Greetings alumni and friends! As I thought about what to write in this column, I thought I’d share some things that have been on my mind recently. The theme of these thoughts is “transitions.” Students go through many transitions during their time at the university. They start out unfamiliar with the place and uncertain about where they fit and how they will succeed. As they get adjusted and find focus, they become transformed from naïve people into students with a purpose. They declare majors and use that as the home base from which to develop the full complement of skills and knowledge that serve them well as they make the next transition following graduation. We in the Department of Psychology are delighted that we get to play a role in students’ transformative experience during the time they spend with us.

There are other transitions that we greet with great anticipation and excitement. For example, each year when we invite new graduate students to join our program, we look forward with tremendous anticipation to what they will accomplish during their time here and how when leave the UW to pursue their independent careers, their accomplishment will reflect well on our program. We have had the good fortune to welcome new faculty in recent years and that transition is always exciting as new ideas and perspectives are introduced to the department.

As I write this column, however, I’m thinking about some other transitions, which, though exciting in some ways, are bitter sweet. Two cherished colleagues are retiring. And though we are excited for their new beginning, at the same time we are saddened by what these transitions mean for our everyday lives and the lives of future generations of students who won’t have the opportunity to be taught or mentored by these colleagues. One of these colleagues is Professor Chuck Snowdon who is retiring in December after being a faculty member here in the department for over 43 years. His extraordinary scholarship and teaching have earned him numerous accolades over the years. Chuck has always been tireless in his service to the department and the university as well as to the field of psychological science. He is the faculty member with the longest standing appointment in the department and he remains one of the most energetic people in the department. The other colleague who is retiring is Professor Bryan Hendricks. After his first retirement, from UW–Wausau, Bryan joined our department to pursue his passion for teaching. For the last 12 years, Bryan has taught Experimental Psychology, Statistics and Introductory Psychology. He has been a constant presence in the department, meeting with students at all hours of the day and evenings as well as weekends. He works closely with students on some of the topics they find most challenging and students have benefitted tremendously from his quality teaching and careful mentoring. This transition will be quite challenging for us as it is difficult for any of us to imagine the future of our department without their presence on a day-to-day basis.

That’s the funny thing about transitions. They always bring change and with the change some nostalgia for what once was. They can also bring new opportunities, however. Our goal is to preserve and build upon the best of what these extraordinary colleagues provided and move forward. As we think about the unknown future, we can confidently with full hearts wish them each the very best as they transition into the next phase of their lives.
We are grateful to our alumni and friends who have donated generously to the Department. This past year your donations have greatly enhanced the undergraduate and graduate student experience. We have placed a high priority on increased funding for graduate students attending scientific conferences to present their work. These experiences are crucial to their professional development. Gifts have been used to support undergraduates in multiple ways, including the graduation reception. This event is a wonderful way to honor and recognize our students in the company of their families. This year we had record attendance of over 400 guests. We are grateful for your ongoing support.

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As a senior Michael Perelman (B.A., 1971) had a unique opportunity to take a graduate level class in psychosomatics with Professor Peter Lang. This experience inspired him to pursue graduate studies in Psychology. “Peter was a brilliant and inspiring teacher; that course was extremely rigorous and launched my interest in psychophysiological disorders in general and subsequently sexual disorders in particular.” says Perelman.

After earning his undergraduate degree, Perelman went on to receive his M.S., M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees in clinical psychology from Columbia University, writing the first dissertation on sex therapy in Columbia’s history. Dr. Perelman was recently awarded the 2012 Award for Professional Standard of Excellence at the annual meeting of American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists.

Currently, Dr. Perelman is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Reproductive Medicine, and Urology at Weill Medical College of Cornell University. He is the Co-Director of the Human Sexuality Program, Payne Whitney Clinic of the N. Y. Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, founded by his late mentor Dr. Helen S. Kaplan. Cornell is the oldest continuously functioning’s sex therapy training program in the world and Michael has been its steward, shepherding it since Kaplan’s death in 1995.

Dr. Perelman is described by colleagues as “a person of the highest integrity and his work reflects the standards of excellence and extraordinary achievement this award is designed to recognize. During his 40-year career he has done much to advance the bio-psychosocial view of sexual health. Michael’s contributions to sexual and reproductive health psychology have often been pioneering, and are always exemplary. He has helped bridge the gap between psychology and sexual medicine physicians and subsequently gaining increased respect for psychology internationally. Michael has inspiringly contributed to clinical training programs, scientific research, and significantly to international standards of clinical practice.”

Dr. Perelman is a member of more than twenty-five professional associations, where he served on, or chaired numerous committees. He has served on several boards of directors and is the immediate Past President of the Society of Sex Therapy and Research (SSTAR).

Dr. Perelman was one of three psychologists in history to be appointed to the Sexual Function Advisory Council of the American Urological Association Foundation. He was elected a Fellow of the International Society for Women’s Sexual Health (ISSWSH), as well as a Fellow of the Sexual Medicine Society of North America (SMSNA). He has distinguished himself as a member of the International Society for Sexual Medicine (ISSM) where, he was appointed and serves on its prestigious Standards Committee.” Dr. Perelman has served as a consulting editor and/or reviewer for numerous journals. He has published countless peer reviewed journal articles, abstracts, posters, chapters in sexual medicine texts and delivered over 250 invited presentations.
Our abilities – and the brain anatomy and physiology that underlie them – are a function of both nature (i.e., genetics) and nurture (i.e., our experiences in the environment). And although our basic genetics have changed little for tens of thousands of years, our current cognitive environment bears little resemblance to that of the first anatomically modern humans. In particular, today our experiences are defined by the pervasive influence of technology. Over 90% of Americans own cell phones, 80% use the Internet regularly, and 70% play video games. Amongst younger generations, these numbers are higher still.

Because these new environments necessarily require specialized cognitive, perceptual, and motor abilities, there is no question as to whether technology is changing our brains and behavior. It is simply a given that our brains are different from those of our ancestors. The questions are instead, How is technology affecting our abilities and behavior? How does the type of technology predict the outcome(s)? How do we build technology to effect primarily positive changes?

My research seeks to address many of these questions. For instance, in one broad project we are examining the behavioral and neural consequences of video game play. Like the term ‘technology,’ the term ‘video games’ encompasses a wide variety of incredibly different experiences. Our objective is thus to map how the specific characteristics of individual game environments determines the final behavioral and neural outcomes (e.g. What game characteristics result in enhanced perceptual or motor skills? What game characteristics predict addictiveness? What game characteristics produce a plastic neural state?). Our long-term goal is then to utilize this knowledge to aid in the rehabilitation of neural processing disorders.

So-called “action video games” (like that pictured below) are one game type that has been of considerable interest to researchers in many domains in psychology. For instance, the violent content has led researchers to examine their effects on social aspects of behavior such as aggression or empathy. My lab’s interest in these games stems from the incredible demands they place on the perceptual and cognitive systems. For example, in this scene the player must monitor many independent sources of information, some of which are in far peripheral vision (e.g. the enemy at the right edge of the screen), perform fast inferences based on data that is only partially observable (e.g. the beam of light in the center of the screen is actually a laser blast fired by an enemy located behind the player), and to quickly form action plans based on this data. These demands far exceed that which is typical in day-to-day life and thus drive large-scale plasticity in the systems that underlie those abilities.

In a second project, in collaboration with well-known game designers, we are seeking to build a truly fun, engaging, and most importantly effective, educational video game. Too often educational games start with content and then attempt to “dress it up” as a video game (we often refer to these games derisively as “chocolate covered broccoli”). Our goal is to take the opposite route – to start with a game built upon the principles of 1) good game design and 2) neural plasticity. Content will then be injected unobtrusively, such that in the end the children can’t tell what parts are the “game” and what parts are the “learning.”

And in a third project we are assessing the consequences of what is known as “media multi-tasking” – essentially the constant switching of focus between types of media (e.g., switching attention from a web browser, down to the phone where a text has been received, over to the television where a dramatic moment is poised to occur, to a different web browser tab, etc). Such behavior is increasingly prevalent and may have clear long-term implications, such as to the ability to sustain attention on a single task or to internally control the locus of attention.
In her 22 years in the Department, Professor Judy Harackiewicz has taught at all levels of our curriculum, ranging from large lectures, small graduate and undergraduate seminars, and individual and group research mentorship, earning both Departmental and University-wide teaching awards in 2000 and 2002, respectively. Since then, Harackiewicz’s teaching has only gotten better.

For her continued dedication, Professor Harackiewicz was awarded a 2012 Alliant Energy Underkofler Excellence in Teaching Award. This award recognizes five faculty members across the UW System for outstanding teaching that leads to substantial intellectual growth in students. Harackiewicz acknowledges that her teaching has come a long way since using chalk on a blackboard. Technology has allowed Harackiewicz to connect with her students and make teaching more fun. “I have learned to present less material and pose more questions to students, they learn better when they have the chance to actively process the material.”

Harackiewicz brings her innovative research on the development of motivation and interest to the development and expression of her own teaching. Her research documents the educational significance of students making connections between what they are learning and their own lives. “My research and my teaching are so intertwined that it is impossible to talk about my teaching without going off on a long research tangent.” she says. She strives to make learning relevant, finding social psychological principles in current events and the media. She will link research on social norms to explain why thousands of UW students rushed the football field after the Badgers beat Ohio State in a critical Big Ten matchup. She uses popular songs to stimulate ideas about new concepts to be discussed in class and help students better retain the material covered in class. Student evaluations consistently rave about her enthusiasm for the material, her ability to challenge their thinking and make the material more accessible.

Professor Harackiewicz has had a tremendous impact teaching graduate students as well. Elizabeth Canning has had the opportunity to learn from Harackiewicz in both formal and informal settings, “Judy’s research on interest and motivation has clearly influenced her approach in the classroom and as a graduate mentor. She encourages all of her students to discover their true passions and really cares about their progress. This semester I’ve had the opportunity to sit in on some of her undergraduate lectures and it is amazing to see how engaged the class is and how passionate Judy is about the material she teaches. As a mentor Judy has always wanted the best for me and pushes me to my full potential. With her help I’ve found what I’m really interested in and have been able to accomplish more than I ever thought possible.”

For as much as students value the impact Professor Harackiewicz has had on their lives, she credits her work with her students as pivotal to her own development. “I think that my job is to make the best case for social psychology. I can’t make them find it interesting, but I can help them explore the field and find connections. And I can provide the support and encouragement to allow them to develop interest. When a student tells me they want to learn more about social psychology and get involved in research, I am happy to find a place for them in my lab. Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than to work closely with students and see them develop scientific skills, confidence, and passion for research.”
As a fifth-year clinical psychology graduate student working with Professor Wen Li, I’m actively involved in multiple aspects of the Psychology Department, including research, teaching, mentoring, and therapy. My research focuses on perceptual sensitivity in anxiety. The various anxiety disorders are classically considered to be cognitive: negative, conscious thoughts (such as worry) are generated in response to neutral stimuli. But what if anxiety starts earlier, at the perceptual stage? Could it be that anxious people also have greater perceptual sensitivity to threat?

Using morphed faces that show a “microexpression” of fear, my lab has found that anxious people can, indeed, detect this fear information better than nonanxious people can. To show that this difference begins during early perceptual stages, we record brain activity with EEG (electroencephalogram), which allows us to determine the precise time at which differences in brain responses emerge. We’re currently analyzing these data to determine whether the differences we’ve observed are a product of early perceptual sensitivity or later cognitive processes. For my dissertation, I plan to test whether these effects involve specific neurotransmitters that increase anxiety, by administering a noradrenergic anti-anxiety drug to participants before the experiment.

Complementary to my anxiety research, I also see therapy clients several days a week, many of whom struggle daily with anxiety. Here in the Psychology Department, the Psychology Research and Training Clinic offers excellent opportunities to work with a variety of clients. The program also sends students to various clinics in Madison, where I’ve had the opportunity to conduct group therapy, assess children for learning problems, and much more. I’m really enjoying how my clinical work connects the research I do with the daily impact of these disorders on people’s lives.

My work with anxiety even extends to teaching and mentoring, my other two Psychology Department activities. As a teaching assistant for large lecture classes, I often teach test anxiety reduction techniques to nervous students, and help them with adjustment to college and to the intensity of the Psychology major. I also serve as the coordinator of the Psychology Research Experience Program, which brings 10 undergraduates from all over the USA to Madison for a summer of mentored research. Sharing the department’s world-class training with these students and helping them alleviate their anxiety about a summer away from home has been immensely rewarding. I’m grateful for the many roles I play in the Department, and am excited to continue studying anxiety in all its forms!
For most first-year students the transition to UW–Madison can be explained by the W-curve, involving an initial honeymoon phase, followed by culture shock, initial adjustment, mental isolation, before finally moving toward acceptance and integration. This year, the Psychology Department is piloting a program aimed at assisting first-semester transfer students with this transition with the help of two peer mentors, Alexandra Esfahani and Nathaniel Olson (photo, right).

Focused on a theme of child advocacy, students in the pilot program enrolled in Child Psychology, a political science class focused on citizenship and democracy, and an additional psychology class emphasizing the intersection between research in child development and the role of a responsible citizen. Students are also required to volunteer 5 hours per week working for a non-profit organization serving at-risk children and families in the local Madison community. “Our goal was to get them quickly integrated into the Department and community while providing a stable support system at the same time,” advisor Stephanie Osborn says.

A psychology and political science major, transfer student Nathaniel Olson has dedicated his life to public service and understands firsthand the challenges faced by new transfer students. Nat shares, “I was extraordinarily eager to help others through their transition period, knowing that they would be having a similar experience to what I had gone through. I felt that I would be able to use a variety of my experiences and knowledge bases to make a valuable contribution. When you arrive on a campus two years after your peers, it’s a lot harder to make your Wisconsin experience genuine. This program provides transfer students an immediate opportunity to connect with an individual who is already engaged in both the community and the academic world of Madison. These connections give transfer students who feel they may have started out a step behind the opportunity to catch up socially and academically with their peers.”

Alex views her role as an opportunity to give back to the Department, “This experience has given me a sense of generativity. It’s made me feel like I had something to give at a very basic level: without knowing it, over the last four years I’ve adjusted to life here in Madison. This is knowledge I can now pass on to our transfer students. This mentoring program has confirmed for me that the Psychology Department and UW-Madison has become my home. I want others to feel that way too. It’s been a great capstone to my psychology major. I function as a leader in this class which builds my confidence in being part of this department. I feel like a piece of the puzzle here: I am part of what makes this department a resource for its students.”


Students gathered to discuss issues related to emotions and stereotypes in the French movie, “Les Intouchables” with featured guest, Professor Paula Neidenthal. “Based on a true story, the movie is about a Parisian aristocrat, Philippe, who is paralyzed from the neck down due to a hang-gliding accident. He hires a poor, unemployed black man, Driss, as his aid” Niedenthal says. She selected this movie based on the psychological themes of stereotypes and prejudice. “We see the race and socioeconomic differences disappear in their relationship, which becomes one of real fondness and even dependence. Similarities more important than differences are revealed. The movie isn’t sentimental or saccharine and I thought that this more raw and undelicate style would appeal to university students. And it did. In the end, we did discuss the features of real psychological situations that bring people together and break down racial and other prejudices.”
We have a long history of excellence in teaching and research in this department. To maintain this high standard we need support from our alumni and friends. Donations in any amount are greatly appreciated and go directly to supporting our students, faculty, and programs. If you would like, you may designate your gift to one of the following areas (please check one):

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