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THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

Graduate School





Dear Students, Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome to the summer 2017 edition of the Graduate School newsletter. This is a special time in the life of the university; we have just graduated an outstanding group of master's, specialist and doctoral students, and we look forward to starting all over again in the fall with new students. The summer is always a time to reflect and prepare for the future.

I am pleased that we have so many excellent students, graduate programs and alumni. It is our privilege to tell some of your stories in our newsletter. We welcome story suggestions and particularly would like to hear from and about our alumni.

In this issue, you can read about the accomplishments of Carla Cotwright-Williams, a math department alumna who works for the federal government. We also have stories about some on-campus programs, new housing for graduate students and new degree programs.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter and appreciate your support of the Graduate School at the University of Mississippi!

Christy M. Wyandt, Ph.D.

Interim Dean of the Graduate School

Professor of Pharmaceutics

Doctoral Alumna Uses Math for Public Good



Carla Cotwright-Williams, Ph.D.

Carla Cotwright-Williams has never met a barrier or a stereotype that could stand up to her; antiquated standards for race and gender quail in the face of her unrelenting competence.

A warm and succinct communicator, she struck her own path early on, attending college far away from her home on the West Coast. After earning her B.S. in mathematics from California State University-Long Beach, she sought out the historically black colleges and universities, or HBCU, experience and attended Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she obtained her master's degree.

She then attended a consortium of Ph.D.-granting universities in Mississippi. It was there that she got her first taste of the University of Mississippi, which would become the stage for more personal growth and achievements than she could have anticipated.

In addition to her own doctoral studies, Cotwright-Williams took on other responsibilities at the university, many of them unexpected. She discovered the first of these the Friday before classes started — unbeknownst to her, she would be teaching a class of her own! Fortunately, she was able to take the instructional course and found, after some adjustment, a real interest in teaching.

She also got involved in student organizations: Pi Mu Epsilon, the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association and the Graduate Student Council, where she served as secretary, vice president and, ultimately, president.

With the GSC, she traveled to Washington, D.C., and lobbied on behalf of graduate students. She joked, “In getting your Ph.D., you develop a lot of skills not necessarily related to your subject matter!” It was her first foray into government affairs, and it wouldn't be her last.

Her professors quickly took notice of her initiative.

“Carla was one of those special student leaders,” said Maurice Eftink, former graduate dean and associate provost emeritus. “She had concerns about the students she was teaching and concerns about her fellow graduate students.

“She had obvious leadership qualities. When she spoke, her peers listened. And we discussed how she needed to answer this call to leadership. Carla was a little reluctant but then committed to be president of the Graduate Student Council. I think she grew in confidence after that decision. She was one of our most successful presidents.”

Another former professor and mentor added that Cotwright-Williams’ “inquiringly pleasant demeanor” positioned her as a leader and spokesperson for the Department of Mathematics, the Graduate School and the university in general.

“We always loved for her to be our representative, be that in a classroom setting, as representative at a faculty meeting or even at a national conference,” said Donald Cole, assistant provost and associate professor of mathematics. “With Carla at the helm, we knew that we would be well represented. Carla was always able to turn chaos into reason.”

This propensity for leadership through her communication skills would be a critical element of her future success.

Cotwright-Williams graduated as the second African-American female to ever emerge from the Department of Mathematics with a Ph.D., her one predecessor being many years prior. She was one of four African-American Ph.D. students to graduate from the department that year, one of whom would become her husband. After graduation, she and her husband moved to Virginia, where they would both take tenure-track positions at different universities: He went to Hampton University, while she went to Norfolk State.

Soon, she felt called to a career outside academia: the federal government. After not being accepted to the first fellowship to which she applied, Cotwright-Williams took a few public policy courses and spent two summers as a research fellow, first with NASA and then with the U.S. Navy.

These short fellowships broadened her experience and made her a more outstanding candidate when she reapplied for a lengthier position. She was then selected for an American Association for the Advancement of Science fellowship for the 2012-13 year. During that time, she worked as a science and technology fellow for both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

One highlight of her experience was the opportunity to travel with an investigative team from her committee to interview first responders from the Boston Marathon bombing, in preparation for a congressional hearing.

“It was a tragic situation, and I was just glad to be able to do something meaningful that way,” she said.

In 2014, Cotwright-Williams worked as the technical lead on a million-dollar federal contract to assess data quality in a Department of Homeland Security data system, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. At present, she serves as the Hardy-Apfel IT Fellow for the Social Security Administration. She cites communication as both a large part of her responsibilities and a significant factor in her success.

The communication skills her professors had admired so early on had deep roots. What began with her experience working alongside Eftink with the IMAGE program, a National Science Foundation-funded program to expose children of color to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) graduate studies, only flourished in her many roles as the communicator of data to laypeople.

She knows all too well the difficulty people often face in trying to convey scientific or mathematical information to people from other fields.

“It’s a big challenge in mathematics and other STEM fields,” she said. “We’re not always the best communicators. And so the rest of the world can’t always appreciate what we do. But I like to say I’m using my math to help the public.”

And Cotwright-Williams is certainly helping the very young people, specifically young women of color, who will one day follow in her footsteps.

“I didn’t meet a black woman mathematician until I was in grad school,” she said. But thanks to women like her, the face of the world is changing. “We’re no longer hidden figures that are trying to make an impact on the world.”

GAs Expand Knowledge through Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning



Educators even at the collegiate level stand to benefit from working with young children.

Prior to working with the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning at the University of Mississippi, Tyler James had no experience with early education.

“I graduated undergrad with a degree in secondary education social studies, so all of my experience has been with older students,” he said. “I came in with little to no knowledge of early childhood policy or teachings.”

James is one of two graduate assistants (the other is Kellon Duff), working with GCSEL to advance research and policy regarding early childhood education. James described the scope of their work as “[everything] from conducting research in latest policies around the country from federal to local legislatures, to helping Dr. (Cathy) Grace with professional developments.”

Grace is co-director of GCSEL, along with recent addition Melody Musgrove, UM associate professor of special education, and she takes the mission of the center very seriously.

“All decisions made by the staff and our partners support our beliefs and are reflected in our commitment to supporting teachers, teacher educators and systems that promote the well-being of young children and their families,” Grace said. “It’s this commitment that has made working with the GCSEL edifying for James, even as an educator at the secondary level.”

Locally, the center’s graduate assistants have been working as close to home as on the university campus itself.

“Recently, Kellon and I had the pleasure of working with the preschool here on campus, the Willie Price Lab School,” James said. “We were tasked with setting up a new room for college students and professors who want to come in and work with the preschoolers.”

Educators even at the collegiate level stand to benefit from working with young children and early childhood education because of the light it sheds on students' future learning behaviors.

James encapsulated this idea, with relation to his own experience, saying, "It has truly been something special for me as a secondary educator to be working with Dr. Grace because now I have this understanding of how early childhood education is operated, which gives me a better perspective of how students are taught by the time they reach me in middle or high school."

The center has also just made a move to be closer to its statewide partner organization.

"We just recently moved our offices from Guyton Hall to Insight Park and are housed in the same location as the North Mississippi Education Consortium," James said. "We partner with the NMEC on providing professional development for early childhood education professionals in north Mississippi and throughout the state."

Grace said she believes that, in addition to expanding the professional horizons of educators at all levels, the center creates and supports environments where children may thrive and enjoy learning.

"We believe that all children have the right to learn and grow in an environment that supports a natural ability to explore, create and wonder," she said.

James said he has benefited greatly from being a part of the center.

"It has honestly been an amazing opportunity for me, learning from Dr. Grace and everyone this past year as I have learned so much that will help me as I continue my career as an educator."

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

Graduate School

Campus Walk Offers Grad Student-Specific Housing for 2018

GRADUATE STUDENT LIVING GROUP

UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI STUDENT HOUSING

COMMUNITY INFO

- +Campus Walk Apartments
- +Located on campus
- +Newly-renovated quad-occupancy units with new flooring and new furniture
- +Private bedrooms with in-room bathrooms
- +12-month lease
- +Rent billed to bursar account
- +Utilities included
- +Wi-Fi and basic cable included
- +Oxford-University-Transit bus stop
- +Fitness center
- +Sand volleyball court
- +Basketball court
- +Car wash
- +Events and activities specifically for graduate students

MORE INFO: studenthousing@olemiss.edu
QUESTIONS: housingma@olemiss.edu
 Application open in MyOleMiss from on March 6 - 4pm on May 31, 2017

Please click the image above to see it full size.

students' interests.

“Graduate students, like other students, benefit from living among peers who are participating in the same or similar collegiate experiences,” McClure said. “Also, by having our graduate students together in a community, we can offer events and activities that are of interest to and that specifically benefit those students.”

Of the planned activities, McClure said, “Of course, we will host social events so that our students can get to know their neighbors. There will be activities that are only for the Graduate Student Living Group, but members will also be encouraged to participate in those for the Campus Walk community.”

Beginning in 2018, University of Mississippi graduate students will have the option of living in Campus Walk Apartments and taking advantage of the conveniences it offers.

“Our potential and current graduate students have expressed interest in living on campus in a community dedicated to students in graduate programs, so we’re excited to offer the Graduate Student Living Group at Campus Walk,” said Jennifer Lea McClure, UM assistant director of student housing for marketing. “Students really enjoy the convenience of having their rent, which includes utilities, basic cable and internet, billed to their bursar accounts.”

Most apartment complexes offer events specifically for their residents, and Campus Walk will be able to tailor some of its programming to suit graduate

Applications for the Graduate Student Living Group will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis until all spaces are filled. There are 50 available spaces, and all apartments are quad occupancy.

“Our department works frequently with faculty from academic programs and staff from student affairs departments to offer our students transformational and purposeful experiences within our residential communities,” McClure said. “In line with our mission, we plan to offer our graduate students secure, supportive and comfortable communities designed to contribute to their personal and academic growth.”

“The Department of Student Housing strives to meet the needs of our students while focusing on fulfilling university academic goals and objectives,” said Lionel Maten, assistant vice chancellor for student affairs and director of student housing. “We believe living on campus is an integral part of any college experience, including graduate students. Through our new graduate living community, we firmly believe that we are offering value-added opportunities for our graduate students to work towards their academic and career pursuits.”

Graduate School

Three New Graduate Programs Launched



New offerings include a Ph.D. in second language studies, a Ph.D. in social welfare and an M.F.A. in documentary expression.

In the spring and fall semesters of 2017, the University of Mississippi is rolling out three new graduate programs. The Department of Modern Languages is offering a Ph.D. in second language studies; the Department of Social Work will be offering a Ph.D. in social welfare; and the College of Liberal Arts will be offering an M.F.A. in documentary expression, housed at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.

Felice Coles, professor of modern languages and graduate program coordinator for the new second

language studies program, stressed that the main focus of the new offering is teaching — not just in schools but in large organizations. Graduates will have the unique qualification to help companies globalize by learning second languages, making them valued assets to companies looking to expand internationally.

For these first few semesters, Coles said that Mississippi students are the primary focus; the department wants locals to get “the first crack at it on the site. We want to keep the best people here.”

Cohorts will consist of five to seven students, and ideal candidates will be looking to make a real commitment to becoming experts, which Coles believes they will find personally and professionally fulfilling.

The documentary expression program, said Ted Ownby, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, has been created to establish an “effective, innovative place for learning ... not just about technical skills but also how to ask and answer questions about the people being studied.”

He said that a problematic aspect of making documentaries is “helicopter projects,” which involve dropping in on a group of people and bringing assumptions and seeking confirmation, which only

reconfirms stereotypes. The South, for instance, has sometimes been the subject of this kind of biased project.

Continuing the theme of focusing on the people of the South, the new social welfare program is very much geared toward “responding to some of the complex needs of the state of Mississippi and the region,” said Javier F. Boyas, associate professor of social work and graduate program coordinator.

Boyas said he believes the state will benefit from what he calls “scholars that will expand research and knowledge in the field,” especially given that Mississippians contend with complex co-morbid issues and lead the nation in several unfavorable distinctions.

The second language studies program officially launched in spring 2017. The documentary expression and social welfare programs will launch in the fall.

Graduate School Hosts Expo for Prospective Students



Prospective students attend the Grad School Expo at the Ford Center.

The University of Mississippi Graduate School hosted its first Grad School Expo at the Gertrude C. Ford Center for the Performing Arts on Feb. 15, for all undergraduate students, graduate students and alumni.

The goal of the event was to provide information on graduate programs offered through the Graduate School, School of Law and University of Mississippi Medical Center. Students had the opportunity to speak directly to faculty members, get a look at individual departments, gain clarity on which program they might like to study, and find information on admissions and funding.

Breneria Travis, manager of graduate admissions and primary organizer of the event, encouraged all students to take advantage of the expo. She said she hoped the event would “ignite an interest and erase any apprehension students may have about graduate education.”

Occupying two floors of the Ford Center, the expo was host to 34 departments and 63 individual programs, with one from the School of Law and three from the Medical Center. The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education was also represented, offering information on the Ronald E. McNair program and the Mississippi Space Grant Consortium.

Over the course of four hours, the expo was host to more than 60 students, some of whom preregistered, while others took the opportunity to stop by between classes. Attendees ranged from freshmen to students who had already graduated, but most attendees were seniors, who stood to gain the most from the expo.

Meredith Cuilik, a senior studying Chinese, attended the expo as part of her research into potential law schools.

“I was glad to be able to meet some of the law school representatives and learn more about it in person. There’s only so much you can get from a website, so I thought this was really helpful,” she said.

Undergraduates from Mississippi Valley State University also attended the expo. Representatives from Alcorn State University and Jackson State University participated as well, and had the opportunity to tour the campus and attend a sponsored luncheon.