Dialogue

Northwestern | COMMUNICATION

FALL 2026



Serious Play



Performance studies doctoral candidate Elise Williams takes a closer look at fellow student Yejia Sun's interactive piece *Museum of What will have been: A guided tour* during the performance studies graduate performances event last March.



Dialogue

ON THE COVER The audience lights up the room during Dean E. Patrick Johnson's rendition of "You Light Up My Life" at February's *Love Songs for the Wintry Blues* (see page 4).



Mixed signals

Faculty research on artificial intelligence explores its strengths, flaws, and potential in communication.



150th birthday

The school's sesquicentennial anniversary in 2028 will be a year of gathering and celebration.



4
NEWS
The Olympics, automation research, a podcast studio, and more.



19
STUDENT FOCUS
Alumna Dianna Lee tees up her future.

24
ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENTS
Awards, films, books, and updates from our alumni community.



18 DISCOVERIES
20 UNSCRIPTED
21 GRATITUDE
22 FACULTY FOCUS
30 IN MEMORY
32 PARTNERSHIP

A 27-year tenure at an institution of higher learning means one experiences one's fair share of graduations. And in my 27 years at Northwestern, I can honestly say I still enjoy them—and even more so as dean. This year's celebration was no different. We had laughs courtesy of speaker Josh Meyers (C98), food for thought thanks to our dynamic student speaker Shahzeb Shah (C26), an emotional a cappella rendition of the alma mater, and no shortage of smiling faces and proud families.



One standout element was the gigawatt-sized elephant in the room: artificial intelligence. It was mentioned, for better and worse, in all the remarks. The reactions of our students suggested animosity toward the tech, and I was relieved that I chose not to center it in my speech, because I wasn't trying to get booed! But the number of times it came up, and the way many of our graduates reacted, was very telling.

I occupy an interesting position as a dean of SoC: We have scholars who, for instance, are leaders and innovators in what is arguably the oldest, most enduring form of human expression—embodied storytelling—and we have scholars who are leaders and innovators in the next generation of life-altering technology—AI. How do we reconcile these oppositional forces?

Well, we don't. Or rather, we don't seek to get everyone on the same page. Instead, we work to facilitate dialogue between the skeptics and apologists, seek to understand the ethics before engaging, and strive to identify where AI belongs and where it doesn't (see page 8). That tension is what keeps each of us accountable, both in terms of how we use it and why we don't. Artists and those who work with art and AI are familiar with the term friction (see page 5), which refers to the challenges inherent in the creative process—challenges that artists want and need in order to create something of meaning and value. Friction must exist in scholarly communities, too, and leads to healthy disagreement, debate (see page 21), and discovery. We're approaching AI, and all our challenges, through myriad methodologies and viewpoints, a signature of SoC's scholarship.

As we approach a milestone anniversary (see page 14), I'm increasingly grateful for how we've successfully struck this balance for so long. Through our departmental differences, we have created unity; in tension, we're stronger; amid uncertainty, we link our arms and press ahead. Friction is our fuel. We are ready for whatever comes next.



E. Patrick Johnson
Dean, School of Communication
Annenberg University Professor

News

Loving you is easy 'cause you're talented



In the pantheon of crooning deans, there are Dean Martin, Jimmy Dean, and, of course, Dean E. Patrick Johnson. Flanked by student, alumni, and faculty performers in February, Johnson mounted *Love Songs for the Wintry Blues*, a 90-minute concert of hits exploring the good, bad, and ugly-crying kinds of love.

"Amid the cold, slush, and gray skies so typical of February, Valentine's Day, with its chocolates and greeting-card clichés, offers a spark," Johnson says. "And that night we turned that spark into a blaze. I wanted to create a heat wave and flood the theater with energy, joy, and gratitude."

Performing to a full house in the Josephine Louis Theater at the Wirtz Center were students Diane Li, Alec Westland-Hurwitz, and Alex Myers; alumni Clare Kennedy McLaughlin (C20), Liam Powers (BSM/WCAS26), and Nolan Robinson (C21); and professor KO, the Donald G. Robinson Director of Music Theatre. Kent Brooks, SoC faculty and an accomplished gospel musician, was music director and pianist.

"The show was my love letter to our fabulous community," Johnson says. "Its support is what lights the way through our darkest days of wintry blues. Without that community, it would have been just me in a sequined jacket singing to a snow shovel—and trust me, the snow shovel doesn't clap. I thank everyone for showing up and proving that love beats frostbite every time."

Symposium takes aim at disinformation

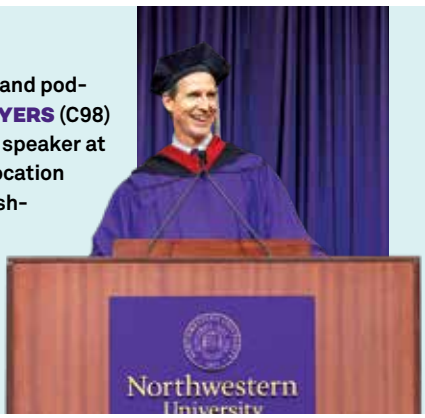
As social media giants scale back content moderation and governments shutter antidisinformation programs, the world is entering what experts warn is a "postmoderation era," all while propaganda grows ever-more sophisticated and dangerous. To address the mounting risks for democratic societies worldwide, Northwestern's Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs and SoC's Center for Communication and Public Policy (CCPP) hosted Global Disinformation in a Postmoderation World, a two-day symposium organized with the Kyiv-Mohyla Foundation of America and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Fact-checking innovators, policymakers, counterterrorism experts, and researchers from across the world discussed how to confront the cutbacks in moderation and oversight and how they're reshaping global vulnerabilities to propaganda, manipulation, and online harms.

"This transition represents not just a policy shift but a fundamental reordering of how societies determine what information can be trusted," says Erik C. Nisbet, the Owen L. Coon Endowed Professor in Policy Analysis and Communication and CCPP founding director. "As platforms defund fact-checking and governments wind down counterdisinformation programs, we aim to develop the strategies and cross-sector collaborations needed to sustain trustworthy and credible information." SoC faculty Nick Diakopoulos and Olga Kamenchuk also participated on panels. –*May Malone, Buffett Institute*



JUST JOSHIN'
Actor, comedian, and podcaster JOSH MEYERS (C98) was the featured speaker at SoC's 2026 Convocation ceremony at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston.



SOC AT SUNDANCE
With faculty and students, Dean E. PATRICK JOHNSON returned to Park City, Utah, last winter for screenings, talks, and networking events. A robust alumni presence included films by or featuring the work of Megan Mullally (C81), Ian Holden (C12), Georgia Bernstein (C17), Cemre Paksoy (C17), and Tracy Rosenblum (C17).



Gergle joins CHI Academy

Darren Gergle was elected to the Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group Academy for Computer-Human Interaction—one of the most prestigious honors in the field. He is one of 11 scholars from around the globe elected in 2026 to the "CHI Academy."

"It's incredibly meaningful," says Gergle, the Bao Family Professor in Human-Computer Interaction. "Many of the scholars I've followed and modeled my career after were inducted into the academy before me. To even imagine someday joining that group was exciting."



With Bryan Pardo and Elizabeth Gerber, Gergle directs the interdisciplinary Center for Human-Computer Interaction + Design, an initiative that brings researchers from across the University together to study and shape the future of humans' interactions with technology.

A professor of mechanical engineering with a joint appointment in the School of Communication, Gerber was a 2025 inductee to the academy.

"Having two consecutive CHI Academy inductees speaks to the strength of the interdisciplinary community we've developed here in human-computer interaction," Gergle says.

Inspiration over automation



As multitudes of researchers examine how AI can increase human productivity, Duri Long is taking a different approach: looking at what AI can do to slow it down, particularly when making art is involved. And that has gotten the right sort of attention.

The assistant professor of communication studies received a prestigious National Science Foundation CAREER Award in May to support her research titled "Generative Friction: A New Paradigm for the Design of AI Assistants to Foster Creative Reflective Practice."

CAREER Awards recognize junior faculty for outstanding research and teaching and set them up to be longtime leaders in their fields. Long, whose past research focused on designing learning experiences and interfaces to foster AI literacy, wanted to push her work further and investigate whether AI can help digital media artists—but in a way that will enhance, not replace, human creativity.

"A lot of the AI tools marketed to us are tools that will speed up our creative processes," Long says. She adds that the grant is asking, "What if we pause for a second and ask whether AI could provide us with inspiration or critique or moments for creative reflection and push us to think more deeply, rather than offloading or making our creative processes more productive?"

The five-year grant allows Long to kick off a design research process; organize and hold iterative workshops for artists to explore ideas; create AI tools to support their work; and eventually offer a residency at Northwestern to help visiting artists use the new tools over a longer-term creative process, allowing Long to further study their efficacy.

With around 500 awarded annually, the CAREER Award is one of the few awards available solely to nontenured faculty. It can make a major difference in long-term planning and setting an ambitious research agenda. Long is one of six School of Communication faculty members with a CAREER Award. She joins communication studies colleagues Leslie DeChurch, Nick Diakopoulos, Darren Gergle, Ágnes Horvát, and Michelle Shumate, who have received the honor.

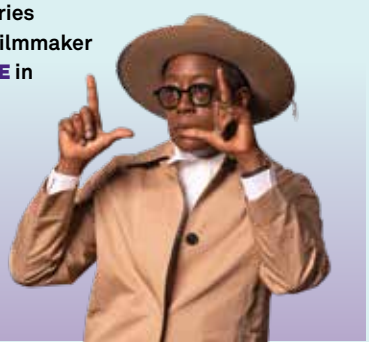
ALWAYS IN DIALOGUE

The 2025–26 Dialogue with the Dean series featured STEPHANIE BURNS (C91), right, senior vice president and general counsel of Sony Interactive Entertainment; JAMEEL JAFFER, director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University; and FAN-GANG ZENG, a leader in hearing science and technology.



UP NEXT

The 2026–27 series kicked off with filmmaker CHERYL DUNYE in October.



New certificate for careers in the business of entertainment



In partnership with the Kellogg School of Management, SoC has launched the certificate in management of creative industries, a new curricular pathway offering a targeted track toward leadership that's open to all undergraduates.

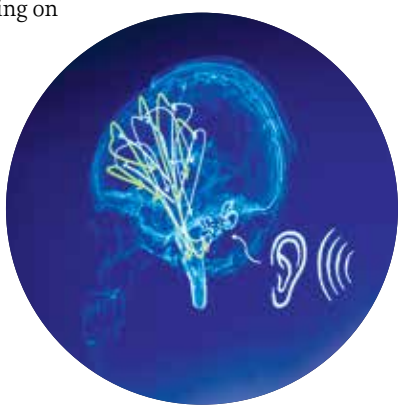
"With the business of entertainment being one that's exploding with new content and delivery models, the obvious next step was to leverage our strengths and develop a curriculum that will be a uniquely innovative pipeline to that world," says Dean E. Patrick Johnson.

Courses cover accounting and finance, business strategy, and leadership in arts and entertainment. Students analyze real-world situations and craft solutions, learn about factors that affect cultural production, and study how data and financial reporting drive decision-making in creative markets.

"This field looks vastly different now than it did even 10 years ago," Johnson says. "New distribution modalities, decentralization, AI, gaming—you name it. It's a vastly more complicated space, but our visionary faculty in both schools and our brilliant, eager students will help shape the future of the creative industries."

Clinical partnership serves unhoused in need of hearing care

Clinical faculty and graduate students from the Center for Audiology, Speech, Language, and Learning are using their expertise to help foster hearing health among a long-underserved population. With ReVive Center for Housing and Healing, a Chicago-based advocacy and assistance program for the homeless, Northwestern audiologists are operating a free walk-in clinic offering hearing tests, middle-ear assessments, cleanings, and counseling on hearing loss, noise protection, and vestibular concerns.



"Working with members of this community facing housing instability, food insecurity, and limited access to medical care has deepened my understanding of the complex challenges they navigate every day," says Katherine Swem, assistant clinical professor and one of the partnership's architects.

Since last year, audiologists have served nearly 50 people from ages 19 to 73. Most who needed a hearing device have received one. The partnership is part of a larger clinical mission to serve the community well beyond the Evanston campus, especially in areas and populations that most need medical interventions. It's also a boon for students, who can broaden their skill sets to serve as wide a range of clinical needs as possible.

"Working at the ReVive clinic allowed me to make connections with community members and develop my hearing-screening skills," says audiology doctoral student Isabelle Reynolds. "I also enjoyed seeing how the center was managed in a way that the people who go there feel safe."

A STAGE FOR CHANGE

Recent theatre and cognitive science graduate AASHNA RAI (C26) received a competitive grant to launch Khwahish, a creative-drama and social-justice education initiative for children in her hometown of Pune, India. She will design and lead workshops for children ages 4–16 with the nonprofit Snehwan, which provides housing and educational opportunities for children who have been orphaned or worked as farm laborers.



THE DANCING DEAN

See that guy, watch that scene on your iPhone screen. The viral dance-off between STEVE CARELL (P24, P26) and Dean Johnson at last year's Commencement made the rounds again this past winter while Carell did press for his HBO show *Rooster*.



A gold-medal internship

As a senior, Caroline Samuelsen (C26) watched in awe from the Milan Ice Skating Arena as US figure skater and fan favorite Alysia Liu won gold at the 2026 Winter Olympics—a pinch-me moment that Samuelsen won't soon forget. But for the communication studies major, it was all part of the job.

Samuelsen landed a coveted two-week internship with NBC on the Olympics broadcaster's corporate events team. She ushered guests to and from venues and activities, regaling them with fun facts about Italy and the games and ensuring there was clear communication about the day's outings, safety, and other protocols. It was, simply put, a dream for the Troy, Michigan, native.

"This experience was amazing," says Samuelsen, who minored in business and earned Medill's integrated marketing communications certificate. She spotted the opportunity on LinkedIn and felt it aligned perfectly with her interests, major, and skills as a communicator.



She carefully crafted a cover letter and honed her résumé for the skills the job needed, and the exercise worked: After a couple rounds of interviews, Samuelson got the gig. As part of her duties, she attended multiple Olympics events, took a guided tour of the famed Duomo di Milano and a pasta-making class, and visited a winery in the hilly Piedmont region west of Milan.

"Every day was different," she says. "I saw the internship and my major going hand in hand. The people skills, the public-speaking skills, and the fast decision-making will stay with me in any career I take on."

She won't need to wait long to apply those skills: She secured a job in communications at Ford Motor Company in her home state after graduation. "It's been a dream year for me," she says.

New podcast studio is open for (funny and other) business



The first official guest to sit at the mic in SoC's new podcast studio was one well worthy of a listen. Actress, singer, and comedian Ana Gasteyer (C89) spoke with Max Herteen, host of the *Northwestern Intersections* career podcast (also assistant director of alumni engagement and a student in the communication master's program). The newly dedicated Caryl Bristol Kushner Podcast Innovation Studio Lab made an exceptional backdrop for Herteen's high-wattage guest.

"It's great," said Gasteyer—no stranger to podcast studios—while surveying the space. "Podcasts are such a foundational element of entertainment right now, and there are a lot of things that already fold into what the School of Communication does in terms of storytelling."

The studio lab is designed to support everything from simple voiceovers to fully produced, broadcast-quality shows. It was among the first major priorities of Dean E. Patrick Johnson.

"This space is designed to facilitate connections and reveal truths through interpersonal engagement," Johnson says. "Note: interpersonal. And while we'll be using the best technology to record and amplify the stories that result, what's bringing them to life are the unpredictable, sometimes messy, often funny, perfectly imperfect qualities of being human."

The podcast studio was made possible by a generous gift from Caryl Bristol Kushner (C59), pictured above, whom Johnson honored during a dedication event in December.

SURROUND SOUND

At the inaugural collaborative Audiophile conference in April, SoC and the Medill School brought nearly 20 guest speakers from the world of audio communication to Chicago for two days of learning and connecting with students and faculty.

AUDIOPHILE

AN EVENT WITH PURPOSE

Pulitzer- and Tony-winning playwright BRANDEN JACOBS-JENKINS was a guest of the Buffett Institute to kick off April's Fulbright Week. Dean Johnson moderated a conversation with Jacobs-Jenkins, who is a professor of theatre at Yale University and former Fulbright fellow. He received the 2025 Tony Award for best play for *Purpose*.





UNCHARTED TE

From automated newsrooms to digital dance, SoC researchers are diving headfirst into the AI revolution to discover whether we'll sink or swim.

BY CLAIRE ZULKEY



RRITORY

Artificial intelligence is here. To what extent it can better help more people (and harm fewer) depends on how they communicate with, train, and customize it. School of Communication faculty members work with and study AI technology in dozens of ways to better understand and hone a tool that's already in our hands.

Ignacio Cruz
The future of work



An assistant professor of communication studies, Cruz has been curious about workplaces since he was a child, listening at the dinner table to his family's stories about their jobs—difficult customers, supportive coworkers, and demanding bosses. At his first job, during high school at a movie theater, he found himself paying close attention to how work made him feel: Why does a job feel motivating one day and demoralizing the next? Why do I have to clean the popcorn machine this specific way? These questions led him to study how technology is entwined with the way we do our work.

> Why does a job feel motivating one day and demoralizing the next?

Today he researches how artificial intelligence is used to inform decisions at work, particularly regarding talent acquisition and communication technologies that promote fairness, accountability, and equity. "How do you program what dependability means to an algorithm?" he asks.

Some of Cruz's studies demonstrate the importance of companies' carefully matching their chosen technologies to specific tasks, skills, and goals. In one case, he describes a job candidate with key leadership experience who didn't input keywords that the recruiting algorithm was trained to find, so the candidate was removed from the hiring pool.

Humans were able to override the technology in that case, but what about next time? Comfort levels in modifying AI tech range widely. "Building AI skills is not just understanding how to use the technology but understanding the logic systems behind it," Cruz says. "We need to keep a close watch on when we're deploying it at scale in companies."

He wants to continue monitoring how AI is trained, interpreted, and used in the workplace to prevent leaving humans behind. "We need to think about social dimensions of work and the human values at its core," he says.



Thomas F. DeFrantz
Can AI dance?



As the director of the SLIPPAGE research group exploring emerging technology applications in live performance, DeFrantz seeks to relate AI to performance, movement, and cultural expression. Having studied computer science as an undergraduate while simultaneously pursuing music and dance, he describes himself as "a super nerdy person who's interested in computational information, even as I work mostly as an artist and a humanist."

The professor of theatre and performance studies credits that odd alignment of interests with a career path that led him to Northwestern, where he can work in a lab that explores questions combining computer science and processing with anti-racist, protofeminist, and queer-affirming performance pieces.

As part of SLIPPAGE's 3D Humanities Series, students produced a three-part performance and workshop sequence designed to expose audiences to professional artists with technology-enhanced practices. The events paired a performance and discussion led by visiting technology-focused professional performance artists with a hands-on, skills-based workshop that engaged technologies such as motion capture, 3D digitization and printing, AI, and mechatronics—merging technological skill sets with critical discussions about artistry, humanity, and social possibilities.

> "What program can we use that can transform a word into a lighting cue or a gesture into a sound?"

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Professor Thomas DeFrantz (left, seated at desk) in his SLIPPAGE lab in John J. Louis Hall rehearsing the AI-saturated work *re-OrientationS* in 2024.

DeFrantz is excited by how technology can affect what he calls "systems of transformation." "What program can we use that can transform a word into a lighting cue or a gesture into a sound?" he asks. He works with tech that's already available, from open-source interfaces to toy remote controls called WiiMotes. "We chose some sounds, created fragments, and programmed them to move with the WiiMote" so the user could create sounds as if through the air but with a continuous controller in their hand.

DeFrantz also served on Northwestern's committee that monitors developments in generative AI applications as they relate to academic policy and practices. He sees the SoC faculty taking a perspective of "not avowed skeptics, but cautious. We're finding our balance of which programs we need, what computational creation is most useful, and where collaboration and conversation could actually produce something that feels special, intimate, and incredibly well-crafted."



Nicholas Diakopoulos
The impact on journalism



AI already plays a role in today's newsrooms, through analyzing data, translating, transcribing, and helping complete stories. Diakopoulos uses it himself, often to help with computer coding or to craft the right headlines and blurbs to promote his translational writing on social media.

> AI can be useful so long as people develop literacy around its capabilities and limitations.

A professor of communication studies and director of the Northwestern Computational Journalism Lab, Diakopoulos is also principal investigator for the Generative AI + Journalism Initiative, with a $1 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to develop tools and responsible practices for using AI in news production. When it comes to how students and professionals should critically engage with AI as users and informed decision-makers, Diakopoulos thinks AI can be useful so long as people develop literacy around its capabilities and limitations—including accuracy, bias, privacy, and the risk of anthropomorphism. The need to verify and edit AI outputs is a key skill he teaches.

For instance, Diakopoulos uses AI tools to generate computer programs, which can save him a significant amount of time. But he must know how to read code to verify the algorithms' accuracy. "It will get things wrong or not do the exact thing you want, so you need to be able to read what it gives you and then assess and iterate on it."

In the meantime, his team is developing evaluation standards for AI models in journalism that will help reporters decide which models to use. For Diakopoulos, "one of the nice things about Northwestern is that it allows me to bring together my interests in AI and journalism with some of the brightest colleagues in the world."

Darren Gergle
If AI can't help all people, what's the point?



How can visually impaired people interact with computers? Backed by a $2 million National Science Foundation grant for AI, accessibility, and collaborative work, Gergle and his team study how AI is integrated into common business software, such as PowerPoint and Slack. These tools promise to enhance productivity by automating tasks, but as Gergle warns, "if accessibility isn't built in from the start, AI risks amplifying rather than reducing inequities, creating a larger divide between those who can fully engage with these tools and those who cannot."

> "Should we focus on modifying existing systems, or do we need to throw it all out and start from scratch?"

"Do we need to design whole new AI-based systems?" he asks. "Are the current shortcomings a matter of system design, training data, or the way these tools are deployed in practice? Should we focus on modifying existing systems, or do we need to throw it all out and start from scratch?"

The Bao Family Professor in Human-Computer Interaction, Gergle and colleagues are collaborating with the American Federation for the Blind to gain a deeper understanding of these issues.

"There are some biases in what gets described and what doesn't," he says when explaining the challenges of AI-provided image descriptions. "Content may be omitted because it's flagged as explicit, even when describing it would be both appropriate and necessary for accessibility."

Another goal is to devise ways to help developers understand where such biases enter into their processes and how they will affect how AI systems operate. Does Gergle feel excited—or frightened—about the implications of AI's rapid advancement? "A little of both," he says.

Yingdan Lu
Why AI and authoritarianism get along so well



From social media bots to fake influencers, it's hard to ignore that AI has become part of politics. Lu, an assistant professor of communication studies, wants to know to what extent these new technologies function in authoritarian politics.

Director of the Computational Media and Politics Lab, Lu trained as a journalist but opted for an academic path, becoming interested in how AI can be leveraged by authoritarian regimes to expand their online influence. In particular, she uses computational methods, deep learning, and large language models to understand the evolution of and engagement with digital propaganda.

> Authoritarian governments . . . are leveraging algorithms to achieve their goals.

In an environment where many actors are competing for social-media attention, authoritarian governments like China's are leveraging algorithms to achieve their goals, she says. When you click on a state-created trending video on one of the most popular video-sharing platforms in the country, "you will find that over 80 percent of subsequent recommended videos will also have been created by the Chinese state."

She also found that celebrity social media accounts often disseminate government propaganda, which boosts their profiles. "Celebrity fans actively incorporate the promotion of state propaganda into their daily activities, which is important to study, as it may influence how normal users engage with the propaganda," she says.

Of course, none of this is limited to China. Lu is also studying the effects of AI used to create surreal images, in which real people are presented in implausible contexts, such as two presidential candidates kissing. Though we know this didn't happens, she says, "somehow it may influence how we think about the politicians."

Özge Samanci
Art, activism, and technology



In the art installation *Vast Waste*, hunks of metal space debris swirl together in a mesmerizing choreography to illustrate the dangers of human-made garbage in outer space. Samanci began developing the data-driven projection (which can be experienced in virtual reality) before starting to work with AI technologies.

The media artist and graphic novelist uses AI as an artistic medium while also examining the technology's effect on art as a force that shapes our world. She treats AI as a tool: In *Vast Waste*, the accompanying music varies in each version of the piece based on the trash's collisions, the number of fragments, and their descent through the ocean's surface. No two variations are the same.

Using AI to create artistic imagery, Samanci says, is far more complex than just giving orders to a bot. "It requires a lot of time investment. AI tools cannot do what you want perfectly. It's really based on probability, on what the systems want, and on what you want. It's a different way of worldbuilding, storytelling, and filmmaking."

> "The minerals that power digital systems . . . are often extracted under precarious conditions."

Despite her excitement about AI's artistic possibilities, Samanci's work also conveys technology's role in environmental destruction that steals from future generations. "The minerals that power digital systems, including rare earth elements, are often extracted under precarious conditions. Workers face toxic exposure, exploitation, and child labor. AI is a very problematic medium."

Her latest AI-driven installation in progress, *AI Bytes Terra*, uses sensors and game-design technologies to visualize these harms, as AI-generated verbs fall from the sky and physically damage the digital environment. "You can talk to the art piece, and the art piece responds to you," she says. "Its responses appear as three-dimensional sentences coming from the sky and descending into Earth, crashing into trees, opening holes in the ground, and landing on a magical forest and turning it into a dystopian space."

Through her work, Samanci aims to understand both the positive and negative potential of AI's impact on the arts. "Surely it would contribute to expanding human life," she says. "But at the same time, I don't know how we clean the mess that AI could create."

Portrait photo conversion by AI; text, design, and background artwork prepared by humans.

Aaron Shaw
New tools to investigate human behavior



How can AI advance how we understand human interaction? That's what Shaw, an associate professor of communication studies and sociology, wants to know. Working with a research team to create generative agents using large language models to simulate actual people, he found that AI agents outperform existing methods in predicting human attitudes and actions while also reducing bias across racial and ideological groups.

The team's work is paving the way for applications in policymaking, business, and media, helping organizations understand human behavior while reducing the cost of data collection.

Shaw credits his coauthor and former undergraduate student Carolyn Zou (C24) with pulling him toward this line of work. Having gone on to receive a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship and pursue a PhD in computer science at Stanford, Zou is now part of startup Simile.ai, which has raised over $100 million in venture funding.

> "I love these research spaces where nobody knows how things work yet."

Shaw envisions the future of the social sciences being advanced by generative AI agents, which may reduce the costs and risks associated with relying on people. "Even if an academic can only afford to run a study with a small sample, they might supplement this with 1,000 simulated responses to achieve a more precise and robust result," he says.

The next question is how to ensure that AI-based social science produces valid, trustworthy results. It's a quickly developing field, which Shaw finds exciting. "I love these research spaces where nobody knows how things work yet," he says, comparing it to swimming in the ocean—something else he loves. "You don't go into the ocean because you think it's safe. You go swimming in the ocean because you're connecting with something greater and bigger and deeper that you don't understand."

GUIDING AI RESEARCH

Fifteen communication studies faculty members who are working on and researching AI have aligned to create the AI and Communication Initiative to help guide scholars on designing, developing, and using AI tools. It will also create benchmarks, support rigorous social science research, and encourage clear and effective communication about the technology.

"The initiative was born from a simple observation," says Nick Diakopoulos (see page 11). "Nearly half the faculty in communication studies do research that touches in one way or another on AI. Together we hope we can more effectively represent our collective interests to the campus and find new opportunities for research collaboration, curricular development, and foundational support."

The initiative's other faculty members, including Ignacio Cruz, Darren Gergle, Yingdan Lu, and Aaron Shaw, have been awarded more than $5 million in AI-related sponsored research, which often takes a human-centered stance. The group hopes to also tackle AI policy and literacy and how AI will affect the future of work.

Marisha Speights
AI and early intervention triage



As clinicians and educators begin to encounter AI-enabled tools in screening and instructional technologies, the systems are only as reliable as the data used to develop and evaluate them. For example, when AI doesn't have enough training in the differences in children's voices, the tools can be less accurate and ultimately less useful for the patients they're meant to serve.

Speights, assistant professor and director of the Pediatric Speech Technologies and Acoustics Research Lab, studies how to make speech technologies work better across race, language, and clinical profiles. She says "the current child-speech datasets don't support broad, generalizable model development for real-word classroom and clinical contexts," so her team is collecting a balanced dataset of children of various races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

> A key focus is adapting systems designed to recognize and analyze adult voices to those of younger speakers.

Speights's lab also builds and evaluates computational models that can handle children's speech as it is actually produced, including from children with speech disorders. A key focus is adapting systems designed to analyze adult voices to those of younger speakers, "because children's voices differ substantially in acoustics, pronunciation patterns, and even how they use language." The goal is not technology for its own sake, Speights says, but tools that are valid, perform fairly across groups, and are useful in the settings where children learn and receive care.

























SoC's 150th Celebration Takes Shape:

A YEAR OF SERIOUS PLAY

SoC 150

BY BRYAN MARKOVITZ

As the School of Communication approaches its 150th year in existence, it's a moment both to celebrate and to position the school for a new era of innovation. Dean E. Patrick Johnson and his team have spent the past year working with a planning committee of students, faculty, staff, and alumni to design a sesquicentennial celebration worthy of our notable history. What has emerged is not your typical milestone but something more intimate and memorable—and distinctly SoC.

Beginning in January 2028, the yearlong celebration will embrace what we do best: telling stories, creating experiences, pushing boundaries, and building connections that last. And we're not just looking backward—we're creating a catalyst for ideas that will shape our next 150 years.

Serious connections

As the SoC community knows, "serious play" is our unofficial motto, capturing a unique approach to learning and discovery that combines rigorous research with playful experimentation. Our sesquicentennial will focus on giving everyone access to only-at-SoC moments that mingle creativity and entertainment with dialogue and insight.

"When people ask what makes SoC different," Johnson says, "I tell them we're the place where a speech scientist and a playwright can have lunch together and both walk away with new ideas for their work—that's serious play in a nutshell. We want to make those kinds of interactions a central part of the celebration."

Throughout the year, the school will create experiences that embody that ethos. Expect hands-on learning, scholars and researchers in conversation with artists, opportunities to rub shoulders with notable alumni, and moments when disciplinary boundaries dissolve. We are designing experiences that flip traditional scripts: events that turn alumni back into students, give students leading roles, and create surprises that remind people why they fell in love with SoC.

"I think that Northwestern and the School of Communication are unique in that way," says Jacqueline Shim Bryant (C85), chair of the 150th Planning Committee and a 30-year member of SoC's advisory board. "I hope the sesquicentennial can highlight some of those collaborations and new things the school is doing, which should both be celebrated and provide our community with a point of pride."

Who's invited?

First and foremost, you! Our guest list starts with current and prospective students, alumni from every era, and the faculty and staff who keep the magic happening. But we're also thinking bigger: engaging industry leaders, the broader Northwestern family, and Chicago's cultural communities. This celebration belongs to everyone who has been touched by SoC's spirit of serious play.

What's next

Preview activities begin in late 2027, with the real action starting in 2028, including ample opportunities to reconnect.

The planning is well underway and the energy is electric. We are 150 years old, but it feels like we're just beginning.

Stay tuned. It's going to be a remarkable year.

> "We're the place where a speech scientist and a playwright can have lunch together and both walk away with new ideas for their work—that's serious play in a nutshell."
>
> **E. PATRICK JOHNSON** Dean, School of Communications



Serious Play



Theatre major Natasha do Valle participates in a discussion facilitated by Gersh, a global talent agency now partnering with SoC (see page 32).

Earlier answers



Megan Roberts (left) and Jonathan Doster (right) with Illinois state representative Natalie Manley, a cosponsor of the bill

Thanks to a new law, Illinois families can get autism interventions sooner.

For years families across the state faced a painful reality: If they suspected their young child might be autistic, they could wait months or years for an official diagnosis. That delay often meant missing a critical window for early intervention. Now a new state law, prompted by research led by communication sciences and disorders professor Megan Roberts, significantly expands who can legally deliver autism diagnoses.

The first of its kind in the US, the legislation allows speech-language pathologists (SLPs) trained in autism-diagnosis methods to diagnose children under age three who are enrolled in the state's early intervention program. Until now, that diagnosis had been limited to physicians and clinical psychologists, creating a waiting list of families seeking the critical information needed to determine treatment.

"The consequences of those delays are profound," Roberts says. "Interventions delivered in the first years of life can significantly improve developmental outcomes. But without a diagnosis, many children cannot access those services."

Roberts and her team investigated how to expand the autism-diagnosis system, looking at whether SLPs and developmental therapists already working with young children would be effective as experts in making diagnoses. Their study found that diagnoses from SLPs matched those of traditional physicians in 93 percent of cases.

> "Interventions delivered in the first years of life can significantly improve developmental outcomes."
>
> MEGAN ROBERTS

In Illinois, there are far more SLPs than there are clinicians qualified to diagnose autism. For Roberts, those results offer a solution to dramatically reduce wait times for families.

"The current system was failing children," she says. "Decades of research had not reduced the average age of diagnosis, telling us we needed a drastic paradigm shift to move the needle."

Enter Start Early, a national nonprofit that promotes early-childhood development and advocacy. Roberts met with the Illinois director of legislative affairs, Jonathan Doster, to explain the results of the study and explore how they could get them into the hands of lawmakers.

"It's rare to find a well-researched, cost-effective solution to a policy problem that seems intractable, yet that's exactly what Meg and her team proposed," Doster says.

The law was approved unanimously by the Illinois General Assembly. With Governor JB Pritzker's signature, Illinois became the first state to formally authorize SLPs to diagnose autism. Roberts hopes other states will follow suit in passing similar bills.

"I hope this is just the beginning," she says. "Our goal is that all children in the US showing characteristics of autism receive an evaluation by three years of age."



FINDING HER FAIRWAY

A close-knit Wildcat community helped Dianna Lee rediscover the game she nearly abandoned.

Despite spending most of her life on a golf course, it wasn't until Northwestern that Dianna Lee (C26) finally fell in love with the game. With a high-pressure five-foot putt, the senior communication studies major led the Northwestern women's golf team to clinch the 2025 NCAA championship. She was named Big Ten cogolfer of the week after the team swept the Spartan Sun Coast Invitational—her fourth such honor overall and the second of the season. No surprise, then, that she plans to go pro.

Prior to her college years, though, the San Diego native was at a crossroads. She felt intense pressure to perform in a sport that she believed was chosen for her by her golf-loving family and was unsure whether she had the passion necessary to sustain a professional career. But while at a tournament, she met a fellow golfer who had committed to Northwestern, and her interest was piqued.

That golfer was "explaining that it's a very family-like culture and she thought she could succeed academically and athletically here," Lee recalls. "She left a huge impression on me because she was a great person and I really respected her." After doing some of her own research, Lee found she was attracted to Northwestern's top-tier academics and the excellent golf program, but also the prospect of a fresh start.

> "What can I do to experience something different that could fundamentally change me as an individual?"
>
> **DIANNA LEE**

"What can I do to experience something different that could fundamentally change me as an individual?" she wondered, acknowledging that she had never experienced weather below 55 degrees.

Northwestern—and its close-knit women's golf team—was indeed the place for her, and she chose a communication studies major to be able to go into marketing if the pro track didn't pan out. But the more she immersed herself in the work, the more she liked it.

"I've gained an interest in health communication and strategic communication," Lee says. "And I've been trying to apply my studies to golf and its business side. The classes I've taken have been very fruitful in understanding how these processes work."

It's also helped her navigate the unique features of life as a student athlete at an academically demanding institution. She leans heavily on staying organized, sticking to a routine, and focusing on tasks at hand.

"Winning the national championship is such a huge adrenaline high, and you almost can't comprehend what actually happened," Lee says. "But my teammates and I all had assignments due. So after celebrating and doing some interviews, we went back to our hotel rooms and said, 'OK, we need to finish our work.' We just have the mindset for stuff like that."

Lee is grateful for the community she formed here and how it helped reconnect her to a sport she was close to abandoning.

"It's changed me," she says. "People here are so willing to help you through any sort of issue. That generosity has stayed with me, and I've made it a point to extend the favor."

Unscripted

with Brittany Shyne



Brittany Shyne (GC16) is a documentary filmmaker whose most recent work, Seeds, *a moving portrait of Black Southern farmers, has been lauded on the festival circuit, scoring big wins at the Sundance Film Festival. The 2025 recipient of the International Documentary Association's Emerging Filmmaker Award, Shyne began creating* Seeds *as a student in the documentary media MFA program.*

Why documentary film?
Growing up, I was always into film or the arts. I'm a natural introvert, and the arts really allowed me to express myself. At Wright State University, I majored in motion pictures. It wasn't until grad school that I became more immersed in documentary films. Working on a longitudinal project like *Seeds* makes you very grounded and determined in other ways. It takes patience and time to understand where the story is going—and for others to understand where you're coming from. Northwestern really gave me the confidence to do this kind of film. I wouldn't have been working on this project if I hadn't been there.

What is the biggest threat facing Black farmers in the South?
The oldest family in my film has owned land since 1883. The biggest threat is land loss. Black farmers used to own 16 million acres; now it's only about 1 percent of rural land. There's been a lot of racial discrimination, and they've faced difficulty acquiring loans and other hurdles in continuing on their family land. But I also wanted to highlight that they are stewards of these particular places. It's not just about plights—land can be sanctuary, respite, a place of refuge.

> "I want people to see a part of the world that's not always acknowledged—some everyday moments are significant and invaluable."

What was it like premiering at Sundance?
We finished the film two weeks before we premiered, and we were still doing sound mixing and color correction. Anytime you show your work, you're in a vulnerable state, but it's nice for people to see what you've been working on for so long. What I found remarkable was how many people came up to me saying their family owned land in Alabama or North Carolina. That interconnection was cathartic to me. Winning the Grand Jury Prize is beyond words, honestly. I'm elated and so grateful that it was received so well. It's still crazy to me.

What do you hope people experience through your art?
I want people to see a part of the world that's not always acknowledged—some everyday moments are significant and invaluable. With *Seeds*, we're talking about ancestral knowledge that is going away. It's about preservation and maintenance of legacy—highlighting communities and stewards of land in ways we haven't seen before, opening up people's worldview.

A winning argument

With a new gift, the future of Northwestern debate is secured—along with the civic skills it builds.

Lance Rosenzweig (McC84, Kellogg85) vividly recalls his first visit to Northwestern. A "sort of reasonably good, not particularly great" high school debater from Parsippany, New Jersey, he decided to pay a visit to Annie May Swift Hall.

"I walked up to the office of the dean, who was then David Zarefsky (C68, GC69, GC74)," Rosenzweig recalls. "He was like a debate god. I was expecting somebody super intimidating, but he was very warm and welcoming." Rosenzweig credits that warm reception for his choice to become a Wildcat.

A three-year participant in the Northwestern Debate Society, Rosenzweig joined a storied assemblage of big thinkers who know how to craft an argument, speed-talk their way through it, and win big. The society is the winningest program in intercollegiate policy debate history, with 15 National Debate Tournament wins.

"I loved that combination of learning, researching, preparing, and working as a team," Rosenzweig says. "But also winning—that is what I really loved about debate." In his first year, he won the National Novice Debate Championship.

That love (and those wins) sustained him through his life and career. Now based in Los Angeles and previously CEO of Pitney Bowes, he continues to support the program in ways both small—like hosting current debaters for dinner and an LA Clippers game—and much larger. Rosenzweig recently endowed the director of debate position with a generous gift that will support the program well into the future. Daniel Fitzmier, who has been with the program for 25 years, is the inaugural Lance E. Rosenzweig Director of the Debate Society.

Rosenzweig acutely understands the value of the debate skill set, especially as Americans become more obstinate in their political camps.

"In debate, half the time you take the affirmative and half the time you take the negative, so you have to thoroughly understand both sides of any issue," he says. "I'm hopeful that this wonderful activity can be something that builds future leaders who are able to truly understand one another's positions and be consensus builders."

Dean E. Patrick Johnson says the gift both validates SoC's extraordinary history in debate and secures its future.

"The debate community at Northwestern is among our most loyal and spirited affinity groups," he adds. "Lance's generous and enthusiastic support means the world to this program and its longevity, and it means the world to our discourse as we strive to find a more civil way to engage, disagree, and maintain respect for one another."



ABOVE
Rosenzweig was honored for his gift at an event in April.



BELOW
Zarefsky, left, and Rosenzweig outside the Evanston campus's Hardy House, headquarters of the Debate Society.

Faculty Focus



Danielle Bainbridge



Thomas Bradshaw



Elisha Boxer Magnifico

Alana Arenas (BFA, DePaul University) starred in Steppenwolf Theatre Company's spring production of *Windfall* by Tarell Alvin McCraney. Both Arenas and McCraney are Steppenwolf ensemble members.

Danielle Bainbridge (PhD, Yale University) wrote *Currencies of Cruelty: Slavery, Freak Shows, and the Performance Archive* and is now director of Northwestern's Black Arts Consortium.

Thomas Bradshaw (MFA, Brooklyn College) revised Elmer L. Rice's 1923 play *The Adding Machine*, mounted last spring at New York's Theater at St. Clement's. Directed by Scott Elliott, the play starred Sarita Choudhury, Jennifer Tilly, Michael Cyril Creighton, and Daphne Rubin-Vega.

Bharath Chandrasekaran (PhD, Purdue University), with Northwestern collaborators, was awarded $50,000 in seed funding from the NUCATS x NICO Symposium to Empower Successful Applications for High-Priority Research for a project exploring how noise from data centers disrupts communication, increases anxiety, and affects sleep and cognition.

Zayd Ayers Dohrn (MFA, New York University) wrote *Dangerous, Dirty, Violent, and Young: A Fugitive Family in the Revolutionary Underground*. The autobiography details his life on the run alongside his parents, the Weather Underground founders Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers. *The New Yorker* published an excerpt from the book in March.

Linda Gates (MA, NYU) received a 2025–26 Alumnae of Northwestern Academic Enrichment Grant to fund her project "Podcasting Techniques and Skills for the Theatre Performer," which brought British-American actress Marion Sybil Lines to Evanston last winter to coach students on creating character voices in British dialects. Lines joined podcasting director Jeffrey Gardner of Audacious Machine Creative to lead a workshop teaching actors to create podcasts on their phones, and Gardner assisted Gates's students in developing a podcast about *Alice in Wonderland*. Outside the studio, Lines joined Gates onstage for a one-night run of the latter's *The Thistle and the Rose* at the Wirtz Center. They performed the play at the 2025 Edinburgh Festival Fringe to sold-out houses and rave reviews.

Nashville, a new book by **Heather Hendershot** (PhD, University of Rochester), explores Robert Altman's 1975 film of the same name—how it tapped into the societal exhaustion of the post-Vietnam era and how it stands out amid its contemporaries for innovative sound design, improvisation, and loose commitment to genre.

The Rebel Girls, directed by **Felicia D. Henderson** (PhD, University of Southern California), won the 2025 African American Film Critics Association award for best live-action short. Winning many other awards from multiple festivals, the film was also nominated for a Humanitas Prize; it tells of the girl warriors on the front lines of the 1960s fight for civil rights who survived their illegal imprisonment through faith, humor, and magical thinking.

Time Passages, a film by **Kyle Henry** (MFA, University of Texas at Austin), had a theatrical tour in 2025 and is now available to stream. It was screened at Northwestern's Block Cinema last winter, sponsored by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities and the Pritzker Pucker Studio Lab for the Promotion of Mental Health via Cinematic Arts. A subsequent discussion was moderated by fellow RTVF faculty member Ines Sommer.

Elisha Boxer Magnifico (MA, Northwestern) is studying the efficacy of Break the Blocks, a program she founded with theatre professor David Catlin that uses principles of improv to help teens and tweens who stutter. Magnifico enrolled 11 participants over the winter, with more to come. She and Catlin hosted their first adults-only event in March.



Zayd Ayers Dohrn



Felicia D. Henderson

Viorica Marian (PhD, Northwestern) was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2025 for contributions to the study of language, cognition, and the bilingual mind and brain along with dedication to communicating science to the public. Marian was one of three Northwestern faculty members elected in 2025 and is the first and only fellow from SoC. Her book *The Power of Language* was the answer to a *New York Times* acrostic word puzzle last year.

Bonnie Martin-Harris (PhD, Northwestern) delivered the 2026 Dodds-Donner Lecture, one of the highest honors in the field of swallowing disorders, at the Dysphagia Research Society annual meeting. "From Patient Experience to Patient Impact: Advancing Dysphagia Research Through Translation, Clinical Integration, and Mentorship" reflected her longstanding leadership in advancing research and translating scientific discovery into meaningful clinical impact. Martin-Harris's R01 clinical trial of a wearable sensor to train patients to coordinate breathing with swallowing was featured at the Querry Simpson Institute for Translational Engineering for Advanced Medical Systems launch in February.

The Queer Voice, Vocal Training, and Singing for Inclusion workshop, convened by **Kelli Morgan McHugh** (MM, Northwestern), tackled how vocal pedagogy can better serve gender-diverse singers. McHugh collaborated with Northwestern faculty Nathan Waller, Neil Verma, and Sarah Inendino to present a workshop with more than 65 scholars, artists, and industry professionals. At the University of Sydney with Northwestern sound engineer Isa Hernandez, she shared the workshop as part of an ongoing partnership between the institutions.

The latest book from **Dassia Posner** (PhD, Tufts University), *Making Meaning in Puppetry: Materials, Practice, Perception* (coedited with Claudia Orenstein and Alissa Mello), was published in 2025 and won the 2026 Nancy Staub Publications Award from the puppetry association UNIMA-USA. Her monograph *The Actor's Revolution: Art and Politics at the Moscow Kamerny Theatre*, was released this fall.

Angela G. Ray (PhD, University of Minnesota) edited *Free Black Charlestonians in Debate: The Complete Proceedings of the Clionian Debating Society, 1847–1858*. The work is a comprehensive aggregation of the minutes of a group of free Black men who met regularly to train in debate and exchange knowledge—an important piece of intellectual history and insight into the educational training of a pre–Civil War free Black community.

Todd Rosenthal (MFA, Yale) is set designer for the upcoming Broadway production of *The Princess Bride*, a musical adaptation of the 1987 movie.

The French ARTE TV program *Invitation au voyage* is producing a documentary on **Özge Samanci** (PhD, Georgia Institute of Technology) and her graphic novels, including *Evil Eyes Sea*, which was named a top graphic novel by *The Guardian* and the American Library Association. She was selected as one of six fellows for the Ragdale Residency's Human Artist Residency, during which she worked on expanding her art installation *AI Bytes Terra* (see page 12).



Bonnie Martin-Harris



Kelli Morgan McHugh

Fraught Balance: The Embodied Politics of Dabke Music in Syria by **Shayna Silverstein** (PhD, University of Chicago) won awards from the Association for Middle East Women's Studies, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the Dance Studies Association. It also received honorable mention for best book from the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance and outstanding monograph from the Society for Ethnomusicology.

Bridge to an Unseen Shore: New Age Music as Visionary Art by **Jacob Smith** (PhD, University of Indiana) was published this fall, exploring the genre's roots in the counterculture and subsequent mainstream crossover. Smith delivered the closing keynote on innovator Ron Hays at April's annual Day with Northwestern on-campus learning event.

Elizabeth Son (PhD, Yale) received a Peace History Society 2025 DeBenedetti Memorial Prize honorable mention for her *Theatre Journal* article "'Stitching Korea Back Together': *Jogakbo* Aesthetics of Care in Peace Advocacy." She is the inaugural director of the Public Humanities Cluster at Northwestern, which brings together the Center for Civic Engagement, the Kaplan Institute for the Humanities, and other University partners to offer training and experiential opportunities for graduate students in the public humanities.

Ariel Stess (MFA, Brooklyn College) won the inaugural 2026 Creative Capital State of the Art Prize for Illinois. She also won the 2025 Yale Drama Series Prize for her play *Kara & Emma & Barbara & Miranda*, which was supported by a grant from the Office of the Provost; Yale University Press will publish the play as part of the award. It was selected for the award by Yale professor and Pulitzer- and Tony-winning playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins (see page 7).

Alumni Achievements



Jody Gerson



Robert M. Hayward

1960s

Irene Leigh (C66) is the author of *Hiding the Holocaust: Memoir of a Deaf Daughter*. Leigh, a deaf psychologist, is the daughter of Jewish refugees who narrowly escaped Nazi Germany but shared few of the horrors with her. She explores how this unspoken history and inherited trauma have informed her personal, academic, and career experiences and how Holocaust trauma and loss affected not only her parents but also herself as a deaf child and parent.

1970s

Maher Ahmad (C71, GC74) was inducted last year into the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame.



Attica Locke

1980s

Jody Gerson (C83), chairman and CEO of Universal Music Publishing Group, was appointed to the Gap board of directors.

Michael Spagna (C84) was appointed president of Sonoma State University by the California State University board of trustees.

Crystal Stephens (C85) is chief executive officer and managing director of BoardWalk Consulting, a national executive search firm specializing in nonprofit and foundation leadership.

Robert E. Brannigan (C88, Feinberg92, Feinberg98) is president of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

Louisa Beltran (C89) is a deals reporter for sports business news site *Sportico*.

1990s

Becky O'Grady (C90) was appointed CEO of Ripple Foods, where she has been a longtime board member.

Pamela Neville (C92) was appointed to the board of directors of We Connect the Dots, an organization helping people from underserved and underrepresented communities gain knowledge about digital technologies and industries.

Kathryn Hahn (C93) plays the evil Mother Gothel in Disney's upcoming live-action adaptation of the animated film *Tangled*.

Ann Haugh (C93) was appointed to the newly created role of chief operations officer for Bermuda-based insurer and reinsurer AXIS Capital Holdings.

Robert M. Hayward (C94, Pritzker97, P24), a University trustee, was included in the National Association of Corporate Directors 2025 list recognizing 100 influential directors, executives, and governance professionals who exemplify excellence in the boardroom.

Bluebird, Bluebird, the 2017 crime novel by **Attica Locke** (C95), was listed tenth on *The New York Times* list of the 50 best thrillers of the 21st century.

Laura Matalon (C82), second from left, a marketing expert for Broadway and beyond and a member of the SoC Board of Advisors, gathered in New York City in July with a group of her former interns and mentees, including, from left, **Arella Flur** (C23), associate company manager for the *Death Becomes Her* tour; **Gaby Godínez** (C21), press and marketing associate for *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* and *Hamilton;* **Abigail Lev** (Medill26), producing and development intern for Disney Theatrical Group; and **Alex Angrist** (C25), product coordinator for *Situation Interactive*.



Kamilah Williams-Kemp (C96) is chief product officer at Northwestern Mutual, leading the company's insurance product design, sales, and service areas.

Zach Braff (C97) is back on call as John Michael "J. D." Dorian in the reboot of his hit sitcom *Scrubs*, airing on ABC. He has directed episodes of Apple TV's *Shrinking* and was nominated for a 2021 Emmy Award for directing an episode of *Ted Lasso*.

Jackie Conrad (C98) is chief development officer of the National Psoriasis Foundation.

Sandy Rustin (C98) was named one of the 2025–26 season's most-produced playwrights by *American Theatre* magazine. Her works include *The Suffragette's Murder* and the adaptation of the cult film *Clue*. The list's 23 playwrights include such names as Henrik Ibsen and Arthur Miller. Rustin had eight works in production in one season—the same number as Tennessee Williams.

Nicole Patton Terry (C99, GC01, GC04) was elected to the National Academy of Education.

2000s

Laura Ryan (GC00) is chief marketing and communications officer for Joint Commission.

Keli Walbert (GC00) was appointed to the board of directors of Spruce Biosciences, which is focused on developing and commercializing therapies for neurological disorders with significant unmet medical need.



Nicole Patton Terry



Michael Mahler

Toby J. Arquette (GC02) was named president of Missouri's Columbia College.

Michael Mahler (C04) was among the four leads in Porchlight Music Theatre's winter production of Frank McCourt's *The Irish . . . and How They Got That Way*.

Slade Larscheid (C06, SPS09) is director of athletics at Ohio University.



Wildcats featured prominently in the 2026 Tony Award nominations. Among SoC alumni who got a nod: **Ana Gasteyer** (C89), center, for best performance by a featured actress in a musical for *Schmigadoon!*, which won best musical. Also in the 12-time nominated, 4-time winning show was **Maulik Pancholy** (C95), who played the Reverend. **Abby Doermann** (C19) served as its marketing manager, as well as for *Giant*, which received four nominations, including best play. **Whitney White** (WCAS08), who participated in SoC's music theatre certificate program, was nominated for best direction of a play for *Liberation*, which won best play. **Geoffrey Ko** (C17) was music director for best musical nominee *Titanique*; **Zachaery Baer** (C10) was an executive producer for *Oedipus* and *Dog Day Afternoon*; and **Chloe Nadon-Enriquez** (C19) was a swing in *Chess*.



Britt Lower



Sarah Sherman

Campbell Black (Co7) joined the firm Cushman & Wakefield as a managing director.

Britt Lower (Co8) received her first Emmy Award last September. She plays Helly R. on *Severance*, for which she won outstanding lead actress in a drama series. She also received a Golden Globe nomination for the same role.

2010s

Mike Kafka (C10) joined the offensive coaching staff of the Detroit Lions.

Brian Arnfelt (C12, SPS13) joined Neal & Leroy as a managing member and chair of the corporate department.

Lindsay Fullerton (GC12) is the author of *Ephemeral City: A People's History of Chicago's Century of Progress World's Fair*. Some of her research was conducted at Northwestern University Archives in the Charles Deering McCormick Library.

Greg Porper (C12) wrote, produced, and directed *Don't Tell Larry*, a dark office comedy about a little white lie that spirals wildly out of control. It was released in theaters nationwide and on streaming platforms in 2025.

Brian Zapf (C12) was elected partner of L.E.K. Consulting's Chicago-based operations and supply chain practice.

HBO Max released *Sarah Squirm: Live + In the Flesh* starring **Sarah Sherman** (C15) in December. Sherman is a core cast member of *Saturday Night Live*.

Eva Victor (C16) received a Golden Globe nomination for best performance by a female actor in a drama film for *Sorry, Baby*, which she also wrote and directed. Victor won the National Board of Review's best directorial debut award and received a Critics' Choice Award nomination for best original screenplay—among the film's dozens of festival and award wins and nominations. Victor stars opposite Pedro Pascal in *Behemoth*, to be released in December.

Night Nurse, a film written and directed by **Georgia Bernstein** (C17) and starring **Cemre Paksoy** (C17), was released in theaters in July. The film premiered in the

Two decades into its mission of supporting theatre students and professional writers to develop new works, Northwestern's **American Music Theatre Project** has turned its focus homeward: toward creatives in the Windy City. Under director and associate professor Masi Asare, pictured below, AMTP in 2025–26 spotlighted Chicago writers and designed more opportunities for student involvement.

"We created new programming to leverage our position at a university known for excellence in teaching and research as well as for talented performing arts students," Asare says. "And with this shift, we're drawing students from a wider range of degree programs and departments."

A fall writers workshop nurtured eight new musicals by Chicago artists with the help of 30 students and a handful of theatre industry professionals. In winter six undergraduate performers appeared in the revue *Yadda Yadda Yadda: The Lyrics of Cheryl Coons* with the assistance of the songwriter, a former Northwestern adjunct faculty member.

Asare says AMTP will continue to grow in influence, particularly as a powerhouse of the Chicago theatre aesthetic, as music theatre workshops have shuttered nationwide while student interest in the genre explodes. The University's program meets critical needs: for students seeking experience, for writers hoping to hone new works—and for audiences craving fresh ideas and perspectives.

"Collaborating with the exceptional Northwestern students as well as professional colleagues was a career highlight for me," Coons says. "The vitality, commitment, and creativity the students brought to my work was incredibly gratifying. We focused on cocreating a great process that showcased the students' gifts and individuality. The result was a wonderful experience for both the audience and the artists."



Sundance Film Festival NEXT section and was a nominee for the NEXT Innovator Award.

Charlie Hall (C19) was cast in the hotly anticipated fourth season of HBO's *The White Lotus* and is a series regular on Apple TV's *Maximum Pleasure Guaranteed*. Hall paid a visit to an SoC senior seminar last winter to share laughs and advice about being an up-and-coming writer and actor in Hollywood.

Yuki Sakamoto Solomon (GC19) received a Chicago/Midwest Emmy Award for sports promotion for her role in producing a video for the Chicago Cubs and Major League Baseball's Tokyo series.

2020s

Seth Carlson (GC21) was named regional editor of the *Ashland Daily Press* and will also oversee the *Price County Review* in his new role with Wisconsin's Adams Publishing Group.



Eva Victor



Charlie Hall



Tor Campbell

Olivia Reis (C22) made her Broadway debut last fall as Antigone in Robert Icke's *Oedipus*, starring Mark Strong and Leslie Manville.

Kallan Dana (GC23) wrote the play *Lobster*, which was featured on *The New Yorker's* and *Vulture's* best theatre of 2025 lists. Dana wrote the first draft in a playwriting workshop that was a partnership between the theatre department and the writing for screen and stage MFA program; it was produced during the Wirtz Center's 2024–25 season.

Tor Campbell (GC24) is musical theatre program director for the Interlochen Center for the Arts.

Luca Hirsch (C26) was named a Fulbright student researcher. He will examine representation of the indigenous Amazigh people in the Moroccan film industry at the Faculté Polydisciplinaire in Ouarzazate, Morocco.





It's true what they say about finding your lifelong collaborators at Northwestern. To wit—the 2026 Tribeca Film Festival. Among featured projects was *Human Theories*, pictured above, produced by **Yoko Kohmoto** (C18) and written and directed by **Jess Zeidman** (C18), with cinematography by **Leo Gallagher** (C19) and art direction by **Camille Casmier** (C19). The film's cast included **Diego Abraham** (C20), **Wyatt Fair** (C15), **Arielle Gordon** (C17), **Daniel Liu** (C16), **Julia Tesmond** (C20), and **JT Tsuchiya** (C21). *Mexicanamerican*, written, directed, edited, and with cinematography by **Eddie Sánchez** (C17), was also featured; it was produced by **Michael Rogerson** (C16) with sound design by **Justin Enoch** (C17). Alumni in festival starring roles included **Zach Braff** (C97) in *Clean Hands* and **Brian D'Arcy James** (C91) in *Finnegan's Foursome*.

Serious Play



Theatre students Rosebud Summers, Madelyn Cantzler, and Andrew McCarthy workshop *[Your Name Here] and Captain Buttonsmash SAVE THE WORLD*, an interactive theatrical experience performed for children in hospitals. The "bedside theatre" initiative is the brainchild of associate professor Elizabeth Brendel Horn, an expert in and advocate for theatre for young audiences.



In Memory

Dorothy Zeisler (C39)
February 21

Bette R. Butterworth (C53)
December 29, 2025

Joan Troobnick (C53)
November 2, 2025

Jerre James (C55)
March 7

Marilyn Jordan (C55)
October 20, 2025

Richard B. Rothman (C55)
January 1

Donald E. Staples (C55, GC67)
January 19

Jane Anderson Preston (GC56)
January 8

Jean Tennes Reynolds (C56)
January 18

Arni Dunathan (C58)
November 30, 2025

Anita M. Klever (C58)
October 21, 2025

Gail L. McCarthy (C58)
January 24

Nancy Welter (C58)
December 5, 2025

Sidney C. Willmington (GC59, GC67)
January 6

John K. Boaz (C60)
December 20, 2025

LaVeta Busker (C60)
February 16

Marcia Rodd (C60)
December 27, 2025

Laura Lorenson (C61)
March 14

John Buck Jr. (C63)
March 5

James Graves Jr. (C64)
February 4

Dee Emrich (C66)
January 1

Jody Gardner (C66)
December 26, 2025

Ilene Wolf (C66)
November 30, 2025

Judd Chesler (GC71, GC76)
December 1, 2025

Stephanie M. Corotis (C71, GC72)
February 6

Ralph Silverio (C71)
March 16

Elisabet Michaelsen (GC72)
February 26

Patricia Kimble (GC73)
January 7

Marla Timmins Harlan (C73)
November 25, 2025

Larry E. Adams (GC76)
January 10

James Boley (GC76)
October 17, 2025

Susan M. Ogden-Malouf (GC77, GC81)
January 2

Robert S. Corker (C79)
December 24, 2025

Denise M. Fleming (C83)
January 3

Cindy Boomgarden Taylor (C83)
February 12

Arnell Brady (GC84)
June 29

Sheila Saperstein (GC88)
January 11

Beverly Whitmire (GC88)
February 8

Robert Lueders (GC95)
March 23

Brittany Blum Bradford (C14)
April 12

Merit Sullivan (GC18)
November 27, 2025

Adam Nathaniel Goodkind (GC23)
October 30, 2025

Jasmine "Jas" Lee (GC24)
February 1



Josephine Louis (C52), a generous supporter of the school and namesake of the Josephine Louis Theater in the Virginia Wadsworth Wirtz Center for the Performing Arts, died on January 25 at age 95. She studied theatre at Northwestern and worked as a copywriter for an advertising agency before marrying John J. Louis Jr., for whom the Evanston campus's radio/television/film production and teaching facility is named. Josephine served on the women's board and with her husband was instrumental in creating the Wirtz Center, which opened in 1980 as the Theatre and Interpretation Center.

Her husband was appointed ambassador to the United Kingdon by Ronald Reagan, and while in London, Josephine invested in Eximious, a British specialty gift store that she brought stateside as a catalog operation and eventually fashioned into a shop in Winnetka, Illinois. Active in philanthropy and serving on several boards, Josephine and her husband raised their family in Winnetka and traveled extensively. She is survived by three children, twelve grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.



Robert Heide (C57), playwright and a spokesman of sorts for the erstwhile bohemian scene of downtown Manhattan, died on December 17, 2025, at age 91. His 1965 play *The Bed* was among the first to emerge in the off-off-Broadway scene and was used in part in Andy Warhol's 1966 film *Chelsea Girls*. Heide's other plays include *Why Tuesday Never Has a Blue Monday*, *Suburban Tremens*, and *Crisis of Identity*. His ubiquity downtown made him an oft-quoted source for writers and historians looking into everything from Stonewall to Warhol, and his experimental plays made him a darling of the 1960s New York theatre scene. He cultivated eclectic collections of pop culture curios and wrote several books on cultural topics with his spouse, John Gilman, who survives him.



Radha Subramanyam (GC92, GC96), former president and chief research and analytics officer at CBS Corporation, died on January 6 at age 55. Subramanyam left New Dehli, India, to attend Northwestern, where she earned a doctorate in the screen cultures program. She held faculty positions at Vassar College and New York University before pivoting to research, working for such companies as MTV, Yahoo, iHeartMedia, and Nielsen. At CBS she oversaw audience measurement, ad analytics, social media measurement, and other research operations. She was honored as a top woman in business by the National Women's Conference and served on boards for the Center for Communication and other organizations. She is survived by her husband, Joseph Walser (G WCAS97), and their two children.



Gregory Mitchell (GC12), a professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Williams College in Massachusetts, died on January 21 at age 46. Originally from Ottawa, Illinois, Mitchell received his doctorate in performance studies from Northwestern. He served as a Mellon Fellow in Gender Studies, was awarded the Presidential Fellowship, and earned membership in Northwestern's Society of Fellows. School of Communication dean E. Patrick Johnson, then a professor, was his doctoral adviser.

In 2012 Mitchell joined Williams College, where he chaired the program in women's, gender, and sexuality studies and held an affiliate appointment in anthropology and sociology. A prolific writer and editor of academic texts, he was also a fearless advocate for legal and human rights, a passion that took him around the world to assist in asylum cases. He taught courses on subjects including queer ethnographic writing, sexual economies, transnational sexuality studies, and masculinity and popular culture. He is survived by his partner, Nico Amador, and his parents, siblings, and nephews.



Gerald Thomas Goodnight, a former communication studies faculty member, influential scholar of rhetoric and argumentation, and winning debate coach, died on July 28 at age 77. He taught at Northwestern from 1975 to 2002; many of his doctoral advisees became prominent in the field of communication studies. He was coach of the Northwestern Debate Society and coached the 1978 and 1980 winning teams at the National Debate Championship.

He later joined the faculty of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, where he was director of doctoral studies until 2013. He was named a distinguished scholar in 2014 by the National Communication Association, received numerous lifetime achievement awards, served as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, and was named one of the 20th century's top five argumentation scholars by the American Forensic Association. He is survived by his wife, Lynn, three children, and six grandchildren.

Partnership

The world's stage



A global talent agency brings A-level access straight to Evanston.

In a new partnership with the Gersh agency, students get face time with entertainment industry executives, thought leaders, and change agents—no plane ticket required. Cochaired by former University trustee David Gersh (C70) and his brother Bob, the agency has been expanding its outreach to emphasize partnerships, community, and immersive learning. For Northwestern, that focus spells a big win.

"After spending some time in the industry, I started to notice what was missing," says Jayson Council, inaugural head of culture at Gersh. "When we think about entry points to a career, you can always start that pipeline earlier."

Council has taken that idea to heart. Among several initiatives he's led, Gersh U is a "mini, portable university" that sends a dozen agency staff members to sit down with undergraduates and "teach them Industry 101+," as he puts it. This past spring marked the first collaboration with Northwestern—Gersh's fourth university partner.

"Northwestern was a natural fit," Council says, because of the "location, proximity to the industry, accessibility to the campus, and the great connectivity between the alumni we have at Gersh and the institution."

At the end of April, 20 juniors and seniors from all SoC majors participated in a two-day intensive led by Gersh staff from eight of its departments. The plan is for the Gersh U partnership to continue indefinitely.

David Gersh, familiar with Wildcats, sees the potential: "We want to hire graduates from the best colleges, and so many from Northwestern are very knowledgeable about film and television—good people with good business heads."

"This is unique, in that they're coming to us," adds Laura Myers, SoC's director of external programs, internships, and career services. "Students get exposure to different agents and executives throughout the departments at Gersh."

As creative industries evolve at lightning speed—challenged by AI and new distribution models—understanding the business has become as essential as mastering the art. The changes also underscore the importance of representation in an increasingly complicated landscape.

"With programs like this, not only does Gersh get to give back," Council says, "but more important, we know we're making sure that the future of the entertainment industry has great young people ready to enter. They are in Gersh U today, but these will be our colleagues in just two years."



Dialogue

Dialogue is published for the alumni of the School of Communication. Send comments and suggestions to **dialogue@northwestern.edu** or *Dialogue*, Northwestern University School of Communication, Evanston, Illinois 60208. Send address changes to **BioUpdate@northwestern.edu**.

Editors Kerry Trotter, Jeff Strayer

Designer Henry McGill

Photography
Courtesy Apple TV+, Justin Barbin, Shane Collins, Greg Endries, Greg Fiore, Roman Iwasiwka, Courtesy Megan Roberts, Donyale West/Shutterstock

10-26/29.8M/JS-HM/3665
©2026 Northwestern University. All rights reserved.
Produced by Global Marketing and Communications.



Blown cover: Celeste Shuman (C26) gives her "blank" stare at SoC's convocation in June. Worry not, the theatre major and psychology minor received her diploma in the mail, as is the custom for all Northwestern graduates.

Northwestern | COMMUNICATION

Northwestern University
School of Communication
70 Arts Circle Drive
Evanston, Illinois 60208

