New Dimensions
Dancers' digital twist and other stories of Broncos soaring in a changed world.
Re-imagining campus living

Arcadia Flats, a new housing option for upper-level and graduate students, welcomed its first tenants in January. Offering five different floor plans, from loft apartments to multiple-room flats, the complex combines the convenience of living on campus with a contemporary housing design. The project leads revitalization efforts in Hilltop Village, which will also include the new student center slated to open by fall 2022.
Soothing snuggles

Students visit with therapy dog Sunny at the Student Recreation Center’s “New Year, New You” event in January. Prioritizing well-being, Western is taking a holistic approach to helping students learn how to pursue their goals, thrive in all aspects of their lives and prosper in meaningful careers.

On the cover: The pandemic propelled Western dancers to explore new territory. The 2021 Winter Gala Dance Concert was re-imagined to transport dancers—and their audience—into a digital world. Read more about the innovative performance on page 13.
At Western, we are in the business of developing human potential in a way that will have a lifelong impact. What’s most exciting and challenging is that we must do so in a dynamic world that calls us to constantly rethink the contours of the future we are sending our graduates into.

If you pause, you can see evidence of the pace of change all around you. With a few clicks, we can order a pizza, buy a week’s worth of groceries or even obtain a new car, all without leaving the couch. Advancements in self-driving vehicles are turning science fiction into science fact; researchers on our campus are studying how to make them safe and accessible. And the last year provides indisputable evidence of the ever-evolving nature of our society. We continued working productively through a global pandemic thanks to videoconferencing, Wi-Fi, powerful laptops and tools that were unheard of just a few years ago.

We are focused on providing an educational experience that helps graduates adapt and thrive in this quickly changing world, finding new ways to help them flourish no matter what the future may hold. Adapting to change is not new, but the need to do so quickly in a world where technology is accelerating that change certainly is.

The World Economic Forum predicts uniquely human thinking abilities—cognitive flexibility, resilience, lifelong active learning and stress management—are among the skills employers will find more and more important in years ahead.

Perhaps because technology has sped up the pace of change, it has also elevated the need for vital skills like critical thinking and problem-solving. The World Economic Forum predicts those uniquely human thinking abilities are among the ones employers will find even more important in years ahead. They include cognitive flexibility, resilience, lifelong active learning and the ability to manage stress.

This is the world we anticipate that drives us to give students room to discover their purpose, become mentally tough, and explore and think beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Our Richmond Institute for Design and Innovation is a hallmark example of a future-focused education. Students use both design and technology to do one of the most difficult things: create something new of value. In this magazine, you’ll learn about how its first graduates are challenged to look beyond traditional production practices to creatively rethink product development.

We’re also teaching students how to develop new solutions to enduring problems. Dr. Ricky Stull and his team, including undergraduate Chris Clark, are taking a different look at nicotine addiction. By studying enzymes, they uncovered new knowledge that can lead to a nonchemical method for helping smokers kick the habit.

And when it comes to resilience, Justin and Alexis Black could write the book. In fact, they did. These determined young alumni grew up in the foster care system. They met at Western and, as you’ll read in this issue, they are now inspiring the world as authors and entrepreneurs.

These are just a few examples of how Broncos are discovering their resilience and ability to pivot in the face of the unexpected to emerge on a new path forward. Our world is better for it.

Sincerely,

Edward Montgomery, Ph.D.
President
Western faculty growing impact through innovation

Research is robust at Western. The annual NSF Higher Education Research and Development Survey shows University projects drawing increased federal funding in Fiscal Year 2019. Western is ramping up investment in innovation and drawing national recognition for research ranging from developing new autonomous vehicle technology and tools for blind individuals to powering the future of space exploration.

Student-run radio station earns national award nominations

Flexibility fueled success this school year for student-run radio station, 89.1 WIDR-FM. The group picked up multiple nominations in the 2020-21 Intercollegiate Broadcasting System Awards. “This is truly a remarkable accomplishment for the 89.1 WIDR-FM team,” says Glen Dillon, assistant director for student media. They have done an amazing job in spite of the pandemic and having to do most of their work away from the actual studios. Student media is strong at WMU!”

Kyle Petronio, a senior from Hartland, Michigan, and Max Reist, a senior from Kalamazoo, were nominated in the best use of sound and best terrestrial categories. Petronio credits WIDR and the multimedia arts technology program for helping him and Reist develop their production skills. “Navigating how to run a radio station remotely has been an easy feat,” says Molly Farrell, a junior advertising and promotion major and the station’s general manager. “It’s a great opportunity to be even more creative, make some actual studios. Student media is strong at WMU!”

Western joins elite ranks of universities strengthening mental health

Western is completing the final steps to become an official JED Campus Alumni. The University is now one of more than 350 campuses across the country working to increase student resilience and decrease the two leading causes of death among young adults: suicide and accidents, including those caused by prescription drug overdoses or alcohol poisoning. A 31-member JED Campus team, made up of representatives from across campus, has been working to increase awareness and use of campus services as well as create a more supportive campus climate, helping students develop grit and resilience. Western was also one of just 21 colleges and universities nationwide that participated in the Equity in Mental Health Framework pilot project to implement additional wellness services for students of color. This mission was supported through The Steve Fund, which is a national organization supporting the mental and emotional well-being of young people.

A number of initiatives from these national partnerships include creating a plan for support services following a traumatic event on campus; Mental Health Awareness Week in fall 2020; the Mental Health Summit for faculty and staff in February 2021; the creation of an assistant director of mental health outreach position in student affairs; launching a campus climate survey; beginning an online diversity and inclusion training; and other initiatives still in progress. “I believe that WMU’s investment in promoting mental health on our campus is growing in its momentum,” says Dr. Gary Bichof, the University’s initial point person for the JED Campus Initiative and professor and coordinator of the Maritages, Couple and Family Counseling Program. “I think we have done a good job increasing awareness...though we still have much work to do.”

Outstanding safety compliance observed on campus in CDC survey

Western recorded stellar results in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Mask Adherence Surveillance at Colleges and Universities Project, or MASCUP. The University joined 65 other institutions of higher education across the country to participate in the study, with assistance from public health students overseen by Drs. Robert Bensley, professor of public health, and Amy Jessop, associate professor of public health. The CDC is tracking the impact mask mandates are having on campuses, specifically how many people are wearing masks and how many are wearing them correctly—meaning covering both the nose and mouth.

According to the latest observations of mask-wearing adherence on Western’s campus, 98% of students, faculty and staff observed were wearing a mask. Of that group, nearly 97% were wearing their mask properly. The national average of the six participating universities that launched the study from September to November 2020 was 85.5% compliance with wearing masks, 89.7% of whom were wearing them correctly.

Bensley says he’s not only pleased with the campus community’s compliance but with the team that helped Broncos get there.

“I am proud of the work our public health student’s have done in implementing this surveillance project. Being part of a national initiative has been a great learning experience for their professional preparation in public health.”
Three influential leaders earn highest alumni honor

The WMU Alumni Association and its board of directors have selected Julie A. Harris, Robert S. Kaiser and Christopher C. Womack as recipients of the 2020 WMU Distinguished Alumni Award, the University’s highest alumni honor. To read more about the 2020 WMU Distinguished Alumni Award, visit wmualumni.org/da.

Julie A. Harris
Harris is the global head of asset and wealth management operations and administration at JPMorgan Chase & Co. A past member and president of the WMU Alumni Association Board of Directors, the 1986 graduate earned a bachelor’s degree in computer science from Western. As a student, she was a member of the Bronco Marching Band, served as a resident advisor and was affiliated with the Delta Zeta sorority. She holds a master’s degree from the J.L. Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

Robert S. Kaiser
Kaiser is the owner and CEO of Gallagher-Kaiser, a billion-dollar company and global leader in the engineering, procurement and construction of industrial systems. He also owns Universal Piping Industries. A national and world champion, and a world speed record holder in offshore powerboating, Kaiser also owns a stake in Muskegon Lumberjacks, an Eastern Conference of the U.S. Hockey League team. In 2018, a transformative gift renovated and expanded the Haworth College of Business Sales Lab into the Robert S. Kaiser Sales, Negotiation and Leadership Lab. As a WMU student, he was affiliated with Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity.

Christopher C. Womack
Womack is president of Georgia Power, that state’s largest electric provider, and will take on additional responsibilities as chairman and CEO later this year. He earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Western in 1979 and was affiliated with Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity; he also holds an M.P.A. from American University. Womack served as member and president of the WMU Alumni Association Board of Directors and currently serves on the WMU Foundation Board of Directors.
The stories are seemingly endless. For academic affairs, “It took every face it becomes this huge mosaic,” says Dr. close you realize there are hundreds of adaptation and ingenuity have emerged. To fulfill its purpose, “So that all may we persisted. In the University’s quest to fulfill this crisis, political and social strife—and yet, a pandemic, an economic challenges—a pandemic, was a year ago. We’ve seen tremendous Our world is not the same world it pandemic on teachers and students the opportunity to give literacy studies graduate students the chance to “learn at your own pace” and expanding her hours check-ins a priority with her flexibility and mental health programming—to keep progress moving forward. Dr. Susan Paszko adapted her action research seminar to give literacy studies graduate students the opportunity to examine the impacts of the pandemic on teachers and gather data that could be used to shape the future of the profession. Dr. Sine Carkovic provided business students with professional work experience by coordinating remote projects with corporate partners. Dr. Monica McCullough made flexibility and mental health check-ins a priority with her biology students, implementing a model to “learn at your own pace” and expanding her hours of availability.

The race car is in a student’s garage. “People are coming, one at a time, to put their parts on,” says mechanical engineering student Nick Durham, president of the group. They leaned on the skills they have developed over the years at Western while also taking time to learn new tricks of the trade—like programming and coding—to keep progress moving forward. Dr. Susan Paszko adapted her action research seminar to give literacy studies graduate students the opportunity to examine the impacts of the pandemic on teachers and gather data that could be used to shape the future of the profession. Dr. Sine Carkovic provided business students with professional work experience by coordinating remote projects with corporate partners. Dr. Monica McCullough made flexibility and mental health check-ins a priority with her biology students, implementing a model to “learn at your own pace” and expanding her hours of availability.

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Persisting through the pandemic

Our world is not the same world it was a year ago. We’ve seen tremendous challenges—a pandemic, an economic crisis, political and social strife—and yet, we persisted. In the University’s quest to fulfill its purpose, “So that all may we persisted. In the University’s quest to fulfill this crisis, political and social strife—and yet, a pandemic, an economic challenges—a pandemic, was a year ago. We’ve seen tremendous Our world is not the same world it pandemic on teachers and students the opportunity to give literacy studies graduate students the chance to “learn at your own pace” and expanding her hours of availability.

The Department of Dance didn’t tip-toe around the initial pandemic in 1, it leapt headfirst into creating new opportunities for students in a field traditionally reliant on in-person experiences. While they grived the loss of physical connection in their art, students gained access to instruction from acclaimed guest artists who could dial in via video conference from all over the world. By connecting virtually, "we easily doubled the number of guest artists students have had access to compared to previous years," says Megan Slayter, who leads the Department of Dance. Assistant Professor Kelsey Paschich, whose research involves creating work in a virtual space, pushed her students to think beyond traditional boundaries. They used motion capture suits to twirl into a digital dimension. "I never considered anything like this," Paschich said. "Figured once COVID-19 happened, we would do a livestream of the show and that would be it," Paschich said. "This last year has taught me—that none of us can survive without each other, and that our best work is possible through collaboration. We’re not always sure what’s possible unless we’re pressured to find out, and what’s possible has been pretty amazing."

Expanding Wellness Offerings

The Student Recreation Center, thrown for a loop when the state’s emergency orders shut down workout facilities, had to quickly figure out how to offer holistic health services and programming without a physical building. "How can we not take care of the emotional well-being of our students? We’re more than a building, so we had to figure out, once we’re pressured to find out, and what’s possible has been pretty amazing."

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Tapping into New Opportunities

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Within days, instructors were leading group fitness classes over Facebook Live and coming up with creative ways to keep minds and bodies engaged. They held meditative sessions and developed challenges like building forts to cut down on feelings of isolation and boost community. And during warmer weather they figured out how to continue classes outside, turning tennis courts and walkways into makeshift studios. "We opened the door for some things we didn’t even know were there," Seth says. "It’s a mind shift, but there’s always something to learn from it."

Kelsey has helped us dive into the new realm of digital dance.” To finally be back in that process and create again with each other was so exciting; it really does spark my passion,” adds Quetzie Jacobs, a sophomore dance major also from suburban Chicago.
Before COVID-19 gripped the world, you were probably unfamiliar with the term “social distancing.” “The practice of keeping physical distance from others is key in the fight against COVID-19, but it’s also a challenge to avoiding social isolation and its potential emotional toll. “If we’re stuck in the house every single day for months was driving me insane,” says senior Precious Onyegbule. “You can text your friends. FaceTime them all you want, but not being able to see them and have fun with them, was draining me personally.”

Breanna Traynor, assistant director of mental health outreach, has heard this concern repeated. “Students are feeling isolated. The lack of socialization and connection seems to be one of the hardest issues that students are experiencing,” she says.

A December 2020 survey by New America and Third Way found 79% of students have concerns about their mental health, having fun or being able to see their friends, FaceTime them all you want, but not being able to see them and have fun with them, was draining me personally.”

“Before COVID-19, if you were stressed or anxious, you would imagine that just about everyone has experienced an increase in stress during this pandemic. The fear and anxiety that comes along with it can be overwhelming,” says Dr. Brian Fuller, director of Counseling Services. “This has had an impact on sleep patterns, appetite and focus at times.”

Recognizing the need for more resources for students to thrive, the University has launched several initiatives focused on student mental health since the pandemic began, including two well-being platforms—WellTrack and YOU at Western. These new initiatives, paired with existing programs are aimed at providing a mental and emotional check-in for students and connecting them with campus resources to ease the stressors of life during distance education and beyond. “We’re asking students not to try to go it alone; we would love to come alongside and assist,” says Dr. Diane Anderson, vice president for student affairs. “We are committed to putting well-being front and center at Western.”

**WellTrack**

Launched in Fall 2020, WellTrack is a self-guided application available to students, faculty and staff. The secure and confidential platform offers a number of tools and resources aimed at managing mental health. WellTrack supports the University’s wellness mission by allowing users to track their mood over time, identify stressors, intentionally schedule self-care activities and learn about strategies to manage feelings of depression, anxiety and stress. They can do this through the five-minute, evidence-based Wellness Assessment, which Traynor says was designed by psychologists so students can gauge where they are at with their mental health. “I think there’s a lot of students, people in general, who wonder: Am I struggling with depression? Would my experience be considered clinical depression? Am I at high risk? I think a lot of students wonder but don’t go forward with setting up an appointment or talking to a counselor,” Traynor says.

The Wellness Assessment can show students a realistic picture of their levels of anxiety, depression or stress. If needed, the app will provide information to connect with a counselor. “I think we’re realizing more and more that we have to do prevention work (for our mental health). We hope that through this app, students can start thinking that way as well,” Traynor says.

**YOU at Western**

At Western, success comes in all forms: academic, career, well-being and purpose. The University is providing students the tools they need to achieve their dreams, traditional or not. Enter: YOU at Western. The holistic well-being platform extends beyond the boundaries of a traditional wellness tool. It not only focuses on a user’s mental and physical health but anything related to the college experience. Launched in November 2020, YOU at Western can be accessed anywhere students need it—on their laptop, tablet or smartphone. “I think now we have a generation of students beyond the boundaries of a traditional wellness tool. It not only focuses on a user’s mental and physical health but anything related to the college experience. Launched in November 2020, YOU at Western can be accessed anywhere students need it—on their laptop, tablet or smartphone.”

Traynor says it’s important that anyone, employee, regardless of job title, knows how to connect students with resources because they’re often the ones to witness warning signs. “They’re the eyes and ears of our students. They are the ones interacting with them,” she says. “They’re on this journey with us to support students.”

**Mental Health First Aid and Western Cares**

When you notice someone is struggling mentally, emotionally or physically, it can be difficult to know how to help. Learning how to respond is the focus of two training programs open to the campus community this academic year.

The University partnered with Integrated Services of Kalamazoo (ISK) to provide Mental Health First Aid for Higher Education. With costs covered by a grant, the all-day virtual training for students, faculty and staff covers how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse.

Another source for guidance is the Western CARES training, which is specifically for University faculty, staff and graduate assistants. Known as “gatekeeper training” for those on the front line, the program focuses on how to recognize when a student is struggling and how to respond and share resources.

“Mental Health First Aid and Western CARES are designed to provide the campus community with the tools necessary to respond to students who may be struggling with mental health issues,” Traynor says. “They are the ones interacting with them,” she says. “They’re on this journey with us to support students.”
Alumni find strength in each other to inspire a new generation

Stability is a sanctuary, and for the first time in their lives, Justin and Alex Black have found it. Both overcoming difficulties as kids navigating the foster care system, they discovered love—and purpose—at Western.

Through persistence, perseverance and sheer will, Justin and Alexis Black have risen above their trauma and created their own success. Alexis graduated magna cum laude from Western in 2018 as a two-time Presidential Scholar and member of Phi Beta Kappa honor society, earning degrees in entrepreneurship and global and international studies. Justin completed degrees in public relations and African studies in 2020. Together they completed 13 study abroad programs, co-developing two themselves, and have since launched four companies.

The husband and wife team share their challenging journeys to overcome in their bestselling book, “Redefining Normal: How Two Foster Kids Beat the Odds and Discovered Health, Happiness and Love.” The memoir lays bare the wounds of their childhood and highlights the support they found in Western’s Seita Scholars’ Program—a comprehensive support and scholarship program at Western for students who have experienced foster care—and each other to build the lives they dreamed of having.

FINDING EACH OTHER

Impressive in their own right, Alexis and Justin’s success stories are extraordinary considering the odds stacked against them. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, only 56% of foster youth graduate high school and less than 3% graduate from college. While there are many contributing factors, the seeds of disruption planted by years of neglect and abuse can be overwhelming.

“For a long time, I felt that I wasn’t worthy of going to college,” Justin says. “It wasn’t until maybe my junior or senior year (in high school) that mentors around me gave me the confidence to apply. They suggested I go to the Seita Scholars’ Program because they had connections, and they knew that the campus coaches would help me and also hold me accountable.”

While Justin found his support system in school, Alexis drew encouragement and guidance from her foster parents—both Western alumni—who later adopted her.

“When I came to Western, that was the first time I really felt like I had a community,” Alexis says. She remembers meeting her future husband the summer before her junior year.

“I have a text from my mom saying, ‘You never know, you might meet your somebody.’ And then, like an hour later, we meet!”

At first battling their own insecurities, the pair found calm in one another they had not felt before.

“We both had our lives that were not meant to be independent completely,” she says. “We’re meant to be interdependent and rely on the people around us for that support, to share the burden, share the lows, to celebrate successes but also the negatives in our lives. As former foster youth, that was one of the most difficult realizations we had to come to.”

Leaning on each other, they continually pushed one another to pursue their passions, including travel. Their time at Western took them around the globe. Experiences in Africa, Asia, South America and Europe expanded their views of the world while also bringing them closer to each other.

A NEW CHAPTER

The couple started 2021 on a plane to South Africa. They’d spend Justin’s final semester at Western studying abroad while Alexis operated their company, The Scholarship Expert remotely. Mid-Right they started kicking around the idea of writing a book together.

Less than two months into their stay in South Africa, life threw another curveball. As COVID-19 became an emergent global health threat, the Blacks were thrust into an emergency evacuation effort.

“We were freaking out, trying to figure out what to do. But my mom said, ‘You know, you can come home,’” Alexis says. “I didn’t really think to ask her. I’m so used to being independent; we figure out things for ourselves. But when she said that, it relieved so much pressure.”

The Blacks quarantined in an RV in her parents’ driveway after returning home from overseas. Determined to maximize the opportunity given to them, they began to think about their next move.

“Redefining Normal” debuted at No. 1 on the New York Times Bestseller list, held by readers for its raw looks at the challenges facing foster youth and the courage and work it takes to overcome them. Everyone’s journey may be different, but the lessons laid out in the book are intended to transcend circumstances.

“When you read our book, you can take our lives out and put your life in and question how you deal with mental health. Who created your definition of love? How do you establish community?” Justin says.

The pair have big dreams for their book, hoping it will become common reading in college programming. They are working on a companion guide right now.

“We grew tired of merely surviving. We wanted to live a life with greater meaning—with greater purpose. We wanted to serve people, because we believe that we have a duty to others, especially future generations,” they say in their book, which also pays it forward by donating a portion of the proceeds to organizations that support foster youth, including the Seita Scholars Program.

“We’re hoping to be positive examples to other people who may not have gone through what we’ve gone through,” Alexis says. “One of our biggest mantras is that we want to die knowing that everything that’s in us—all the knowledge, all of the experiences, everything—I don’t want that when I die. I want to give that to other people. I want to pour that out to the world around me.”

Turning uncertainty into opportunity, the couple began writing the book they conceptualized just months ago. “We maximized every single day. We worked at least 10 hours a day, sometimes more.”

PRESSING ON

By November, they were published authors. “Redefining Normal” debuted at No. 1 on three Amazon bestseller lists, held by readers for its raw looks at the challenges facing foster youth and the courage and work it takes to overcome them. Everyone’s journey may be different, but the lessons laid out in the book are intended to transcend circumstances.

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Breaking free from the cycle of generational dysfunction. It stops with us. In addition to being authors, Justin and Alexis Black are mentors, helping students maximize their scholarship potential and emerging from college debt-free with The Scholarship Expert and teaching youth the importance of self, community and impact with Rising Over Social Expectations (ROSE) Empowerment Group—an initiative apart from the Redefining Normal company.

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Breaking free from the cycle of generational dysfunction. It stops with us.
Athletically gifted, academically accomplished

Bronco gymnasts are not only 2020 Mid-American Conference regular season champions, they are also academic all-stars. They are perennially among the leaders in the Women's Collegiate Gymnastics Association's Scholastic All-America Awards. In 2020, the team finished fourth in the nation in the WCGA's team grade point average rankings, with a combined GPA of 3.87. At press time, the team had qualified for NCAA Regional competition, hopefully on the road to the NCAA Women's Gymnastics Championship in mid-April.
Groundbreaking research could provide key to kicking smoking habit for good

Quitting smoking is a common resolution, but a nicotine addiction is hard to curb.

"People try to go cold turkey all the time. The problem is that there are withdrawal symptoms," says Dr. Ricky Stull, assistant professor of Chemistry at Western, whose breakthrough research lays the groundwork for a potential solution. His work advances a strategy of using enzymes to degrade nicotine in the body, flushing it from the system without any adverse effects.

Stull’s research, published in the journal Nature Chemical Biology, corrects a fatal flaw in an animal study that generated global buzz two years ago. The original study found rats addicted to nicotine—when injected with a lab-engineered form of the enzyme NicA2, which occurs naturally in bacteria found in tobacco fields—kicked their addiction.

“They didn’t have any evidence of relapse, any evidence of withdrawal—all great things,” Stull says. “But there was a problem with the NicA2 enzyme in that study. The enzyme, as they were using it, degraded nicotine so slowly they had to use outrageous amounts in order to see all these beneficial effects; you could never translate it to people.”

The NicA2 enzyme requires an electron acceptor in order to degrade nicotine. Stull, with the help of undergraduate lab assistant Chris Clark and collaborators at the University of Michigan, uncovered researchers had incorrectly assumed molecular oxygen was the electron acceptor for the enzyme.

“My research was showing oxygen wasn’t the acceptor for the enzyme. Instead we found a cytochrome protein, which is part of the electron transport chain and is normally used to produce energy within the cells, is the natural electron acceptor,” says Clark, who is pursuing bachelor’s degrees in chemical engineering and biochemistry. “I found if you use the cytochrome c as the electron acceptor, you need far less NicA2 to get the beneficial loss of nicotine addiction.”

The result could be monumental for the millions of tobacco users who know the habit is bad for their health but are struggling to quit.

“I think the application where this would most be useful would be in an individual who is attempting to quit smoking and is at high risk of relapse,” Stull says, giving an example of someone trying to quit smoking who slips during a social event with friends. Generally, introducing nicotine back into their body would trigger the addiction in their brain. “If they’re being treated with this enzyme during a re-exposure event, the nicotine would not actually reach their brain, which would prevent them from becoming addicted once again.”

There’s plenty more to learn about why the enzyme is able to reduce concentration of nicotine in the blood without triggering withdrawal. The next step in the process will be for scientists to put Stull and Clark’s research into practice through testing to determine its viability, but the breakthrough could also have wider implications.

“This is one of the first—if not the first—cases that we’ve proven oxygen is not the native electron acceptor for an enzyme in this family,” Clark says. Discoveries like this are what got him excited about the field. Admittedly bored and disinterested in classes in high school and thus doing poorly academically, Clark didn’t get accepted to Western on his first try because of a low GPA. After taking some classes at a community college and buckling down on his studies, he was admitted on his second attempt with plans to be a chemical engineer. His interest evolved as he was exposed to more classes involving living systems.

“I found the complexity and not being confined to rules that are often common in life sciences very appealing because it’s very complicated and always evolving,” says Clark, who grew up in Holland, Michigan. “Living things are exciting because sometimes the rules we think we know are completely wrong.”

By broadening his horizons and diversifying his scientific research at WMU, Clark is also contributing to the development of potentially life-saving therapeutics.

“Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable illness in the world,” Stull says. “If we could come up with a new treatment that can help people get over their nicotine addiction or tobacco use, we could make a pretty big impact on human health.”
First cohort of product design program sharp on all edges

On an internship at a Texas company last summer, Aisha Thaj summoned the courage to ask the CEO a question during a virtual meet and greet—a risk that landed her in his office. She wasn’t in trouble. With Thaj’s question, the chief executive realized the intern was on to something.

“Have you considered the potential of having a designer on the engineering innovation side—the conceiving side,” the product design student asked. Thaj noticed the aircraft manufacturer did not engage creative designers in its industrial design process.

“That’s really where implementing design can and should be a part of the rest of the industry,” she explained amid her peers. Intrigued by her culture-shifting idea, the CEO invited the college junior from Portage, Michigan, to unpack the possibilities.

“If you want people pushing your vision forward, designers have to be as adept at creating innovative, necessary products and solving problems using design thinking.”

“At the heart of this program is the University embracing and validating our corporate partners by responding to their needs for highly skilled product designers,” says Dan Guyette, dean of the College of Fine Arts. “They were fully engaged in the program’s creation process and helped us understand what the outcomes needed to be. They made the program possible through funding, sharing expertise and hiring our students as interns and employees.”

By the end of the internship and with her senior year at Western ahead, Thaj had job offers from three areas of the company: engineering, marketing and product design. She chose product design and starts in July.

Thaj’s tale about how she landed her first job may be unique to her, but being sought-after as a WMU product design student is not.

The first class of the University’s product design program, which is based in the College of Fine Arts’ Richmond Institute for Design and Innovation (RIDI), graduates this spring. Many of the grads have positions at prestigious companies. Drawing on the program’s transdisciplinary approach to incorporating product design with engineering and business principles, a single graduate offers companies a coveted blend of skills. That’s what industries are seeking and what gave birth to the program four years ago.

CORPORATE PARTNERS ASK FOR HOMETOWN TALENT

Development of the product design program was prompted by a petition from regional corporations to fill a talent void for junior designers in Michigan—the country’s No. 1 state for talent void for junior designers in manufacturing such products as cars, furniture, shoes, handbags, doors and hair clips.

“We’ve fostered partnerships with design-centric companies across many industries, including some we didn’t anticipate, such as developing products to aid people with disabilities.”

Graduates are projected to command starting salaries between $55,000 and $65,000 a year.

RDI and the faculty are central to students’ success. The institute opened in fall 2018 in a newly renovated 26,000-square-foot facility, featuring studios, presentation spaces and laboratories dedicated to innovation, fabrication, rapid prototyping, 3D printing, woodworking and metalworking.

The program is led by a three-member faculty team: Sunki Hong is the team’s visualization expert. Carly Hagens specializes in research. RIDI Director Mike Elwell helps students focus on implementation.

“Our design institute and the faculty are super amazing,” says Nick Koch, a senior from Chelsea, Michigan. “Faculty and students from other design programs who have visited our workshops and toured our studio space say they wish they could have these types of resources and supplies available; they offer students limitless possibilities. If we have a concept, we just talk to the faculty and they help us make it happen.”

Koch has acquired a valuable set of experiences working with area corporations to round out his degree program. In summer 2020, he engaged virtually with a Stryker Corp. team looking at potential methods for delivering chemotherapy in the home environment.

This past fall, he was hired as an independent contractor by Tekna in WMU’s Business Technology and Research Park as an industrial design consultant. Well prepared to prosper in his field, he received a job offer before graduation from Stryker as an industrial designer on a medical acute care team designing hospital beds and stretchers.

Despite pandemic constraints, most of the 16 students in the first cohort completed traditional internships in a wide variety of companies, manufacturing such products as cars, furniture, shoes, handbags, doors and hair clips.

“We inspire our students to create products with a purpose that improve quality of life here and around the world,” Elwell says. “Students who are interested in this program want to make the world a better place through their work and careers. We specifically give them projects that are designed to create social good, such as developing products to aid people with disabilities.”

Guyette’s grateful for the many key people who were essential to the program’s development—from individuals, like Bill and Linda Demmer, to foundations and corporate partners, and especially the generous contributions of Jim and Lois Richardson that made RIDI possible.

“Of all these community partners we have created power and synergy to benefit our students, the workforce and the economy.”

Students are prepared to create products that improve quality of life and they’re ready to make waves in their industry.
New Resiliency Center coordinates care for the ‘whole person’

As an intern at Western’s Children’s Trauma Assessment Center (CTAC), Steve Weaver has seen firsthand that trauma rarely touches just one person at a time.

Coordinated care with individuals, family members and caregivers covering every aspect of a child’s life is essential to treatment. “Interdisciplinary contact number is critical to being able to treat the whole person,” says Weaver, who will graduate this summer with a Master of Social Work degree. “It’s important to have a comprehensive lens to look at all pieces and know what the full experience is for the child and those who are in the child’s life.”

Western is making those connections through its Resiliency Center for Families and Children.

Established by the College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) in 2009 through a state appropriation of $15 million, the center addresses the many needs of those experiencing trauma, toxic stress, chronic disability, neurodevelopmental disorders or substance use disorder.

The college will use the funding in its efforts to impact resiliency in the region, including the enhancement of many services at CTAC and the Unified Clinics, a large multispecialty group practice that provides clinical training experiences for WMU students, according to Dr. Ron Cisler, CHHS dean.

The funding will allow CTAC and the Unified Clinics to increase the number of children and families receiving trauma assessments and treatment. This includes new services such as treatment for families in which parents have a history of substance use disorders, resiliency-based interventions for families and sensory-processing therapy for children.

“Treat underlying issues due to trauma, toxic stress, anxiety, depression or a substance use.”

This center will integrate services from CTAC with services from other clinics housed in the Unified Clinics, such as behavioral health, speech-language pathology, audiology, vision, occupational therapy, physical therapy and medicine. Clinical expertise from CHHS’ other disciplines, including public health, social work, holistic health and nursing, will also be incorporated.

Children and families are screened, assessed and directed to services that will best fulfill their needs.

Resiliency case manager Shelbey Watson-Beasley, also a social work graduate student, coordinates the care for these children and families.

“At the Resiliency Center, we’re not just assessing them, we’re getting them connected to the care and resources they need and coordinating care for people who come into the clinic,” Watson-Beasley says.

“One of our many concerns is making sure that this center is sustainable,” says Cisler, who is also principal investigator of the Resiliency Center and chair of the center’s steering committee.

“We want to provide long-term service solutions and eventually expand the reach of the center to other local and regional communities in need.”

The goal is to create a one-stop shop for these families, increase efficiencies and potentially double the number of children who can receive trauma assessment in a year, adds Amy Penticone, clinical director for the Resiliency Center.

“There’s always been a coordination of some services, but this is really solidifying and having a seamless process,” Penticone says. “We’re filling a gap to keep families connected to the services they need.”

The center will focus on resiliency by instating a uniform assessment and referral process across the clinics and continuing to support professional and educational collaboration where students and clinicians are able to learn from each other.

A steering committee made up of individuals from various disciplines at Western and WMU Homer Stryker MD School of Medicine has identified “Center Cores” to guide interactions of faculty, researchers, staff, students and the community and help implement and sustain the work of the center.

The goal is to become a leader in supporting care for families, children and communities suffering from trauma-related issues and a national center for the development of research and education regarding trauma-related conditions. This all while maintaining culturally responsive, interdisciplinary practice, education and research, according to its mission.
Finding opportunity amid crisis: Preparing teachers for a strong future

When K-12 school districts abruptly transitioned to distance education in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to the internet was a common discussion topic. Districts took different approaches to bridging this gap, rolling out laptops or tablets to students and offering mobile Wi-Fi in some areas. What to do with the technology became a less common question.

“Considering the high cost of the technology and that devices are shared among families, districts had a number of questions,” says Jennifer Hinga, a high school teacher and recent graduate of the master’s degree program in literacy studies at WMU. “How will we prepare the teachers to teach online? How will we support those with less tech access?”

Hinga, along with her colleagues in the cohort completing the literacy studies program in August 2020, was among the first to take the capstone course during the summer, when most districts across Michigan had not had students in their classroom since March.

“They’d just experienced unprecedented COVID-19 transitions, and everyone was stressed out and ready to go back in September with so many unknowns,” Piazza says. “I decided, let’s do some survey research and see if we can understand how Michigan teachers are adapting their instructional practices and compare that with their own experiences in the prior spring term, which will inform how we prepare to go back to school in the fall—whether it’s virtual, face to face or hybrid.”

She devised a survey study, approved by WMU’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, to investigate experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic related to their ability to meet the needs of diverse learners through distance and online education. Piazza was concerned the shift to online and distance learning may be hindering teachers’ efforts to address issues of inclusion and equity that are typically a strong emphasis in their program.

“The overall focus is how do we meet students’ needs in pre-K through 12 settings during these unprecedented times, but I also asked about literacy specifically and about diverse and traditionally marginalized learners as well as learners with special needs,” says Dr. Susan Piazza, professor and unit coordinator of literacy studies within the College of Education and Human Development.

“We started from earnest curiosity and based on the needs to offer this action research class,” says Piazza, professor and unit coordinator of literacy studies. “Students agreed this was probably one of the most meaningful ways they could have conducted research related to their teaching experiences during a pandemic, because they got to process it all with each other, with me and with colleagues in the field.”

Piazza’s literacy studies master’s students generally finish their degrees with an action research seminar, where they pose research questions and collect data focused on literacy instruction in schools. However, the cohort completing the program in August 2020 became the first to take the capstone course during the summer, when most districts across Michigan had not had students in their classroom since March.

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Hinga is among a cohort of literacy studies graduates who found a way to better adapt to pandemic challenges in their own classroom while also collecting data that has the potential to influence the future of the teaching profession and boost student achievement. Their advisor, Dr. Susan Piazza, opened the door for students to turn those teaching challenges spurred by the pandemic pinch into opportunities to make an impact on the field.

“We’ve given people access to what was made available, however, was a different approach to bridging the discussion. Districts took the internet was a common approach,” says Jennifer Hinga, a high school teacher and recent graduate of the master’s degree program in literacy studies. “How will we prepare the teachers to teach online? How will we support those with less tech access?”

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MBABBA MEANAW WARESA is the fertility goddess of South Africa’s Zulu nation. Rule over agriculture, harvests and rain, she’s also the deity of one of West Michigan’s favorite beers. “According to legend, she gave humans the gift of beer and taught them how to brew,” explains Jamal Ewing, co-owner of Black Calder Brewing Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The goddess inspired his brewery’s logo, which reimagines her hair as a crown of hops. The brewery’s name is a nod to Grand Rapids, nicknamed “Caldier City.”

“We wanted a name to speak to who we are and incorporate the community in which we belong. Black is a strong word associated with strength, power, sophistication and elegance. Putting the two together, we felt like we had a really solid name,” says Ewing, a two-time Western alum. 

Launched on Black Friday 2020, Black Calder is the first Black-owned brewery in Michigan. In a field historically lacking diversity—a 2019 Brewers Association survey found just 3% of responding brewery owners were Black—Ewing and co-owner Terry Rostic hope to infuse their culture into the craft beer community and inspire inclusion. Their website includes a promise to “celebrate, cherish and highlight the things special to us in our culture,” promising to be “unapologetically proud, Black and represent the fullest.”

“We want to celebrate our culture’s contributions to art and history in all its forms, from the designs we use on our beer labels, the artwork you will see on the walls and the artists we work with to create them, to the music playing in the taproom, pop culture references we use on social media and the community organizations we support,” says Ewing.

In fact, the company has created a dedicated space for underrepresented artists to share their work. “It’s one of our goals to provide a platform in the industry for artists of all backgrounds.”

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Ewing’s passion for beer runs deep. While he cultivated his love of craft brews at Western, he also honed his business skills, earning a bachelor’s degree in sales and business marketing in 2006 and an MBA in 2013. “My time at Western helped me develop the critical thinking skills I needed to excel in my career.”

In 2016, after bumping into Rostic at an event and bonding over beer, Ewing saw an opportunity to match his entrepreneurial process with his future partner’s brewing expertise. “They say start a business about what you’re passionate about. I was passionate about beer!” Ewing says. So, he and Rostic started envisioning their brand, networking and experimenting with different brews. Their dreams took a giant leap forward in 2018 when they won $20,000 in the Start Garden competition, which gives seed money to promising entrepreneurs in the Grand Rapids area.

“At that point we were like, ‘We’ve really got something that might work.’ And we kept planning and going at it,” says Ewing. He still has several books from his business classes that have turned into valuable resources as the company developed. “We actually wanted to open a taproom in late 2019, but it didn’t end up working out. It turned out to be a good thing that we didn’t open, because a few months later COVID-19 happened.”

As the pandemic ramped up, Ewing and Rostic started exploring the option of contract brewing, which would allow them to partner with an already established brewery and use their space to make and distribute beer. “COVID-19 has affected everyone, especially small business owners. We put in a lot of work and sacrifice up to this point and didn’t want to give up. We were forced to pivot,” he says. The Black Calder team found a partner in Brewery Vivant and got to work crafting their first brew: Black IPA. Building excitement in the beer community through social media and word-of-mouth, the beer sold out on preorder in just a few days. They’ve since brewed several other creations, including BOUGIE Smore Stout and Bishop, a juicy double IPA.

“We’re able to get our beer out there and build a reputation for what we do, which I think will help us once we do eventually open a taproom—hopefully by the end of this year or early next year.”

GIVING BACK

While Ewing and Rostic may be recognized as the state’s first Black brewery owners, they’re quick to recognize other people of color who’ve been involved in the industry for years. “It’s an honor to be recognized and be a part of history in that way. At the end of the day, we want to be known more for our beer than our skin tone,” Ewing says. “Hopefully we can be an inspiration for other people who... want to enter the industry.”

Black Calder has a philosophy of “craftlanthropy,” or philanthropy through beer. “We’re blessed to be able to do the things that we do but realize there are many others who are less fortunate. We used a portion of the proceeds from our first release to purchase water for a community in Tanzania,” says Ewing.

“Our motto is simple, ‘Make dope beer for dope people.’ Yet our hearts are huge and complex,” the Black Calder team says on its website. “Community is extremely important for us. We feel blessed to have an opportunity to bring people together through beer.”

Alumni Profile

MBA leads the charge to diversify craft beer industry

Pioneering Brewer

Jamal Ewing holds a pack of four original Black Calder beers.
The food world has had to adapt to cope, whether it’s the ‘new normal’ or this is just what it is now. We’ve seen some really creative approaches,” says John Schmitt, former restaurateur, alumni and senior business consultant for the Michigan Small Business Development Center, hosted at Haworth College of Business. “Restaurants have done their best to be agile and resilient as they face circumstances they never could have planned for.”

In the year since restaurants have been able to operate “normally,” a roller coaster of restrictions left the industry scrambling for recipes to cook up opportunities for cash flow. “I saw a couple people breaking down and for the first time in months, I was walking downtown Kalamazoo—I felt a little melancholy. There were no cars on Michigan Avenue—it was like a ghost town. Then I start hearing Motown music. As I’m walking downtown Michigan, coming close to Bimba’s Pizza, I see they’ve put in a new door with a window and put a pizza rack out on the sidewalk. They put loudspeakers out there playing music and they’ll call your name when your order was ready,” recalls Schmitt. “People were socially distanced, either in their car or on the sidewalk, and for the first time in months, I saw a couple people breaking down dancing. That was an example of a business that used what they had and figured out how to best make it work, and that was successful.”

Fine dining fended for the simple fact that the food typically doesn’t travel well. Establishments able to stay afloat explored concepts like reservation-only dining where customers pre-order meals, allowing for expedited service and more table turns. Meal kits have also become popular giving customers the opportunity to pick up ready-made meals they can cook themselves at home. “My rose-colored glasses want me to believe that there is something about the shared experience. And as a former restaurant owner, having that shared experience of breaking bread with other people is an aspect of our society that I do think there’s a basic desire for,” says Schmitt.

“Presidential Brewing (in Portage, Michigan) celebrated its one-year anniversary in February 2020. They didn’t have a canning line, so the owner shifted their business model when they discovered they could deliver beer under COVID-19 rules enacted by the Michigan Liquor Control Commission,” Schmitt says. “They started offering the service and gradually grew their customer base by offering the convenience of delivered beer.” Some restaurants chose to remain shut down even as restrictions were lifted, unable to cover costs on the fraction of sales that smaller capacity would yield. Others ditched brick-and-mortar operations for “ghost kitchens”—mobile units with space to prepare to-go meals without the added costs of rent, utilities and large staffs. Another trend Schmitt noticed is establishments creating new experiences for customers to drum up business, especially in downtown areas that depend on foot traffic from people checking out events, which have mostly moved to virtual spaces.

“The pandemic has reinforced how integral restaurants are to communities—both in terms of economic impact and quality of life. ‘My rose-colored glasses want me to believe that there is something about the shared experience. And as a former restaurant owner, having that shared experience of breaking bread with other people is an aspect of our society that I do think there’s a basic desire for,’ says Schmitt. “In my more than 30 years of experience in the food business, I haven’t seen this level of teamwork between distributors, janitorial services, marketing companies, point-of-sales companies and other competitors before.”

A number of non-traditional tools were also employed at the start of the pandemic to help prop up the industry, from grassroots social media efforts to buy local to the creation of Feed the Fight Kalamazoo, a volunteer organization co-founded by Dr. Sally Hadden, associate professor of history, that buys meals from local restaurants and delivers them free of charge to frontline workers. “No matter the effort, the unfortunate truth is some restaurants will not survive the multiple blows dealt by the pandemic.”

“The playing field is going to be cut down. My gut tells me it’s going to be more like a quarter to a third of restaurants will either have to change ownership or shut down,” says Schmitt. “The shrinking number of options, however, will provide opportunities for those left standing to increase their customer base and income.

Through all the anxiety and uncertainty, a silver lining has emerged: It’s brought communities and the industry together like never before. The pandemic has reinforced how integral restaurants are to communities—both in terms of economic impact and quality of life. “In my more than 30 years of experience in the food business, I haven’t seen this level of teamwork between distributors, janitorial services, marketing companies, point-of-sales companies and other competitors before.”

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The trends we’ve seen in the restaurant industry come down to convenience, he says, pointing out the pandemic exacerbated trends already emerging among younger diners who crave shorter restaurant visits and dining on demand. More delivery options and specially crafted to-go menus are likely to become permanent staples of restaurant strategy post-pandemic.

Eating in an igloo suddenly doesn’t seem so novel. With indoor dining limited or shut down entirely at times, the pandemic has pushed the traditional boundaries of the restaurant industry.

Pandemic didn’t swallow restaurant industry’s appetite for innovation
Send submissions to deanne.puca@wmich.edu. Include your name, major, degree, year graduated and a daytime phone number by which we can reach you. We will publish photos as space permits.

Classnotes

**John Buchanan MacKenzie**, BA '78, a former member of the Board of Trustees, was chosen as chair of the guidance and counseling department. This position is a new role at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) High School, which has become the Redford University High School of Fame.

**Roger Wilton Avers**, BS '50, former WMU football and original hockey team leader, public-school teacher, head wrestling coach, head basketball coach, and head football coach in Grand Rapids, was inducted into the WMU High School Coaches Hall of Fame.

**Theodore H. Houslay**, BA '22, has been named a marketing intern at LinkedIn. In New York City, he is a marketing intern for LinkedIn.

**Greg Guetschow**, BA '03, was named interim city manager for Northville, Michigan. He is currently a senior project manager at the city-owned Northville Public Library.

**Ron Restum**, BA '79, joined Online Nutrients Recovery Technologies Inc. in Vancouver, Canada, and Silverthorne, Colorado, as chief revenue officer.

**Christopher Clarence Swenson**, BS '74, president, CEO and chair of Georgia Power, was appointed by Gov. Brian Kemp to serve on the board of directors for the Georgia Port Authority, which manages and operates Port of Savannah, Port of Brunswick and other inland port operations throughout the state.

**Cynthia Herrera**, BS '15, MS '19, was named associate vice chancellor for Student and Community Affairs. She currently serves as interim associate vice chancellor for Student and Community Affairs.

**Michael McCready**, BS '15, of Canton, Michigan, joined the city of Buros as economic development director. McCready previously served as a business development and marketing director at the Vermont County Business Development Corporation in Castleton, Vermont.

**Burt Nanna**, BA '09, MBA '21, of Vineland, New Jersey, is the new president of the Monmouth College Community College in Red Bank, New Jersey. He will begin his role in early 2023.

**Chelsea R. Nassa**, BA '19, MA '21, PhD '21, was named the new president of the University of Vermont. Nassa comes from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she served as vice president for student affairs.

**Teresa Law**, BA '10, of Byron, New York-based AirChek Smoked Fish as its chief marketing officer.

**Kensington**

**Nancy Nagel Kaigama**, RN '08, of Ibadan, Nigeria, is a registered nurse in Minnesota. She is the state’s largest federally qualified health center, working to identify community needs and build them into programs and services.

**Tien Hall**, BA '11, joined General Trust in Philadelphia as chief marketing operations officer.

**Cecilia Powell**, BS '13, of Chicago, is a financial advisor for the First State Bank of Winnebago County.

**Amy Hamblin**, BA '13, of Chicago, is an associate producer, writer and developer of the Donald Judd Symposium at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Indiana. She is also a development director for the Michigan Food and Wine Festival.

**Jennifer (Madsen) Dale**, MN '15, chief development officer for the Children’s Museum of Grand Rapids, was appointed by Governor Gretchen Whitmer to the Michigan Board of Trustees. Dale was previously the chief development officer for the University of Chicago System, where she oversaw the university’s fundraising efforts.

**James Howden**, BA '10, was named for The Rees Group in Traverse City, Michigan. He is also the new president for the Michigan Food and Wine Festival.

**Todd Regan**, BA '10, was appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to the Michigan Food and Wine Festival to address food insecurity, a major issue affecting the state. The festival is the state’s largest food and wine event.

**Stephen L. Tupper**, MA '13, of Grand Rapids, was appointed by the Anti-Discrimination Board of Directors to serve as the new president of the foundation.

**James Hagen**, BA '02, with a special focus on helping veterans, was appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to the Michigan Food and Wine Festival to address food insecurity, a major issue affecting the state. The festival is the state’s largest food and wine event.

**Marcia K. Springer**, BA '77, was named director of the University of Michigan’s Medical School's Office of Diversity.

**Dwayne R. Datt-Nanna**, BA '19, MA '21, was named interim president of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is also a senior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

**Terrance Scammon**, BS '19, joined the University of California, Berkeley, as an assistant professor of marketing.

**Heather Buchanan-Smith**, BS '01, vice president, marketing and student services for LUMA Homes, was named a National Home Building Association of America LUMA Homes Emerging Leader.

**Robin D. Howden**, MBA '11, was promoted to executive director of Community Health Center of Greater Grand Rapids.

**George Grant Jr.,** PhD '00, was named a professor of Community Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**Alaxi Mavrellis**, BBA '04, was named managing director, market risk management, at Bank of America in Chicago. He is also the new chief investment officer for the Committee on University Investments.

**Rev. Clyde Mayo**, BA '00, was named president of the United Presbyterian Church in Southern California and the executive director of the United Presbyterian Church in Southern California. He is also the new president of the United Presbyterian Church in Southern California. He is also the new president of the United Presbyterian Church in Southern California.
As the sun sets over Sangren Hall, Western looks forward to the dawn of new opportunities with the return to near-normal operations on campus in fall 2021.