recent Faculty Publications


Research Collaboration with South Valley University in Egypt
Sherri Pataki, Assistant Professor of Psychology

Two of my Capstone advisees, Catharine Hebdon (class of 2007) and Nicole Roberts (class of 2009), and I have been very fortunate to be able to collaborate with a doctoral student in Egypt, Safia Fathelbab Amin. Safia and I first met six years ago when I was participating in an interfaith dialogue group at the Islamic Center in Pittsburgh, PA. At the Islamic Center, I met Dr. Abdul Mawguod, an English professor from South Valley University, and he introduced Safia and me through the internet. We have been in touch ever since.

Safia received her Master’s degree in social psychology from Cairo University in 2004 and is currently working on her doctorate. We both have research interests in the area of interpersonal relationships so we have many mutual interests and possibilities for future collaboration. Safia’s doctoral dissertation focuses on improving interpersonal communication skills, especially speaking and listening skills within friendships. While working on her Ph.D., she also teaches in the Psychology Department at South Valley University.

Working with Safia, both Catherine and Nicole have been able to develop Capstone projects comparing American and Egyptian expectations and experiences in close relationships. Catherine’s project focused on the ideals men and women hold for relationships following marriage. One interesting finding from her study highlighted different views regarding the role of the extended family following marriage such that Egyptian participants placed greater emphasis on caring for their mothers following marriage than participants from the United States. Catherine presented this work at a meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association and at the National Conference of Undergraduate Research and we are currently writing a paper to be submitted for possible publication. Nicole’s project will focus on gender roles in the family and parenting behavior. She is predicting that parenting relationships are based on more traditional gender roles in Egypt than in the United States, and that this will be reflected in participants’ descriptions of each parent. She has recently finished the process of translating her survey into Arabic and will begin collecting data in Egypt.

These research experiences have been particularly rewarding for my students and for me personally. Safia is a wonderful colleague to work with, and we have developed a close friendship over the years. After completing her Ph.D., Safia plans to apply for a scholarship to study in the United States so we are hopeful that we will have the opportunity to meet in person someday.

Remembrance of Renee S. Karwacki (1986-2007)
Laura Pienkowsk, Class of 2008

Renee was unlike any other person I know; she was funny, quirky, smart, witty, honest, unique, hardworking, and so much more. She was someone who could not be defined, nor would she want to be. Although her life was cut short, she never once lost hope and she never once gave up. From the beginning, before her cancer diagnosis, I watched her body give up on her, but I never once saw her spirit break.

Renee and I had many classes together at Westminster, being that we were both Psychology majors. She was famous for letting me know I was an “overachiever,” yet, she never stopped working herself. Even after she withdrew from college, underwent multiple rounds of chemotherapy, and was ingesting more medicine in a day than some people will in a lifetime, she wanted nothing more than to see her friends, be in class, and be back to work.

Even when she was so worn down, she was the positive person in my life, giving me encouragement to continue on because that was Renee. I will never forget her, she was my friend, my classmate, and now she is my inspiration.
Neuroscience, like Bob Dylan, warns us that the times are changing. Political movements aside, we see the changing times in our daily lives through our abundant use of information technologies, and for psychology in particular, the impact of neuroscience on our study of behavior. The psychology department is aware of this major paradigm shift and working to be a leader in incorporating neuroscience into undergraduate curricula. More entering students are aware of the field of neuroscience and are interested in exploring it in their coursework and through on-campus and off-campus research. This year three department supported Honors projects have biological psychology themes and several students are doing summer internships in graduate neuroscience laboratories or medical neurology settings.

As co-coordinator of the neuroscience program, I have professional experiences that give me a good vantage point to map out directions for growth. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to serve on the public education sub-committee of the Society for Neuroscience, serve as a member for the Center for Scientific Review of the National Institutes of Health and I am a member of the oversight committee of a new undergraduate national honorary in neuroscience, Nu Rho Psi. I am also fortunate to have Westminster colleagues that are putting in place the pieces needed for a robust undergraduate neuroscience program. A neuroscience coordinating committee has been assembled and includes Kirk Lunnen and me from psychology, Katherine Robertson and Marosh Furimsky from the biology department, Terri Lenox from the computer science department and David Goldberg from the philosophy department. Through the actions of this committee, the support the college and programmatic initiatives of the psychology department, a picture of a model undergraduate neuroscience program can be brought into focus.

A cornerstone of our neuroscience program at Westminster is the psychology department’s behavioral neuroscience laboratory course which is uniquely structured in our curriculum to serve both psychology majors and majors in the natural sciences and other areas. Although not a required course for psychology majors, most psychology majors take the course to satisfy a departmental elective and to partially satisfy the requirement for courses in the natural sciences. The course is now cross-listed as a biology course fostering the synergy between biology and psychology for a strong neuroscience program. The biology-psychology bonds have also been forged in other ways: biology’s animal behavior course is now cross-listed as a psychology course; biology and psychology have a cluster course on sexual behavior; plans are in place to develop a course in neurobiology; and joint meetings of neuroscience, psychology and biology students doing research with neuroscience themes are being scheduled.

Despite being a small campus, students have many opportunities to learn about neuroscience’s impact on the modern world-view and to see neuroscientists in action. Although neuroscience in large university environments can tend to be exclusive (I have heard it joked that “you don’t have to be a rocket scientist” has been replaced with “….neuroscientist”), Westminster’s approach has been inclusive. Two popular cluster courses have been developed – the neuropsychology and philosophy of mind, and neural networks from the computer science and biopsychological perspective – that students have enjoyed and have played formative roles in their career ambitions. A popular fall outing for the psychology club is attending the Society for Neuroscience meeting so they can learn about the field on an international stage.

As inevitable as the incorporation of information technology into our lives, the teaching of neuroscience will need to find new modes of expression in the Westminster curriculum. I find it fortunate to work with like-minded colleagues and a supportive institutional environment. If you were a psychology major 20 years ago and come today for a visit, you would be impressed by much that you won’t recognize. I am certain that will also be the case for our current neuroscience students when they visit 20 years from now.
Reflecting on Travels with Students

Jamie McMinn, Assistant Professor of Psychology

I have had the opportunity to travel with students to conferences, and I always find the experience to be enjoyable...okay, well at least after the conference has ended and everyone has returned to their dorms. For those of you who have had me in classes, you know that I am a stickler for details. I want your flight schedule and lodging information. I want to know how you will get to the airport, and whether or not you submitted your travel reimbursement request to the Drinko Center. Did you remember to pack three versions of your presentation or poster just in case the equipment fails? How many times have you rehearsed, and are you prepared for any tough questions that may come your way? And that is all four months before the conference even begins!

Eventually, I step out of “parent mode” and remember that our psychology students are well-prepared for most challenges they will face as student researchers, including navigating their way through the country’s busiest airports and cities. In some cases, they arrive to the gate only a few minutes before the plane departs, but they DO arrive!

Traveling with students always affords me the opportunity to learn more about students than what I learn in the classroom. I had no idea, for example, that one student had a life-long passion for Legos until we came upon Lego-Land in Chicago. Nor did I know our students were experts in chocolate, ethnic cuisines, and the differences between Starbucks, Caribou Coffee, and Seattle’s Best. And for those students who are not “foodies” but are willing to try, I am always happy to be the first to expose them to the delights of sushi, Thai, Ethiopian, Jamba Juice, bubble tea, and so on. Perhaps the most curious information I gather from students during these trips includes the details on the latest majors who are dating or breaking up, the top 10 uses for a Social Psychology text book, and the various nicknames that students have given to me over the years (most without my knowledge, of course).

One of the more gratifying parts of taking students to conferences is introducing them to researchers whose work they include in their Capstone projects, or whose research we are discussing in class. Often it helps students to see that these researchers are “normal” people who are interested in their research, and that interest is evident when elite scholars praise our students’ work. I always remind students, too, that conferences provide great networking opportunities. They never know when talking to a researcher could lead to a research position or a foot in the door of graduate school later on. Conference Happy Hours are valuable on many levels!

Taking students to conferences is one of my favorite aspects of scholarship at Westminster, and I know that our students enjoy the experience, too. The professional and personal development that occurs is quite valuable, and I always appreciate seeing students in a context different from the classroom. Now whether or not those students appreciate seeing their faculty in a context outside the classroom is a different story, so send those stories in. We would love to hear about your favorite conference experiences!
Greetings from the Psych Club!

Alexandra Alfieri, Psychology Club President

The 2008 school year is off to a good start for the 30+ members of Psychology Club. Psych Club is run by a student panel of officers: President Alexandra Alfieri, Vice President Matthew Facciani, Secretary Shalyn Eakin, and Treasurer Karina-Mikayla Barcus. The faculty adviser for the club is Kirk Lunnen.

This year we have undertaken a variety of different projects to make our presence known across campus and in the community. The first event of the semester, a lecture by a school psychologist, is scheduled for October 6. In addition, members of the Psych Club will host a game of Jeopardy during Geek Week. Geek Week is designed to test knowledge of the sciences, and teams consist of members from different majors across campus.

Other goals for this semester include: helping with Special Olympics, fundraising for People in Need, and volunteering at different activities on campus. Our club fundraiser will be selling Daffin’s candy bars. Our members will also be attending various conferences, such as the annual Society for Neuroscience conference in Washington, D.C. in November. In the spring, some of the senior members of Psych Club will attend the Midwestern Psychological Association conference in Chicago to present their senior capstone projects. Overall, the year should be full of learning, volunteering, and fun!

Psychology Club Officers, L-R: Vice-President Matt Facciani, Treasurer Karina-Mikayla Barcus, President Alexandra Alfieri, 2007-2008 President Veronica Geretz, and Secretary Shalyn Eakin at the psychology department picnic on September 25.

Photos from Preschool Lab Playground Dedication Ceremony Sept. 29, 2008

L-R: Preschool Lab Teacher Debi Roud, Atty. Charles Mansell, Debbie Lynch, Preschool Lab Head Teacher Diana Reed, Preschool Lab Director Mandy Medvin, Psychology Department Chair Alan Gittis.

Preschool Lab graduate (Class of 2007) Max Furimsky enjoys the new spinner bowl.