

# CLA

College of Liberal Arts

EXPLORE/ENGAGE/ENRICH/EARN

Fall 2024 / Winter 2025 ■ vol. 12, no. 1



# DOCUMENTING DEMOCRACY



Hayes memorabilia collection puts U.S. and state politics on display on campus and in coursework



MIDDLE  
TENNESSEE  
STATE UNIVERSITY.

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mtsu.edu/liberalarts

Fall 2024 / Winter 2025 ■ vol. 12, no. 1

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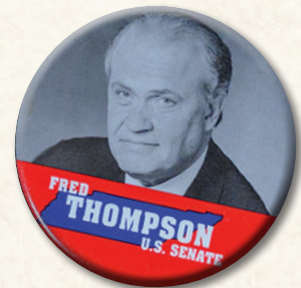
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# Dean's Letter



**Blue Horseshoe**  
A symbol of tradition  
and good fortune for  
Middle Tennessee State University.  
**THOSE WHO TOUCH THE BLUE HORSESHOE  
WILL BE GRANTED GOOD LUCK.**  
Idea created by the MTSU  
Guidance Center



# PROFOUND EFFECT



I have often been quoted as saying, “It is not how you start; it is how you finish.” I don’t know when I started using this aphorism, but I know I have applied it in many settings, whether in the workplace, in raising my children, or in community service environments. It speaks to the importance of finishing tasks well, leaving a place better than you found it, and making sure that you have had a positive impact on others by the time you are ready to move on to the next assignment.

When I really stop to think about it, how you start—the tone you set, the climate you create, the reputation you build—is vitally important too, and we cannot take it for granted.

As dean of MTSU’s College of Liberal Arts, my job is to support the faculty, staff, and students in the college and empower them to do their best. In this role, I work not only with those in my college but with others across campus and in the broader community as well. When we welcome new students, faculty, and staff, they know that they belong. They know they are an integral part of our community, fully accepted and able to participate in the life of the college.

This is due in large part to our shared liberal arts mindset. The liberal arts mindset is one of curiosity, acceptance, and inclusion of multiple perspectives that leads to greater creativity, better problem-solving capacity, and more effective communication. These shared values bring us together and allow our CLA departments, programs, and centers to have a tremendous impact in the lives of those we serve. When we meet like-minded individuals and groups in the community, we find partners in collaboration and service to help us support our faculty, staff, and students.

In this edition of *CLA Magazine*, you will learn about the myriad ways our college creates belonging, impacts our community, and builds legacies that last a lifetime. We appreciate your continued partnership to make a difference.

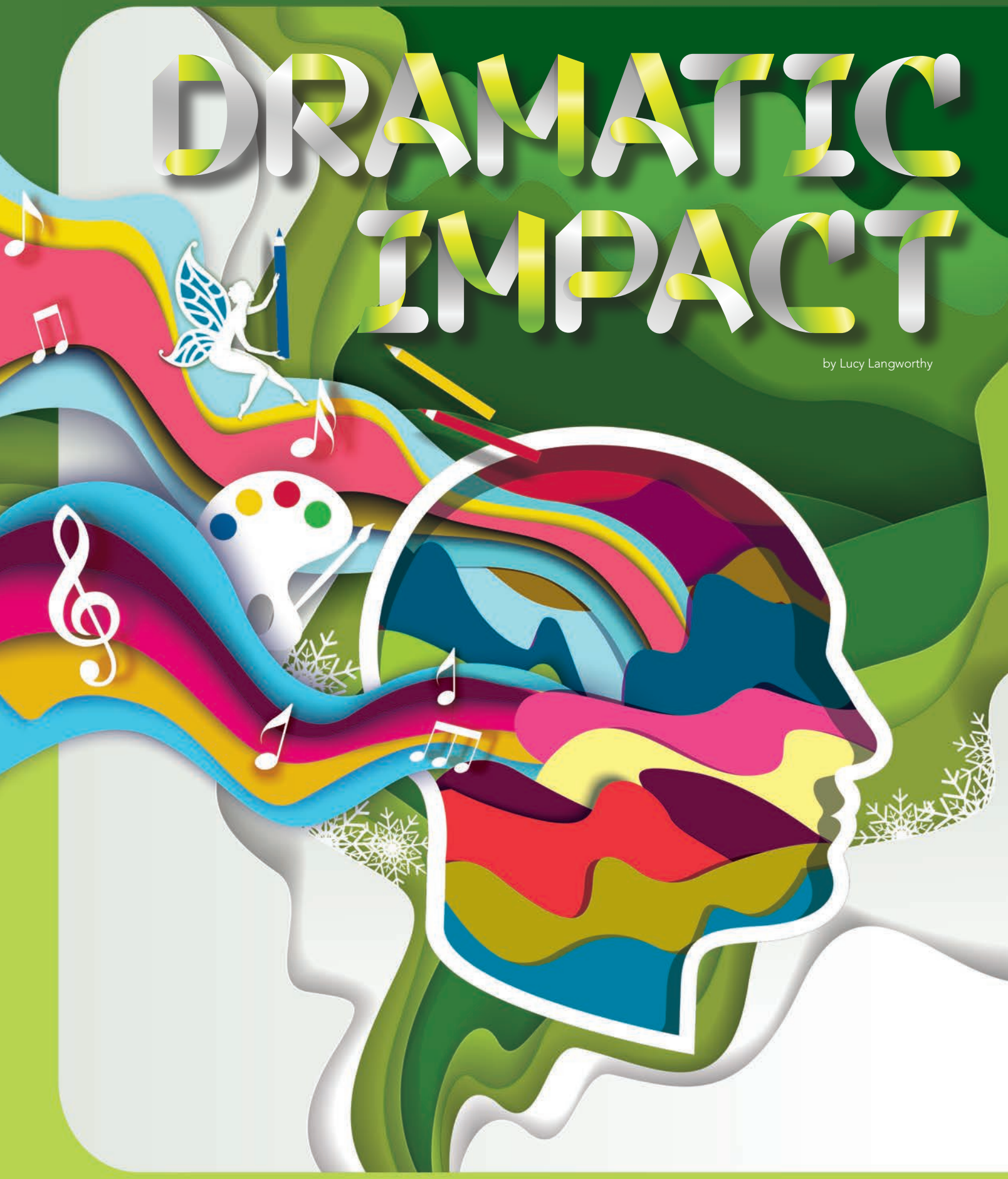
Whether it is how we start, how we finish, or everything that happens in between, I am so proud of what we stand for in the College of Liberal Arts. We meet students where they are, help them see that they have a place here, that they will leave us fully equipped to meet their expectations for their lives and, beyond that, be able to give back and make an even greater impact on those who follow. ■

—Leah Tolbert Lyons

Dean, College of Liberal Arts  
[leah.lyons@mtsu.edu](mailto:leah.lyons@mtsu.edu)

# DRAMAMATIC IMPACT

by Lucy Langworthy





# MTSU and local arts organizations generate \$52.4 million in economic activity

**“We are stronger together” is one of the most powerful phrases associated with the pandemic, and it certainly describes the continued partnership between the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) and the Rutherford Arts Alliance (RAA).**

This collaboration with community partners has paid off, with a recent study detailing how the Rutherford County arts and culture sector generated a staggering \$52.4 million in economic activity for the county in 2022–23. MTSU partnered with RAA to gain this data for the sixth Arts and Economic Prosperity Study (AEP6), coordinated by Americans for the Arts.

With assistance from MTSU’s Center for Chinese Music and Culture, School of Music, and Department of Theatre and Dance, RAA was able to get valuable feedback on the arts and culture for AEP6, and the results were impressive. Events at MTSU, along with many others throughout Rutherford County, showed a 68% increase in economic growth in the county from a similar 2017 study, confirming that the arts sector is a major driver of economic growth in Rutherford County.

This sector, which was among the most devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only helped people find joy and ward off isolation during the pandemic, but it also generated staggering amounts of economic activity locally during the study period. In Rutherford County alone, there was \$25.8 million in spending by arts and culture organizations and \$26.5 million in event-related spending by their audiences.

These findings, reported by 779 attendees from May 2022 through June 2023, make it clear that when a community funds the arts,

it not only builds a more beautiful, vibrant place to live, it also significantly stimulates its economy.

In Rutherford County, the study shows that the arts supported 915 jobs; generated \$9,476,808 in local, state, and federal tax revenue; and attracted 2,109 volunteers. It goes further to report that the average person spent \$37.97 beyond the cost of admission per event on things such as dining out, parking, and child care. And those visiting from outside the county spent more: 24.4% of attendees were non-local visitors who spent an average of \$57.24.

AEP6 is the largest and most inclusive study of its kind. It documents the economic and social contributions of arts and culture in 373 communities and regions representing all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

One new goal of the study was to measure not only the economic impact of the arts, but also the social impact. Of those surveyed, 87% of arts and culture attendees agreed that the activity or venue where they were “is inspiring a sense of pride in this neighborhood or community,” an affirmation of the transformative power of cultural engagement.

Such pride is well illustrated by the MTSU alumni who stay in our community to lead the way in arts and culture organizations. Alumna Regina Ward serves as executive director of the Center for the Arts (CFTA), which provides the community with 14 excellent productions each year—two of which are performed at



*MTSU alum Jeff Lysyczyn, executive director of Rutherford Arts Alliance*



*Center for the Arts' Peter Pan performance at MTSU*



*Darren Levin (center) helping students Sean McDevitt (l) and Sammy Webster gain professional experience in Nashville*



*Michael Baggaly and artists Ginny Togrye and Sharon Kolli with a scale model for 14-foot sculpture in the "heart of the state"*





MTSU's Tucker Theatre to accommodate larger audiences. In 2023, CFTA brought *Peter Pan* and *White Christmas* to the MTSU campus to sell-out crowds. With roots deep in education, Ward hopes to build on CFTA's collaboration with the University by creating internships for MTSU Music, Theatre, and Dance students at the center. CFTA also gives many MTSU students opportunities to appear in its productions or offer valuable technical assistance.

CLA faculty also lead the way in the middle Tennessee arts community. Michael Baggary, an associate professor of Art, is literally changing the arts landscape in Murfreesboro. Baggary is working with RAA artists Ginny Togrye and Sharon Kolli to design and create a 14-foot bronze sculpture—signaling Murfreesboro as the geographical center of Tennessee. This heart-shaped sculpture will also serve as a symbol of MTSU's commitment to artistic innovation and community enrichment.

Furthermore, MTSU students are actively contributing to the local arts scene, with students providing technical expertise to theaters in Nashville under the guidance of Theatre Professor Darren Levin, for instance. Levin understands the importance of giving students off-campus opportunities to complement the skills they are acquiring in the classroom and MTSU's own performance spaces.

"These experiences provide incredible opportunities for our students to gain professional credit and begin to establish their design and technology careers in Metro Nashville and beyond," Levin said. "An essential part of a healthy arts community is nurturing the arts ecosystem in the area. Seeing the growth of our students is incredible and truly embodies hands-on learning."

Collaboration is an essential part of the artistic process, and CLA is committed to partnerships that will continue to impact our campus and community for years to come. Earlier this year, RAA embarked on its next chapter by appointing its first executive director, Jeff Lysyczyn. An MTSU alumnus with 30 years of experience in the music industry, Lysyczyn is excelling in the role and working to build even stronger relationships with local artists and leaders.

The message is clear—when communities invest in the arts and culture, they are investing in a sector that stimulates the economy, supports local jobs, and contributes to a more livable, innovative, and creative community, one that MTSU and RAA are creating together. ■

*Lucy Langworthy is assistant to the dean in MTSU's College of Liberal Arts.*



## Americans for the Arts

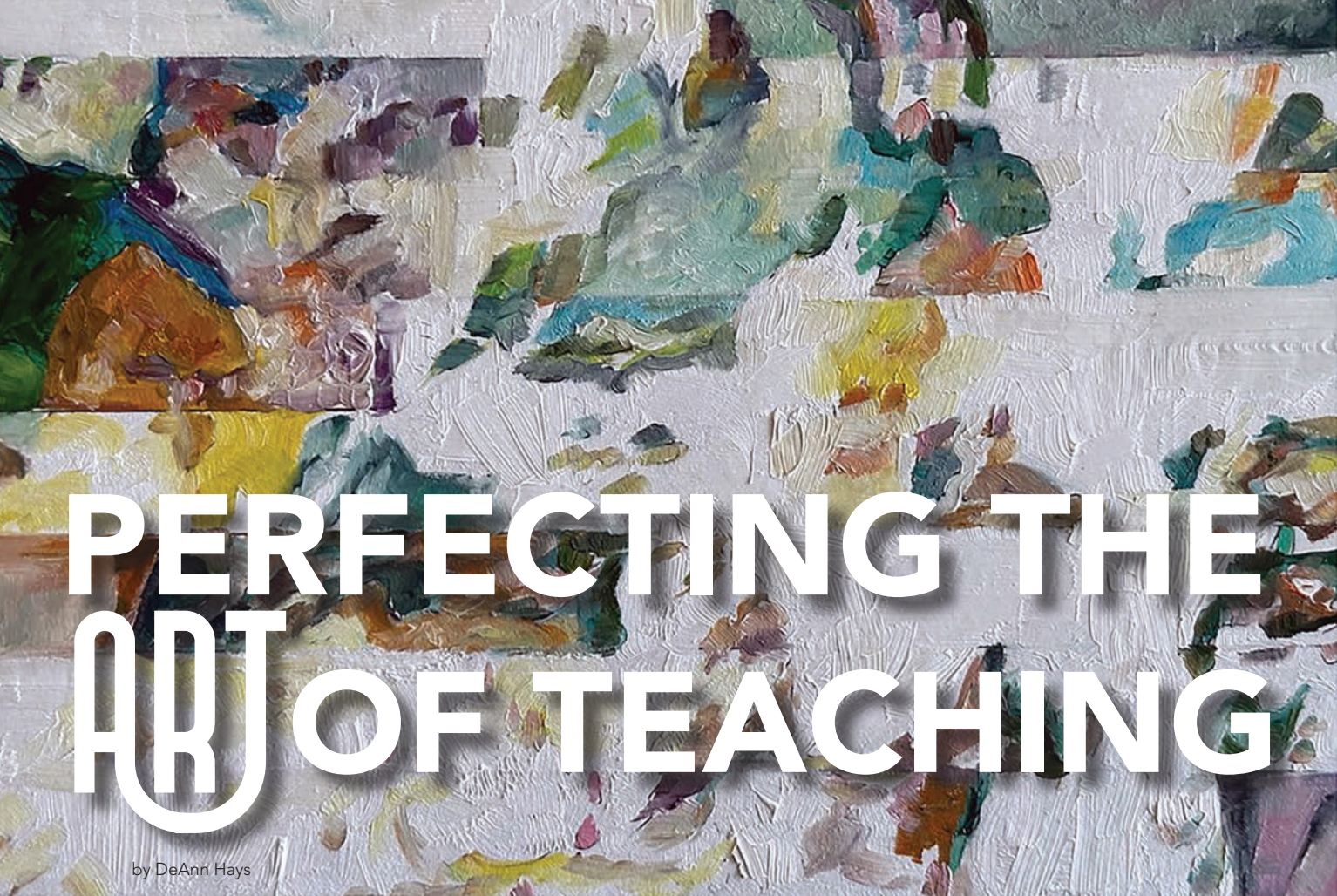
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## ARTS & ECONOMIC PROSPERITY 6



RUTHERFORD  
ARTS ALLIANCE

915  
JOBS CREATED



by DeAnn Hays

*Sisavanh Phouthavong Houghton's Whispers of Hope oil painting, 2024*

## Painting professor honored for faculty excellence by MTSU's athletic conference

Community engagement has long been a focal point for Sisavanh Phouthavong Houghton, an MTSU Art professor who teaches others to create, think through a problem, and see different points of view through various lenses.

Her excellence inside and outside the classroom recently received yet another honor, MTSU's inaugural Conference USA Faculty Achievement Award from the Blue Raiders' athletic conference.

"I was blown away by receiving this award," she said. "I think it's amazing that Conference USA (CUSA) is giving and awarding, or even highlighting and spotlighting, faculty who sometimes are in the background.

"We are always supporting the students, but also students who are athletes, who we know are working very hard academically and in sports. I've always been impressed by their ability to maintain their work ethic and their ability to see the importance of both sides of academics and sportsmanship."

Houghton has taught at MTSU for 20 years. She is a Lao American interdisciplinary visual artist who has had international exhibits in Italy and Greece and nationally at the Knoxville Museum of Art and the Susquehanna Art Museum in Pennsylvania. Her work is featured in the permanent collections at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga and the American Embassy in Paramaribo, Suriname.

Additionally, she has led community art projects with nonprofit organizations such as SEAD (South East Asian Diaspora), Legacies of War, the Frist Art Museum, Oasis Center, and the Center for Refugees+Immigrants of Tennessee.

CLA Dean Leah Tolbert Lyons called Houghton "a gifted artist who shares her expertise with students as an engaging



instructor—whether in the classroom or across the globe through study abroad. Her dedication to her students and their success exemplifies what a professor should be; Sisavanh represents the college well both on and off campus.”

University officials said Houghton was selected from many competitive applications by a committee of faculty colleagues.

MTSU has been a member of CUSA, among the nation’s best athletic conferences in student-athlete academic performance, since 2014. Earlier this year, the conference established the Faculty Achievement and Professor of the Year awards to honor the exceptional achievements of faculty members at conference universities.

“I am thrilled Sisavanh won the first-ever CUSA Faculty Achievement Award at MTSU,” Provost Mark Byrnes said. “This is an initiative to recognize and honor the great academic work going on across the conference. This action by the conference reminds us all that the main reason we’re here is for academics.”

Houghton earned her B.F.A. at the University of Kansas and her M.F.A. at Southern Illinois University. Among many awards and recognitions, she won Best in Show for the 38th Positive/Negative Exhibition in 2023 and was awarded a Tri-Star Current Art Fund grant from the Warhol Foundation in 2022.

At MTSU, she has won the Non-Instructional Assignment Award and received the Outstanding Teaching and Distinguished Creative Activity awards, and she has been recognized as an outstanding mentor through the Disability and Access Center.

“It’s been a pleasure to give back to my students, to the faculty and service, and even my own research,” Houghton said. “As a Southeast Asian American, it has been important to me to be at the forefront in my teaching, service, and research. I continue to serve MTSU and both the local and refugee communities. It is with great pleasure to give back to my students and to MTSU, which has recognized me with numerous awards and grants through my journey here at Middle Tennessee.” ■

*Houghton accepts MTSU’s inaugural Conference USA Faculty Achievement Award, presented by University Provost Mark Byrnes.*





# A Place to Call Home



## Communication Studies faculty collaborate to create belonging

by Mary Beth Asbury

There are many reasons why people choose to go into academia. Some desire to share information through teaching, doing research, and/or mentoring others. When I decided to enter academia, I did so with one primary goal: to “speak life” into others, ensuring that others always felt seen, heard, and loved for who they are.

The best way for me to achieve this goal was to learn how to communicate effectively to others, so I chose to major and concentrate my studies in the field of Communication Studies, which studies human interaction (i.e., how we use symbols to create messages and meanings). Through teaching, I was easily able to encourage others through my lectures and activities in the classroom, yet I never anticipated this desire would carry into other areas.

However, that opportunity presented itself in 2021, when I was asked to serve as interim chair for MTSU’s Department of Communication Studies and then was named chair in 2022. When I started leading the department, I saw that it is not only students who need to know they are seen, loved, and heard, but everyone does, including faculty, staff, and administration. As such, I set a goal to create a department that promoted belonging in many ways.

As a faculty, we promoted belonging with one another by having open and honest conversations, often about difficult subjects. We created space for each other’s differences and respect for each other’s views. We celebrated accomplishments of individuals and teams, and we rallied together when support was needed to get through a challenging time.

As we have become a more united and cohesive faculty, we cannot help but share that spirit with others. Since we feel like we belong here, we want others to feel like they belong here, including students, faculty, staff, and administration.













To encourage belonging, we focus on building relationships at every level. Communication is at the heart of all relationships—family, friends, romantic relationships, work relationships, etc. One of the ways that we create these relationships is often through “breaking bread” together, and as such, a lot of our activities to create belonging revolve around food.

Our department works incredibly hard to make sure students, faculty, staff, and administration feel valued and welcomed in Communication Studies. In fall 2023, our department held an ice cream social, where anyone on campus could get free ice cream between classes on a sweltering day. We had more than 100 people stop by and get a scoop of ice cream as they were walking to class.


While the event was aimed at students, we welcomed faculty, staff, and administrators because we value all relationships on campus. In fall 2024, we held another ice cream social and expanded the event with a fellow CLA department—the newly merged Political and Global Affairs—to have not only ice cream but snow cones as well.

Additionally, we hosted two tailgating events before football games in 2023. We welcomed all to eat, play games, and socialize before the Homecoming and Veterans Day games.

To promote community within the College of Liberal Arts, we also put on a chili cookoff, where CLA faculty and staff brought their best chilis to win the coveted title of Best Chili 2023. Robb McDaniel (Political and Global Affairs) took home the trophy for Best Non-Traditional Chili, and Pat Richey (Communication Studies) captured the title of Best Traditional Chili. This community-building event reinforced not only to our students but also to other faculty that Communication Studies is a place where everyone is welcomed.

Opportunities to break bread together continue throughout the rest of the academic year. We also connect with our students through a pizza event, a hot chocolate event, and the much anticipated “Taco ‘Bout Communication”—a mass advising event where students can meet with their CLA and faculty advisors while eating tacos for lunch, provided by the department.

Relationship-building is at the heart of all we do in Communication Studies. Through building and maintaining relationships, my original desire for pursuing a career in academia to “speak life” into others is being fulfilled. However, I never imagined it would expand into so many areas of my academic life, and I am ever grateful for the opportunity to show others a spirit of encouragement and be surrounded by a team that also values inclusiveness.



**One of the ways that we  
create these relationships is  
often through “breaking  
bread” together.**



Ultimately, we simply want all to know that Communication Studies is a place where everyone is welcome just as they are.

Our department ends each academic year with our favorite event—the Communication Studies Senior Ceremony. This departmental recognition for our students graduating in the spring and summer semesters allows for a personalized send-off as our students enter the next chapter of their lives. We encourage students to bring their friends and families to this ceremony, where they receive a special medal signifying that they are MTSU Communication Studies graduates.

During the event, we do not simply call students' names and present them the medal—we read messages about each student from faculty who have had them in class. Students graduate from the Department of Communication Studies knowing that they are more than just a name to us. We have a relationship with them, and we hope to always be a place they can call home. ■

*Mary Beth Asbury is a professor of Communication and chair of the Department of Communication Studies.*









# ARTISTRY IN MOTION



For almost 40 years, Tennessee Governor's School for the Arts builds a community of aspiring artists

by Kate Goodwin

Like the more than 10,000 Tennessee Governor's School for the Arts (GSFTA) alumni before them, the 286 talented high school students in the 2024 cohort spent an intense summer learning from expert faculty, and each other, in the creative spaces on campus.

These students from across the state auditioned and interviewed to spend three weeks on campus taking a deep dive into developing their artistry and creativity. In addition to earning college credit during the program, they get to envision their careers as arts professionals and see real-world applications of their craft.

For many of them, this experience will help determine future college and career aspirations.

Then-Gov. Lamar Alexander created GSFTA in 1984 as one of the original three Governor's Schools in Tennessee, with MTSU being the obvious choice for a program focused on the arts. The first cohort of young musicians were welcomed to campus in 1985, and theater and visual art students were added a year later. The program expanded to include dance in 1987 and then filmmaking in 2009.

## Learning by Doing

For the 39th year, a talented group of faculty and staff from across MTSU and the country shared their expertise with the GSFTA students. The program also employs current MTSU students as counselors, which enables them to work collaboratively with Governor's School faculty and serve in leadership roles with the high school students. Named director in 2022, I am also excited to build upon the program guided over the years by my predecessors—MTSU faculty members

Tom Naylor (1985–94), James Brooks (1995–2000), Terry Jolley (2001), Dale E. McGilliard (2003–08), and Raphael Bundage (2008–21).

Through the program hosted by MTSU's College of Liberal Arts, students learn experientially by creating, performing, and producing their own work. Several also explored off-campus art experiences last June, including field trips to the Frist Art Museum, Tennessee Performing Arts Center, Third Coast Improv, and Street Theatre in Nashville. And they also learned from experiences with visiting artists who performed on campus during GSFTA.

The visiting artists included Alex & Olmsted, a theater duo of MTSU alumni Alex Vernon and Sarah Olmsted, who returned to present their critically acclaimed and delightfully creative mix of theater, puppetry, design, and movement in their original production *Hubba Hubba*.

Sankofa Drum and Dance ensemble had the students on their feet in Tucker Theatre with its high-energy, interactive performance that combined the polyrhythms of African drumming with the dynamic dances of West Africa. And renowned clarinetist and GSFTA alumnus Bixby Kennedy was in residence with our music students. During his week on campus, Kennedy conducted several masterclasses with our student musicians and then played an evening concert with GSFTA music faculty.







## All the Campus Is a Stage (or Screen)

The culmination of each GSFTA summer is a series of finale events. Both the theater and dance finale performances took place in Tucker Theatre. Theater students presented a showcase of musical theater numbers and acting scenes designed by the theater design students. The dance finale had five original numbers choreographed by five of our GSFTA dance faculty, ranging from ballet to flamenco to modern.

In Hinton Hall, the music finales consisted of opera medleys and a choral ensemble performance from the vocal music students. Meanwhile, the instrumental students performed a piano recital, wind ensemble concert, orchestra concert, and chamber ensembles on the Saunders Fine Arts front lawn. The highlight of the music finales each year is Beethoven's *Fantasy in C Minor for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra*, a performance which brings every music student to the stage to perform together.

The Governor's School film finale, presented in the Keathley University Center theater, premiered four student films that were conceived, written, cast, shot, and edited by film students in the three weeks of GSFTA. The visual art finale consists of a gallery exhibition throughout Todd Hall of the student work generated in their various studio classes during the program, including sculpture, graphic design, painting, sketchbook, animation, photography, drawing, and ceramics.

While the hope is that Governor's School students will have deepened their understanding of their own creative processes throughout their whole time at MTSU, it was exciting to share their work with each other, their families, and friends during the two-day GSFTA finale celebrations.

Scan QR code for GSFTA 2024 playlist with finale performances.









## Building A Community of Artists

The most frequent sentiment shared by students at the program's conclusion each year is the significance of getting to spend time with peers who are as passionate and focused as our students feel they are themselves. We are grateful that MTSU has been the summer home for young artists as they discover both the joy and rigor of a study in the arts. And the Governor's School invites you to see Tennessee's talented high school students firsthand.

Next summer, GSFTA will celebrate its 40th anniversary and will include opportunities for GSFTA alumni to join the 2025 cohort in commemorating four decades of inspiring young Tennesseans to pursue a creative life. In looking forward to the next 40 years, the goal of GSFTA is to remain committed to providing a top-notch arts intensive experience for students while returning to the original intentions of Gov. Alexander—that GSFTA be provided to every student selected for the program free of charge. With the continued support of the Tennessee General Assembly, GSFTA alumni, and friends, the Governor's School arts program hosted by MTSU can work to build a community of artists who will enrich the lives of Tennesseans today and for years to come. ■

*Kate Goodwin is an associate professor of Theatre and director of the Tennessee Governor's School for the Arts.*







2024



1993



2023



2024



2024



2021



# DOCUMENTING DEMOCRACY

by Louis M. Kyriakouides



## Hayes memorabilia collection puts U.S. and state politics on display on campus and in coursework

**How do candidates for office communicate with voters? Television, radio, and online platforms fill this role. But candidates and their campaigns also create posters, signs, buttons, bumper stickers, and themed merchandise to build name identification and create excitement for their candidacy. These artifacts comprise a rich heritage of material culture documenting American democracy.**

Often, these items do not survive the campaigns for which they were created. However, prominent Tennessee political leader and businessman Johnny Hayes (1941–2008) loved American politics, and it fueled a passion for collecting political memorabilia. Over the years, he assembled one of the largest

political collections in the United States and the most important collection documenting the history of Tennessee politics. In 2019, Hayes' children—Craig Hayes, Amy Hayes, and Mary Kate Mouser—donated their father's extensive collection to the Albert Gore Research Center so that future generations of students, teachers, scholars, and the public may learn and benefit from the collection.

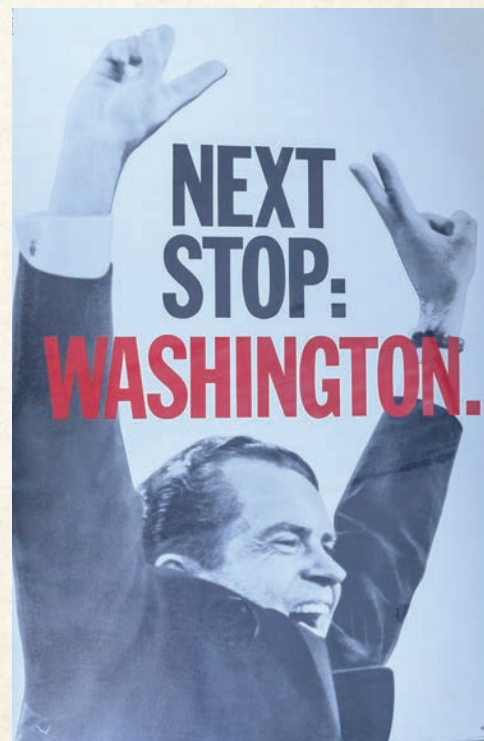
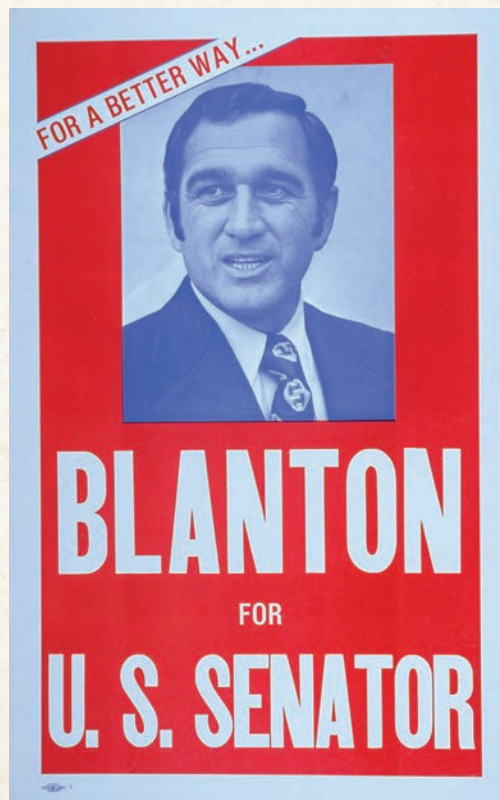
Hayes made his mark in a career devoted to public service. He served as the financial chair of the congressional, senatorial, and presidential campaigns of Al Gore (son of Albert Gore Sr., an MTSU alumnus and former U.S. senator) and the gubernatorial campaigns of Phil Bredesen. He also served as Tennessee's commissioner of Economic and Community Development during Gov. Ned McWherter's administration and on the board of directors of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Hayes was a generous mentor to young people wanting to be involved in public service. George Phillips, a prominent Nashville attorney, volunteered for Al Gore's 1984 U.S. Senate campaign when he was an undergraduate student. Phillips recalled that Hayes was "a great mentor to me." His experience with Gore's campaign led to serving as a staff member of Gore's office and then a long career in public service. Phillips also noted that Hayes "had an enormous heart for people."





Johnny Hayes with political memorabilia from his collection







*Former U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander visiting MTSU's Gore Center and viewing items from the Hayes Collection during a 2019 visit*





## On the Trail and on the Hunt

Hayes was always on the lookout for interesting political items. His service in Tennessee's government in the 1990s required him to travel across the state. Ronnie Steine, a friend and fellow political memorabilia collector, recalled that Hayes made a point of visiting local antique shops and flea markets always on the hunt for an interesting political button, poster, or banner. Hayes displayed his materials in a small building next to his home.

"Showing off his political memorabilia was his greatest joy," daughter Amy Hayes said. "Every time you walked into the building where the collection was housed at his home, it was a new history lesson."

The collection itself is enormous. Gore Center archivist Hannah Meller has been overseeing the processing and digitization of the collection. She notes that the Hayes Collection "contains thousands of buttons, hundreds of political posters and paper documents, and hundreds more three-dimensional objects, like busts of John F. Kennedy, presidential glassware, shirts, donkey and elephant statues, hats, food products, [and even politically themed] toys."

The collection holds important 19th-century items, including prints from James K. Polk's 1844 campaign for president. There is a large muslin Lincoln-Johnson banner from the 1864 presidential election. Every 20th-century presidential campaign and most of the Republican and Democratic nominating conventions are well documented with buttons, banners, posters, and programs. Some of Meller's favorite items in the collection are a set of bandanas and scarves with eye-catching campaign messages, including a Ronald Reagan scarf from the 1980 Republican convention.

The Hayes Collection's strength is in its documentation of Tennessee candidates and campaigns, from gubernatorial campaigns, congressional campaigns, and even local races for sheriff and judges that tell the story of Tennessee's democracy. There are posters and buttons from Albert Gore Sr.'s and Al

Gore's campaigns, as well as items from the campaigns of several former U.S. senators from Tennessee, Lamar Alexander, Bill Brock, Bill Frist, Estes Kefauver, Jim Sasser, and Fred Thompson. The collection contains one of the hallmark flannel shirts worn by Alexander in his 1978 walk across Tennessee in his gubernatorial campaign.

## Preserving Political Legacy

The processing of the Hayes Collection has been fully integrated into the archival training mission of the Gore Center. Meller began working on the Hayes Collection while a graduate student in fall 2019, soon after the memorabilia arrived at the Gore Center.

In 2021, a grant-writing team led by CLA Dean Leah Tolbert Lyons secured funding for the processing of the collection. This allowed Meller, recently graduated with a History M.A. with a Public History concentration, to join the Gore Center's full-time staff. The grant also supported graduate assistants and the creation of a digitization lab for oversized archival materials. The team was able to process a significant portion of the collection and create digital images of over 1,000 of the most compelling items, which are now available online.

Processing the collection proved to be an intensive education in American political history for the Gore Center's student archivists and staff. Each item needed to be researched so that it could be accurately described and placed in historical context. Creating digital images of the oversized posters required learning new technical and database skills. Older, brittle posters had to be encapsulated in Mylar film to preserve them. Students learned about the importance of shielding items from ultraviolet light and how to preserve older fabric artifacts. The many Public History graduate students who have worked on the Hayes Collection have gotten unequalled hands-on training in archives and museum techniques and processes that helped launch their professional careers.





## Democracy on Display

In October 2024, the Gore Center staff and students curated an exhibition of selections from the Hayes Collection titled “The Art & History of Political Campaign Communication: Selections from the Johnny Hayes Political Memorabilia Collection at the Albert Gore Research Center.” As center director, I was assisted by Public History graduate student Logan Williamson in choosing almost 100 of the most historically significant items for showing in MTSU’s Todd Art Gallery.

To launch the exhibit, the Gore Center sponsored a panel discussion on political communication featuring a panel of prominent Tennessee political leaders and scholars. Mark Tipps, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist’s first chief of staff, joined former U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper’s chief of staff Lisa

Quigley, former state House Speaker and current Distinguished Visiting Professor Beth Harwell, and MTSU Political Science Professor Kent Syler to discuss how candidates communicate their positions and policies to the public. A reception followed where Hayes’ friends and colleagues gathered to remember his service and celebrate American democracy.

Beyond this exhibit, the Hayes Collection is already widely used in the classroom by faculty and students at MTSU. Syler uses the materials in courses on campaign management and American politics, for instance, and I integrate the Hayes Collection into my Southern political history classes.

“The Johnny Hayes Collection delivers a visual history of political communications in Tennessee and the United States,” Syler said. “It is a great resource for students.” ■

*Louis M. Kyriakouides is a professor of History and director of the Albert Gore Research Center.*

*Louis Kyriakouides showing pieces from the Hayes Collection*







*Kent Syler (l) shows the Hayes Collection to Dean Leah Tolbert Lyons, student Logan McVey, and alumnus Jim Free during a visit to the Gore Center.*

*MTSU Provost Mark Byrnes (l), former state House Speaker and current Distinguished Visiting Professor Beth Harwell, and former Gov. Phil Bredesen at the Hayes exhibit opening*





# WON'T STOP 'TIL HE GETS ENOUGH

MTSU experience takes Devin Bowles from Jackson, Tennessee, to the Michael Jackson Broadway musical

by Leah Tolbert Lyons and Matthew Hibdon







*MJ: The Musical opening night performance at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre on Dec. 21, 2023*

As the first national tour of *MJ: The Musical* enters its second year on the road, MTSU Theatre alumnus Devin Bowles is at center stage. A Jackson, Tennessee, native, Bowles has the second male lead in the musical, playing the role of Joe Jackson, as well as tour manager Rob.

*MJ* is a musical featuring the music of international pop icon Michael Jackson, with a book by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage and choreography by Tony Award winner Christopher Wheeldon. Based on Jackson's life, the musical centers on preparations for Jackson's 1992 Dangerous World Tour where all profits were donated to charity. Much the same way Jackson could never avoid the spotlight, the musical that bears his name has garnered much attention and received critical acclaim since its Broadway debut in 2020 and national tour beginning in 2023.

What propelled Bowles to such a key role in this major touring production? Bowles does not hesitate to say that MTSU was at the center of it all.

"Coming out of high school, I did not know much about theater—how to do it, how to study it, how to get into any type of Broadway caliber training," Bowles admitted.



*Bowles (second from right) and the cast of MJ on the first national tour (photo by Matthew Murphy)*





Bowles in *The Royale* at MTSU



Bowles as Pharaoh in MTSU's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 2018

A fortuitous meeting at a high school performance of *Grease* set in motion a series of events that catapulted Bowles to new heights. Someone he met from the audience recommended that he attend the Tennessee Governor's School for the Arts (GSFTA), hosted by MTSU. "I ended up getting into Governor's School. That was the first time I ever met Jeff Gibson," Bowles said.

Gibson, CLA associate dean and professor of Theatre, is a former, long-serving chair of Theatre and Dance who was leading the department when Bowles was a student. It is through GSFTA and that personal connection with faculty that Bowles made the decision to attend MTSU and major in Theatre.

## Looking back on MTSU, what I thoroughly enjoyed was that they did not put me in a box.

"My freshman year, Mrs. [Kristi] Shamburger put me in *Peter Pan*. That, mixed with the accumulation of being in lighting classes, wardrobe classes, makeup . . . the flame was there, and MTSU fanned the flame."

MTSU's Theatre program creates well-rounded practitioners who understand multiple facets of the discipline, which helps them hone their craft. Focused on equitable access and faculty mentorship, the program creates a place for students to pursue their passion and appreciate the discipline—not only what happens on the stage, but every part of the production process.

"Looking back on MTSU, what I thoroughly enjoyed was that they did not put me in a box," Bowles said.

Accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre, MTSU's program develops knowledge and skills to pursue theater professionally while embracing the values of a liberal arts education as part of the bachelor's degree. As such, the program helps equip graduates with critical thinking and communication skills that allow them to work collaboratively with diverse teams and engage in complex problem-solving. This broad-based education, coupled with technical skills and disciplinary proficiency in theater arts, gives graduates an advantage in their careers that sets them apart.

Bowles is quick to recognize the vital role of MTSU faculty, both in Theatre and Dance and the School of Music. He rattled off a list of names—"Kristi Shamburger, Jeff Gibson, Kyle Kennedy, Angela Tipps, Kate Goodwin," and the list goes on.

Bowles also participated in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF), one of the many cocurricular activities that MTSU Theatre students are encouraged to pursue. He reflected on his junior year as pivotal to his current success.



“That was the year I knew New York was a possibility. Winning the KCACTF Award put my mind in a different bracket of pursuing the career as a whole and not just a skill,” Bowles said.

This, along with the Southeast Theatre Conference (SETC), field trips to New York, and other study-away possibilities, exposes students to the professional milieu while they are still in college. These opportunities are possible through the connections of MTSU faculty—scholar-practitioners whose professional work as creative artists and expert mentorship give our students a critical advantage.

“SETC was the reason why I was working professionally in college. Having the chance to audition for multiple people, multiple companies, multiple repertory theaters, summer stock theaters,” Bowles said.

“On top of that, meeting kids my age from other universities. The theater world is so small. I ended up working with some of those same people professionally in New York.”

Whether it is in radio interviews, appearances on television such as the *Jennifer Hudson Show*, or singing the national anthem at a Boston Red Sox game, Bowles does not shy away from his roots and speaks of his alma mater with pride. “When people ask where I got my start: ‘I went to Middle Tennessee State University.’ ”

Bowles is poised for continued success on the second year of *MJ*’s national tour, complete with “hometown” stops in Memphis and Nashville. ■

*CLA Dean Leah Tolbert Lyons and Bowles outside San Francisco’s Orpheum Theatre during MJ: The Musical’s tour stop*



To learn more about the production and find tickets to see Bowles and company on the road, visit [tour.mjthemusical.com](http://tour.mjthemusical.com).





# THE *Arts* ARE THRIVING at MTSU

## THEATRE

### *Our Town*

February 27–March 2, 2025

Tucker Theatre

This timeless drama first appeared on Broadway in 1938 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Don't miss MTSU Theatre's production of this great American classic!

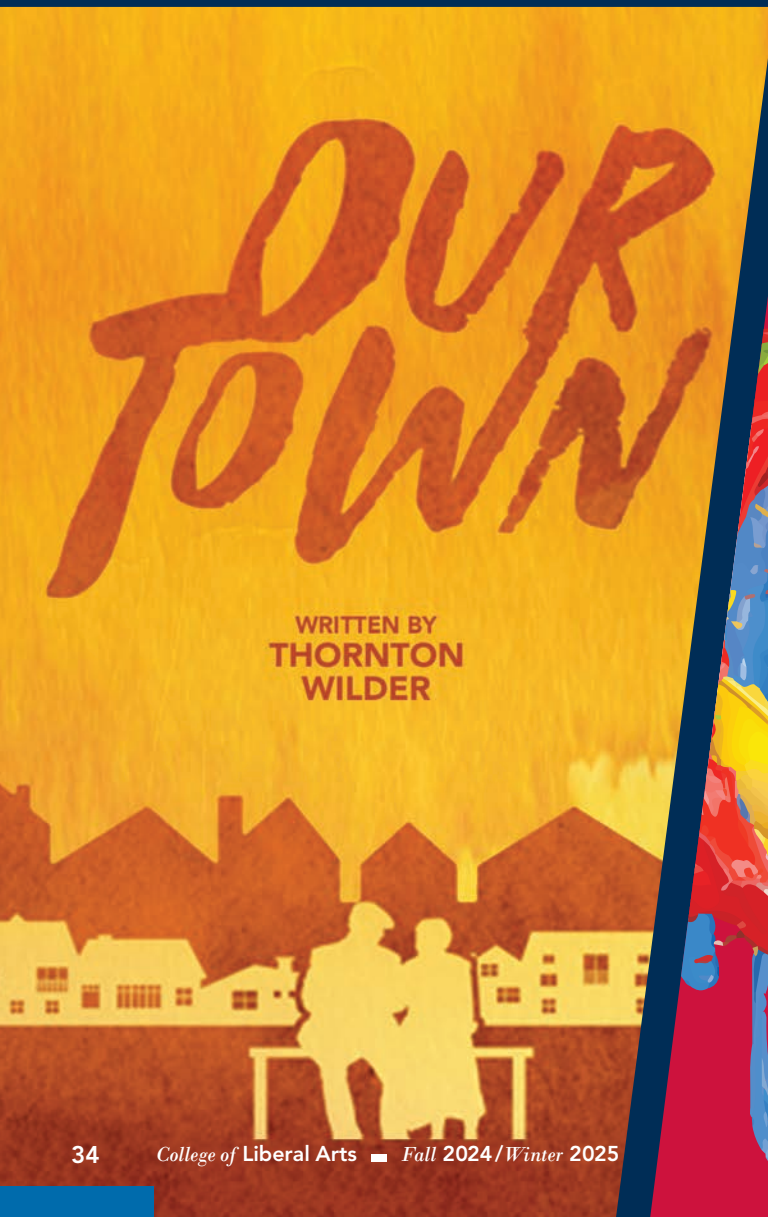
## MTSU ARTS

### MTSU ARTS CELEBRATION CONCERT

April 5, 2025

Tucker Theatre

Save the date for the annual celebration of the best of MTSU Arts. Stay tuned for updates about this year's special guest host and our MTSU Arts Hall of Fame inductees.





Just as our students enrich their lives by showcasing their skills, we invite you to enrich yours by becoming an MTSU Arts Patron. You can join the MTSU Arts Patrons Society and view our events calendar at [mtsu.edu/mtsuarts](https://mtsu.edu/mtsuarts). Questions? Call 615-898-5223

MTSU *Arts*  
Proudly Presented By



## MUSIC

### Steel Pan Ensemble

April 23, 2025

Hinton Hall

Don't miss the opportunity to savor the unique sound of the School of Music's talented Steel Pan Ensemble.

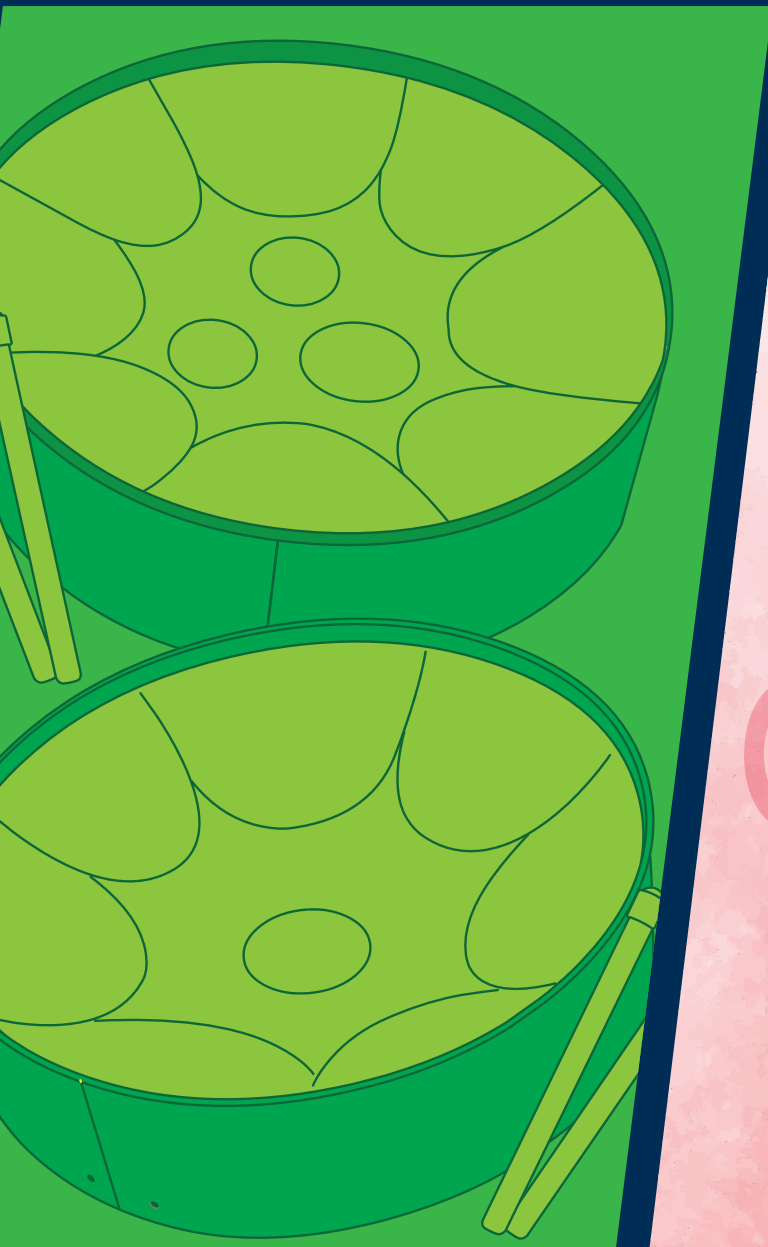
## DANCE

### Spring Dance Concert

April 24–26, 2025

Tucker Theatre

Come see original choreographic work from guest artists and our talented faculty! The concert will feature collaborative work with design, technical, and stage management students from the Department of Theatre and Dance.



SPRING  
DANCE  
CONCERT  
2025



# CLA Highlights

Three graphic design students from the **Department of Art and Design** received recognition from the American Advertising Federation (AAF) at its 2024 National Conference in Salt Lake City. The students were recognized with American Advertising Awards (ADDYs) to reward the creative spirit of excellence in the art of advertising. **Ana Cannon** and **Savannah Harden** won Gold ADDY Awards, and **Samanta Velazquez** received a Silver ADDY Award. Their award-winning design works were selected from over 25,000 entries in AAF's annual three-tiered competition.

AMERICAN  
ADVERTISING  
AWARDS  
STUDENT DIVISION



During the most recent Fall Faculty Meeting, CLA faculty members took home all three of the **Outstanding Teaching Awards** presented by the MTSU Foundation. Nominees for this award are assessed on their dedication to effective teaching, service and mentorship, student engagement, and achievement. CLA is proud to congratulate these faculty for their excellence in teaching and contributions to our community of scholars.

**Priya Ananth**

World Languages,  
Literatures, and Cultures



**Douglas Dabbs**

Art and Design



**Francis Koti**

Political and  
Global Affairs





The MTSU Alumni Association presented its alumni recognition awards during Homecoming weekend. 2024 marks the 11th consecutive year of the True Blue Citations of Distinction awards that were created to recognize outstanding alumni who represent excellence through their careers, loyal support of their alma mater, and service to the broader community. CLA Dean Leah Tolbert Lyons is the recipient of this year's True Blue Citation of Distinction—Achievement in Education (MTSU faculty).



## CLA Leadership Updates

### Shannon Chappell Hodge

Chair, Sociology and Anthropology

Hodge joined the faculty at MTSU in 2005, as a newly minted Ph.D. in Anthropology from Tulane University. A native of Kansas City, Kansas, she finds similarities to middle Tennessee in the landscape, kindness of the people, great music, and excellent barbecue. An archaeologist and biological anthropologist, she studies human osteology and skeletal biology of human remains from archaeological sites, specializing in the study of ancient disease. She notes that she has been privileged to work with ancestral remains of pre-contact Native Americans, pre- and post-emancipation African and African American cemeteries, battlefield casualties from the Battle of Monterrey in the Mexican-American War, and most recently her work on urn burials from the Brazilian Amazon. Hodge makes her home in Wilson County, with husband Phil (Tennessee state archaeologist and proud MTSU alum), two teenagers, three cats, and Rocky the dog. She enjoys travel, walking the dog, reading, and relaxing with friends and family.



### Kristi Shamburger

Chair, Theatre and Dance

Shamburger has a Bachelor of Music (Musical Theatre) from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, and an M.F.A. in Musical Theatre from the University of Nevada–Las Vegas. A member of Actor's Equity Association for 26 years, she has worked in regional theaters across the nation. She taught theater and musical theater courses and choreographed for Middle Georgia College, Huntington University, and Belmont University before joining the MTSU Theatre faculty in 2010. Shamburger has had the pleasure of directing MTSU's productions of *Cinderella*, *Sweeney Todd*, *9 to 5*, *Peter Pan*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *Les Misérables*, to name only a few. Additionally, she serves as the advisor to Musical Theatre Performance minor students and teaches Musical Theatre Performance, Musical Theatre Performance II, and Musical Theatre History. She is a certified instructor of the Expressive Actor Technique, often exploring this technique with students in Voice for the Actor classes and workshops across the Southeast.





# MAKE OUR STORIES POSSIBLE

The *College of Liberal Arts* hopes you have enjoyed this edition of the *CLA Magazine* and are as excited as we are about the accomplishments of our students, alumni, and faculty.

Please consider a tax-deductible gift to support one of the programs highlighted in this issue—your generosity makes innovative learning in and out of the classroom possible. You can easily help make our stories possible by giving a gift online or via text.

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**EXPLORE**  
YOUR WORLD



**ENGAGE**  
YOUR MIND



**ENRICH**  
YOUR LIFE



**EARN**  
A LIVING





## Global Branding

Alumni, faculty, and staff attended an unveiling ceremony for the newly merged Department of Political and Global Affairs. The change is the result of putting the Department of Political Science and International Relations and the Department of Global Studies and Human Geography under one umbrella, an academically strategic move, MTSU Provost Mark Byrnes said.

[mtsunews.com/mtsu-department-political-global-affairs-merger](https://mtsunews.com/mtsu-department-political-global-affairs-merger)



## Leading Choice

Michai Mosby, a senior who is minoring in Political Science and majoring in Public Relations, is serving his second term as president of MTSU's Student Government Association. "Michai is the epitome of a servant leader. His desire to elevate the voices of students and to leave MTSU better than he found it is clear," said Khalilah Doss, vice president for student affairs and dean of students.

[mtsunews.com/mtsu-sga-president-michai-mosby-2024](https://mtsunews.com/mtsu-sga-president-michai-mosby-2024)



## Vote of Confidence

Ahead of the November presidential election, MTSU was recognized among 192 universities nationwide that received a 2024 "highly established" rating from ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.

[mtsunews.com/mtsu-receives-seal-for-student-voting-efforts](https://mtsunews.com/mtsu-receives-seal-for-student-voting-efforts)



## National Award

MTSU English graduate student Rachel Booher (Foreign Languages, '23) was one of six students nationwide selected as a 2024 Marcus L. Urann Fellow by the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.

[mtsunews.com/grad-student-pkp-national-fellowship-2024](https://mtsunews.com/grad-student-pkp-national-fellowship-2024)



