



UNIVERSITY OF  
North Alabama

2026-2027

# Profiles in Excellence



# UNIVERSITY OF North Alabama

*The Office of Academic Affairs annually presents Outstanding Faculty Awards for Excellent work in Teaching, Research, Service, and Advising. The honorees are nominated by their colleagues and students and honored at the annual Awards Gala.*

## Contents

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Outstanding Teaching ..... | 2 |
| Outstanding Research ..... | 4 |
| Outstanding Service .....  | 6 |
| Outstanding Advising ..... | 9 |

# Outstanding Teaching

**Dr. Kayla Jenssen** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Sociology in the College of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering. She is the 2026 recipient of the Lawrence J. Nelson Award for Outstanding Teaching. Here she is in her own words:

**Q. Tell me more about the Active Student Responding (ASR) techniques and how you have seen them work to great effect in your classrooms, both online and in-person.**

- A. My teaching philosophy is simple: great teaching is not about delivering information—it's about creating the conditions in which students can learn and be successful. As a behavior analyst, I naturally gravitate toward evidence-based instructional strategies that actively involve students in the learning process. One of the approaches I rely on most is Active Student Responding (ASR). Rather than having students passively listen to a lecture, ASR creates frequent opportunities for every student to answer questions, solve problems, discuss concepts with peers, or immediately apply what they've just learned. In my face-to-face classes, this includes think-pair-share activities, polling, guided discussions, response cards, and scenario-based learning. In my online courses, I use frequent quizzes, discussion boards, video knowledge checks, and other low-stakes learning activities that encourage continual engagement rather than passive viewing. Research consistently shows that students learn more when they actively participate, and I have seen that reflected in my own classrooms. Students retain concepts longer, become more confident in participating in discussions, and are more willing to ask questions because responding becomes an expected part of the learning experience. Just as importantly, ASR provides me with immediate feedback about what students understand, allowing me to adjust my instruction before misconceptions become barriers to learning.

**Q. Your nominators comment specifically on your teaching. When did you know you wanted to be a professor, and what do you enjoy most about the work?**

- A. When I first entered graduate school, my goal was to become a practitioner in applied behavior analysis (ABA), working directly with children diagnosed with autism. I was passionate about providing high-quality, evidence-based services that could improve the lives of individuals and families.

As I progressed through my graduate education, however, my perspective began to change. I realized that while I could make a meaningful difference working with the children on my caseload, I could have an even greater impact by preparing the next generation of practitioners. By teaching future behavior analysts, educators, psychologists, and other professionals, I could help increase the number of well-trained individuals equipped to serve people with

exceptional needs. In many ways, becoming a professor was an opportunity to expand service delivery capacity – not by serving one child or one family at a time, but by helping prepare hundreds of professionals who would go on to make a difference in countless lives. That mission continues to motivate me every day. I enjoy helping students connect research with practice and develop the confidence and skills they need to become compassionate, evidence-based professionals. One of the greatest rewards of teaching is watching students discover not only what they know, but what they are capable of accomplishing in the lives of others.

**Q. Students have said they respond positively to your communication and availability. How do you prioritize that as part of your schedule and routine?**

- A. Students cannot succeed if they feel disconnected from their instructor. I want every student to know that asking questions is encouraged and that seeking help is a sign of engagement, not weakness. To support that, I intentionally make communication part of my teaching rather than something that happens outside of it. I respond to emails as promptly as possible, maintain consistent office hours, post regular course announcements, and proactively reach out when I notice a student struggling. Those small interactions often have a significant impact.

**Q. What do you believe is the single-most significant part of a student's academic success?**

- A. If I had to identify one factor, it would be consistent engagement. Students do not have to know everything when they walk into the classroom. They simply need to show up consistently, participate actively, ask questions, and remain willing to learn. While intelligence and prior experience certainly play a role, I have found that engagement is the characteristic most strongly associated with long-term success. My responsibility as an educator is to create an environment where students want to participate because they see value in the learning process and believe they are capable of succeeding.

**Q. What does it mean to you to be named the 2026 recipient of the Lawrence J. Nelson Award for Outstanding Teaching?**

- A. Receiving the Lawrence J. Nelson Award for Outstanding Teaching is both humbling and deeply meaningful. Although I never had the opportunity to meet Dr. Lawrence J. Nelson, many of my colleagues did, and they have shared with me the tremendous impact he had on the University of North Alabama and, most importantly, on its students. To be associated with that legacy is something I do not take lightly. Teaching is something I continually strive to improve. Every course, every semester, and every group of students present an opportunity to become a better educator. To have those efforts recognized by the University is an incredible honor.



Dr. Kayla Jenssen

# Outstanding Research

**Dr. Justin Carter** is an Assistant Professor of Management in the Sanders College of Business and Technology. He is the 2026 recipient of the Jim Couch Award for Outstanding Research by Faculty. Here he is in his own words:

**Q. Some of your more recent areas of research, AI and PsyCap, are groundbreaking in nature. Tell me about some of your findings and why these areas are of interest to you.**

A. What ties my work together is a simple question: how do we perform well and stay healthy in demanding environments? That led me to Psychological Capital (PsyCap): the study of four developable resources, hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. It is rigorous but also practical. I have applied that same lens to AI, where I am less interested in the technology than in the human side. One interesting finding is that positive and negative attitudes toward AI are not opposite ends of one scale. People can be excited and uneasy at the same time. PsyCap and AI fit well together because AI creates a tremendous amount of uncertainty and PsyCap can help us navigate it. The technology is impressive, but the human response is where the real story is.

**Q. In addition to your research, your work has appeared in numerous publications, been cited for its relevance, and maintained methodological rigor. How do you balance this work in research with your teaching?\***

A. I try not to treat research and teaching as separate parts of the job; they work best when they feed each other. Research keeps my teaching disciplined and close to the evidence. Teaching keeps my research practical, because ideas only matter when they get used. My students also help me see which questions matter; their concerns about work, leadership, burnout, and AI reflect what is happening in organizations.

**Q. Speaking of teaching, how does your research inform your work with students and in the classroom?**

A. My research shapes how I teach. I want students to leave with better ways of thinking, not just content knowledge. The PsyCap work reminds me that students need hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism as much as any employee does, especially with so much uncertainty about careers, identity, and AI. That is why I lean on simulations, reflection, and applied projects: students need to make real decisions under ambiguity and live with the consequences. My AI research points the same way. The goal is not AI-resistant students but AI-resilient humans who use AI in the right way. Whether the subject is PsyCap or AI, I am teaching people to move forward in complicated environments.

**Q. You have also done a TEDx Wilson Park talk and host a podcast series. How are these additional activities part of your research?**

A. Research has to be translated. A journal article reaches other scholars, which matters, but many of the people who need these ideas most, leaders, students, parents, business owners, sit outside that audience. TEDx, podcasting, and community talks let me reach them. My TEDx talk asked the same human-centered question my research does: as technology gets more capable, what remains deeply human, and what should we be careful not to outsource? The podcast lets ideas breathe and helps me listen, which sharpens my next questions. I see it all as public scholarship, not something separate from the academic work.

**Q. Finally, what does it mean to you to be the 2026 recipient of the Jim Couch Award for Academic Affairs for Outstanding Research by Faculty?**

A. It is a tremendous honor. Research is quiet work. People see the finished article or the award, not the rejected drafts, the revisions, and the late nights behind it. Being recognized for that means a great deal, and it is humbling, because I have leaned on mentors, colleagues, students, and a university that let me chase the questions I care about. I am proud of it, and I take it as motivation, because there is still so much work to do around AI and the human side of change.



Dr. Justin Carter

# Outstanding Service

Ms. Trinda Owens is the Director of Field Education in the Masters of Social Work Program and a Lecturer in Social Work in the College of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering. She is the 2026 recipient of the Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Service by Faculty. Here she is in her own words:

**Q. Tell me about your decision to enter the field of social work and teaching. What inspired this step for you?**

A. My journey into social work and higher education was not a traditional one. After spending many years working in manufacturing, I returned to college at age 47 to complete a goal I had started decades earlier. Along the way, I experienced personal challenges, setbacks, and moments when I questioned my own purpose. Those experiences helped me develop a deep desire to help others navigate life's challenges and recognize their own potential.

Social work provided the perfect intersection of service, advocacy, mental health, and community engagement. Teaching became a natural extension of that calling. I wanted to help prepare future social workers not only with knowledge and skills, but also with the compassion, resilience, and self-awareness needed to serve others effectively. Today, I have the privilege of becoming the kind of educator I once needed, someone who believes in students, encourages them, and helps them see possibilities beyond their current circumstances.

**Q. Service may be at the very heart of social work. How do you exemplify this as part of your teaching style?**

A. Service is at the heart of everything I do as an educator. I strive to create learning experiences that extend beyond textbooks and assignments by connecting students with real people, real communities, and real-world challenges. Whether through service-learning projects, community partnerships, guest speakers, field education, or classroom discussions, I want students to understand that social work is not simply a profession; it is a commitment to serving others.

I also believe that service begins with relationships. I work intentionally to support, encourage, and mentor students while helping them develop their professional identity. Whenever possible, I involve students in community projects, presentations, and research opportunities because I want them to see what competent service looks like in practice. My goal is for students to leave my classroom not only more knowledgeable, but also more prepared to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

**Q. Your service extends beyond the classroom and UNA. Tell me about some of your contributions and outreach to civic, social, and spiritual organizations.**

A. Service has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I learned it by watching my mother. As the only child of my

grandmother, she devoted herself to caring for family members during times of illness and need. I watched her care for my great-great aunt until her passing, and later for my grandmother and my grandmother's sister. My brothers and I helped where we could. At the time, I did not realize I was learning lessons about service, compassion, and responsibility, but those experiences shaped me in lasting ways.

In high school, I became involved in organizations that emphasized community service, and when I later moved to the Shoals area for college, serving others felt like a natural extension of who I was. Throughout the years, I have volunteered and partnered with schools, churches, nonprofits, civic organizations, and mental health advocacy groups. My outreach includes youth mentoring, bullying prevention, suicide prevention, mental health education, community workshops, and faith-based initiatives. Whether I am speaking to students, facilitating workshops, organizing community programs, or supporting mental health awareness efforts, my goal is always the same: to use my knowledge, experiences, and gifts to make a positive impact in the lives of others.

**Q. Is there one area of your service about which you are the proudest? Tell me more about it and why.**

A. The area of service I am most proud of is the opportunity to encourage and support students and young people as they navigate challenges and discover their purpose. Much of that passion comes from my own journey. As a college student, I struggled academically, not because I lacked ability, but because I was carrying personal challenges and experiences that I did not fully understand. At the time, I did not have the tools, support, or language to make sense of what I was experiencing, and I often felt like I was navigating life on my own.

Today, I recognize many of those same patterns in students. I see bright, capable individuals whose academic performance is impacted by circumstances outside the classroom. I see students who begin to withdraw, lose confidence, or question their ability to succeed. While I am not their therapist, I can be someone who notices, listens, encourages, and helps connect them with resources and support.

One of the greatest privileges of my work is being able to become the kind of educator I once needed. I want students to know that their challenges do not define them, that there is hope beyond their current circumstances, and that they have purpose and potential. Whether through teaching, mentoring, field education, or community engagement, helping people recognize their value and possibility is the area of service that brings me the greatest sense of fulfillment and pride.

# Outstanding Service

**Q. What does it mean to you to be named the recipient of the 2026 Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Service by Faculty?**

- A. Receiving the 2026 Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Service is both humbling and deeply meaningful. Service has never been something I pursued for recognition. It has simply been a natural extension of who I am and how I was raised. I learned the value of serving others by watching my mother care for family members during times of illness and need, often putting the needs of others before her own. Although I did not fully appreciate it at the time, those experiences shaped my understanding of compassion, responsibility, and service.

This award is especially meaningful because it comes from a university that has been part of my journey for many years. As a student, I experienced challenges, setbacks, and moments when I questioned whether I would ever complete my degree. Years later, I returned, earned my degrees, and now have the privilege of serving students at the very institution where my own transformation took place.

For me, this recognition is not simply about what I have done. It represents the opportunity I have been given to encourage others, create meaningful connections between the university and the community, and help students recognize their own potential. It is a reminder that service matters, relationships matter, and that sometimes the greatest impact comes from simply showing up for others. I am honored and grateful to receive this recognition.



**Ms. Trinda Owens**

# Outstanding Advising

**Dr. Sabrina Stanley** is an Assistant Professor of Education in the Spencer College of Education and Human Sciences. She is the 2026 recipient of the Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Advising by Faculty. Here she is in her own words:

## **Q. Tell me about how you build relationships with students and why this matters as part of the advising process?**

- A. Building relationships matters as part of advising students. I build relationships with students by taking the time to get to know them as individuals. I think students respond best when they feel seen as people rather than as names on a roster. Every student comes with a different background and a different path. Their experiences, strengths, goals, and challenges make it so that no two academic journeys look exactly alike.

That belief probably comes from my own experiences. Growing up, I had an unusual name for my generation, and people often called me something close to Sabrina, but not quite right. I wanted to be known for who I actually was. Later, as the parent of twins, it was important to me that each twin, like my other children, was recognized for their unique interests and talents. Advising is similar. Each student deserves individualized attention, even during the rush of advising season. When I understand who a student is and what they hope to accomplish, I can combine that understanding with my knowledge of program requirements to help them make decisions that best support their goals. Building those relationships allows advising to become more than course selection; it becomes a partnership in their success.

## **Q. Some of your student advisees mention your accessibility and open communication. How does this contribute to their success?**

- A. Accessibility and communication are essential for students to not feel like they have to navigate their academic journey alone. Much of our communication today happens through email, which can sometimes feel impersonal. I try to overcome that by responding promptly and maintaining an open dialogue with students. Even when I don't immediately have an answer, I can tell them, "Let me find out and get back to you." That response still lets them know someone is listening and willing to help.

I also take my office hours seriously. Students know that if they come during my posted hours, I will be there and I will make time for them. During advising periods, I extend my availability to ensure students get the support they need. I believe students are more successful when they know they have someone they can reach out to, someone who will respond, and someone who will work alongside them as they make important academic and professional decisions.

## **Q. When did you begin advising students at UNA, and have you seen your process evolve over time?**

- A. I began advising students when I arrived at UNA in August 2023, and my process has certainly evolved. Early on, I knew the basics, but there were many situations where I needed to consult colleagues or my Program Chair before providing students with accurate information. Fortunately, my students were incredibly patient and gracious as I learned the complexities of our programs and

procedures in the beginning. Over time, experience has helped me become more proactive and confident as an advisor. I've developed a stronger understanding of degree requirements as well as common challenges students encounter. As a result, I can now anticipate many of their questions and effectively help them navigate their programs. Advising for me is less about giving answers and more about helping students plan strategically for their own future.

## **Q. Students have also said you become a mentor for them. What does this mean to you, and do you continue to stay in touch with them after graduation?**

- A. Mentorship means supporting students beyond their course schedules and degree plans. I advise mathematics, business, and science education majors. I make a point to connect them with opportunities that align with their interests, including scholarships, workshops, internships, and professional development experiences.

I stay connected with students during their teaching internships, even when I am not serving as their university supervisor. The teacher education internship can feel isolating while students are away from campus and focused on meeting certification requirements. I want them to know they are still part of the UNA community and that I remain invested in their success.

Many of those relationships continue after graduation. Because of my background as a high school science teacher, I frequently stay connected with our science education graduates. I share information about professional learning opportunities, student competitions, workshops, other resources that may benefit them and their classrooms, and the occasional teaching meme. I know other science teachers around the state, and I work to get our graduates connected into that network. For me, mentorship is about helping students successfully transition into the profession and continuing to support them as they grow in their careers.

## **Q. Finally, what does it mean to you to be named the recipient of this year's Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Advising by Faculty?**

- A. Receiving this award is a true honor. At UNA, I work alongside outstanding colleagues who are deeply committed to our students. So, to be recognized among them is both humbling and meaningful. What made the recognition especially significant were the letters of support from students. My students humble me. Reading their comments showed me that the qualities I strive to bring to advising, such as being thoughtful, encouraging, and attentive, are what they experience working with me. One student mentioned the math and science stickers I give out during advising appointments. I am so happy that students enjoy this simple gesture because, in many ways, those stickers communicate what I hope every advisee feels when they leave my office: "I see you, and you matter." Advising is ultimately about building relationships and helping students feel welcomed and supported. Knowing that students noticed those efforts and felt positive about them is some of what makes this award so meaningful.



Dr. Sabrina Stanley



# Outstanding Advising

**Ms. Heather Stancil** is a Senior Academic Advisor and Program Coordinator in Interdisciplinary and Professional Studies. She is the 2026 recipient of the Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Advising by Staff. Here she is in her own words:

## **Q. Tell me the most fulfilling aspect of your work in advising.**

- A. Working with students from all walks of life, I get to see some with clear goals reach and surpass them, others who feel a little lost find their way, and still others who have never had a cheerleader in their corner experience the satisfaction of finally finishing what they started. Every student has a story, and I have the privilege of leaning into those stories and helping students of all ages discover their path to personal fulfillment. Every one of my students who earns their degree, though they did all the hard work, make me feel like I earned it all over again with them. There's a reward for me at the end of every semester!

## **Q. There is a lot of juggling of information regarding majors, career pathways, and different academic and non-academic pathways. How do you stay organized while working with dozens of students on their career goals and personal development?**

- A. Though I work with a diverse group of students with various interests, I've discovered that patterns often arise. Even though every student is an individual, our areas of emphasis help develop categories that point me in a general direction to help guide students. Then, I just have to take notes and build a relationship. It is a lot to keep up with and can be demanding, but I get to speak to every student every semester. Their customized program of study has key notes. When the notes are connected to a relationship, and I am preparing to meet with them, I am reminded of who they are, their goals, and what they are trying to achieve. Relationships make all the difference.

## **Q. What do you see as the key – perhaps multiple keys? – to student success?**

- A. Organization skills and personal drive are essential. I often share that when I was in grad school, balancing work and two graduate degree programs, the most effective strategy I employed was making a master syllabus each semester with all my class due dates printed on one document. It was taped to my desk and even color-coded based on the type of assignment that needed to be completed. This helped give me a point of reference that I saw every day, and I could plan how early I needed to begin working on each assignment. Then I could put a big black line through each one when I completed it. There are lots of tools students can use to stay on top of things, and

that was just my way. I have a digital to-do list I use at work every day now. A personal drive is key as well because if you keep your eye on the prize, though you may fail, you have the gumption to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going. Recently, I saw this in a student who was on a constant struggle bus to finish his bachelor's degree. But he never gave up and graduated! A few weeks ago, he emailed me to share that he was working on a master's, had a 4.0, and had his sights set on a doctorate. He had and still has a personal drive! I was reminded that just because one moment in life may appear grim, the rest of your life shouldn't be defined by any one experience. Stay focused and keep driving.

## **Q. Your nominators speak of the role you play in student recruitment. Why does building that relationship matter?**

- A. I love the classic quote from Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people forget what you said, people forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." When students are checking out colleges and degree programs, there are several things and motivations that initially draw them to a program. However, it's the relationship that often leads them to a full commitment. When you can make a student feel seen as an individual and supported and then follow up to let them know you meant it, students will not only seek your program out but hold the program's banner up to recruit others for you. When you are available to them at the recruiting stage, throughout the program, and after they finish, students notice, and they remember.

## **Q. And, finally, what does it mean to you to be named the recipient of the 2026 Academic Affairs Award for Outstanding Advising by Staff?**

- A. This is an incredible honor. I feel like I am just doing my job, but to be recognized in this way is truly humbling. I try my best every morning to pray and thank my God and Savior for the opportunities I have and for any recognition I receive. He gives me the energy for it and has surrounded me with an amazing team of people in the Dean's Office, the Office of the Registrar, Admissions, the Success Center, and so many more places. Ultimately, I can't do it without their support. I am so grateful for our team at UNA and understand that any success I experience is shared by all who contribute to the university, making it such a great place to work.



**Ms. Heather Stancil**



# **Division of Academic Affairs**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA**

UNA Box 5041 | One Harrison Plaza | Florence, AL 35632

256.765.4100 | [una.edu](http://una.edu)