

**FRIDAY,
MAY 22, 2026**

4 - 6 p.m.



**Educational Leadership
Graduation Celebration &
Garbing Ceremony Program**

**Honoring the Accomplishments of the
2026 Educational Leadership Graduates**

School of Education



UNIVERSITY OF
St. Thomas

The School of Education
congratulates all EDLD candidates
who are graduating this spring.

Dean's Welcome

Dear Education Leadership Graduates,

We are so proud of you.

Each of you has reached this milestone through commitment, perseverance, and a deep sense of purpose. It has been an honor to walk alongside you during this part of your journey.

As you move forward, you will carry your work into many different spaces. Some of you will lead within schools and systems. Others will bring your learning into new sectors and communities. Wherever your path leads, I hope you carry with you a clear sense of who you are called to be and how you are called to serve. You are prepared not only to navigate complexity, but to help shape systems that are more just, more responsive, and more human-centered for all.

The faculty, staff, alumni, and student community of the School of Education extend heartfelt congratulations to all doctoral graduates this spring. You brought deep expertise, dedication, and passion to your programs and dissertations, and we commend the hard work and vision that brought you to this milestone.

We celebrate you today—and look forward to the impact you will make tomorrow.

We wish you all the best.



Dr. Amy F. Smith, Dean

Order of Service

- 4 p.m. Gather and enjoy light refreshments
- 4:15 p.m. Welcome, Program, and Presentation of Candidates
EdS, Leadership in Student Affairs MA, Education Leadership MA, EdD
- 5:35 p.m. Closing remarks
- 5:35- 6 p.m. Continue enjoying refreshments while commemorating the occasion with photo opportunities

We asked our doctoral candidates to provide a short description
of themselves and their dissertations.
They reflect these students' hard work, significant
accomplishments, and bright futures.

PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION CANDIDATES

Nouf Alashreef

I received my MA degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. I worked as an English Language teacher in both private and public schools for 11 years. I worked as a language instructor at a private college for two years. My research interests include educational technology, instructional design, language learning pedagogy, language teachers' professional development, virtual reality, AI in education, and gamification.

Doctoral Dissertation: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of K-12 Teachers' Perceptions of Virtual Reality Integration with English Language Learners

This mixed-methods case study examined K-12 language teachers' perceptions of integrating immersive virtual reality (VR) into their instruction through two frameworks: the Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Using a case study approach, I summarized the findings from a survey of 168 teachers and interviews with 12 teachers, presenting them in four major categories: challenges, opportunities, motivations, and recommendations. Head-mounted devices (HMDs) of VR posed several challenges related to hardware, students, costs, time, content, and assessment. HMDs also provided opportunities for language enrichment, personalization, concept simplification, peer collaboration, and integration with artificial intelligence (AI). Furthermore, participants were motivated by students' achievements and enjoyment, reduced workload, and innovative technology. Finally, teachers recommended selecting appropriate hardware and software, familiarizing themselves with VR, aligning VR with learning goals, engaging in professional development, setting clear rules and expectations for learners, and conducting pilot tests before the actual VR implementation.

Courtney Cavellier

Dissertation Approved with Honors

This fall, I will begin my 30th year in education. Over these decades, I worked in public and independent schools; in boarding schools; in elementary, middle, and high schools; and in higher education. It has been a wild and rewarding career. I have been a tutor, an afterschool teacher, an English teacher, a reading specialist, a learning specialist, an administrator, a school board member, and a professor. Now, I am teaching pre-service teachers in the School of Education at North Dakota State University. My work is grounded in the lessons I have learned from my students over and over again: we are humans first, and community and connection matter most in teaching. Before I studied at the University of St. Thomas, I earned a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Wesleyan University and a master's degree in education focused on human development and psychology from Harvard University. I want to thank my professors at the University of St. Thomas, especially my dissertation chair Dr. Wharton-Beck and my committee members Dr. Bongila and Dr. French. I am ever grateful to my mentors, my mother Christine, my father Kerry, my husband Matt, and our sons Peter and Joseph.

Doctoral Dissertation: Hard Work and Heart Work: The Experiences of Women in School Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, school leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and its multiyear disruption to schools. This phenomenology examined the experiences of women in K-12 school leadership positions during the pandemic in five Midwestern states. Fourteen women across school types and settings participated. Data collection included interviews, photo elicitation, and artifact collection. Participants experienced challenges in both school leadership and their personal lives. The findings include leadership situated in multilayered complexity and individual context, crisis and continuity leadership, responsibility to and for others, and well-being and self-care. The study also examined the post-COVID professional decisions participants made (e.g., staying in, leaving, or adjusting their leadership roles). COVID-19 was not a direct factor in their decisions, but it led to

reflection. Findings were analyzed using Smith and Riley's (2012) critical attributes for crisis leadership and a framework of role theories. Participants demonstrated these attributes. The attributes did not address two qualities that the findings suggest are critical: compassion and leader well-being. Updated post-COVID-19 models of crisis leadership are warranted. The role theory framework included strain, conflict, enhancement, and enrichment (Goode, 1960; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Marks, 1977; Merton, 1957; Sieber, 1974). Participants held multiple roles and experienced strain, conflict, enhancement, and enrichment. These dynamics coexisted: leaders experienced the challenges of strain and conflict alongside the benefits of enhancement and enrichment. Still, blurred boundaries between professional and personal lives complicated self-care. Recommendations include attention to leader well-being, updated crisis planning, continued hiring of women into leadership, and analysis of post-COVID leader attrition and retention.

Katia Colón-LaCroix

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I am a proud Puerto Rican in the diaspora, born and raised in Minneapolis. For nearly three decades, I have worked alongside many colleagues and friends to advance educational equity and college access, centering first-generation college students of color. My work spans roles as a youth worker, K-12 teacher and administrator, and higher education professional in Newark, Philadelphia, and the Twin Cities. I currently work as a College Persistence Counselor at Dougherty Family College, and spend my time with my family, animals, and books.

Doctoral Dissertation: Refocusing the Lens:

A Grounded Theory of Success and Support for and by First-Generation College Students of Color

This qualitative, constructivist grounded theory study explored two research questions: 1) How do first-generation college students of color (FGCSOC) define college success? and 2) What supports and structures do FGCSOC believe are paramount in reaching these measures? Participants included 11 students attending three universities in the Midwest United States who represented a diverse range of social identities. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, student-created visual representations, and a focus group. I analyzed interview, visual, and focus group data using Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory methodology through iterative coding and constant comparison. Analysis identified five major themes across the research questions. For Research Question 1, themes included agents of community impact, reappropriation of success measures, and belief in the transformative power of higher education. For Research Question 2, themes included self as a driver of success and the fabric of student success. Findings culminated in a collaboratively developed emerging theory of support and success for FGCSOC, illustrated by a visual model outlining essential elements of support and five guiding principles for enacting them. I analyzed and interpreted the findings through the critical frameworks of Intersectionality and Funds of Knowledge. This study offers insights and recommendations for understanding and supporting the success of first-generation college students of color in higher education.

Norman E. Ferguson, Jr.

I currently serve as the Director of Veterans & Military-Connected Students Services at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. I am a US Army Veteran and have been serving veterans, on both the career and education sides, for over 10 years. I have degrees from the University of Alabama at Birmingham as well as the University of Georgia. My work with veterans includes such programs as an annual PTSD Awareness Conference, highlighting trauma and the effects it can have on others as well as ways to deal with this issue, and an annual Veterans Ball that honors veterans and recognizes the community who supports them.

Doctoral Dissertation: ATTENTION! Transitioning from Boot Camp to College: First Year Experience of Veterans Entering Higher Education

This study examined the lives of student veterans during their first full academic year in higher education, after they had left the military. Using a case study approach, this research project followed nine student veterans as they navigated the Fall and Spring semesters at a university to learn how they approached the different

challenges faced by each. Enlistment, fraternization, traversing, conquering, and awareness emerged through data analysis. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Theory of Belonging were used to assess these experiences, looking into how they maintained their endurance and dedication to finishing the year. As a result of these experiences, certain recommendations were constructed to address the challenges and aid in future lives of student veterans.

Alicia Brae Fleming Hamilton

I am an Assistant Professor in Communication Sciences and Disorders at SCSU. For the past 15 years, I have worked as a bilingual Spanish–English speech language pathologist. I earned my bachelor's degree from Marquette University and my master's degree in Speech Language Hearing Sciences with a bilingual certificate from ASU. Earning my doctoral degree has been a personal and professional goal, and I am grateful to reach this milestone. My professional interests focus on pediatric populations, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and assessment and intervention practices that honor the linguistic and cultural strengths of multilingual families. I am passionate about preparing future speech language pathologists and committed to advocacy for individuals with disabilities, including addressing ableism and racism within special education. I authored the reflective workbook *Exploring Cultural Responsiveness: Guided Scenarios for Communication Sciences and Disorders Professionals*. I view learning and reflection as essential to effective practice and remain dedicated to lifelong growth. This journey has expanded, challenged, exhausted, and inspired me. When impatience and perfectionism surface, I reflect on this poem: “We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders... We are prophets of a future not our own” (Bishop Ken Untener).

Doctoral Dissertation: *Sembrando Arbolitos* (Planting Little Trees): A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Latino Immigrant Parenting and Advocacy in Early Childhood Special Education During Federal Occupation

Latino children represent a fast-growing group in Minnesota's early childhood landscape, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in early childhood education and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022; Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). This disparity raises critical concerns for Latino families given the well-documented benefits of early intervention for children's academic, social-emotional, and long-term life outcomes (Bakken et al., 2017; García et al., 2021; Magnuson & Duncan, 2016). Despite Minnesota's robust early intervention infrastructure, many Latino immigrant families do not access ECSE, prompting questions about the accessibility and responsiveness of these systems. This constructivist grounded theory study examined the lived experiences of urban, Spanish-speaking, Latino immigrant families in Minnesota as they navigated ECSE systems during a period of heightened immigration enforcement and federal occupation. Through individual interviews and a focus group, participants and the researcher co-constructed the theory, *Sembrando Arbolitos*. The theory conceptualizes family advocacy as a dynamic social process rooted in survival, resistance, and humanization, sustained by faith and shaped by the intersection of immigration status, language, race, and disability. Findings highlight how families mobilize cultural wealth to navigate hostile systems while maintaining a long-term, future-oriented vision for their children. This study contributes to early childhood and special education scholarship by centering marginalized family voices and emphasizing the necessity of designing ECSE services that acknowledge intersectional identities, structural inequities, and sources of cultural wealth.

Bojan Hoover

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I have been an active music educator, educational leader, composer, and performing musician for the past 15 years. Currently, I teach fifth grade band in Independent School District #196 and serve as an adjunct music instructor at Inver Hills Community College and the University of St. Thomas. In addition to my teaching responsibilities in the Rosemount, Apple Valley, Eagan school district, I also serve as the performing arts

liaison for district staff and administrators. Previous to my current role in the district, I taught band at Rosemount High School in Rosemount, Minnesota, for 11 years. One of my primary goals as a music educator is to cultivate an inclusive learning environment where every student feels a strong sense of belonging—reflected in the 100% band participation rates at many of the schools I serve. I hold bachelor’s degrees in music education and music performance from the University of Minnesota and a master’s degree in music composition from Pulse College in Dublin, Ireland. I am extremely grateful to the many professors I had the privilege of learning from while pursuing my Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of St. Thomas.

**Doctoral Dissertation: The Segregated Marching Arts:
Finding Commonality and Distinction Between Marching Band Traditions**

The marching arts hold a unique and favorable place in America’s music education and entertainment system. Through a rise in popularity over the past century, marching bands and their counterparts have evolved to look and sound very different based on the style that they choose to use. Within the United States, two of the most popular styles that marching arts ensembles utilize is HBCU-style and corps-style. Using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory and Social Constructivism, this study asks: how do HBCU-style participants view corps-style traditions and techniques and vice versa; how do marching band performers in the United States who have participated in both HBCU-style and corps-style traditions compare the two experiences; and how do marching band performers who participate in both HBCU-style and corps-style ensembles transition between the two social environments? Data was collected using multiple case study methodology, which included survey data gathered from HBCU-style and corps-style participants, interviews with participants who had experiences using both styles, and through in-person and online observations. Qualitative research from this study found tension from perceived hierarchies between the styles and uncovered four themes from participants who had experienced both styles: introductions, traditions, motivations, and connections. Findings from this study have implications for marching arts educators, participants, and organizations. Recommendations include increasing exposure to both styles within teaching training programs, viewing performances from styles that are less familiar to participants, and including all ensembles to participate in competitions and festivals with appropriate procedures to evaluate all styles fairly.

Jennifer L. Johnson

Dissertation Approved with Honors

My favorite lessons have come from the children I’ve taught. For more than 20 years, my educational experience has taken shape through roles in Early Childhood Family Education, Early Childhood Special Education, the kindergarten classroom, and mentoring. Each experience has deepened my belief that truly listening to students is at the heart of meaningful teaching and learning. I currently serve as an early childhood literacy coach, partnering with districts to strengthen early learning systems and advance the goal of every child reading at grade level, every year. I am especially passionate about working alongside teams to build capacity, foster collaboration, and center student voice in ways that support what schools cannot do alone. My graduate work at the University of St. Thomas, along with a certificate in Leadership for Early Childhood and Family Policy through the University of Kentucky, has challenged and refined my thinking. I remain grounded in gratitude for the students, colleagues, and mentors who continue to shape my journey.

**Doctoral Dissertation: “Want Play Together?”:
Multilingual Preschoolers’ Oral Language, Agency, and Identity in Early Childhood Classrooms Schools**

Language in the early childhood years shapes children’s communication, identity, and sense of belonging within classroom communities. Multilingual preschoolers’ oral language development is inseparable from cultural identity. Despite extensive research on bilingualism and positive cognitive outcomes, few studies center multilingual preschoolers’ own perspectives on how classroom contexts influence their linguistic identities and participation. This qualitative case study examined the affective, behavioral, and cognitive factors that shape

multilingual preschoolers' oral language development and home cultural connections used in early childhood classrooms. Using classroom observations, interviews, and child-centered photo-elicitation conversations, preschool student voice was prioritized to understand how children experience and use language in school settings. Findings revealed multilingual preschoolers actively negotiated agency and identity through play, peer interactions, and flexible language practices. Children used translanguaging, gestures, and strategic silence as meaningful communicative tools, as the students lacked shared language partners. Linguistically affirming environments increased children's verbal risk-taking, engagement, and confidence. In contrast, English-dominant practices limited participation and subtly positioned home languages as peripheral. These findings position multilingual preschoolers as active language agents rather than passive learners. Implications call for early childhood practices intentionally designed across affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains: fostering emotional safety, identity affirmation, and belonging (affective); expanding peer interaction, play-based language opportunities, and modeling (behavioral); and nurturing strategic language use, metacognition, and agency (cognitive). When these braided dimensions are aligned, multilingual oral language development becomes not simply a literacy outcome, but a holistic process grounded in voice, participation, and identity.

Alisa J. Lamont

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I am a higher education practitioner and scholar whose work centers on philanthropy, equity, and meaningful engagement. I currently serve as Associate Director of Donor Relations at the University of St. Thomas, where I partner with university leadership to design thoughtful, high-touch experiences that honor donors and deepen their connection to the institution's mission. My academic and professional journey reflects a deep commitment to understanding how generosity is shaped by culture, identity, and lived experience. Prior to my EdD, I earned an MS in Fundraising Management from Columbia University and a BA in Economics and German Language and Literature from Carleton College. Looking ahead, I plan to build on my research through collaboration with scholars in the field, including Dr. Jean-Pierre Bongila, who served as my dissertation chair. I deeply respect and admire his scholarly contributions, and I am honored to continue this work alongside him as a colleague. I also look forward to teaching, writing, and contributing to the field by elevating diverse perspectives on giving. I am deeply grateful for the love and support of my family, dissertation committee, School of Education faculty, Cohort 6 classmates, and St. Thomas colleagues.

Doctoral Dissertation: The Color of Money:

How Historically Excluded Alumni Perceive and Participate in Philanthropy at Catholic Universities

Higher education institutions have long assumed that cultivating alumni philanthropy begins with them—that giving must be developed, solicited, and encouraged through institutional strategy. This study invites a different perspective. This qualitative multiple case study interviewed 12 alumni of color from four Catholic universities to examine how they perceive and make sense of philanthropy at their alma maters. Findings illuminate how young alumni of color are already practicing philanthropy—through time, service, testimony, and relational engagement—shaped by family backgrounds, cultural traditions, and religious practices long before any institution played a role. What institutions determined was not whether these alumni would give, but whether that generosity would flow back toward them. Analysis revealed four themes: Perceptions of Philanthropy; Foundations of Philanthropy: Family, Faith, and Community; Institutional Experiences Shaping Philanthropic Orientation; and Institutional Engagement as Showing up and Giving Back. Interpreted through Bourdieu's (1986) Theory of Cultural Capital, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model, and the Five Ts of Philanthropy, the findings extend Yosso's framework beyond the classroom: just as students of color bring rich cultural assets to their institutions, alumni of color bring deep philanthropic beliefs and behaviors to their alma maters. The philanthropic potential of historically excluded alumni is already present. What remains is the institutional responsibility to recognize it.

Joel John Navam

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I grew up attending international schools in India and South Korea before moving to the U.S. for my higher education journey. After exploring a career in marketing and sales, I felt a calling to work with college students and began my career in student affairs. The Leadership in Student Affairs Master of Arts program influenced my approach, values, and passion for student advocacy in higher education. I have worked at the University of St. Thomas and the University of Minnesota in a variety of roles since 2018. Currently, I serve as a Scholar Advisor at Wallin Education Partners, supporting two-year college students by fostering motivation, effective decision-making, and career exploration through one-on-one sessions. I feel honored to have completed my Doctor of Education at the University of St. Thomas. This milestone marks a significant culmination of my career in higher education, which has had the most profound impact on my life so far. It is thrilling to integrate academic theory with student affairs practice—especially as I observe tangible ways my research topic surfaces in student interactions. I'm grateful to my dissertation chair, committee members, and faculty who championed my success throughout this incredible five-year journey!

Doctoral Dissertation: What Two-Year College Student Persistence Says About Effective Academic Advising Approaches: A Grounded Theory Study

This qualitative, grounded theory study examined two-year college students' perceptions of academic advising approaches that positively impacted persistence from their first to second year in higher education. Individual interview participants included 12 students who completed their first year at six different public two-year institutions in 2022, 2023, and 2024. Focus group participants included a new group of seven students who completed their first year at five different public two-year institutions in 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. I used theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) by leveraging a thematic analysis to build an emerging theory through individual interviews. Then, I presented this emerging theory to focus group participants before refining it toward a final theoretical model. This final theoretical model culminated in the Relational Advising for Student Agency (RASA) model, an academic advising approach for two-year college students during their first year. I interpreted the findings using Bandura's (1977a) Theory of Self-Efficacy and Bloom et al.'s (2008) Appreciative Advising framework. This study provides recommendations for higher education professionals—specifically academic advisors, faculty, and staff—as well as external partner organizations.

Stephanie Nordstog

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I am profoundly grateful for the support and encouragement of my husband, mother, and family. Thank you for believing in me, keeping me grounded, and loving me through this process. I also deeply appreciate Dr. Aura Wharton-Beck, my dissertation chair, and my committee, Drs. Candace Chou, Latanya Daniels, and Hugh Smeltekop, as well as Dr. Sarah Noonan, for their insights, support, and encouragement. I am equally thankful for the wider network of faculty, classmates, and friends who broadened my perspectives and challenged me to think more critically; lead more courageously; and grow as a scholar, educator, and leader. I have more than 20 years of experience across K-12 education, higher education, and law, with a focus on inclusive practices, program improvement, and systems change. My background includes teaching, school and district leadership, and adjunct faculty roles. I hold an MA, JD, Principal and Superintendent licenses, Learning Technology Leadership & Innovation certificate, and now an EdD in Educational Leadership. I currently work at Normandale Community College coordinating an inclusive higher education credential program and serve as adjunct faculty at Augsburg University and the University of St. Thomas.

Doctoral Dissertation: Permission to Practice: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of Law Student Perceptions of Virtual Reality to Learn DEI Skills

This study examined law students' experiences with virtual reality (VR) as a modality for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training to understand how immersive technology shapes learning, perception, and real-world

application of anti-bias concepts. As institutions increasingly adopt VR for professional education, limited empirical research examined how learners experience VR-based DEI training over time or how learning transfers beyond the simulation environment. This mixed methods study explored law students' perceptions of VR as a DEI learning tool, the processes through which learning occurs, and the extent to which learning transfers across academic, professional, and personal contexts. The study drew on the Technology Acceptance Model, adult learning theory, critical consciousness, and psychological safety to frame analysis and interpretation. Using a convergent mixed methods design, the study collected data before and after 19 law students completed two VR-based DEI modules that simulated scenarios involving bias, microaggressions, and skills to intervene in challenging situations. Pre- and post-participation surveys measuring perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude toward use, and behavioral intention to adopt VR for DEI learning provided quantitative data. The study also collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and follow-up reflections to capture participants' interpretations, emotional responses, and reported enactment of learning over time. Findings demonstrated strong acceptance of VR as an engaging and valuable DEI learning modality. Participants reported heightened awareness of bias, increased confidence in issue spotting, and sustained recall of emotionally salient moments from the simulations. Experiential design features such as realism, embodied perspective, and private practice opportunities supported learning. However, participants enacted learning unevenly in real-world situations, with contextual constraints, relational risk, and perceptions of psychological safety shaping decisions to intervene. These findings implied that VR-based DEI training can foster meaningful cognitive and affective learning when paired with intentional curriculum design and supportive organizational structures to advance equity-focused learning outcomes.

David A. Richardson

I am a choral conductor, educator, singer, and keyboardist from the Charleston Tri-County area (South Carolina). I have taught in Dorchester School District Two for the past 17 years, serving at Fort Dorchester High School, Rollings Middle School of the Arts, and spending the last nine years at Summerville High School. As a conductor, I have conducted numerous county and regional honor choirs throughout the Carolinas and Georgia. In the summer of 2022, I made my Carnegie Hall conducting debut conducting David Brunner's *I Am in Need of Music*. I also served as president of the South Carolina Music Educators Association Choral Division. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education (Voice) from Charleston Southern University, a Master of Music in Choral and Early Childhood Music Education from Kent State University, and a Doctor of Education in Leadership and Learning with a Music Education concentration from the University of St. Thomas.

Doctoral Dissertation: The Desire to Exist and Thrive: Lived Experiences of Black Doctoral Music Education Graduates in Higher Education

This phenomenological study was an examination of the lived experiences of Black graduates who completed doctoral degrees in music education at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the United States. Despite ongoing discourse on equity, Black doctoral students in music education remain underrepresented and navigate environments shaped by structural Whiteness, Western Eurocentric curricula, and limited culturally responsive mentorship. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Theory, this study centered the voices of six Black doctoral graduates across multiple generations, each holding a PhD, EdD, or D.M.A. in music education. Data collection included in-depth interviews, a focus group, and survey responses, which were analyzed thematically. Five themes emerged: (a) structural Whiteness in faculty representation and mentorship; (b) racialized experiences, including microaggressions, tokenism, and isolation; (c) self-agency as a mechanism for persistence; (d) the dominance of Western Eurocentric curriculum and marginalization of Black musical traditions; and (e) personal and professional outcomes of degree completion. Findings indicated that participants encountered systemic barriers, including limited mentorship and exclusionary curricula, yet demonstrated resilience through peer networks, external mentorship, and cultural grounding. Participants reported transformative outcomes such as strengthened scholarly identity, leadership development, and expanded career

opportunities, alongside a commitment to mentoring future Black music educators. These findings highlight the need for culturally sustaining pedagogy, racially conscious mentorship, and increased representation in doctoral music education. This study contributes to limited scholarship and offers implications for program reform in recruitment, curriculum, faculty development, and institutional policy.

Jessica Lynn Ricker

I have taught elementary and middle school music since 2008, with experience in both Tennessee and Kentucky. I currently teach preschool through fifth-grade music and direct an auditioned choir of fourth- and fifth-grade students who perform throughout the school year in both school and community settings. I also direct and often write musical theater productions for every grade level, Kindergarten through fifth grade; all grade levels perform yearly at the school, while one grade presents their musical at a local performing arts center. I am proud to call the mountains of East Tennessee home and to be the first person in my family to earn a Doctor of Education degree. Completing this journey fulfills a long-held goal, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity. I plan to remain in elementary music education while also pursuing future work at the post-secondary level, where I hope to use what I have learned to help ensure all students' voices are heard. I am indebted to my husband, Trey, whose unwavering support made this possible. I also extend sincere thanks to my dissertation committee—Dr. Orzolek, Dr. Sommers, and Dr. Wharton-Beck—for their guidance. Finally, I will always value the friendships formed within my cohort, which I know will endure well beyond this experience.

Doctoral Dissertation:

The Perceptions of Social and Emotional Intelligence in School-Aged Children: A Case Study

This instrumental case study examined the perceived benefits of group singing on the social and emotional intelligence of school-aged children. Guided by a Constructivist/Interpretivist paradigm, the study explored how participation in community children's choirs supported the development of social and emotional competencies aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. Purposeful sampling yielded two child participants, aged eight and 10, and one choir director with over 40 years of choral directing experience. I collected data through observation, field notes, and focus group interviews and then analyzed the data using thematic coding and member checking to ensure reliability. Analysis revealed six overarching themes and 22 subthemes, which illustrated key outcomes of group singing: contextual aspects of the choral setting, which foster emotional safety and belonging; motivation for group singing participation; self-awareness and confidence; resilience and growth mindset; ongoing social success and community impact; and social awareness and facility. I interpreted the findings through the theoretical lenses of Turner's *Communitas* and Noddings' Care Theory, which illuminated how group singing participation nurtured empathy, cooperation, perseverance, and nonverbal communication. Results suggest that group singing may provide a more accessible means of cultivating children's social and emotional intelligence and may offer benefits comparable to those of formal social and emotional (SEL) curricula. Although the small sample size and narrow geographic limit the study, its findings transfer to similar educational contexts. The research concludes that music education—particularly group singing—may play a vital role in supporting children's social and emotional development within existing school structures. Recommendations include encouraging administrators to protect and prioritize music education, supporting music educators in advocating for the importance of music education alongside academic instruction, and engaging stakeholders in advocacy for equitable access to quality music instruction provided by competent music educators. Future research should expand these findings through larger, more diverse samples and geographic settings.

Allyson Marie Rottman

I am a music educator with over 23 years of experience teaching in the Pre-K through 12 and higher education music classrooms. Currently, I am the Associate Executive Director for Worcester (Massachusetts) Youth Orchestras and also serve as the Advocacy Chair for the Massachusetts Music Educators Association and Editor

for the Large Municipalities section of the *Massachusetts Music Educators Journal*. I utilize my experiences as an educator, scholar, and leader to make a lasting impact on the field of music education.

**Doctoral Dissertation: On the Contrary:
A Narrative Inquiry of White Music Educators Challenging the Dominant Paradigm in Music Education**

Music education in the United States is out of touch with the realities of the classroom. The overarching methods and approaches used by music educators uphold the White, Western Eurocentric traditions. White music educators must embrace more culturally relevant practices that disrupt the dominant paradigm of White Western traditions, yet many remain hesitant. This highlights the overwhelming need for research into how White music educators are challenging dominant traditions in the classroom. Through the lenses of both engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) and Care Theory (Noddings, 1988), this narrative study focused on the experiences of five White music educators in the U.S. who perceive themselves to be challenging the status quo. The guiding question to support this exploration was: How are White school music educators in the United States negotiating the disparities between the White, Western Eurocentric conception of music education and what are best practices for their students? Data collected through participant interviews and a researcher's journal yielded common themes of becoming aware, expanding abilities, and creating new dimensions. The implications of the study include the overarching influence of preservice music education programs on the identities and philosophies of educators and the importance of collaboration and connection with colleagues in the field. Recommendations include the need to increase cultural and societal relevance in both preservice programs and ongoing professional development for in-service music educators.

Susan Jun Silberhorn

I have spent over 25 years teaching in middle school classrooms, driven by the same curiosity about how the world works that initially drew me to science as a child. This curiosity has influenced my teaching approach and strengthened my belief that all students can meaningfully engage with and contribute to STEM. Throughout my career, I have focused on designing learning experiences that encourage students to ask questions, solve problems, and recognize the links between science, engineering, and the communities those fields serve. My work combines classroom practice with research, emphasizing that STEM education should be both intellectually challenging and fundamentally human. Earning my doctorate marks a significant milestone in a journey dedicated to my students, their ideas, and potential. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue making an impact and assisting adolescents in discovering their abilities and finding their path in the world through STEM.

**Doctoral Dissertation: From Challenge to Compassion:
Integrating Empathy into the Engineering Design Process in Middle School STEM Education**

The study examined the impact of human-centered, empathic design on middle school students' empathy, STEM self-efficacy, ethical and moral reasoning, and sense of belonging in STEM. Using a convergent mixed-methods case study approach, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, Moral Development Theory, and Ethics of Care, the study investigated the effects of a curriculum intervention across three eighth-grade science classrooms in a Midwestern K-8 school. Data were gathered from 58 participants through pre- and post-surveys and classroom reflections to measure changes across four constructs. Quantitative results revealed statistically significant increases in empathy and STEM self-efficacy following the intervention ($p < .05$). Although the shortened survey instrument did not fully validate the sense of belonging construct, qualitative findings revealed growth across all four areas: students demonstrated increased empathy, stronger STEM self-efficacy, a deeper sense of belonging in STEM, and emerging ethical and moral reasoning. Students' reflections highlighted enhanced perspective-taking, greater emotional awareness, and expanded connections to STEM. Collectively, these findings present a compelling argument that intentionally integrating empathy at the beginning of the engineering design process strengthens both the emotional and cognitive aspects of learning. Human-centered, empathic design fosters students' moral responsibility, promotes ethical decision-making, and empowers

students to see themselves as capable contributors, suggesting that empathy-based approaches should be central to middle school STEM education. These results indicate that empathy-centered design may play a critical role in advancing developmentally responsive middle school STEM education.

Amber A. Sorenson

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I am a first-generation college student who simply believes education is the best tool we have to make the world a better place, and I have spent 18 years in public education living that out. I earned my undergraduate degree in elementary education from Luther College, completed my Master's degree in Curriculum & Instruction at St. Thomas while navigating being a new mom, and then completed a Master's program at St. Cloud State to become a library media specialist. I have taught middle school math, reading, elementary media, and technology, and I now serve as Technology Integration Coordinator for South Washington County Schools. My work sits at the intersection of policy, professional development, pedagogy, and practice. I engage teachers in taking risks with emerging technologies in a system that is traditionally slow to change and resistant to innovation. My research into how teachers adopt AI is an extension of a conviction I carry into every classroom, every conversation, and every dinner table discussion with my own kids: when we know better, we do better.

**Doctoral Dissertation: A Professional Reckoning:
A Mixed-Methods Study of K-12 Teachers' Perceptions of
Generative AI and the Values Shaping Pedagogy**

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the K-12 educational landscape, and understanding teachers' perceptions of AI is critical for districts navigating the complex implementation of AI in schools. This mixed-methods study examined K-12 teachers' perceptions of AI, factors shaping teachers' perceptions, and how teachers' perspectives influence pedagogical decision-making and instructional choices. Three key findings emerged from this study. First, teachers demonstrated a significant adoption gap between teacher and student use of AI. Next, neither formal training on AI nor years of teaching experience significantly predicted AI confidence. Both trained and untrained teachers reported nearly identical confidence levels, while professional values and identity emerged as dominant predictors of AI use in the classroom. Finally, teachers' instructional approaches followed three main pedagogical typologies: Restrictors, Cautious Integrators, and Advocates. Each typology reflects distinct values-based orientations toward AI use in the classroom and not simply varying levels of confidence or technical readiness. These findings challenge conventional technology adoption models and have direct implications for AI implementation in schools. Technical training alone cannot address the values-based concerns that educators have about students using AI. Effective AI integration in K-12 schools requires sustained professional dialogue that provides a differentiated approach for each typology and prompts critical reflection of whether existing instructional practices remain relevant in an AI-driven world.

Erin Whipkey

Dissertation Approved with Honors

My journey into student affairs began nearly 22 years ago on the campus of Creighton University. As a Resident Advisor and Orientation Leader, I discovered my enthusiasm for listening to, caring for, and encouraging those around me. After college, I went on to complete my master's in Higher Education Administration from the University of Kansas. Since then, I have spent most of my professional career at the University of St. Thomas – four years as the Flynn Hall Area Director and nearly 10 years as an Assistant Director of Campus Life. I loved the opportunity to connect with students, plan engaging events and celebrations, and be part of their journey at St. Thomas. Recently, I joined the community at Augsburg University as the Director of Campus Life. Supervision plays an important role in the workplace. However, research shows the field of student affairs does not spend enough time preparing graduate students and young professionals to be effective supervisors. With this research study, I hope to highlight the need for intentionality in the process of training and preparing graduate students to be supervisors in student affairs. I would like to

give a heartfelt thank you to my wonderful dissertation committee for their time and support on this journey: Dr. Jayne Sommers (chair), Dr. Aura Wharton-Beck, and Dr. Laura Isdell. Thank you to my family and friends for their endless love and encouragement, especially my mom, Debbie; my sister, Lindsay; and my nieces, Ellie, Katelyn, and Leah. I love you all.

Doctoral Dissertation: Preparing Graduate Students to be Supervisors in Student Affairs: A Phenomenological Study

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the experiences of graduate students learning and preparing to be supervisors in student affairs. Participants included nine graduate students enrolled in student affairs-related programs at four-year institutions, with an in-person graduate assistantship within an office or department under student affairs. Participants included current graduate students and recently graduated students (those who completed their program within the previous two years). Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom. Open coding was utilized to analyze interview transcripts, which identified six themes: formal learning; classroom and academic-related learning; informal learning; reflections on preparedness; experiences and opportunities; and intentionality. Findings were interpreted using Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This study provides recommendations for administrators and assistantship supervisors to enhance the learning experience for graduate students and to more effectively prepare graduate students to be supervisors in student affairs.

Kha A. Yang

Dissertation Approved with Honors

I am a Certified Diversity Executive (CDE®) and serve as the Associate Vice President for Inclusive Excellence at the University of St. Thomas. In this role, I report to the university's president and serve as the cabinet advisor on institutional vision, strategies, and organizational change related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I oversee the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, which advances the university's ongoing commitment to a vibrant campus community where all can flourish and reach their highest potential. I bring nearly 30 years of experience as a cross-cultural bridge builder, educator, organizational change catalyst, community organizer, and developer of inclusion programs. I am a certified Qualified Administrator of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI©) and other complementary tools that facilitate systems change and organizational culture. I believe in cultivating individual and collective agency for transformative change.

Doctoral Dissertation: The War on DEI in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry of Chief Diversity Officers Amid Anti-DEI Attacks

This qualitative narrative inquiry examined how chief diversity officers (CDOs) experienced, interpreted, and made sense of anti-DEI turbulence and their leadership roles in higher education from 2020 to 2025. Using maximum variation sampling, participants were drawn from four U.S. regions and represented diverse, intersecting backgrounds. The study used two semi-structured interview methods: in-depth interviews and photo elicitation. Drawing on data from 12 CDOs, the study identified six themes: career pathways, the weaponization of DEI, emotional labor and burnout, reframing DEI, anchoring purpose, and reflecting on leadership. To guide the analysis of these findings, the study employed three analytical theories. These frameworks included Weick's (1988) Sensemaking Theory, Park's (2010) Meaning-Making Model, and Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2007) Complexity Leadership Theory. Collectively, these three approaches provided a comprehensive framework for examining CDOs' experiences, interpretations, and leadership in an era of heightened anti-DEI rhetoric. The study provided critical insights and practice recommendations for institutions of higher education as they navigate current political turmoil and assess and sustain academic excellence amid a shifting higher education landscape.

Order of Recognition for the 2026 Graduates

A. Education Specialist (EdS) with Administrative Licensure

**Brittany Crouse
Julie A. Danielowski
Ethan Harris
Mubaarak Mohamed
Hoonseok Oh
John Raasch
Andrea Robbins
Allison Stevens
Pang Xiong**

B. Leadership in Student Affairs (MA)

**Erin Besser
Keturah Cox
Cade Madson
Carolina Martinez Garcia
Jonathan Mor
Tess Munshower
Evie Sorenson
John Stewart
Abbie Sundich**

C. Educational Leadership and Administration (MA)

**Annie Foley
Syeda Razia
Padra Xiong
Yerri Xiong**

D. Doctor of Education

Graduate	Dissertation Chair	Dissertation Title
Nouf Alashreef	Chientzu Candace Chou, PhD	A Mixed-Methods Case Study of K-12 Teachers' Perceptions of Virtual Reality Integration with English Language Learners
Courtney Cavellier <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Aura Wharton-Beck, EdD	Hard Work and Heart Work: The Experiences of Women in School Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Katia Colón-LaCroix <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Jayne K. Sommers, PhD	Refocusing the Lens: A Grounded Theory of Success and Support for and by First-Generation College Students of Color
Norman E. Ferguson, Jr.	Aura Wharton-Beck, EdD	ATTENTION! Transitioning from Boot Camp to College: First Year Experience of Veterans Entering Higher Education
Alicia Brae Fleming Hamilton	Jayne K. Sommers, PhD	<i>Sembrando Arbolitos</i> (Planting Little Trees): A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Latino Immigrant Parenting and Advocacy in Early Childhood Special Education During Federal Occupation
Bojan Hoover <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Doug Orzolek, PhD	The Segregated Marching Arts: Finding Commonality and Distinction Between Marching Band Traditions
Jennifer L. Johnson <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Sarah Noonan, EdD	“Want Play Together?”: Multilingual Preschoolers’ Oral Language, Agency, and Identity in Early Childhood Classrooms
Alisa J. Lamont <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Jean-Pierre Bongila, EdD	The Color of Money: How Historically Excluded Alumni Perceive and Participate in Philanthropy at Catholic Universities
Joel John Navam <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Jayne K. Sommers, PhD	What Two-Year College Student Persistence Says About Effective Academic Advising Approaches: A Grounded Theory Study
Stephanie Nordstog <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Aura Wharton-Beck, EdD	Permission to Practice: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of Law Student Perceptions of Virtual Reality to Learn DEI Skills

David A. Richardson	Aura Wharton-Beck, EdD	The Desire to Exist and Thrive: Lived Experiences of Black Doctoral Music Education Graduates in Higher Education
Jessica Lynn Ricker	Doug Orzolek, PhD	The Perceptions of Social and Emotional Intelligence in School- Aged Children: A Case Study
Allyson Marie Rottman	Karen Howard, PhD	On the Contrary: A Narrative Inquiry of White Music Educators Challenging the Dominant Paradigm in Music Education
Susan Jun Silberhorn	Jayne K. Sommers, PhD	From Challenge to Compassion: Integrating Empathy into the Engineering Design Process in Middle School STEM Education
Amber A. Sorenson <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Chientzu Candace Chou, PhD	A Professional Reckoning: A Mixed-Methods Study of K-12 Teachers' Perceptions of Generative AI and the Values Shaping Pedagogy
Erin Whipkey <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Jayne K. Sommers, PhD	Preparing Graduate Students to be Supervisors in Student Affairs: A Phenomenological Study
Kha A. Yang <i>Dissertation Approved with Honors</i>	Aura Wharton-Beck, EdD	The War on DEI in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry of Chief Diversity Officers Amid Anti-DEI Attacks

THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC REGALIA

The robes, hats, hoods and even the different colors worn by faculty members and graduates as they march into the commencement hall have historical origins and significance.

During the Middle Ages, scholars at the earliest English and European universities wore wool or fur garments to stay warm in the drafty stone buildings. Most of the scholars were also monks or priests, and as such had the hair shaved from the crowns of their heads in the distinctive clerical tonsure. Cloaks included a hood that could be pulled up to keep their heads warm. The academic gowns and hoods were adapted from both secular and clerical garments of the time, and the color, trim or binding of the hood chosen by early scholars indicated the degree held by the wearer.

The style of academic dress most frequently worn in the United States dates back to colonial times, although it was not formally adopted until near the end of the 19th century, when it was chosen as appropriate attire by the Intercollegiate Commission during a meeting in New York. It has remained the general standard in America since, although some variations occur at individual institutions. In the United States, black is the traditional color for academic gowns. Some institutions allow holders of doctoral degrees to wear robes in the university's colors.

The sleeves of the robes vary, depending on the degree held by the wearer. The bachelor's robe has long, pointed sleeves. The master's robe has sleeves that are oblong and closed at the ends, with slits through which the arms may be extended. The doctoral robe has a full sleeve with a velvet facing on the front and at the neck, and three velvet bars on each sleeve. The velvet may be black or of a color that symbolizes the degree held by the wearer.

The head covering most commonly used in the United States is the square, tasseled "mortarboard." Some American universities use berets, and in other countries a variety of styles of head coverings is worn with academic regalia. The tassel is usually black and worn over the left front quarter of the mortarboard. Holders of doctoral degrees may wear gold tassels.

The hood is the most distinctive feature of American academic dress, which through color and design may indicate the wearer's degree and the institution at which the degree was earned. Hoods are lined with the colors of the institution that awards the degree and may be faced with the color designating the degree awarded. Hoods vary in length. The bachelor's hood is about three feet long, the master's slightly longer and the doctoral version is longer still and is decorated with broad color panels.

Candidates for advanced or professional degrees wear hoods symbolic of the degree. The color of the trim of the hood and the sleeve chevrons and panels of the academic gown are distinctive of the degree as follows:

Degree	Gown	Hood
Doctor of Education	Light Blue Velvet Panels and Sleeve Chevrons	Light Blue Collar

The colors of the University of St. Thomas are embodied in the lining of the hood (purple and gray). The colors of the hoods of faculty are those of the institution conferring their degree.

THANK YOU

We would like to thank all of those who served
as part of students' dissertation committees
as chairs or committee members:

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