From Student to Professor: An Interview with Nikki Arola

The name Nikki Arola may be familiar in the University of St. Thomas Psychology Department. As a student, Arola collaborated on research projects with Dr. Bock, Dr. Buri, and Dr. Tauer in the department. She also conducted research of her own through the Young Scholars Summer Research Grant. Inspired by Dr. Bock and Dr. Tauer to apply to Doctoral programs, Arola graduated with her sights set on attending Loyola University in Chicago.

Now a fifth year student of the clinical psychology PhD program at Loyola, Arola is back at St. Thomas teaching a General Psychology class two times a week. Although a strange experience at first, Arola shared that she loves being back in the department. She is now working with colleagues who used to be her mentors, but commented that she sometimes has to remind herself she is no longer a student when she walks through the cafeteria. To her, coming back as a professor at St. Thomas speaks to the environment of the university and the kinds of relationships that can form during your time as an undergraduate.

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Thinking about pursuing graduate school?
Here’s how you should be preparing...

Sophomore year...
- Begin building a strong GPA
- Join UST’s psychology club or Psi Chi Honor Society
- Involve yourself in research with professors
- Search for an internship

Junior year...
- Keep your grades up
- Invest in a GRE study aid
- Conduct your own research project with the help of an advisor
- Search for an entry level job in the mental health field

Senior year...
- Begin working on your personal statement
- Schedule and take the GRE
- Request letters of recommendation
- Begin applying for schools

Visit the Psychology Department resource station in JRC LL54 for tips and materials on how to find an internship or job, conduct personal research, ask for letters of recommendation, and write graduate school applications.
New class arriving Spring 2015...

Unusual Vision:
Impairment & Function
PSYC 489 / NSCI 490

3.3 million people over the age of 40 live with uncorrectable impaired vision; only 200,000 of them are totally blind. This topics class will explore visual capabilities that do not conform to what most people think of as “normal” human vision through readings from the primary literature, laboratory investigations, discussion, and demonstrations. Special emphasis will be placed on common types of visual impairment (for example, cataract, color defect, macular degeneration, glaucoma, and retinitis pigmentosa), their underlying biology, and how the visual capabilities of someone with one of these conditions compares to those of someone with “normal” vision. Exploration of the visual systems of other organisms will provide a perspective on what human vision can and cannot do.

Psychology majors: This course will fulfill a lab requirement, or a cognition/brain course, or an elective. Neuroscience majors: This course can serve as a capstone course or a Neuroscience elective.

If you have any questions contact Dr. Paul Beckmann, pjbeckmann@stthomas.edu, 651-962-5036.

“Education survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten.”
-B.F. Skinner
Association for Moral Education Conference 2014
Thriving Individuals/Thriving Communities: The Role of Moral Education in Human Flourishing

This October marked the 40th annual Association for Moral Education (AME) Conference, held in Pasadena, CA. Dr. Tonia Bock of the University of St. Thomas Psychology Department is highly involved with the association and has been bringing students to attend the conference with her for many years. Seniors Anna Hangge, Taylor Larson, and Logan Tufte, and junior Kelsey Tisthammer accompanied Dr. Bock in attending this year’s conference.

Attending a conference is an excellent opportunity for undergraduates to immerse themselves in the world of scholarly research, become acquainted with professionals in the field, and meet other students engaged in similar research. Based on the reactions of the students who attended this year, this year’s AME conference was no different. It was a full three days of thought-provoking presentations, insightful discussions, and taking the time to recognize the excellent work that association members are doing in the community.

One example is the work of Fr. Gregory Boyle, the AME “Good Work Award” winner for 2014. Fr. Greg founded the independent non-profit, Homeboy Industries in 2001. Homeboy Industries, located in Los Angeles, CA, is the largest gang-intervention and re-entry program in the country, serving as a model for other programs nationwide. In his book, Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion, Fr. Greg recounts his experiences working with gang members in Los Angeles. Because Fr. Greg was unable to attend the conference due to complications of his cancer treatment, one of his Homeboy clients accepted the award on his behalf.

“Homeboy Industries has been the tipping point to change the metaphors around gangs and how we deal with them in Los Angeles County. This organization has engaged the imagination of 120,000 gang members and helped them to envision an exit ramp off the “freeway” of violence, addiction and incarceration. And the country has taken notice. We have helped more than 40 other organizations replicate elements of our service delivery model, broadening further the understanding that community trumps gang -- every time.”

-Fr. Greg
Apart from attending presentations and engaging in discussion, the UST undergraduates attending AME had the opportunity to give presentations of their own.

As a continuation of Dr. Bock’s moral identity research, Tufte took on a project in collaboration with Dr. Bock and alums Elizabeth Harris and Angie Kurth. He presented a paper titled, “The Mediating Effect of Moral Identity on the Community Involvement, Identity Achievement Relationship.”

Hangge, Larson, and Tisthammer also developed their project as a continuation of Dr. Bock’s work. Titled, “Differing Conceptualizations of Moral Identity in the Ideal Self,” their study examined conceptualizations of moral identity and how they relate to integrity, civic engagement, and socially malevolent tendencies.

“At AME I gave a paper presentation investigating the possible causes of volunteering in college age students. It turns out that volunteering while considering the moral implications of your actions is linked to further volunteer behavior. It was great giving this presentation at AME because it allowed me and others to share our ideas and research and really engage with some of the experts in the field. This helps as a student because it confirms that you are actually thinking of unique and novel ideas and that you can stand toe to toe with the experts in the field and contribute to the knowledge base.”

-Logan Tufte

“My favorite thing was how friendly people were! Many people approached us to talk about our study and they were nice, curious, and genuine. And Peter Samuelson, the conference organizer, was a big part of that!”

-Taylor Larson

“Our study considered which qualities people choose for their ideal self and how these qualities relate to morally relevant variables. We found significance while looking at integrity, specifically that participants who choose Aristotelian-like moral qualities have higher integrity. It was a great experience to be able to present our research to professionals in the field and stand amongst graduate students who are doing excellent research.”

-Anna Hangge

“My favorite thing was that there were so many people from different backgrounds—education, philosophy, and psychology!”

-Kelsey Tisthammer
Seven Rivers Conference
From Budding to Blossoming

In late November, Dr. Giebenhain and her History of Psychology in Context (PYSC 422) students travelled to Lacrosse, Wisconsin to show off their research. Held at Viterbo University, the 12th Annual Seven Rivers Undergraduate Research Symposium was an opportunity for the students to share the research they have been working on all semester and learn about other student research.

The symposium consisted of oral presentations and poster presentations, with awards for each type. Students in Dr. Giebenhain’s class presented posters, which meant they were in the running for the ‘People’s Choice’ award for Best Poster. Three posters would win, one for each discipline represented at the conference: Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences.

A couple days after the conference, the award winners were announced, with UST students winning Best Poster in the Social Sciences! Seniors Katie Grumann, Kat Matthews, and Alyssa Radichel presented a poster titled “Prostitution: Historical Archival Analysis across the 1800s and 1900s” which earned them enough votes to claim the prize.

Dr. Giebenhain asked her students to pick a social justice issue as the subject for their project. She suggested that they choose a topic featured in their group’s assigned chapter from the class textbook. Students were instructed to conduct a historical analysis of their issue. Grumann, Matthews, and Radichel studied primary sources and used content analysis to find themes in the literature surrounding the issue of prostitution.

In anticipation of the symposium, Dr. Giebenhain told her students that they were “budding professionals.” Alyssa Radichel described what happened after the symposium was over: “She complimented us when we got on the bus that we were so professional at the conference that now she can’t call us ‘budding’ anymore, we’re ‘blossoming’!”

Congratulations to Dr. Giebenhain and her students on another successful research symposium!
Kevin Kling, Matthew Sanford, and Cathy Wurzer will lead a FREE Forum at 7:00 p.m. on December 9, 2014 at the University of St. Thomas. Together, they will invite the audience to listen, feel, and recognize their own story and the role they have in shaping their lives. What’s your story and how will it affect you?

Matthew Sanford and Kevin Kling, two renowned authors and storytellers, will meet on stage at the University of St. Thomas for a lively and moving discussion about the nature of storytelling in our lives. “Mind Body Dialogues II,” moderated by Cathy Wurzer of Minnesota Public Radio’s Morning Edition, will follow the central concept of how storytelling makes us human; how it affects our health, our healing and our happiness. Throughout the evening, the trio will explore how the stories we tell ourselves and others can hurt or heal and how this changes over the course of a lifetime.

Using humor, human connection and simple mind body practices, the three will teach the audience how to recognize the innate and miraculous nature of story as healing agent—for both outward signs of disease and disability as well as the more hidden challenges of stress, anxiety and the like. The conversation, led by Wurzer, will showcase Kling’s singular wit and Sanford’s extraordinary insight to both entertain and inspire.

Sanford and Wurzer are familiar faces on the UST stage. Last year, they launched the “Dialogues” series with friend and former St.Thomas dean, Dr. Bruce Kramer, in front of an overflow crowd of more than 1,000 people. Their discussion focused on living well in a difficult body (Kramer was diagnosed with ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, in late 2010).

This year’s event, “Healing through Story”, begins at 7 p.m. at Woulfe Alumni Hall located in the Anderson Student Center on the university’s St.Paul campus. Free and open to the public, the evening is sponsored by Health Partners, Mind Body Solutions, and the Project for Mindfulness and Contemplation at St. Thomas.

Mind Body Dialogues is an ongoing series of public-forum, moderated conversations. Like last year, the forum will be rebroadcast on Minnesota Public radio and Twin Cities Public Television.

“It took a devastating car accident, paralysis from the chest down, and dependence on a wheelchair before I truly realized the importance of waking both my mind and my body.”

-Matthew Sanford
We have all been there. Sitting in the middle of a full class looking up at the professor and realizing that the last few seconds (or minutes) have been lost to wandering thoughts of boyfriends, best friends, and all but the lecture at hand. Hope is not lost, however, as recent research in the field of cognitive psychology has found a possible new strategy for undergraduate students to increase attention and become more present learners. Not only can mind wandering be embarrassing for the student and potentially distracting during the class, but studies have shown that it can reduce memory about the material presented. Evidence has also been found that negative moods follow mind wandering and therefore, improving attention could lead to better academic performance and even attitude.

A research team at the University of Miami investigated short-term mindfulness training as a tool to improve attention. Mindfulness training places emphasis on the present moment and directs participants to focus on one specific action such as walking and eating, but it is most commonly used with breathing. If the participants feel their attention wandering to distracting thoughts or sensations, they are encouraged to gently guide their focus back to the task at hand. Long-term practitioners of this strategy had reductions in the activity of the brain network responsible for mind wandering and reported less inattention during meditation practices. Not only is there evidence that improvement of attention occurs within an already established population of active participants, but students that had six hours of training in two weeks improved their Graduate Record Examination, a measurement of academic mastery, and improved their working memory. Alexandra Morrison and her colleagues looked into the potential benefits of short-term mindfulness training on undergraduates specifically within a semester long course. They used the sustained attention to response task (SART) which measures mind wandering by asking participants to sustain focus on mundane repetitive information and allowed the researchers to analyze trends over a period of time. They also included a working memory test to determine if 7 hours of training over 7 weeks would produce similar results as previous studies. The research team “predicted that relative to a no-intervention control group, students who received mindfulness training would report experiencing less mind wandering and have better task performance on the SART as well as the working memory tasks” [Morrison, Goolsarran, Rogers, & Jha, 2014]. They believed that mindfulness would improve attention and increase the ability to hold small pieces of information in memory.

They implemented their experiment by randomly assigning students to either a training group, or a control group that did not include any training. The training occurred for 7 weeks for a total of 7 hours over one semester. During the week, the students participated in a 20 minute session to convey information about “defining mindfulness, cultivating focus and staying on task, acknowledging doubt and judgment, stress reduction, integrating mindfulness into everyday life, and discussion of challenges arising during the academic year” and closed with a 5 minute group practice session. The students were also required to come to the laboratory twice per week to perform a 20 minute mindfulness session on their own. To determine the overall effects of the training, each individual was tested at the beginning and end of the semester.

Several main areas of the SART task were influenced by the mindfulness training. Across the training group and control group, there were no differences at the beginning of the semester. This reflected exactly what the researchers were hoping would be the case. It showed that all of the students were at a baseline level of accuracy, variability, and self-reported inattention before the training started. After the mindfulness training (MT) ended, however, overall accuracy of the SART task decreased significantly for the control and increased significantly for the training group (See Figure 1, Graph A). The graph illustrates the interaction between the two variables across time. There is strong evidence that the MT increased the ability to stay engaged on the task at hand. There is also a large difference shown between the
response variability of individuals in the control group compared to the MT group over time (See Figure 1, Graph B). The opposite relationship in comparison to accuracy is shown in the graph as the control group increases variability from the start to the end of the semester and the control group decreased variability after training. A decrease in variability indicates that the training group had a more stable rate of attention to the task than the control group. The figure shows in Graph C that the training group stayed at baseline when responding to the question, “Where was your attention focused just before the probe?” The higher the number, the more “off-task” the participants thinking and Graph C shows that the control had a significant increase from the base line at the end of the semester. This result points to the protective quality of MT against off-task thinking.

Contrary to their hypothesis, Morrison and her colleagues did not find any significant relationships between MT, time, and working memory. One reason may be that the working memory task provided no cues to shift attention back to the work at hand. During the SART task, participants were periodically prompted to self-report their attention. This may have acted as a trigger to increase participant’s attention whereas there would be no such trigger in the working memory test. Also, the working memory test had a higher perceptual demand for participants than the SART task. It has been shown that lower demands in regards to perception correlate with mind wandering which may account for why no mind wandering was seen in a high demand task. Another explanation given by the researchers is the simple fact that other studies supporting a relationship between MT and working memory had more intensive training routines. It may be that the 7 hours per week for 7 days a week was not enough to heavily influence working memory processes.

The findings of this study also do not provide conclusive evidence as to why students without MT are shown to be less attentive at the end of the semester compared to the beginning. A possible explanation may be that as the semester progressed, the environmental stressors, such as final exams, raised the probability of intrusive thoughts, dysphoria, and reduced well-being. If this were the case, the MT would be acting as a protective tool that the students within the training group could use to buffer against the effects of each maladaptive trait of the end of the semester. In combination with these somewhat unexpected results, the data provides strong evidence that MT influences attention.

Overall, the findings of Morrison and the team of researchers display the effects of MT on attention even if the effects cannot encompass working memory. It may not be that mind wandering has only negative effects on an individual but could be beneficial in some contexts as well. More nuanced studies could look at the influence of mind wandering that promotes internal reflections compared to those that focus on external worries or problems. Also, mind wandering may even benefit individuals by providing opportunities for autobiographical planning and creative problem solving. Future research could determine if the occurrence of autobiographical planning and creative problem solving decreases with the use of MT which would point to mind wandering as a source of both characteristics. As popularity of this view increases, more emphasis will be placed on identifying the potential benefits of mind wandering.

Further research can also be done in many areas related to MT and mind wandering. An important follow-up to the current study would be to gather data on the classroom experience of students that have undergone MT to determine if there are real world differences after the program. As all of the data were collected through lab procedures in the study done by Morrison and their colleagues, it is too early to make conclusive claims that MT can truly affect academic performance. Future studies could also investigate the effects of other forms of meditation for undergraduate college students. For instance, combinations of MT with yoga would elucidate the influence of regular body movements on attention. Progressive muscle relaxation practices could also identify how anxiety relief may help. Even religious forms of mediation such as centered prayer could be examined for possible relationships to attention. Although complete elimination of mind wandering may not be feasible and could possibly be detrimental, MT is an influential strategy to help reduce unwanted wavering of attention. Next time you are in a class and life’s many worries blur your focus, take a deep breath, center your thoughts to the present moment, and sign up for a mindfulness class!
From Student to Professor (cont.)

When Arola is not teaching, she is working with pediatric clinical neuropsychology assessments, specifically with children with learning disorders and other conditions. During the week, she also works on research papers and projects, one of which is the second half of her dissertation.

Arola hopes to work as a neuropsychologist in the future, assessing children and adolescents. Although she most likely will not return to St. Thomas to teach next year, she hopes to return to teaching when her career is more established. She would like to teach as an adjunct professor, teaching one class a semester in abnormal psychology or some other course. She expressed that she loves working with students in a mentoring role and giving guidance, so she hopes to return to that role in the future.

The St. Thomas Psychology Department is so happy to see one of its students come full circle. Arola has worked hard as an undergraduate and graduate student and is now able to give back to St. Thomas and its students. Welcome back Nikki!

“Where your talents and the needs of the world cross, there lies your calling.”

-Aristotle

Get to know the 2014-2015 EAs!
Match the EA with their fun fact and future plans.

- Ashley
  - This EA went on a six-day, 70 mile canoe trip down the St. Croix River this summer and plans to take on a Masters Degree in Counseling Psychology next.

- Anna
  - This EA can touch her tongue to her nose and is planning on attending graduate school and ultimately earning a PhD in Clinical Psychology.

- Taylor
  - This EA has gone deep-sea fishing and has been on several road trips across the United States, the next of which may lead to medical school.

- Madelyn
  - This EA can speak Latin which is something unique to put on applications for graduate school in public health or medical school.

- Rachel
  - This EA will be pursuing a Masters Degree in Counseling after giving up childhood plans to become Oprah Winfrey.

- Lexi
  - This French-speaking EA has lived in the same building in all four years at St. Thomas, but will move out upon graduation to pursue a degree in Cognitive Psychology.