

A Trailblazing Department Marks a Milestone

By Ellen N. Woods

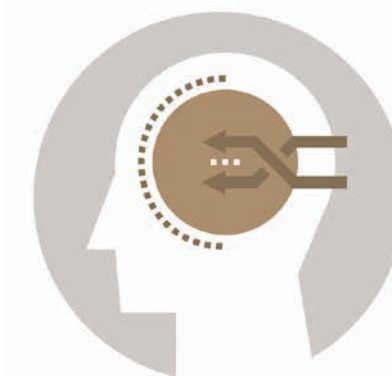
In 1889, a 26-year old priest with a doctoral degree in sacred theology came across a second-hand copy of Wilhelm Wundt's 1874 *Principles of Physiological Psychology* at a Paris bookstore. His name was Edward Pace and he was so inspired by Wundt's ideas that he resolved to study with the author at the University of Leipzig in Germany, becoming the first Catholic priest and one of only six Americans to have studied with the founder of experimental psychology.

Shortly after earning his Ph.D. in 1891, Rev. (later Monsignor) Pace began teaching what he'd learned in Europe at Catholic University. In 1892 he introduced the earliest psychology laboratory of its kind in any Catholic institution.

The first psychology courses offered that year were taught in theology, and later under the discipline of philosophy. In 1905 the Department of Psychology was set up within the School of Philosophy. Pace and his colleagues were beginning to demonstrate how empirical studies of pain or attention could advance our understanding of basic human sensory experience.

In 1922, one of Monsignor Pace's students succeeded him as department chair. Thomas Verner Moore was a Paulist father, then a Benedictine, and finally a Carthusian monk at the time of his passing. He had a medical degree and served as a psychiatrist with the armed forces during the First World War, became superintendent of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and established St. Gertrude's School of Arts and Crafts for mentally challenged children. Father Moore's clinic became a model after which other Catholic clinics were patterned.

The department continued to extend its contributions to training mental health professionals in the following decades. In 1947, Father John Stafford, who had received a Ph.D. from the University of Louvain, became head of what was



now called the Department of Psychology and Psychiatry. Under his leadership, there was a thriving Chaplain Training Program as well as a Veterans' Affairs training program in clinical psychology. Catholic University had the only American Psychological Association-approved clinic within 100 miles of Washington, D.C.

By 1960, the Department of Psychology was well established, and housed in the third floor of McMahon Hall. James Youniss, who arrived that year to study in the doctoral program and who is now a professor emeritus, recalls his thoughts on the department at the time. It was "anchored to psychology's very origins, but also with signs of movement to contemporary times and the future."

As the department looked to the future, there was increasing recognition of the impact of psychology in a variety of fields, and the department hired faculty for several new programs, including social psychology, personality, counseling, and human development.

One of those faculty members was Hans Furth, whose background included escape from his Nazi-besieged Austrian homeland, training as a concert pianist at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and 10 years in a Carthusian monastery. He brought a unique interest to the department: study of the deaf, with a deep interest in the work of Jean Piaget, the leading developmental psychologist of the 20th century. Furth's publications made accessible Piaget's largely abstract ideas, including the notion that children left to their own devices continually rethink their understanding of the world and are not empty vessels waiting for educators to fill them with knowledge. He found that far from impeding their development, use of sign language for those with hearing impairments, highly discouraged in deaf education at the time, actually spurred healthier development.

Furth, Youniss, and faculty member Bruce Ross established the Center for Thinking and Language in the 1960s, and they made Piaget's theory the centerpiece of the Ph.D. program in developmental psychology. In 1970, the University awarded Piaget an honorary doctorate.

During the following decades, the department developed its doctoral programs in Applied Experimental Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Human Development; master's programs in Psychology and Human Factors; and a strong undergraduate major. The faculty and the student body grew, with undergraduates becoming a priority equal to graduate students.

Among the faculty to join the department in the 1970s were James Howard, Diane Arnkoff, and Martin Safer — all now professors emeriti who maintain strong ties to the department and their former students. Professor Carol Glass, who will retire at the end of this year, joined the faculty in 1978,

Research Spotlight

Resiliency Builder Program

Associate Professor Brendan Rich has always been interested in working with children. He once thought he might like to be an elementary school teacher. While working as an assistant teacher years ago, he says, "I found myself drawn to the kids who were struggling academically, who were anxious, reluctant to engage with their peers."

In his Child Cognition, Affect, and Behavior Lab, Rich now runs the Resiliency Builder Program. Through group therapy interventions in local schools, he and his students are dedicated to "changing the trajectory for children with significant risk for academic and social failure. We are teaching resiliency skills that will stay with them throughout their lifetime," says Rich.

For the last eight years, Rich has partnered with local clinical psychologist Mary Alvord to bring group therapy programs to schools in Washington, D.C., and Montgomery County, Md., particularly to at-risk youth who do not have access to counseling services. "We are teaching broad social competence coping skills like how to regulate emotions when things are not going your way, problem-solving, positive thinking," Rich says. "And we are doing this in group settings so the kids get to practice with their peers."

One of the measures of the program's success comes from teacher reporting. "Teachers are telling us the students are better behaved, they don't get frustrated as easily, they have more friendships, their grades are improving."

As with all research labs in the Department of Psychology, Rich relies on student involvement. He currently has eight undergraduate, five master's, and four doctoral students working with the Resiliency Builder Program. "I love providing opportunities for undergraduate students to get involved in clinical research, to be exposed to it so early on in their academic careers," he says.

"Being a research assistant has been such a confidence-building experience," says Alexandra Sinner, a junior neuroscience major. "I've been involved in all aspects of research including data collection and entry, meeting with eligible families to explain the program, and leading meditations at the start of group sessions. I love interacting with kids, as well as working on a team that includes grad students."

Rich and his students recently began collaborating with the NIH National Human Genome Research Institute. "We will complete a genetic profile and neurological imaging before and after participation and hope to see a change in brain functioning as a result of the program. This collaboration is very exciting for all of us."

In 1892, Catholic University began offering psychology courses. By 1905, it had one of the first psychology departments at an American university. Today psychology is one of the most popular majors at the University — offering students unlimited career prospects.

Father Edward Pace outside McMahon Hall, ca. 1900.
Photo courtesy of The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives



Seth Kiser, Ph.D. 2015, is in charge of the psychology department's electroencephalography (EEG) lab. Here he works with a student to gather research data.



finding “a supportive environment for women in science and for young faculty members.”

They were all in attendance when the department formally celebrated 125 years of psychology in October, along with the department's full current faculty. A one-day conference and reunion brought more than 100 alumni to campus for a day of panel discussions and shared memories.

The alumni in attendance spanned decades, and their resumés spoke volumes about the places you can go with a psychology degree. A small sampling of the group includes John Curry, Ph.D. 1978, professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences and the department of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University; Cheryl Boyce, Ph.D., B.A. 1991, chief of the Implementation Science Branch, Center for Translation Research and Implementation Science at the National Institutes of Health; Robert Molloy, Ph.D. 1996, director of the National Transportation Safety Board's Office of Highway Safety; Elizabeth Van Winkle, Ph.D. 2012, the acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; Ali Mattu, Ph.D. 2012, an assistant professor at the Columbia University Medical Center, who brings psychology to a broader public with *The Psych Show* on YouTube; and John Murray, Ph.D. 1970, an expert on social development of children and youth, who has published 10 books on the impact of television on children.

One of the highlights of the event was a keynote address by Angela Santomero, B.A. 1990, co-creator of *Blues Clues* and creator of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* on PBS. “Everything I do is inspired by my psychology foundation at Catholic University,” she said. “I had great professors who truly took an interest in me and who and what I wanted to be.”

Mentorship was a recurrent theme at the celebration, as participants paid tribute to faculty members who had provided guidance during and after their time on campus.

“Mentorship is a hallmark of the department,” says Professor Glass. “We hire faculty members who, in addition to being accomplished scholars, show promise and passion as teachers.”

Today, psychology is one of the most popular majors within the School of Arts and Sciences, reaching as many as 300 majors in recent years. The department has continued to expand its offerings, recently adding a concentration in children, families, and cultures; a new B.S. degree in psychological and brain sciences; and, in conjunction with the School of Engineering, a neuroscience minor. A year after adding the new B.S. degree, the department has 65 undergraduate students now majoring in brain science.

“We offer the experience of a small-college liberal arts education but at a major research university,” says Associate Professor Marcie Goeke-Morey.



“Our faculty members are accomplished in their fields, all contributing cutting-edge research to the literature. Undergraduate students have the opportunity to participate in research apprenticeships in any one of our many research labs working side by side with faculty members and doctoral students.”

The psychology department has 11 labs producing nationally and internationally acclaimed research, including the Adolescents and Families Lab; the Children, Families, and Cultures Lab; the Cognitive Affective Neuroscience Lab; and the Suicide Prevention Lab, to name a few.

“Our curriculum is very strong in research methods, critical thinking, and statistics. That kind of training serves a student well whether he or she is going on to graduate school or starting a career,” says Professor Marc Sebrechts, the Wylma and James Curtin Professor of Psychology, whose 20-year anniversary as department chair was also celebrated at the October conference.

“The issues psychology raises are inherently interesting,” Sebrechts says. “What drives our thinking and reasoning and motivations? We are exploring fundamental questions about the human condition.”

“In addition, psychology provides a strong foundation for just about any career choice. While we have a number of undergraduates who go on to graduate school with the goal of becoming clinical psychologists, we have just as many who enter careers in business or human resources or education. And many others go on to graduate school to study medicine, law, nursing, and social work.”

At the 125th anniversary celebration, Youniss described the key role of psychology by recalling remarks made by Cardinal James Gibbons a century earlier at the department's 25th anniversary celebration. Gibbons spoke of the turmoil of the times, the poverty of immigrants who had recently arrived from Europe, the world war then engulfing Europe and involving America, and many social issues that needed addressing. He noted that “from the very nature of our condition upon this earth, from our progress in knowledge, our political organization and our economic condition . . .” the human state has “made possible and necessary the social sciences” and “demanded a more systematic inquiry than ever before into our human relations . . . the structure of society, the origin and history of institutions, the cases of decline, and the possibility of betterment . . .”

Youniss noted that Cardinal Gibbons's insightful comments still apply. 

— *Maria Mazzenga, Ph.D. 2000, education archivist, and Marc Sebrechts, psychology department chair, contributed historical information to this article. For direct links to research sources, visit catholicmagazine.catholic.edu.*



Research Spotlight

The Virtual Study of Light on the Moon

Katherine Rahill, a doctoral student in the Human Factors/Applied Experimental Program, has chosen the topic of lunar psychophysics for the research that will lead to her dissertation. It's an area of study she invented — the lunar aspect, that is.

Psychophysics is the study of human sensory perception of physical stimuli — the relation of the psychological to the physical. “The lunar component,” says Rahill, “is the study of how certain aspects of physical properties of those stimuli change in a lunar-like environment. To narrow my focus, I am looking at just one stimulus, which is the scattering of light on the moon.”

Rahill says she has long been fascinated by the moon. “I have my own telescope and I am able to zoom in and look at craters and other types of reflectance properties.” Rahill aspires to be an astronaut. She knows, however, that only about one percent of those who apply may ever achieve that goal. For now, she is excited that she has garnered some initial interest from NASA in her research.

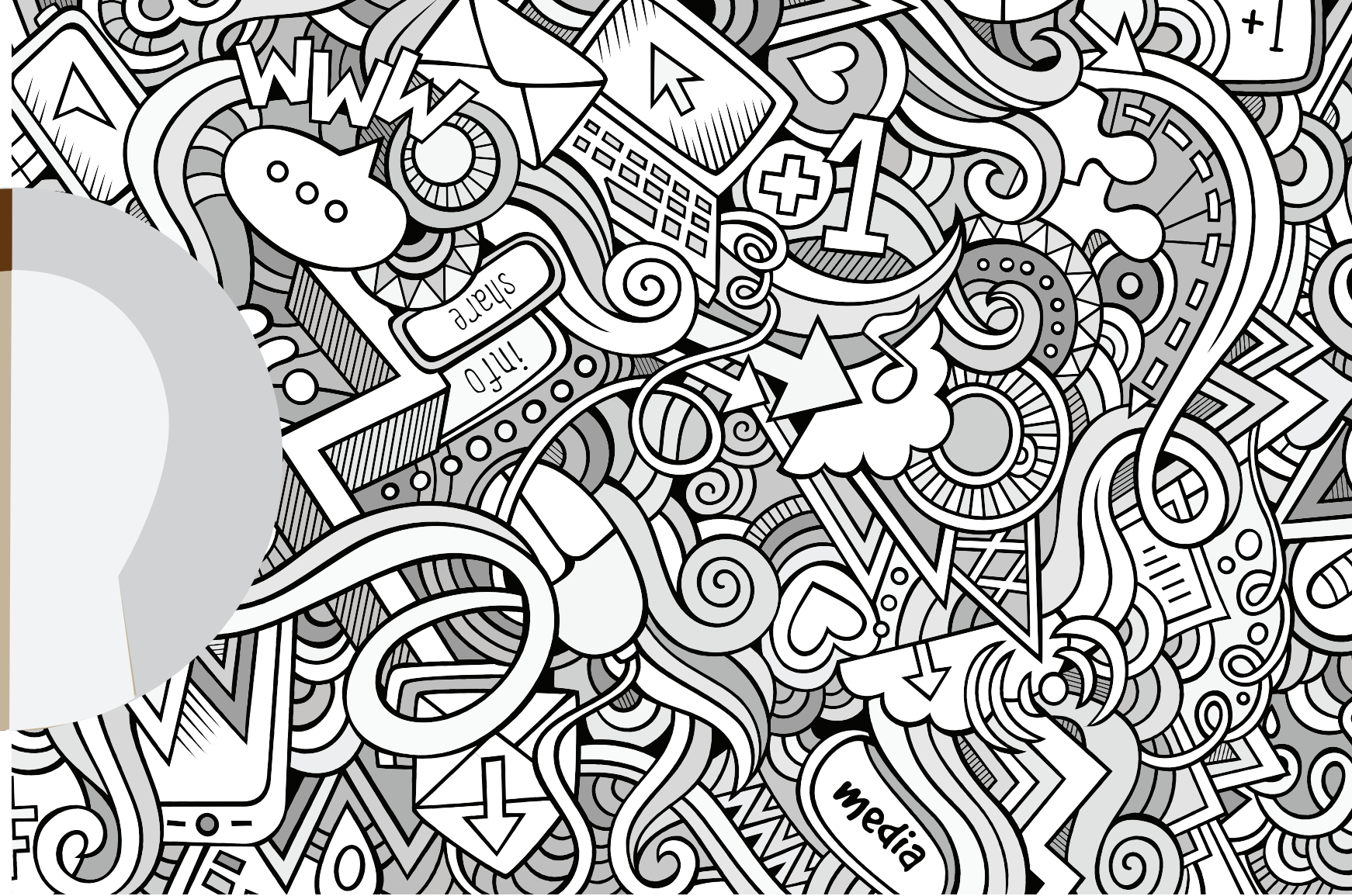
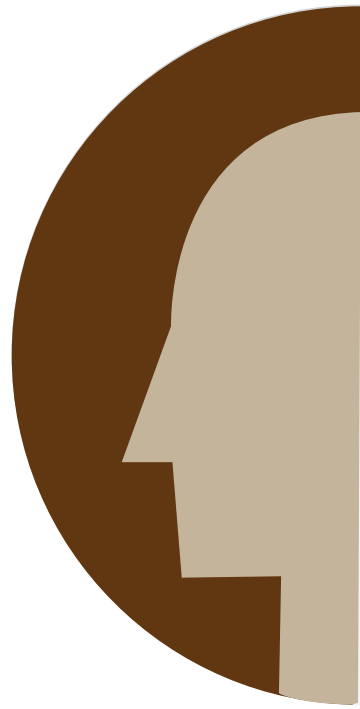
The practical implications of her research are inspired by the Apollo years, says Rahill. “Many astronauts had issues with estimating landmarks in the distance. Many were underestimating distances by miles, thinking something was not as far or as steep. So they were exerting a lot more effort and depleting more oxygen resources than they planned. That has not been revisited since that era.”

Rahill works under the direction of Marc Sebrechts, professor and department chair, in the Psychology Department's Cognition and Virtual Reality Lab.

“As a mentor and advisor, Marc has sat with me countless times to help shape the idea and determine if it was theoretically sound,” says Rahill. “What I love about the Psychology Department is when I came up with this idea and brought it to Marc and other faculty members, no one told me I was crazy to study something that was completely new. There was just support and genuine interest.”



mind • ful • ness



One afternoon toward the end of the fall semester, Marcie Goeke-Morey, associate professor, was headed to her office in O’Boyle Hall. “A beautiful tree stopped me in my tracks. The leaves had the most glorious shades of red and the sun was streaming through the branches,” she says. “I stood there and took it all in. I wasn’t thinking about the class I had just taught or the to-do list waiting for me at my office. I was focused only on the moment and the spectacular sight in front of me.”

Goeke-Morey’s experience is the very definition of mindfulness, which she describes as “awareness in the present moment with an attitude of acceptance and without judgement.” Goeke-Morey says that the practice of mindfulness is not only having a positive impact in her personal life, but in her scholarly work as well. In collaboration with her colleague Professor Barry Wagner, she has begun a research project to study the role of mindfulness in family life. “The goal is for our research to lead to an intervention that promotes connectedness and compassion and more optimal relationships,” she says.

Mindfulness has become a popular tool in clinical therapy in recent years. “As a field, we are early in the research, but we are seeing positive outcomes including treatment of anxiety and depression,” Goeke-Morey says. “More and more studies are finding that mindfulness enhances people’s lives by improving their ability to focus, to handle stress, and to experience more positive outlooks and gratitude.”

The Department of Psychology has taken notice, introducing a two-part

course last year, Mindfulness and Meditation, that explores the history of mindfulness and meditation in its original religious and spiritual contexts, as well as its evolution to an object of contemporary scientific study. During class time students try specific forms of meditation with the intention of maintaining a mindfulness practice beyond the classroom.

A team of researchers in the department has gained attention for a trail-blazing training program bringing mindfulness into the area of sports psychology. The publication of *Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement* (American Psychological Association, 2018) by two Ph.D. alumni, Keith Kaufman and Timothy Pineau, and Professor Carol Glass, is the result of more than 10 years of work with collegiate and high school athletes, recreational athletes, and college athletic coaches.

The program trains athletes and coaches to “approach their sport with mindful awareness and acceptance, which can lead to heightened performance and enjoyment,” says Glass.

It began when Kaufman came to Catholic University in 2002 to enter the doctoral program in clinical psychology under Glass’s mentorship. He had come from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he double-majored in psychology and exercise and sport science, combining his two loves, “sports and the mind.” He found a kindred spirit in Glass, a self-described integrationist, who embraced a variety of techniques in her research and clinical practice including cognitive behavioral therapy

and mindfulness. At the time, Glass’s son was rising through the national ranks of recurve archery, and she found herself becoming increasingly interested in sport psychology. Their shared interest led to the research that would become Kaufman’s dissertation on mindfulness for athletes.

The pair found surprisingly little research on mindfulness in sports when they began. However, they did discover a reference to a poster presentation by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a noted scholar and founder of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, on the topic of mindfulness for rowing teams. Kabat-Zinn graciously typed his unpublished poster for them, and this early work served as inspiration for their research.

“As we began our work, we found a paradox,” says Kaufman. “The mind, like any other part of the body, needs training. In sports, we spend hours upon hours training the body and we assume the mind is along for the ride. We were introducing something revolutionary. Let’s put in the same time and commitment to mental training, not as a tool we pull out when needed, but as a way of life.”

Pineau came to Catholic University’s psychology program in 2008 as a doctoral student and athlete with his own interest in mindfulness and sports. He joined Glass and Kaufman in their research and further development of the Mindful Sport Performance Enhancement (MSPE) program.

Pineau, who teaches the psychology course on mindfulness and meditation, says many of the athletes who participated in MSPE studies were surprised

when the positive effects of mindfulness extended beyond their athletic performance. “They reported they were sleeping better, less anxious, and more present in their everyday lives,” he says.

Pineau practices mindfulness as an integral part of his own life and incorporates it regularly in his clinical work. He says the practice of mindfulness has the potential to enhance anyone’s life. His advice to someone who wants to begin a practice? “It helps to get started within a community. Take a class in person or online. There are also very good apps that can help you get started. There are many different forms of meditation. There is no right or wrong way. It’s simply about focusing on the present moment. Choose to commit to the practice every day for at least two weeks. Then look back, notice what changes you experienced, and decide if you want to continue on. The important thing is having the experience. It takes practice.” — E.N.W.

Did you graduate with a degree in psychology?

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