Holiday greetings, alumni and friends. Things have been going well in the department. In the fall of 2011 we rolled out our new curriculum, about which I wrote in a previous column. The new depth courses have been met with positive reactions on the part of the students enrolled, the faculty teaching the courses and the teaching assistants who have run the discussion sections. We look forward to other new depth courses that will be offered in the spring of 2012. Because of the generosity of donors, we have been able to improve the support for graduate student travel to conferences and we have begun a graduate-student-run speaker series for the department. We are grateful to those who have made donations that have enabled us to pursue these initiatives this year. We, of course, hope to be able to continue these in the coming year.

As we approach the holidays, I find myself thinking about the department and generating my “wish list” for the department. Of course, I wish for the typical things. For example, I wish for successful recruitment of exciting faculty and outstanding graduate students. I wish for the department to maintain its strong national ranking. I wish for all our undergraduates who approach graduation to pursue personally satisfying and financially rewarding post graduation plans. But this year, I find myself also wishing for bricks and mortar! This may, at first, seem like a strange wish but one only has to walk the halls of Brogden to understand it.

Our building, which opened its doors in 1964, is showing its age. The building is in a dilapidated state and its condition continues to decline as the months and years go by. Supporting this observation, central campus has determined that Brogden cannot be improved through renovation and it has been slated for demolition in the campus long term building plans. Brodgen is not equipped to support modern psychological science – our science has changed a great deal since the building was designed. Perhaps more distressing than the state of disrepair and the outdated nature of the facilities, the building was not designed to be student friendly. There are no common spaces where students can gather to study or to relax between classes. Where do students hang out? Have a look at the picture on the left – they hang out in the lobby outside the lecture halls on the first floor of the building. Most students sit on the concrete floors only to be displaced when classes end and hundreds of students exit the lecture halls to leave the building. In the winter, it’s especially bad when people track in snow on their boots and the floor is wet and there is no place for students to sit. Personally, I find this image disturbing. I’m sure many of you recall sitting on the floor of the lobby wishing that there were spaces where you could hang out in the Psychology Building.

(continued on page 3)
Along with the pride and prestige that we enjoy as a Top-5 psychology department come responsibilities to the field. Of course, many of our faculty help to govern and guide contemporary scientific psychology by, for example, holding leadership positions in professional societies, editing scholarly journals, and contributing to peer review of research funding from government and foundations. Additionally, as a department, we have a responsibility to help shape the future of academic psychology. In this regard, we are actively seeking to address the achievement gap, as documented in a 2006 report\(^1\) that found “disquieting and encouraging trends” in the period from 1989 – 2003: Whereas at “lower levels of the pipeline” there was a steady rise in the percentage (to nearly 25%) in minority psychology students receiving the bachelor’s degree, “troubling trends” at “higher levels of the pipeline” included a stalling, from 1999 onwards, of growth in the number of African American and Hispanic/Latino(a) students entering PhD programs, as well as in the number of minority students receiving the PhD in Psychology. One response of the Department of Psychology, led by Professor Brad Postle, has been to reanimate the Psychology Research Experience Program (PREP), a summer research opportunity program (SROP) that provides intensive mentoring and experience in scientific research and in professional development to undergraduates from historically underrepresented populations – racial and ethnic minorities, low-income, and first generation college students.

PREP had a successful run from 2000-2005, enrolling 67 participants in labs representing each of the five broadly defined areas of research in the department. Subsequent follow-up indicates that nearly 50% of these PREP alumni went on to enroll in Psychology PhD programs, and another 35% in other post-baccalaureate programs (e.g., psychology masters programs, medicine, and law). With the retirement of PREP Director and long-time undergraduate advisor Arlene Davenport, funding for the program lapsed and it became inactive. More recently, the Department has formed a Committee on Climate and Diversity (see its full report at [http://psych.wisc.edu/climate](http://psych.wisc.edu/climate)), and this committee made renewing PREP a priority. In 2010, funding was secured from the National Science Foundation’s “Research Experience for Undergraduates” (REU) mechanism, and in June of 2011 a new crop of “PREPsters” was welcomed to Madison.

The PREP class of 2011, selected from an applicant pool of over 200, brought with it a rich diversity of geographical and educational experience, ranging from small Midwestern liberal arts colleges (Alverno College in Milwaukee, Carleton College in Minnesota) to private research-intensive universities (NYU) to large public universities (San Diego State University) to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (North Carolina A&T). Their PREP research experiences were equally diverse, ranging from studies of Autism Spectrum Disorders to neural responses to negative odors to ultrasonic vocalization in mice. (All research projects are detailed in The PREP Journal, viewable at the “Student Research” link from [http://psych.wisc.edu/PREP](http://psych.wisc.edu/PREP).) And it’s not just a platitude to say that PREP has also yielded direct benefits for the Department of Psychology. Because effective mentoring is central to the success of any SROP, we partnered with the Wisconsin Program for Scientific Teaching to adapt its highly successful mentor training program, originally designed for the biological sciences, for psychology. This enabled us to hold a weekly mentor training workshop, running in parallel to PREP, that was attended by each of the graduate students who was the day-to-day mentor of a PREP undergrad. Thus, PREP has also created a valuable professional development opportunity for our graduate students.

Although winter is upon us, work is already underway to mount a successful PREP for the summer of 2012!

We would like nothing more than to have a building that would be welcoming to our students and would provide them with wonderful places to meet and study. My desire for this type of warm and welcoming space for students was fueled recently when I took a tour of the newly renovated Education Building. The building is beautiful and a great deal of care and attention went into creating spaces for students to gather (e.g., cozy fireplace, comfortable seating for small gatherings, tables for studying). And, it was evident that students were both taking good advantage of the space and enjoying it (photo inset). They really felt like they belonged and had a place that was designed for them.

My holiday wish is to create this type of warm and welcoming space for our extraordinary students. Unfortunately, this wish can only be realized with a new building. We are working hard to make this wish a reality and will continue to push for the university to move plans forward for a new home for Psychology. We have been told that we will need to raise at least half of the money needed to renovate an existing building or build an entirely new building. Until the time when we can raise sufficient funds, my fondest holiday wish will be unfulfilled – hence my wish for bricks and mortar. Until then, I’ll be dreaming of a new building.
My main research interest centers on the cognitive functions of language. Apart from being used to communicate our ideas, how does speaking a language shape those ideas in the first place? What sorts of concepts might be “unthinkable” if we didn’t have the capacity for language, and to what extent is the ability to categorize, remember, and perceive shaped by its acquisition and use?

The ultimate question my research aims to answer is: to what extent have the unique aspects of human cognition and perception been enabled through the evolution of language?

Because we all grow up speaking at least one language, it is difficult to know what the unique contribution of language is to our cognitive skill set. One way of getting around this lack of a natural “alinguistic” control group is by attempting to up- or down-regulate language and observe the consequence of this manipulation on performance on a given cognitive or perceptual task.

Consider the classic story of Eskimos having lots of words for snow, the inference being that knowing the extra words changes not only how one communicates, but how one “thinks.” If the only evidence for this difference in “thought” is a difference in vocabulary, the logic becomes circular (how do we know that Eskimos think differently about snow? Well, just look at all the snow-words they have!). The critical experiment then, is to train two groups on the same category distinction, providing each with equal learning experiences, manipulating the availability of verbal category labels. Indeed, when we did this, the group that was learning the novel categories along with labels learned the distinction much quicker.

I subsequently applied the same approach to progressively more basic perceptual tasks in each case measuring the effect of verbal manipulations on performance on putatively nonverbal tasks such as visual discrimination and visual search. Surprisingly, verbal labels affected performance on even the most basic visual tasks such as simple detection (did you just see something?) Essentially, for several seconds after hearing a word like “chair” subjects are better “chair detectors” compared to trials on which they do not actually hear the word. In more recent work I’ve used neural stimulation techniques such as transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) and transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to affect linguistic processing more directly, finding again that performance on basic perceptual tasks was affected and participants displayed categorization impairments similar to a group of aphasic patients we tested.

In a separate line of research, my collaborator Rick Dale and I, have examined how socio-demographic factors such as the number of people who speak a language, correlate with structural aspects of the language. In an analysis of over 2,000 languages we found that “small” languages are considerably more morphologically complex than languages spoken more widely. As a language spreads and is learned by a more heterogeneous population, it simplifies, likely because adult learners of the language are poor at learning complex morphologies. This work highlights the close, organic, interplay between language structure and the cognitive constraints and communicative needs of its speakers.
While the Psychology Department is well known for training its graduate students as rigorous psychological scientists, many of our students also discover a passion for teaching. Leah Zinner (Ph.D., ’07), an assistant professor at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia, is their most recent recipient of the Lu Thomasson Garrett Award for Meritorious Teaching.

While at UW, Leah served as a teaching assistant (TA) for 6 different classes, Introduction to Psychology, Psychological Statistics, Experimental Psychology, Human Sexuality, Personality Psychology, and Psychology of Human Emotions. As time went on, Leah found herself gravitating toward more teaching opportunities. Zinner explains, “I felt it was extremely rewarding and the feedback was more immediate, as compared to research. And I loved being able to share the parts of psychology that I loved – for example, helping students understand how to evaluate a claim in the media, or sharing a fascinating or surprising research finding.”

Her positive experiences as a TA led Zinner to explore a career emphasizing teaching over research. She lobbied to teach Social Psychology the summer before she would defend her dissertation and the experience, while extremely challenging, confirmed her desire to pursue a teaching career.

Zinner credits her sound training in research as essential building blocks to her teaching efforts. “I spend quite a bit of time helping students develop their own research projects, and being a TA for Experimental Psychology at UW, a course where students have to formulate and conduct their own research project, helped prepare me for this task.”

Zinner’s dedication to teaching the foundations of psychological science at Oglethorpe has sparked an interest in research to a new generation of students through her research mentorship. With her support, several have earned student awards at regional conferences such as the Georgia Psychological Association and the Southeastern Psychological Association.

On October 6, the Psychology Department hosted its first-ever road show, holding it in Chicago, home to many Wisconsin alumni. The reception was held at Carmichael’s Steak House and was sponsored by Advocay Board member Dave Weiner (’54). The featured speaker was Professor Lyn Abramson, internationally renowned depression researcher and beloved teacher of countless undergraduates and graduate students over the years. Speaking on the topic “Understanding, Treating, and Preventing Depression: Latest Developments and Future Directions,” she provided a fascinating look at her own pathway through depression research, as well as exciting advances in the field.
While research collaboration is often the norm in our pursuit of psychological science, for many, teaching our classes is an individual pursuit. Jenny Saffran and Melanie Jones, who both teach a large lecture course focusing on child development (Psych 560), hatched a plan to link the students in Saffran’s discussion sections of her child development course to Jones’ students in her field experience class (Psych 412).

For years the two had been brainstorming ways to collaborate in their teaching of this course, but more importantly, Jones states, “we were interested in finding ways for students to learn from one another and help each other connect their in-class learning to their everyday experiences.” Saffran was already tapping into the talents of our advanced undergraduates by providing them with the opportunity to teach their peers in optional discussion sections for her class. While Jones was planning to teach her field experience (internship) course with an emphasis on child development. “Creating a collaboration between all of these groups of students seemed like the logical next step.”

Students enrolled in Psych 412 worked in settings ranging from early child care to working with at-risk populations such as children with disabilities. Each week students selected research articles relating to their work and engaged in discussions about how they could utilize such research in their placement sites as well as their weekly online blogs for students enrolled in the Psych 560 discussion sections, who rotated responding to the blogs each week.

To spark conversation, the bloggers always ended their blogs with several questions for their readers. Saffran adds, "What I most appreciated about the class blog was the interaction it spurred. The students who wrote the weekly posts always provided insights - often linked to current events or popular culture - that I found fascinating. And the comments written by the students were very interesting; they often referred back to personal experiences, and used those to interpret themes from the class. I learned a great deal as an instructor from the experience."

Erin Casey, who was both a Psych 560 Teaching Fellow and in the Psych 412 class, had the unique opportunity to see the impact of the cross-classroom collaborations first-hand, "I was surprised to see the amount of new ideas and creative directions in students' responses to the blogs. It was clear to me, however, after reading the responses, that the learning was going both ways. The Psych 412 students were gaining just as much from reading blog responses, as the Psych 560 students were from reading and responding to the blogs themselves. As a teaching fellow, I was sure to share this insight with my students, something that I hope helped validate their intellectual prowess and encourage them to continue their inquisitive thinking."

Evan Pagel summarizes his experience, “There’s much to be said about the knowledge gained and skills acquired through classroom learning, but arguably even more can be said about interactive, online learning communities such as the one fostered through the child development blog constructed for Psych 560. The writing process has a way of opening up doors you never would have known existed, and it was this component fused with the initiation of stimulating discussion that made the experience of contributing to the blog that much more beneficial to me. You come to realize that there are others that are just as passionate about the development of our youth as you are, and through reading and responding to the posts of your fellow students you gain a richer understanding of the concept that you may not have been introduced to otherwise."
Health is a complex phenomenon—it is more than just the absence of disease, but also encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being, according to the World Health Organization. My research converges with this comprehensive description— I am interested in the mechanisms through which social, psychological, and biological factors relate in the context of health and well-being. I am a fourth-year graduate student in the Biology of Brain and Behavior area group, mentored by Carol Ryff and Chris Coe. I study how socioeconomic and psychological factors come together in predicting inflammation, an important biological process involved in the development and progression of many chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and type II diabetes.

We address these questions using data from a national, longitudinal study of adults known as MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.: http://midus.wisc.edu). These adults completed thorough survey assessments of their social and psychological functioning and mental and physical health twice over a 10-year period. Many participants also completed a two-day clinic visit where objective biological and neuroscience assessments were obtained.

It is well established that individuals who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have higher rates of disease and mortality compared to individuals with higher incomes, more education, and/or more prestigious jobs. This relationship is relatively linear, meaning that, on average, you have better health than individuals below you on the socioeconomic hierarchy and worse health than those with a higher status. This is referred to as a socioeconomic gradient in health. However, not everyone who is disadvantaged experiences poor health, and some of my work aims to investigate factors that promote resilience and have health protective benefits, especially to people at risk because of their low socioeconomic status.

For example, we found that individuals with a high school education or less who also had high psychological well-being (including having a sense of purpose and meaning in life or having positive social relationships) had comparable levels of inflammation to individuals with college degree. In other words, psychological well-being reduced the socioeconomic gradient in inflammation and is protective especially for individuals with low socioeconomic status.

Another line of work has looked at factors that may be especially detrimental to the health of disadvantaged individuals. Anger is an especially relevant emotion for those who experience social inequalities, and individuals with less education who experience and express anger frequently experience the worst inflammatory profiles. Together, these findings highlight how important psychological influences are for health as well as how psychological factors play an important role in reducing or exacerbating well-established risk factors for poor health.

Congratulations to our recent award winning students! Daniel Bradford & Kathryn Hefner were honored by the Society for Psychophysiological Research for their outstanding research posters; Kathryn also earned a prestigious NRSA fellowship; Kristin Javaras was received the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Dissertation Grant; and Christine Moberg was selected for an APA Dissertation Award.
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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