STETSON UNIVERSITY

Summer 2025 - Spring 2026 COHL Annual Report

Prepared by

The Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan

https://www.stetson.edu/other/cohl/

A Message from the Director

Dear Friends and Supporters,

It is a privilege to share this year's report from the Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan. Our mission is to promote human flourishing through research, education, training, and easy-access programs for health and well-being. This past year, with your help, that mission reached more people than ever.

Research with national reach.

Our Templeton World Charity Foundation-funded study of Lectio Divina and spiritual exercises continues, and I was honored to present two papers at the Global Summit on Spirituality, Religion, and Mental Health. Our Meaning-Making Project, developed with Dr. Ralph Piedmont, produced two publications. These introduced the Ways of Meaning Scale and tested meaning-making across cultures in China. Student researchers Paige Pei and Milena Lorenzi Salini joined us at the American Psychological Association Convention in Washington, D.C. Our Connect Lab is now collecting data on moral injury and trauma among U.S. military veterans.

Wellness tools that people can use.

Our SMART Lab has now delivered more than 700 stress management and resiliency training sessions, free of charge to participants. We were awarded a $10,000 Hollis Institute Impact Grant to update lab equipment. The lab will also be featured in the next edition of the Pearson textbook Counseling Today.

Care for older adults and their families.

Our Brain Fitness Academy grew from 14 participants in Summer 2025 to 19 in Spring 2026. Nearly all returned each semester, which tells us the program matters to them. Six Stetson interns each term work one-on-one with participants. Many go on to occupational therapy, medical school, clinical psychology programs, and research careers. Our Care Partner Support Group gave family caregivers a place to find practical tools and community.

Community connection.

In March, we hosted Connected Communities: Overcoming Isolation and Loneliness at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in DeLand. It brought together clinicians, educators, faith leaders, and neighbors to address one of today's most pressing public health challenges.

None of this happens on grant funding alone. Although we apply for external support regularly, the center depends on friends like you for the essentials. Your gift can be designated to the center's mission, lab materials and technology, administrative and coordination positions, or graduate assistantships. Each one directly strengthens the students we train and the community we serve.

Thank you for believing in this work. I invite you to visit, to follow our progress, and to consider a gift to COHL. To give, visit the College of Arts and Sciences giving page, select "Other" under the designation menu, and type "COHL."

With gratitude,

Jesse Fox, PhD

Director, Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan
Associate Professor of Counselor Education,
Stetson University

The goal of the center is to promote human flourishing through research, education, training, and easy-access programs for health and well-being.

ABOUT COHL

The Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan (COHL) is an interdisciplinary, collaborative space in the new Cici and Hyatt Brown Hall for Health and Innovation. COHL was born out of Hyatt and Cici Brown's goal of enhanced health education, and investment into the local community's health care providing an opportunity to create community outreach experiences.

The goal of the center is to promote human flourishing through research, education, training, and easy-access programs for health and well-being.

CENTER FOR OPTIMAL HEALTH
ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

COHL Faculty and Staff

JESSE FOX, PHD — COHL DIRECTOR

Associate Professor of Counselor Education

Jesse Fox, PhD, earned his doctorate from the University of Central Florida and spent several years on the faculty at Loyola University Maryland in the Department of Pastoral Counseling before joining Stetson in 2017. He has experience working with a range of clinical populations including college counseling, outpatient addiction treatment, community mental health and private practice. He is a project leader for the Spiritual and Religious Competency Project, a $5.1 million grant funded by the John Templeton Foundation. Since 2020, Dr. Fox has served as the Executive Director of the Episcopal Counseling Center, a non-profit counseling center serving the DeLand Community since 1987.

SARAH GARCIA, PHD — BFA RESEARCH FACULTY

Associate Professor of Psychology

Sarah Garcia, PhD, is a clinical neuropsychologist who studies non-pharmacological interventions for cognitive decline in a variety of medical populations. Her past work has examined cognitive deficits in a wide variety of populations (e.g. heart failure, bariatric surgery candidates, and dementia) as well as the use of exercise, sleep and electrical stimulation as potential preventative and treatment approaches.

MATTHEW SCHRAGER, PHD — BFA PRESIDENT AND DIRECTOR

Professor of Health Sciences

Matthew Schrager teaches courses in human anatomy/physiology, the physiology of aging, exercise physiology, biomechanics and research methods. His research focuses primarily on aging, bioenergetics, and functional capacity. He has a secondary research focus on the physiology and biomechanics of mobility and human performance. In his aging research, Dr. Schrager analyzes large-scale databases through the National Institute on Aging, and he has published with Stetson students research on blueberries as a potential countermeasure to the functional effects of aging.

COHL Faculty and Staff

ARIEL CHIVERS—COHL COORDINATOR

Ariel Chivers, a health and wellness expert who has been working with the senior population for 12 years, is the coordinator for the BFA and the Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan (COHL). She leads the Brain Fitness Academy sessions with the assistance of three or four undergraduate students who have strong backgrounds in psychology and health sciences-based courses. Chivers is the former associate executive director of the Volusia Flagler Family YMCA.

NICOLE KING— CARE PARTNER SUPPORT LEAD

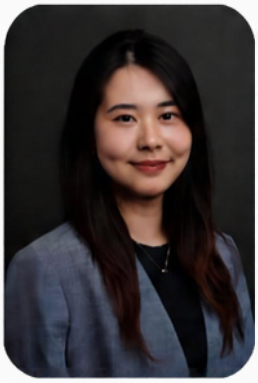
Nicole King is an alum of Stetson University and graduated with both a bachelor's in sociology and a master's in clinical mental health counseling. She is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor at her own local counseling practice and enjoys seeing clients from diverse backgrounds. Her clinical niche is grief and loss, but she also works to advocate for the unhoused and for survivors of domestic violence by working with national organizations that support increased access to care and resources. Facilitating connection is a passion of Nicole's and her work in both developing and running the Care Partner Support Group has been deeply fulfilling.

Student Research Assistants

These talented students contribute to COHL research through their curiosity, insight, and dedication.

Milena Lorenzi Salini

Milena Lorenzi Salini is a Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate student at Stetson, who graduated from the University of Central Florida with a bachelor's degree in clinical psychology, and a certificate in criminal profiling. She has professional experience in victim advocacy, domestic violence services, and social justice initiatives. As an international student, she brings a valuable global perspective, her research interests are forensic psychology, trauma, the intersection of spirituality and psychology and everything that sparks her curiosity.



Yufei (Paige) Pei

Yufei (Paige) Pei is currently completing a graduate degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Stetson University. Originally from China, she brings a multicultural perspective to both her research and clinical training. Her research experience includes multicultural psychology, religion and spirituality, and meaning making. She is also interested in mental health within LGBTQ+ populations and the Asian/Asian American community. Drawing on her own experiences navigating diverse cultural contexts, she brings a unique perspective to understanding resilience and identity development.

Trinideé Mercado

Trinideé Mercado is a Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate student at Stetson University, who graduated from Rollins College with a bachelor's degree majoring in psychology and communication studies. She has professional experience in victim services, journalism, and mental health counseling. Her research interests focus primarily on trauma, resilience, and mental health in first responder and veteran populations.

STUDENT RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

These talented students contribute to COHL research through their curiosity, insight, and dedication.

ANTHONY WILLIAMS

Research Assistant

Anthony is a Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate student at Stetson University. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of Central Florida and is a bilingual Miami native. As a leader in the hospitality industry and an active member of the recovery community, he brings skills in leadership and facilitation to his clinical training. His research interests include multicultural psychology, minority mental health, sexuality issues, addiction and recovery, and factors that influence stress and resilience.

ARACELIS CARTER

Research Assistant

Aracelis is a Clinical Mental Health Counseling graduate student at Stetson University. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Psychology (Clinical Track) from the University of Central Florida and has a background in developmental psychology, including work as a sensory–motor coach/evaluator and experience supporting children with diverse needs. She is committed to advocacy for vulnerable populations, and her clinical and research interests include trauma and stress–related disorders, child development, chronic illness, and trauma–informed care across the lifespan.

SHARED RESEARCH THEMES

Moral Injury • PTSD • Spirituality • Numinous Narratives • Veteran Mental Health

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HUMAN FLOURISHING: THE SCIENCE OF SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS EXERCISES

This Templeton World Charity Foundation-funded study examines *Lectio Divina* and the implications of spiritual exercises for human flourishing.

The project explores spiritual exercises across religious traditions and asks how contemplative practice can support thriving and transformation.

TEMPLETON
World Charity Foundation

PROJECT FACTS

GRANT
$500,000

TIMELINE
2024-2027

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
JESSE FOX, PHD

CO-INVESTIGATORS

Joseph Currier, PhD
University of South Alabama

Paul Granello, PhD
The Ohio State University

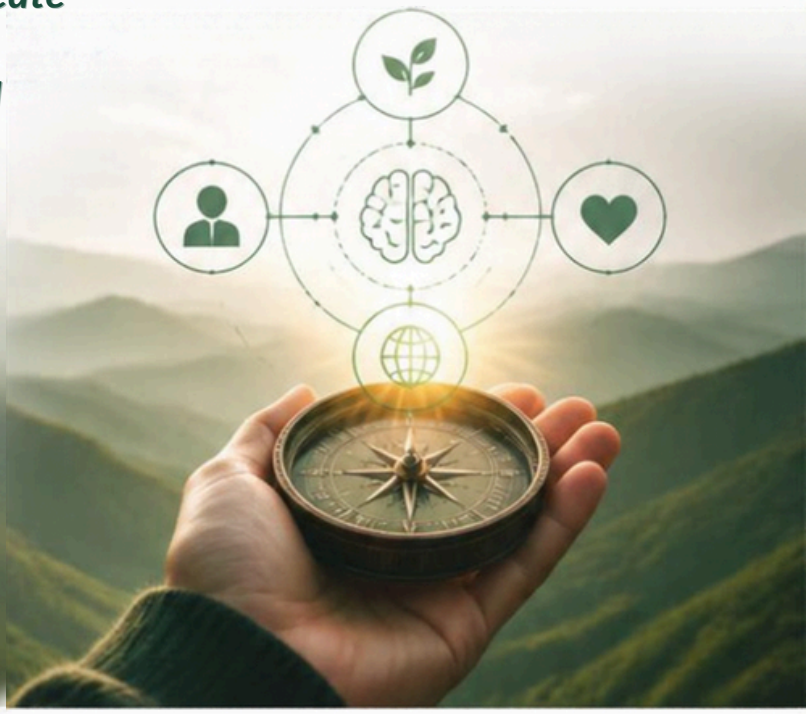
Global Summit on Spirituality, Religion, and Mental Health

With the support of the Templeton World Charity Foundation, Dr. Fox presented two papers on the psychological foundations of Lectio Divina.

Dr. Fox with neuroscientist Dr. Michael Ferguson

THE MEANING-MAKING PROJECT

An initiative developed in partnership with Stetson's Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan that examines how people create meaning through the Logoplex model, developed by Ralph L. Piedmont, PhD, and how meaning-making supports human flourishing.



IN PARTNERSHIP

This project is developed in collaboration with Stetson University's Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan. Together, we explore how meaning-making—through Ralph L. Piedmont's Logoplex model—relates to human flourishing across diverse populations.

PUBLICATION OUTCOMES

1. **"Finding More Meaning in Meaning-Making: Development and Validation of the Ways of Meaning Scale"** by **Ralph L. Piedmont, Jesse Fox, Evan Copello, and Jon R. Webb, published online July 4, 2026, in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.**

   This study introduced and validated the Ways of Meaning Scale and identified four meaning-making orientations: solipsism, secular humanism, aesthetic, and transformative.

2. **"Cross-Cultural Generalizability of the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale to China: Meaning-Making As a Human Universal"** by **Jesse Fox and colleagues, published May 31, 2026, in *Medical Research Archives,* Volume 14, Number 5.**

   This study found the simplified Chinese MEMS supported a unidimensional structure with three sub-facets, with evidence of internal consistency and convergent validity.

3. **"East meets West: cross-cultural generalizability of the Numinous Motivation inventory in Poland and Vietnam" by Ralph L. Piedmont, Katarzyna T. Bochniarz, Jesse Fox, Thi Thanh-Huyen Bui, Huyen Thi Tran, and Joanna Różycka-Tran, published September 16, 2026, in Frontiers in Psychology, Volume 17, Article 1866025.**

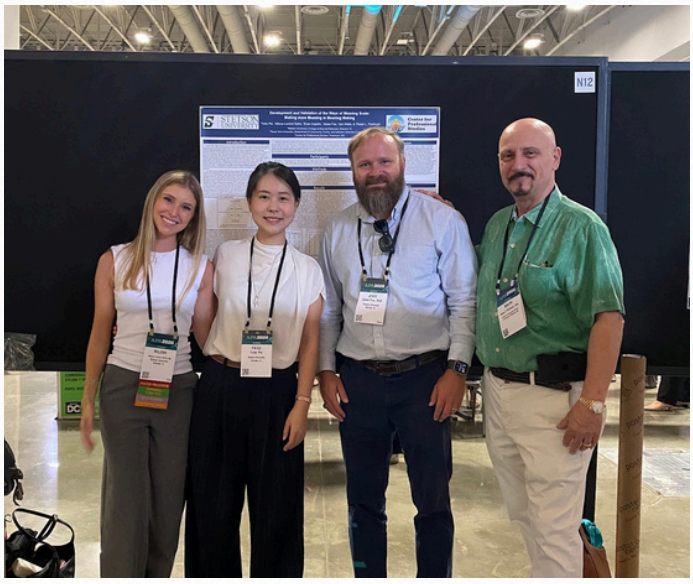
   This study tested the Numinous Motivation Inventory with Polish and Vietnamese participants and found that its core dimensions—infinitude, meaning, and worthiness—were structurally consistent across both cultures, distinct from the Five-Factor Model of personality, and uniquely associated with psychological distress and help-seeking.

We gratefully acknowledge Ralph L. Piedmont, PhD, Jesse Fox, and all project collaborators for their leadership and contributions.

Meaning-Making Project at the American Psychological Association Convention

Presentation at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Fox, Dr. Piedmont, and COHL Research Assistants Yufei (Paige) Pei and Milena Lorenzi Salini presented at the APA Convention on the Development and validation of the Ways of Meaning Scale.



Developed in partnership with The Center for Professional Studies in Timonium, Maryland.

SMART LAB PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Our SMART Lab is part of a consortium of SMART Labs with The Ohio State University.

We utilize a standardized curriculum and technology developed by the world-renowned HeartMath Institute™.

We have created a self-paced guide for helping people identify where stress comes from, and how they can better anticipate and respond to situations that create stress and overwhelm.

Participants in the SMART lab receive these benefits free of charge, supported in part through grant funding, and can participate in research on a voluntary basis.

SMART LAB

HeartMath.

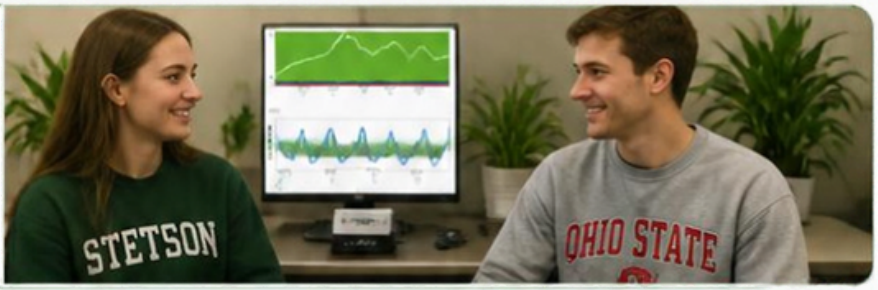
STETSON UNIVERSITY
PRO DEO ET VERITATE
1883
FLORIDA

SMART LAB PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

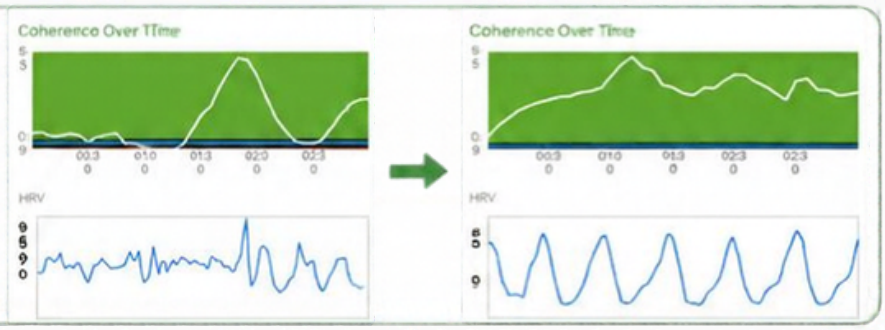
Officially surpassing 700 Stress Management and Resiliency Training sessions since our labs' founding in 2022!

Recruited 80 + individuals from across the country to participate in daily emotional and spiritual tracking 3x daily called Ecological Momentary Assessment.

Logged 140+ Stress Management and Resiliency Training Sessions with Stetson and Ohio State Students



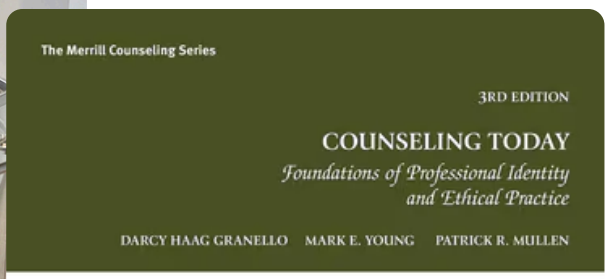
Recruited 40 + individuals from across the country to participate in Heart Rate Variability monitoring paired with contemplative practices

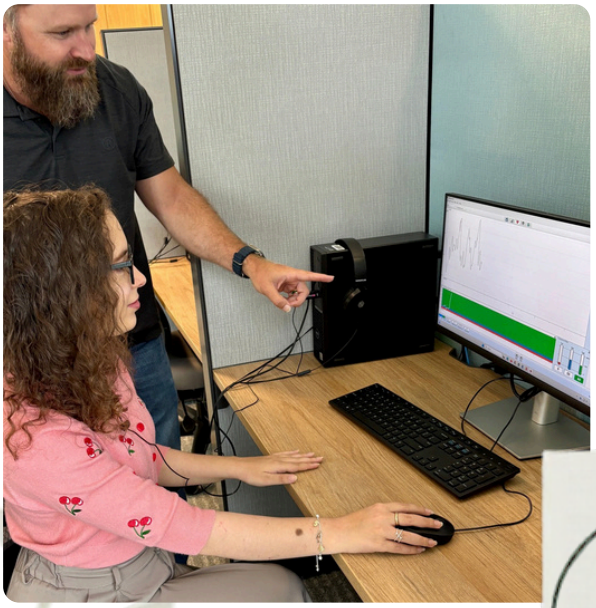


Submitted and received a $10,000 Hollis Institute Impact Grant to update lab equipment!

SMART LAB FEATURED IN BEST SELLING TEXTBOOK

Dr. Fox's SMART Lab team will be featured in the next edition of "Counseling Today," a best-selling introductory text book published by Pearson. The SMART Lab is named as an innovative method to teach practical wellness strategies that are effective and science based.





Applied wellness research. Innovative teaching. Lasting impact.

BFA PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Served bi-weekly cognitive rehabilitation program for 49 participants and provide important intergenerational learning through internship and practicum experiences.

Summer 2025

- 14 participants
- 13 participants returned for Summer 2025 semester

Fall 2025

- 16 participants
- 14 participants returned for Fall 2025 semester

Spring 2026

- 19 participants
- 17 participants returned for Spring 2026 semester

- Currently recruiting for our Summer 2026 semester
- 3rd Year receiving the Hollis Institute Impact Grant

Brain Fitness Academy

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BFA PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

- Collaborations with Hollis Center trainers including regular exercise classes with Frankie
- Tai chi with Bill and Pat Hoback
- Dance classes with Susan Femino-Floyd
- Talks on research and aging by faculty including Dr. Matt Schrager
- Trips to Gillespie Museum, Hand Art Museum, and duPont-Ball Library
- Presentation from Meryl Baker from AARP on the Six Pillars of Brain Health
- Participation in Alzheimer's Association's annual Walk to End Alzheimer's in November 2025
- Attended The 1st Annual Senior Expo at Volusia Memorial
- Planted succulents and flowers in the teaching garden with volunteers Chantal Michaud and Barbara Chivers
- Wet and dry art activities with Dr. Shankar-Brown, Associate Professor of Education
- Individual and couple portraits from local photographer, Betsy Stange

BFA STUDENT INTERNS

Student Experiences

Undergraduate students participate in a number of internship activities, working one-on-one with participants, and being trained on and utilizing cognitive rehabilitation and physiology techniques.

This internship gives them real-world health experience, and exposes them to advanced healthcare training earlier in their academic career.

Summer 2025

- **6 Stetson student interns**

Fall 2025

- **6 Stetson student interns**

Spring 2026

- **6 Stetson student interns**

Many students credit internship experiences to helping them develop professional skills and contacts and identify a career path for themselves.

This combination helps ensure students are successful in their immediate years post-Stetson

Post graduation, BFA Student interns have pursued the following:

- **Occupational Therapy**
- **Medical school**
- **Research at major universities**
- **Clinical psychology graduate programs**

BFA STUDENT INTERNS AND RESEARCH

Each semester 3 student interns help with research

3 times a year, interested BFA participants did a longitudinal study evaluating cognitive, physical, and quality of life outcomes.

Senior projects from health sciences look at cognition and quality of life correlates for their capstones.

1 student looked at grip strength asymmetry as a potential biomarker of cognitive performance for her capstone.

CARE PARTNER SUPPORT GROUP HIGHLIGHTS

Each semester our Counselor Education Alumni, Nicole, and one Internship student each semester participated in the leadership and planning of the bi-weekly meetings.

In addition to providing much-needed support and opportunities to share with other care partners, topics covered in the groups included becoming a resilient caregiver; tips for managing stress and burnout; diffusing family conflict and tips for improving communication; nutrition and wellness; tips for creating a dementia friendly home; mindfulness activities; and sharing community resources.

Research was conducted on the impact of the Care Partner support groups on the stress and strain/burden experienced by family caregivers.

Summer 2025

- **11 Care Partners attended support groups**

Fall 2025

- **12 Care Partners attended support groups**

Spring 2026

- **12 Care Partners attended support groups**

CARE PARTNER SUPPORT GROUP HIGHLIGHTS

Summer 2025

Guest speakers included

- Frankie Painter, Stetson University certified exercise instructor
- Audrey Bellini from Home Instead
- Dr. Strickland from Family Medicine

Fall 2025

Guest speakers included

- Anne Tracey from Halifax Hospice
- Lyndsey Taylor from the Alzheimer's Association
- Josh Freitas from CERTUS Memory Care

Spring 2026

Guest speakers included

- Carlos Soldevilla from Dignity Memorial
- Beau Herman from Assisted Living Locators
- Heather Vargas from Cobb Cole
- Detective Hinson from the Volusia Sheriff's Office

Community Symposium on Loneliness and Isolation

The Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan Hosts Community Symposium on Loneliness and Isolation bringing together community leaders, students, and professionals to address isolation and build connection.

AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION

On March 20, 2026 Stetson University's Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan (COHL) hosted Connected Communities: Overcoming Isolation and Loneliness, an interactive symposium focused on one of today's most pressing public health challenges. Loneliness and social isolation affect nearly one in two adults in the United States and are associated with serious health risks, including heart disease, depression, and **premature death, comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day**. Former Surgeon General Dr. **Vivek Murthy** has identified social disconnection as a critical public health issue, calling for collective **action to strengthen relationships and rebuild a more connected society.**

A DAY OF LEARNING AND CONNECTION

The event, held at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Deland, brought together community members, mental health professionals, educators, faith leaders, and advocates for an afternoon of learning, reflection, and connection.
The symposium was organized by Dr. Jesse Fox, Associate Professor in Stetson's Department of Counselor Education and Director of COHL.

INSIGHTS FROM EXPERTS

Featured speakers included Dr. **Paul Granello** of The Ohio State University, the **Very Rev. Audrey Sutton,** an Episcopal priest and anti-human-trafficking **ministry leader, and Garrett Graves,** a licensed mental health counselor, registered play therapist, and **Stetson Counselor Education alum**. Together, the panel explored the impact of **loneliness on individuals and communities,** while offering practical strategies to strengthen social connection and promote well-being.

ENGAGEMENT THAT BUILDS COMMUNITY

The event created space not only for expert dialogue but also for meaningful engagement among attendees. Participants took part in guided discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and small group conversations designed to foster connection and shared understanding. Organizers emphasized the importance of moving beyond **loneliness** to actionable steps that build stronger, more connected communities.

STUDENT AND ALUMNI INVOLVEMENT

Students and alumni from Stetson's Counselor Education program played an active role in supporting the event. Student research assistants **Milena Lorenzi Salini, Paige Pei, and Aracelis Carter,** along with alum **Trinideé Mercado,** participated in organizing the event. Alum **Garret Graves** served as a symposium speaker.

EVENT AT A GLANCE

Date
March 20, 2026

Venue
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Deland, Florida

Focus
Overcoming Isolation and Loneliness
Building Connection and Well-being

Goal
Strengthen relationships and rebuild a more connected society

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Dr. Paul Granello
Associate Professor The Ohio State University & Suicide Prevention Expert

The Very Rev. Audrey Sutton
Episcopal priest and anti-human-trafficking ministry **leader**

Garrett Graves
Licensed mental health counselor, registered play therapist, and Stetson Counselor Education alum

Dr. Jesse Fox
Associate Professor, and Director of COHL
Symposium Chair

The symposium underscores Stetson's ongoing **commitment** to addressing complex social and mental health challenges through collaboration, research, and community partnership. As **conversations around loneliness and social solation** continue to **gain national** attention, events like this highlight the vital role of **connection** in fostering individual and **collective well-being.**

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

CONNECT LAB

Coping with Numinous Narratives in Combat Trauma

The Connect Lab investigates the complex intersection of moral injury, PTSD, spirituality, and traumatic distress among U.S. military veterans. Our goal is to better understand how spiritual experiences and meaning-making shape mental health outcomes after combat-related trauma.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does the "numinous" sixth personality trait predict trauma-related distress among U.S. military veterans?

PROJECT TEAM

Jesse Fox, PhD, *Principal Investigator*

Ralph Piedmont, PhD, *Co-Investigator, Center for Professional Studies*

Trinideé Mercado, *Co-Investigator, Stetson University*

PROJECT STATUS

Data Collection in Progress!

Participants will complete a 30-minute survey about their experiences.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

THE WOUNDS OF WORTHINESS

Attachment Injury, Moral Injury, and Self-Acceptance Among LGBTQ+ Adults

Led by **Anthony J. Williams**

Faculty mentorship: **Jesse Fox, PhD**

This study examines how religious and spiritual experiences shape psychological and spiritual well-being among LGBTQ+ adults. We explore connections among:

- Self-acceptance
- Sexual and religious identity integration
- Attachment-related spiritual experiences
- Moral injury
- Feelings of worthiness and meaning
- Psychological well-being

ABOUT THE SURVEY

An anonymous online survey for English-speaking LGBTQ+ adults age 18 and older.

Takes approximately **15–20 minutes.**

PARTICIPATION PATHWAYS

Stetson students:
Participate for SONA credit.

Non-Stetson participants:
Everyone is welcome to participate.

This project aims to inform more affirming and culturally responsive mental-health and spiritual-care practices for LGBTQ+ communities.

NEEDS OF THE CENTER

The work we undertake in the center is not possible without your support. Though we apply regularly for external funding, there are needs we often must seek additional support to fill.

When you give, the intention of your gift can be designated for any of the following purposes:

- The mission of the center to promote training and research in health related disciplines.
- Material and technology for our labs.
- Full and part-time administrative and coordination positions.
- Graduate assistantships.

Center for Optimal Health Across the Lifespan

WANT TO SEE MORE ABOUT COHL?

Click Here

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- Follow this link Give to the College of Arts and Sciences giving page.
- Under the designation drop-down menu, please select “Other” and then type in "COHL".