

1/30/26 Academic Affair Highlights

Dear Colleagues,

Weather has been front of mind for all of us, and for those of us raised in parts well North, this weather brings a certain sort of nostalgia (and a reminder of why we moved South!). I found myself captivated by moonlit shadows of the trees arrayed across my backyard. I hope you've been able to find some things to appreciate amidst the plowed mounds and ice.

January has somehow managed to come and go and we've even got the semester in motion – we will have a full week of classes soon, I'm sure...

Despite the short week, there is no shortage of your highlights to showcase!

- Dr. [Connie Peterson](#), associate professor in Health Professions, kicked off the new year by receiving the [2026 Athletic Trainer Educator of the Year award](#) from the [Virginia Athletic Trainers' Association](#). Her fellow athletic trainers lauded her excellence in practice and her contributions to the field of athletic training. In an email I received from the VATA Honors and Awards Committee Co-Chairs notifying me of Connie's recognition, they wrote, "Simply put, you have one of the best. We are proud to have her supporting the continued growth of our profession." Impressive!
- Assistant professor in the School of Media Arts and Design [Elisabeth Kvernen](#) recently co-authored an article in [Design and Culture](#), the *Journal of the Design Studies Forum*. "[The Welcome Neighbors Sign—A Pro-Immigration Design Artifact: How One Yard Sign Became a National Movement of Political Dissent](#)" is an excellent case study of the "Welcome Neighbor" signs developed in Virginia in 2016 that are still seen frequently in local yards. The work reviews the "evolution of the sign from a neighborhood conversation to a national campaign" and "speaks to graphic designers who are interested in using their skills to influence social and political spaces."
- If you think it is too cold to head to the arboretum this week, you can visit virtually. The work of assistant professor of Biology Dr. [Andrea Berardi](#) and her students on pollinators is featured on the [EJC YouTube channel](#). Just a few weeks after going live, "[Research in the Arboretum](#)" has 100+ views.
- We first told you about assistant professor in the Department of History Dr. Jonathan S. Jones' first book, [Opium Slavery: Civil War Veterans and America's First Opioid Crisis](#), in the [Nov. 7, 2025 highlights](#) email. The book has just been named one of seven finalists for the [Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize](#), which is awarded annually for the best scholarly work on Abraham Lincoln, Civil War Soldiers or the Civil War Era – unusual for a first-time author. Nice work!
- Congratulations to Dr. [Xu Niu](#), assistant professor of Finance, for his feature on [The CLS Blue Sky Blog](#), Columbia Law School's blog on corporations and the capital markets. His co-authored paper, "[Hedge Fund Activism and Value Creation in Family Firms](#)," published in [Social Science Research Network](#), serves as the basis for the blog post and looks at what happens when activist hedge funds take an interest in family-controlled

companies. The paper shows that investors respond more positively to activist campaigns involving family firms, suggesting they see more potential for improvement. The analysis also finds that these interventions lead to stronger gains in areas like operating performance, takeover activity and transparency.

- Associate professor of percussion [Casey Cangelosi](#) and instructor of percussion [Aaron Trumbore](#) performed Casey's original work, [Blink](#), for percussion, lights and electronics at the recent [Percussive Arts Society International Convention](#). Sponsored by the [Percussive Arts Society](#), the annual convention is the largest event of its kind – exclusively focused on drums and percussion in all its forms and from all genres – in the world.

I look forward to hearing about all of the exciting accomplishments you and your peers reach this year. Please keep sending them to provost@jmu.edu.

Sincerely,

Bob