



February 2026

From the College

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones”
-John Maynard Keynes

We are in the heart of the semester! What an exciting time to be on campus. Students are all around us, our colleagues are presenting and publishing papers, and every couple of days we get the sunshine and warm weather that remind us that spring is right around the corner. First things first. Later this month, on February 17, we are co-hosting the President’s Ascend Education Conference in the University Center. We have some outstanding speakers ([see the flyer here](#)) and I hope you will join me in representing our College. If you have not yet signed up to attend (and its free), you can do so here ([link to the registration form here](#)).

We are also looking for feedback from the College’s faculty and staff on the work undertaken by our two Task Forces last fall. One is presenting a scenario of restructuring our academic departments by moving several programs (their report is [here](#)). The other is proposing a revision to our shared governance structure (their report is [here](#)). We value your feedback and input, and you can provide that by either calling either Associate Dean Zanskas or me, or by filling out these feedback forms. [Shared Governance Task Force feedback form](#) and [Academic Program Task Force feedback form](#).

I have had the privilege of meeting multiple faculty candidates during the past couple of months and hope that you are taking the opportunity to sit in on candidate research presentations and teaching demonstrations. If every search is successful, we will be welcoming nine new faculty members to the College this coming fall! Your engagement with candidates, and in welcoming new faculty, helps to build a culture in our College that conveys value to each of us. I appreciate your engagement in this process. I also hope to have news of the hiring of an Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs soon and appreciate the hard work of the committee that vetted nearly 50 applications!

And speaking of new faces, if you get a chance please stop by and say hello to Evelyn Palmer in the Dean’s office this spring. Evelyn is visiting us for the first half of the year to work with our social media, marketing, and our River City Partnership. A native of Sardis, Mississippi, she has spent the last 20 years in Los Angeles appearing on a number of television news programs. She has also authored “You Are What You Tweet” and has an excellent national reputation for her social media and marketing skills. We are lucky to have her for a few months so please help me welcome her.

Let me close by saying thank you to all of you for the work you do. We have outstanding students and their success is a direct reflection of your work and dedication to them.

Happenings: What's Going On This Month



February 17: ASCEND: Educating For Character, Building Values In a Changing World
Maxine A. Smith University Center | Bluff Room 304
10:00 a.m.– 2:00 p.m.

February 18: Writing Retreat— Dr. James Meindl
University Center Beale Room | 9 AM–2 PM | Snacks, coffee, and lunch provided
RSVP | jmeindl@memphis.edu

February 18: Staff Leadership Council
Ball Hall 124 | 11 AM–12:15 PM

February 25: Teaching Series | Universal Design and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities with Tara Buchanann, Director of Disability Resources for Students

ASCEND College of Education Conference

The College of Education will host ASCEND: Educating for Character – Building Values in a Changing World on February 17, 2026, from 10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. in the Maxine A. Smith University Center, Bluff Room 304.

The conference will feature keynote speakers Dr. Mike Brown and Dr. Jason Baehr and will explore character education and values-based leadership in today’s educational settings.

Those interested are encouraged to register.

 [Register Here](#)

Research & Scholarship Highlights

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University of Memphis College of Education Faculty Awarded Prestigious Spencer Foundation Research Grant

MEMPHIS, Tenn.- Dr. Nikki Wright, assistant professor of Leadership and Policy Studies, and Dr. Matthew Panozzo, assistant professor of Literacy in the Department of Instruction and

Curriculum Leadership, at the University of Memphis College of Education have been awarded a highly competitive research grant from the Spencer Foundation.

[Read more here »](#)



Dr. Eli Jones on Fairness in Music Performance Assessment

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Eli Jones, assistant professor in Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research, recently published a study in SAGE Journals exploring how the design of music performance assessments affects fairness for students. His research shows that when

judges rate different groups of performers with no overlap, student rankings can shift in ways that don't reflect true achievement. The study recommends adding shared performances among judges or applying a statistical adjustment to create more consistent, comparable, and fair results.

[Read more about Dr. Jones's research »](#)



Dr. LaSheba Hilliard Receives Grant for Inclusive Literacy Project

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. LaSheba Hilliard, faculty member in Instruction and Curriculum Leadership, has received a grant from the Tennessee Council for Exceptional Children to support her project, *Adapting Classroom Books for Learners with Intellectual Disabilities*. The project will provide professional development for elementary special education teachers, equipping them with research-based strategies to adapt grade-level texts into accessible, engaging and age-respectful materials aligned with students' individualized needs and IEP goals. The funding period runs from December 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026.

We are proud to recognize Dr. Hilliard's work advancing inclusive literacy and instructional practice.

For more research publications, check out the @COE LinkedIn and Facebook page



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COE Community Highlights



Dr. Genia Bettencourt Receives NASPA Early Career Award

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Genia M. Bettencourt, faculty member in the Leadership department, has been named a recipient of the 2026 Faculty Council Early Career Award from National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

This national award recognizes early-career faculty for excellence in research, teaching and service within the student affairs field. Dr. Bettencourt will be formally recognized at the 2026

NASPA Conference in Kansas City.

Please join us in congratulating Dr. Bettencourt on this outstanding achievement.



Dr. Dan Collier Recognized by The Chronicle of Higher Education

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Dan Collier, faculty member in the Department of Leadership, has been recognized by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of a limited group of influential researchers in higher education over the past 25 years.

This distinguished group includes scholars and leaders whose work has helped shape the national landscape of higher education research and policy. Dr. Collier's inclusion reflects the impact of his scholarship and his national influence in the field.

[Read more here »](#)



Leadership Appointment for COE Associate Dean

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Steve Zankas, Associate Dean in the College of Education at the University of Memphis, has been appointed Board Member at Large for the CADREI Associate Deans of Research Network.

This appointment reflects Dr. Zankas' leadership and continued service to research and scholarship within higher education.



Leadership Appointment for CREP Research Director

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Dr. Todd Zoblotsky, Research Director at the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) within the College of Education at the University of Memphis, has been appointed to the Books from Birth Advisory Council.

Dr. Zoblotsky also serves as a Research Development Faculty Fellow, supporting efforts to strengthen research capacity and funding across the university.

These appointments reflect Dr. Zoblotsky's leadership in educational research and his continued service to initiatives that connect research, policy, and practice.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT





ICL Alumna Dr. Brigitte Owens Brings Educational Leadership to the Business World

Dr. Brigitte Owens, a University of Memphis ICL alumna, spent nearly 30 years in education leadership before becoming vice president of commercial real estate at PRG Commercial Property Advisors. Her journey shows how a leadership-based education can open doors across industries.

[Read more about Dr. Owens »](#)



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Contact us: 3798 Walker Ave., Memphis, TN 38111 | 901.678.4265