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UNIVERSITY OF  
**GEORGIA**

Owens Institute for  
Behavioral Research

## The Owens Observer

Newsletter of the  
Owens Institute for  
Behavioral Research

## September 2026

Welcome to the first newsletter of the fall semester. This edition of the Owens Observer is packed with information, including the announcement of several **new grant awards**. Congrats to these OIBR investigators. This newsletter also contains your official invitation to the **OIBR annual meeting**. It will be held on **October 13<sup>th</sup>** over lunch in the Rialto Room at the Hotel Indigo. We hope you will join us for this event, where we will celebrate OIBR faculty accomplishments and update you all on OIBR activities. Please **RSVP** through the link below. This month, we also welcome new faculty affiliates and introduce our newest Grant Development Program participants. You'll also find information about upcoming opportunities, including **Tea Time for early career scholars** and **online office hours** hosted by Kim Cherewick and Jenny Claire Carey. Last, but not least, OIBR welcomes two new staff members, **Brenda Sertich** and **Sydney Barrilleaux**. I hope everyone's semester is off to a great start!

**Jody Clay-Warner**  
Director

# Upcoming Events

## Annual Meeting

A black poster with a red shield logo on the left containing a white building icon and the year '1785'. To the right of the logo, the text 'Owens Institute for Behavioral Research' and 'UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA' is written in white. In the center, a red rectangle contains the text '— ANNUAL —' and 'MEETING' in white. Below this, the date and time 'OCTOBER 13' and '12:00 - 1:30PM' are displayed in white. A grey rounded rectangle below contains the text 'HOTEL INDIGO, RIALTO ROOM', '500 COLLEGE AVE. ATHENS', and 'LUNCH WILL BE SERVED'. At the bottom, the text 'RSVP HERE BY OCTOBER 1' is underlined in white. Small red squares are placed around the central text area.

 Owens Institute for  
Behavioral Research  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

— ANNUAL —  
**MEETING**

**OCTOBER 13**  
**12:00 - 1:30PM**

HOTEL INDIGO, RIALTO ROOM  
500 COLLEGE AVE. ATHENS  
LUNCH WILL BE SERVED

RSVP HERE BY OCTOBER 1

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## Tea Time



We are pleased to announce the continuation of **Tea Time**, an OIBR offering for early career faculty for learning, sharing, and camaraderie. Each month, an OIBR Distinguished Scholar will present information on a professional development topic, allowing time for discussion and Q&A.

The next session will be held Friday, **October 2** from 10:00am – 11:00am in the OIBR conference room (249A Brooks Hall). Tea, coffee, sparkling water, and cookies will be available.

**Julie Luft**, Athletic Association Professor and Distinguished Research Professor, Department of Mathematics, Science & Social Studies Education will be featured. Her topic is, “Navigating bumps in the road: Moving towards tenure.” **Early career affiliates should RSVP here to secure your spot.** Each session is limited to 12 participants.

# Spotlight



## Psychology professor is building better treatments for schizophrenia

Distinguished Scholar Greg Strauss was recently featured in an article on UGA Today. This piece by Joy Pope, Communication and Content Manager for Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, delves into his background and his research into schizophrenia.

## Faculty News

### Welcome New Affiliates

**Derick Baum**, Assistant Professor, Sociology

**Catherine Carlson**, Associate Professor, Social Work

**Hoda Fakhari**, Assistant Professor, Communication Studies

**Abraham Flanigan**, Assistant Professor, Educational Psychology

**Sina Gallo**, Associate Professor, Nutritional Sciences

**Elizabeth King**, Associate Professor, Center for Integrative Conservation Research

**Akshat Lakhiwal**, Assistant Professor, Management Information Systems

**Josh Novak**, Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Science

**Bev Rosario-Williams**, Assistant Professor, Counseling and Human Development Services

**Ashlee Tziganuk**, Assistant Professor, Financial Planning, Housing, and Consumer Economics

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## Welcome Class of 2026–2028 Grant Development Program Participants



**Jessica Flannery**

Assistant Professor, Psychology

Research Interests: fMRI with ecological behavior tracking, Neurocognitive mechanisms, Substance use, and other health-related behaviors



**Sarah Haight**

Assistant Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics

Research Interests: Bias, discrimination, and inequality; chronic disease; Geographic info systems; Infant and maternal health; Marriage, family, and close relationships

**Mengqi Liao**

Assistant Professor, Advertising & PR

Research Interests: Human AI interaction; Media psychology; Conversational AI; AI hallucination; Dark patterns; Responsible AI design

**Dylan Richards**

Assistant Professor, Psychology

Research Interests: Assessment and evaluation; Bias, discrimination and equality; Chronic disease; Diversity; Emotion; Exercise; Experimental methods; Mental illness; Substance use; Social psychology

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## OIBR FY2027 Seed Grant Recipients

The Owens Institute for Behavioral Research offers seed grants to support interdisciplinary research in the social and behavioral sciences. Open to OIBR Affiliates, Distinguished Scholars, and Grant Development Program participants, the grants fund small-scale projects (up to \$15,000) that gather preliminary data or demonstrate proof of concept for future grant proposals.

Congratulations to this year's recipients! Applications for next year's seed grant competition will open in January.

**Shana Adise**

Assistant Professor, Nutritional Sciences

**Co-I's:**



**Ashley Sanders, Department of Psychology**  
**Matthew Borzage, Children's Hospital Los Angeles**

**Title:** "Optimizing a Neuroinflammation-Sensitive MRI Battery for Pediatric Brain Health Research"



**Sarah Height**  
**Assistant Professor, Epidemiology & Biostatistics**

**Co-I's:**  
**Lucy Ingram, Health Promotion & Behavior**  
**Georgie Mois, Health Promotion & Behavior**

**Title:**  
**"Provider Perspectives and Practices in Perinatal Mental Health (P4MH): A multi-method pilot study in rural Georgia"**

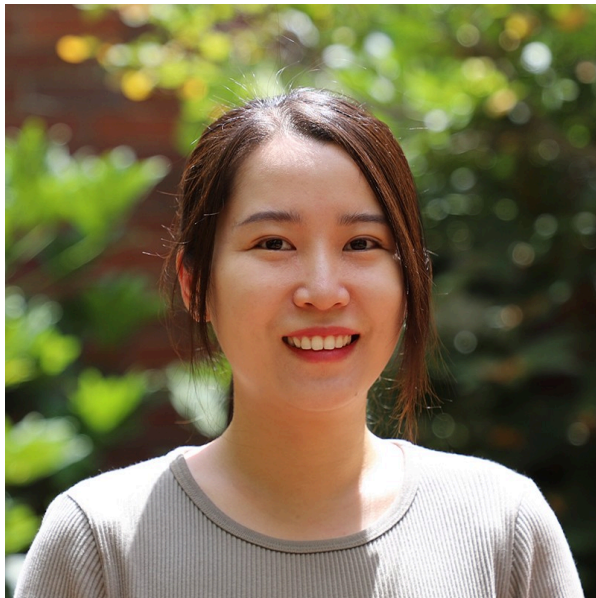
**Roberta Salmi**  
**Associate Professor, Anthropology**

**Co-I's:**  
**Rajnish Vandercore, Zoology, Peradenya University**  
**Elizabeth Mallott, Biology, University of Washington in St. Louis**



**Title:**

“Kinship and Social Relationships as Behavioral Mechanisms of Gene Flow in a Primate Hybrid Zone”



**Suhang Song**

Assistant Professor, Health Policy & Management

**Co-I's:**

Jin Sun, Computing

Lisa Renzi-Hammond, Gerontology, Health Promotion & Behavior

Yian Gu, Columbia University

**Title:**

“Artificial intelligence-powered image-based dietary assessment for Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias epidemiological research”

**Julie Stanton**

Professor, Cellular Biology

**Co-I's:**

Paula Lemons, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology



**Title:**

**“Ai and Learning in the Life Sciences:  
Characterizing metacognition as  
students solve problems with AI”**

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## New Grant Awards



**Erin Dolan**

**Title:** Enhancing Faculty Mentorship of PhD  
Students in Biomedical Research

**Agency:** NIH

**Project Dates:** 6/15/2026–3/31/2031

**Award Amount:** \$1,710,000

**Co-Investigators:** Justin Lavner (UGA), Emily  
Rosenzweig (Columbia Teachers College)

This research will test tailored social-psychological and skill-building interventions designed to strengthen faculty–PhD student mentoring in biomedical research, reduce student attrition, improve well-being, and enhance student, faculty, and research outcomes.

**Katie Ehrlich**



**Title:** Examining the Crossover Effects of Adolescent Stress on Parent Cardiovascular Health  
**Agency:** NIH  
**Project Dates:** 9/1/2025–5/31/2030  
**Award Amount:** \$2,400,950  
**Co-Investigator:** Tianyi Yu (UGA)

This project will identify (a) how adolescent stress affects two risk factors for their parents' cardiovascular disease: parent cardiometabolic risk and inflammation, (b) the modifiable psycho-cognitive, social, and behavioral mechanisms underlying these associations, and (c) socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and sex disparities in these processes. Findings will lead to the design of a future parenting intervention to help parents respond to adolescent stress in ways that promote parent cardiovascular health.



**Niyantri Ravindran**  
**Title:** Parent–child Physiological Synchrony in Naturalistic Settings  
**Agency:** Mental Research Institute  
**Project Dates:** 5/15/2026–5/15/2027  
**Award Amount:** \$25,000  
**Co-Investigator:** Drew Abney (UGA)

This project will use wearable sensors and audio recordings to examine how parent–child physiological synchrony changes during naturally occurring positive, negative, and disengaged interactions. It will also assess how these patterns relate to parent and child mental health and parent–child relationship quality.

**Inseok Song**



**Title:** Personalized Low-Cost Telescopes: A Tiered Approach to Active Learning in Astronomy

**Agency:** NIH

**Project Dates:** 10/1/2026–9/30/2029

**Award Amount:** \$399,895

**Co-Investigators:** Amedee Martella (UGA),  
Nandana Weliweriya Liyanage (UGA)

The Low-Cost Telescope project will provide undergraduate students with individually operable, smartphone-enabled telescopes costing under \$100, allowing them to gain hands-on experience throughout the complete astronomical observation and analysis process. Through tiered course integration, rigorous evaluation, and nationally available open educational resources, the project seeks to expand access to authentic astronomy education while strengthening students' technical skills, scientific identity, and persistence in STEM.



**Karen Johnson**

**Title:** Integrated Biomedical–Behavioral HIV Prevention for Women in Non-carceral Correctional Supervision Programs: A Hybrid Type II Trial of E-WORTH South in Alabama

**Agency:** NIH

**Project Dates:** 8/15/2026–5/31/2031

**Award Amount:** \$2,841,922

**Co-Investigators:** Ye Shen (UGA), Rifat Haider (UGA), Renee Heffron (University of Alabama Birmingham), Rajinder Singh (University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences), Eva Woodward (University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences)

This hybrid Type II trial evaluates E-WORTH South among 230 women in non-carceral supervision programs who use substances in Alabama,

assessing clinical effectiveness (PrEP uptake, PrEP persistence, sexual risk behavior reduction, substance use reduction) and implementation strategies (Implementation Facilitation). Results will provide evidence for scaling HIV prevention interventions across the Deep South for populations in the criminal legal system, addressing NIDA priorities for pragmatic implementation research in high-burden populations.



### **Brandon Yik**

**Title:** A National Portrait of Organic Chemistry Instruction and Assessment Practices

**Agency:** NSF

**Project Dates:** 10/1/2026–9/30/2029

**Award Amount:** \$400,000

This project will create the first national, mixed-methods portrait of organic chemistry teaching and assessment, including instructors' use of AI, opportunities for three-dimensional learning, and differences across institution types. Findings will inform open-access tools and practical resources to help instructors improve learning objectives, assessments, and AI policies in organic chemistry and other gateway STEM courses.



### **Julie Stanton**

**Title:** Understanding the Postsecondary Science Degree Persistence of Undergraduate Rural Students Using Participatory Action Research

**Agency:** NSF

**Project Dates:** 10/1/2026–9/30/2029

**Award Amount:** \$155,104

**Co-Investigators:** Darris Means (Clemson University), Jori Hall (University of Illinois)

This project will examine the strengths, resources, and support networks that help rural students persist in undergraduate life science programs at Clemson University, the University of Georgia, and the University of North Georgia. Using student interviews and participant-generated photographs, the researchers will develop practical guidance to help faculty and administrators create more supportive learning environments and increase rural participation in the life sciences workforce.

**Logan Fiorella**

**Title:** Collaborative Research: Identifying When and Why Students Procrastinate in Undergraduate STEM Courses: Toward Developing Personalized Interventions

**Agency:** NSF

**Project Dates:** 9/1/2026–8/31/2029

**Award Amount:** \$298,214

**Co-Investigators:** Akira Miyake (University of Colorado), Hannah Snyder (Brandeis University), Emorie Beck (University of California Davis)

This project examines the daily situational and psychological factors that trigger academic procrastination among undergraduate STEM students using real-time smartphone reports. It will also determine which procrastination-reduction strategies work best for particular students and circumstances, providing a foundation for scalable, personalized interventions that improve academic performance and well-being.



## **Xiaoming Zhai**

**Title:** Collaborative Research: AI-Enhanced Problem-Posing Based Learning: Supporting Mathematics Teachers' in-the-Moment Instructional Decision Making

**Agency:** NSF

**Project Dates:** 8/15/2026–7/31/2029

**Award Amount:** \$225,555

**Co-Investigator:** Jinfa Cai (University of Delaware)

This three-year project will develop an AI system that analyzes student-created mathematics problems and provides real-time reports to help teachers make instructional decisions during problem-posing-based learning. The research will examine how teachers use these reports and whether AI-enhanced instruction improves students' mathematical learning, engagement, and opportunities to draw on their own experiences and ways of thinking.

**Title:** NSF FF: Planning: A Teacher- and Guardian-Co-Designed System for Capturing Small-Group Scientific Argumentation in High-School Science

**Agency:** NSF

**Project Dates:** 7/15/2026–8/31/2027

**Award Amount:** \$49,999

**Co-Investigator:** Christina Chhin (UGA)

This planning project will explore the feasibility of a privacy-focused, AI-driven tool that analyzes high-school small-group science discussions and alerts teachers to important insights, misconceptions, or stalled argumentation they might otherwise miss. Through teacher and family co-design, the project will establish requirements for usability, consent, data retention, voice

identification, and opt-out options while developing and testing an on-device processing prototype and teacher-facing dashboard.



## **Sina Gallo**

**Title:** CTSA Pilot: Vitamin D Status in Early Pregnancy, Endothelial Function and Biomarkers of Preeclampsia among Women Medically Classified as Overweight or Obese

**Agency:** Emory (NIH subcontract)

**Project Dates:** 8/1/2026–7/31/2027

**Award Amount:** \$60,843

**Co-Investigator:** Tony Wolf (UGA)

Women medically classified as overweight or obese with concurrent vitamin D deficiency may have poorer maternal vascular outcomes hence, may particularly benefit from targeted vitamin D supplementation. Prior to the implementation of randomized clinical trials (RCTs) there is a need to investigate how vitamin D status associates with potential pathological processes involved in preeclampsia development among high-risk subgroups of the population. Hence this present study aims to advance our understanding of vitamin D status thresholds, which will directly inform optimal target supplementation dosages for a future RCT.



## **Lorenzo Villa-Zapata**

**Title:** CTSA BERD Pilot: Overcoming Access Barriers to Curative Cancer Care: A Geospatial and Economic Modeling Framework for CAR-T Therapy in Georgia

**Agency:** Emory (NIH subcontract)

**Project Dates:** 8/1/2026–7/31/2027

**Award Amount:** \$30,181

**Co-Investigator: Lan Mu (UGA)**

This work establishes a replicable precision public health framework for advanced cellular therapies, directly informing Georgia's Cancer Control Plan and positioning the team for NCI implementation science and pragmatic trial funding. By embedding advanced biostatistical methods into translational cancer research, this project aligns with the Georgia CTSA priorities by accelerating translation of data-driven insights into equitable healthcare delivery.

**Ishtiaque Fazlul**

**Title:** Turning Policy into Health: Translating Insurance Affordability Subsidies into Better Healthcare Access

**Agency:** Emory (NIH subcontract)

**Project Dates:** 8/1/2026–7/31/2027

**Award Amount:** \$60,795

**Co-Investigator:** Suhang Song (UGA)

This pilot project will use the American Rescue Plan Act's expansion of Affordable Care Act premium tax credits as a natural experiment to assess the causal effects of increased insurance subsidies on healthcare affordability, access, and utilization among nonelderly adults. Using restricted National Health Interview Survey data from 2019–2024 and difference-in-differences models, the study will generate preliminary evidence to inform federal and state policy and support a future NIH R01 application.

**Jessica Muilenburg**



**Title:** Understanding Available Resources and Delivery of Recovery Services in a College Setting

**Agency:** NIH

**Project Dates:** 9/5/2026–5/31/2031

**Award Amount:** \$3,486,956

**Co-Investigators:** Heather Padilla (UGA), Orion Mowbray (UGA), Katie Ehrlich (UGA), Carolyn Lauckner (University of Kentucky), Trace Kershaw (Yale University), Raul Hernandez (Yale University)

This study will evaluate how campus recovery communities at 30 colleges and universities support students recovering from alcohol misuse and alcohol use disorder, identifying organizational barriers, facilitators, and changes in available resources over time. Researchers will also follow 900 students using surveys, real-time assessments, and mobile breathalyzers to examine how recovery services, social networks, cravings, and self-efficacy influence treatment engagement and return to alcohol use, ultimately informing tailored real-time interventions.

## OIBR News

### Welcome Brenda Sertich



Brenda joined the Owens Institute in June 2026 after 18 years in the banking industry. As Senior Accountant, she serves as the payroll coordinator for all positions managed by OIBR, oversees OIBR's inventory, coordinates participant compensation accounts and provides financial and administrative support to OIBR's Grant managers. We're excited to have her on board!

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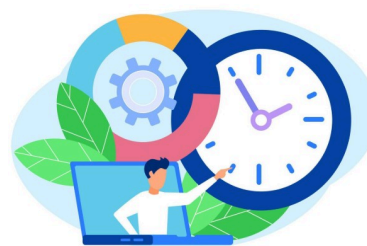
## Welcome Sydney Barrilleaux



Sydney started as OIBR's Outreach and Communications Manager in August 2026. She was a student at UGA for six years, earning both a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in journalism & mass communication. She spent two years with UGA's Division of Marketing & Communications as a research writing graduate assistant, and she is thrilled to now be a part of OIBR!

## Online Open Office Hours

Starting September 14, **Kim Cherewick**, Assistant Director, and **Jenny Claire Carey**, Post Award Operations Manager, will be resuming their weekly office hours. Drop in via [Zoom](#) from **10–11am every Monday** to ask any grant-related questions. Contact Kim at [ksilvis@uga.edu](mailto:ksilvis@uga.edu) with any questions.



## Policy Updates

### NSF Forward

The American Physical Society (APS), in collaboration with strategic partners, launched NSF Forward. The goal of the initiative is to create bold, actionable recommendations so NSF can meet the changing needs of the nation, its citizens, and science. The APS is inviting researchers, educators, students, and more to gather ideas to form policy proposals and legislative language for the 120th Congress to consider. For more information, and to submit your thoughts to the community input form, visit the [APS Website](#). **Responses are due September 21, 2026.**

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## Proposed Changes to Reporting Outcomes from NIH Peer Review

NIH is accepting input on potential changes to the reporting of peer review outcomes. The first-level peer review process is proposed to be modified to place an application in one of three impact categories:

- "Most competitive" (based on the top 25% of final overall impact scores),

- "Competitive" (based on the 26–50% of final overall impact scores), or
- "Not discussed" (scores >50%, or ND)

With the exception of the reporting of final overall impact scores and percentiles, all other initial review group procedures would be retained. For more information and to offer your comments, visit the [NIH website](#). Responses are due October 13, 2026.

## Opportunities

### Rising Star Award Nominations



We are accepting nominations for the **2026 OIBR Rising Star Award**. The winner will receive a plaque and a \$1,000 research fund. The winner will be announced at the OIBR Annual Meeting on October 13th.

***The OIBR Rising Star Award recognizes the scholarly achievements and future potential of an OIBR Distinguished Scholar or Affiliate who is within 8 years of their Ph.D. This award focuses on exceptional and sustained research contribution and future promise, as evidenced by publications, grant submissions through OIBR, funded grants, major works-in-progress, and other discipline-relevant evidence of past and likely future scholarly impact.***

#### Nominee Eligibility:

- Ph.D. conferred within the last 8 years (no earlier than August 2018)
- Current OIBR Distinguished Scholar or Affiliate

- Nominated by a current OIBR Distinguished Scholar or Affiliate (self-nominations are not accepted).

#### Nomination Process:

- The nominator must send a statement of no more than 750 words describing the quality and impact of the nominee's research and expected research trajectory, along with the nominee's CV
- Application materials must be sent as a single PDF to Kim Cherewick via [oibr@uga.edu](mailto:oibr@uga.edu)
- Nominators can nominate more than one individual for this award, but the materials must be sent as separate emails
- **Nominations must be received by 5pm September 25, 2026**

#### Review and Selection Process:

- A 3-person ad hoc OIBR committee representing 3 different academic units and at least 2 different colleges will review nominations

Please review the eligibility criteria and nomination process above carefully.

If you have additional questions, please contact [jclayw@uga.edu](mailto:jclayw@uga.edu).

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## OIBR Pivot Funds

The OIBR Pivot Fund 2027 targets OIBR faculty who conduct research in topical areas where funding is under threat. The fund is designed to help faculty pivot their research in ways that increase opportunity for funding. Funds can be used to collect data, purchase data sets or equipment, or for other needs, as identified by the investigator, to facilitate submission of an external grant proposal. Funds cannot be used for conference travel or personnel funding (faculty or student). The budget cannot exceed \$5,000.

The application should contain: 1) one paragraph describing your current research; 2) one to two sentences explaining how you are pivoting your research; 3) one page describing the project for which you are seeking funding, your

qualifications for conducting the proposed research, and intended external grant mechanism(s); 4) budget, budget justification, and timeline; and 5) a current CV.

Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis by the OIBR Leadership Team. Send applications (as a single PDF in the order listed above) to [oibr@uga.edu](mailto:oibr@uga.edu), with the subject line “Pivot Funds.”

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## Open Access Publishing Opportunities

UGA Libraries’ open access publishing program continues to expand, now offering faculty and graduate students access to more than 9,000 journal titles across 14 publishers through new and existing “read-and-publish” agreements. These agreements cover article processing charges, enabling researchers to publish open access at no cost while increasing the visibility and reach of their work. Building on more than \$2 million in savings for UGA authors in 2025, the addition of a new agreement with Taylor & Francis further broadens opportunities for accessible, high-impact scholarship. Open access publishing not only removes paywall barriers but also supports greater dissemination, collaboration, and citation of research. [Read more about how open access publishing can benefit your research.](#)

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