



When Professor of Psychology Dr. Joanne Altman left Washburn University after twenty years, it was for the opportunity to become the first Director of Undergraduate Research and Creative Works at High Point University. She found it too difficult to move fully away from teaching, so she still takes a class abroad to Africa each year, and she continues to teach an undergraduate class, all part of her drive to help students become enculturated as quickly as possible into an academic atmosphere; her unceasing devotion to her students spans decades now.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY: INSPIRING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Following the Animals

When she was making choices about which college to attend as an undergraduate student, Joanne Altman picked her college because, in addition to being her father's alma mater, it had seventeen monkeys. Even after spending years researching monkey behavior with Dr. Roger Thompson, she still didn't imagine her career could revolve around animals.

When she asked her mentor, Thompson, about her options for graduate school, she didn't consider options for working with animals because, as she told him, she figured it was "time to grow up." He reminded her that her father, a veterinarian, didn't grow up so much that he couldn't keep doing what he loved. Thus, she ended up at Temple University because they had 106 cats.

Ultimately, with her mentor's guidance, she determined how to connect her passion for teaching and research with her passion for animals, embarking on a path as an academic. After completing a post-doctoral position at Johns Hopkins, she spent two decades at Washburn University, where she won numerous awards for teaching, research and service.

Though she had not imagined leaving Washburn University, when High Point University offered her the inaugural spot as Director of Undergraduate Research and Creative Works, she couldn't resist that opportunity.

Standing Out from The Pack

There are two million students graduating every May, she tells incoming students at HPU, and her goal is to make HPU students more marketable for any future they imagine for themselves; they are tasked with finding ways to stand out from a pack of job applicants and preparing to demonstrate their unique skills to any potential employer.

In "Undergraduate Research and Creative Works: Roadmap to Employment in a Competitive World," Altman notes that the value of a liberal arts education is being challenged by critics, who argue that a "well educated citizen of the world" may not be employable; the mandate for any institution of higher learning, meanwhile, is to produce students who are "job-ready graduates."

What is being missed, Altman argues, is that these are not conflicting agendas. At High Point University, in combining the breadth of learning a general curriculum offers along with opportunities to work collaboratively with faculty in focused, discipline-specific research, they are working to send out graduates who are prepared to "engage a global world emotionally, socially, intellectually, civically, and economically." Each student has a chance to offer something new and unique in their field, and they will be able to also demonstrate the soft

skills that many potential employers are not seeing in the applicants fresh out of college.

Altman has been doing this for quite some time now. She jokes that "to her great horror," one of her students just celebrated her 42nd birthday. Every year, for students she's worked with on their research projects, she gifted them the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* She inscribed each book with a thoughtful message that has been carefully designed for the individual.

Katie's Story

HPU student Katie Long is one of the students who has benefitted directly from Altman's drive to see her students succeed. For three and a half years, Long met with Altman every week about her work with primates. As Long progressed through the program, Altman turned the conversation to discussions of Long's career and future. When Long graduated with a biology degree and moved to Iowa to study veterinary medicine, she took the Seuss book with her to keep on her desk, a constant reminder of a professor who believed in her.

Long notes that Altman helped her excel in research but also in many other ways. Because Altman knew Long's plans were to apply for vet school during her junior year, she helped her prepare applications and would spend "countless

hours either after work or in between meetings answering all my questions no matter how silly they may be.”

Now, three years later, Long is finishing her final year at Iowa State University, and she knows she wouldn't be where she is if not for Altman's assistance. She adds, “To this day I still keep in contact with Dr. Altman and continue to ask her all my silly questions. I feel extremely fortunate that I was able to work with her for so many years and maintain a relationship where I can still go to her for advice no matter what the situation is.”

Blaine's Story

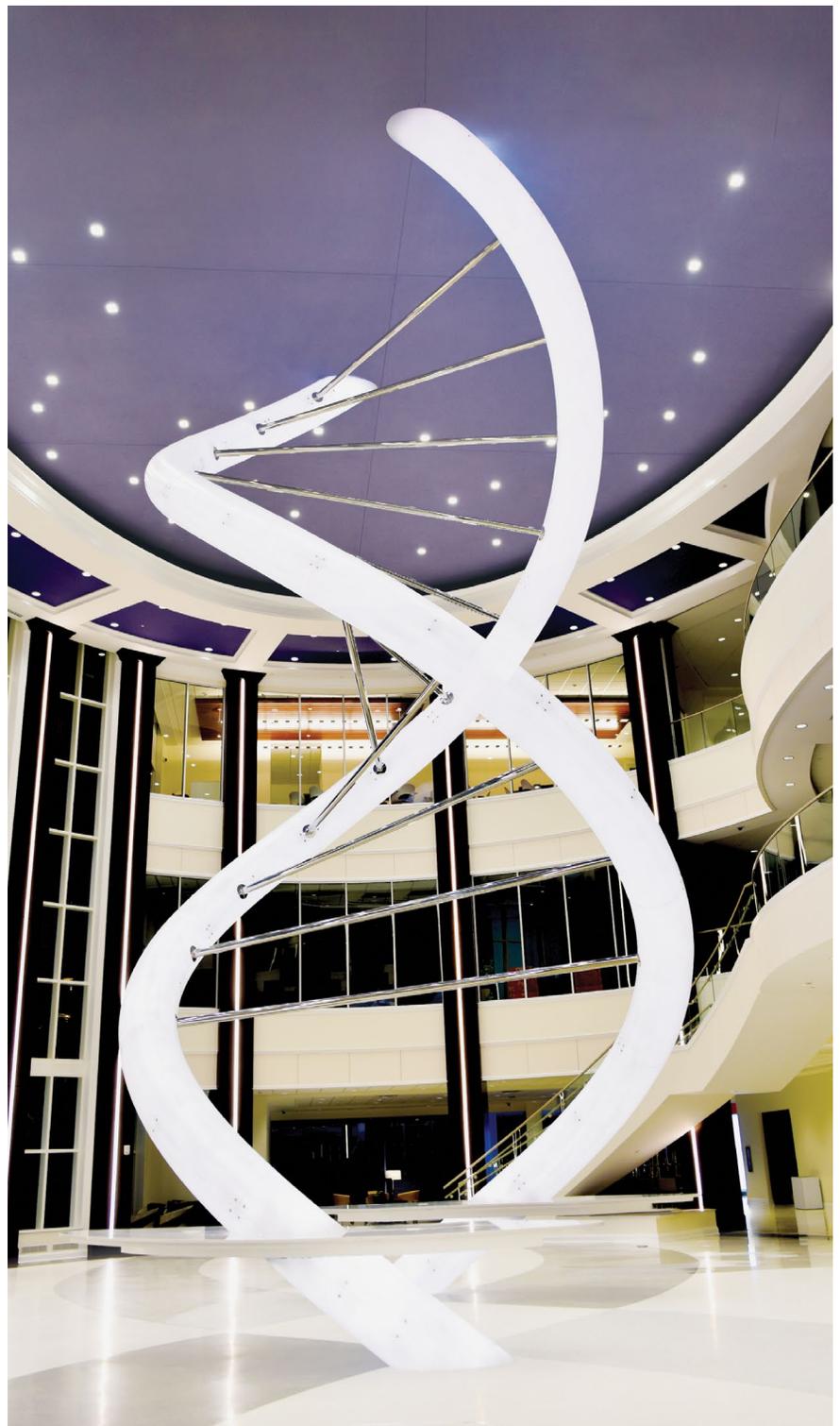
Washburn graduate Dr. Blaine Landis is now an Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior in the UCL School of Management. What Landis remembers most about his time with Altman is how passionate she is about helping students and her talent in communicating difficult concepts in ways students can process. She's clear, strategic, and methodical—without ever becoming repetitive. Students learned early, Landis recalls, that you had “better not miss class,” because every teaching encounter was meaningful and challenging. While his studies have brought him to some of the finest Ivy League institutions, he has not encountered an educator more talented or devoted. He notes, “She's up there among the very best—she really is that good.”

“She's thought a lot about how students learn,” Landis adds, and she gives copious amounts of thoughtful feedback. “Everyone knows Dr. Altman's purple pen,” he adds. She doesn't take shortcuts, which he appreciated as a student but admires even more as a professor, knowing full well how time-consuming it is to offer meaningful, helpful feedback to even one student—let alone dozens of them. She is still serving as a role model for him as a mentor and a teacher. When he's working to ensure he stays at 100 percent for all of his students, he notes, “I try to channel my inner Dr. Altman.”

Joe's Story

Another recipient of Altman's mentoring is Washburn graduate Dr. Joseph Currin, now an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University. Currin was not a traditional student; he already had a degree in Engineering but found himself bored and frustrated. Though he was unsure of the next step, he thought counseling people might feel rewarding, so he enrolled in one summer class, Intro to Psychology, and happily landed on Altman's radar. While he was nervous—with no background in research and no confidence in his writing—Altman insisted that he was bright and capable. Every time he felt himself hitting a wall, there was Altman, telling him, “You can do more.”

Though the classes grew more challenging, of course, staying within Altman's sphere of influence made the difference. On the first day of Research Methods—a class that intimidated the students who nervously took their seats on day one—Altman walked in wearing a



The three-story DNA sculpture is housed inside High Point University's Congdon Hall. The 220,000-square-foot facility opened in fall 2017 to serve as the home for the Congdon School of Health Sciences and the Fred Wilson School of Pharmacy. The sculpture reflects the spirit of innovation found throughout HPU's campus.



Grim Reaper outfit. Clearly, even Research Methods wasn't going to be dull or frightening, not with Altman at the helm.

Even as his mentor was urging him to complete an honors thesis, he recalls saying, "Fine, I'll do it, but I don't want to." Her belief in him was more powerful than his reluctance or ambivalence. When he couldn't find the confidence in his abilities, she was there—pushing him to believe, prodding him into that next step, and not letting him look back.

"That's where I fell in love with research," he admits. Eventually, Currin found a way to tie his research into his work with LGBT work in grad school, and he found his career path. Because he was able to use her belief in him to eventually find and hold on tightly to his own motivations and self-drive, he concludes, "It all goes back to what she had me do."

Heather's Story

Dr. Heather Morgan, another Washburn graduate, first arrived at college from a town of about 100 people. She notes, "When you're in a world that small, it sets your ceiling at a certain level." Her goal of earning a B.A. already surpassed anything expected of her, and she had no ambitions beyond completing her undergraduate degree. Then, Altman told her, "I think you can do a lot more."

Altman showed Morgan that she could craft a path to look exactly the way she wanted, and that wasn't just one moment



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of encouragement or a stray compliment. Altman continually showed confidence in Morgan’s abilities and admitted that even some academics with impressive backgrounds can still wonder if they have what it takes—if they are intelligent enough, hardworking enough, and capable enough. Morgan isn’t sure if this is a fear more unique to women in academics and the workforce in general, but she has now spent much of her own professional career mentoring young women who face similar doubts.

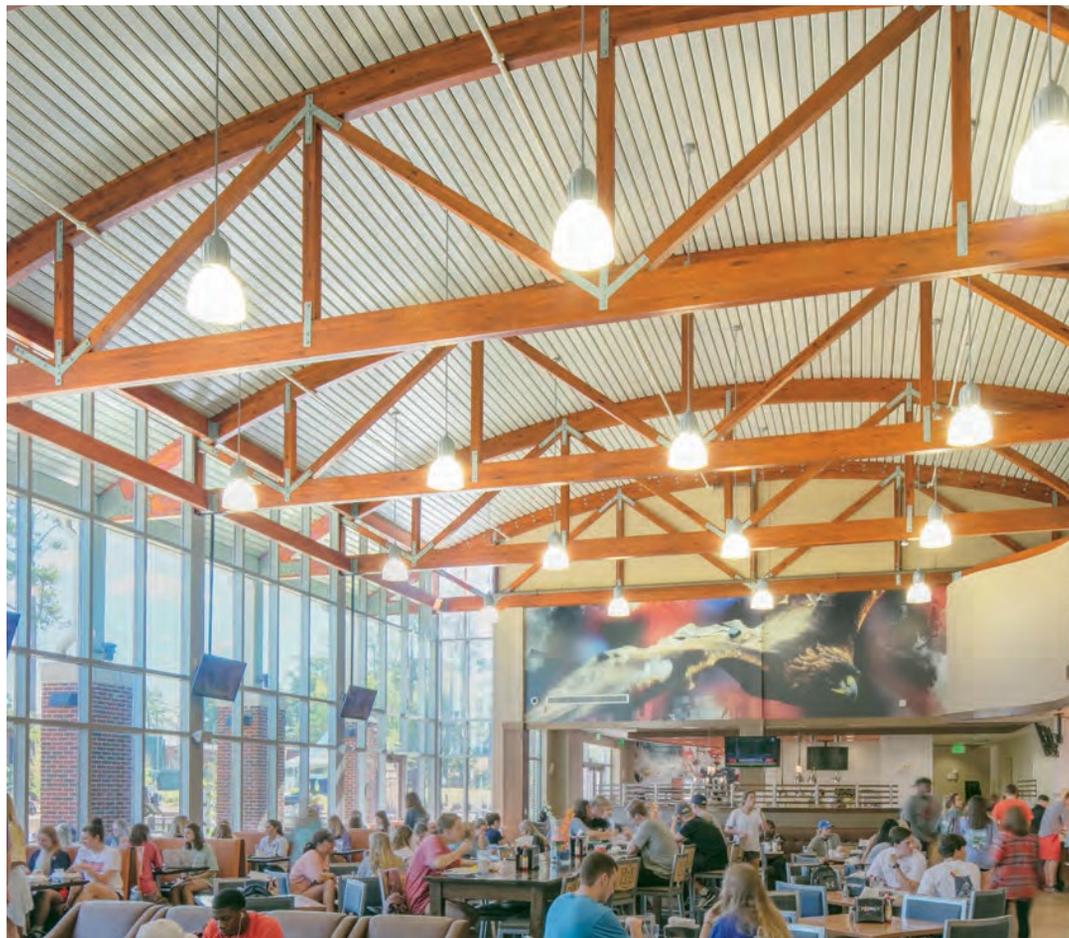
Even though she’s now proven herself by all reasonable measures, Morgan still finds herself facing doubt that can grow paralyzing. Not long ago, she encountered such a moment, and she searched for Altman’s contact information. First,

she recounted for her mentor a moment from a few years before; she had learned an executive-level position was open in the company where she was at the time. Though she had set her sights on that position, it wasn’t without barriers; it would be a skip-level promotion, and her own supervisor was applying. She worried she would be viewed as too young or too inexperienced to be worthy of the title, and she was prepared to walk away from the opportunity from fear of rejection, even though she was conflicted and saddened by that choice.

Later that evening, as she was preparing to read her child a bedtime story, her daughter Quincy chose a book she hadn’t selected before—it was the Dr. Seuss book Altman had given Morgan at

graduation. She stumbled upon that inscription at the precise moment she most needed to see it again: “There’s nothing more rewarding for a teacher than to make a connection with a student and help her find new horizons; and it has been a pleasure. You have such an openness for learning, a joyful spirit, enthusiasm, and courage. These qualities will lead you to continued success in the future. But there will be times along the way when your confidence falters and you grow doubtful. Let this book be a lasting reminder to you that I have every confidence in what you can achieve. So take all your next big steps knowing that a small piece of your past has complete faith in your future. Now go find those new horizons.”

The following day, Morgan applied for the position, and a few weeks later, she accepted that job. At the time she was writing Altman, she was preparing to defend her dissertation one week later and found herself once again “riddled with doubt and insecurity.” This time, she purposely sought out the children’s book and reread that inscription. She finished her letter to Altman with this: “You may already be aware of this, but it’s worth reiterating that the impact you have on your students extends far, far beyond the



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classroom. Even now, 12 years later, your confidence is pushing me to face the challenges I fear and to overcome the insecurity that could very easily hold me back. Once again, thank you; I am eternally grateful for the education, inspiration and motivation that you instilled. It is serving me well to this day.”

For Altman, it all goes back to a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire that she often read to her classes: “Come to the edge,” he said.

“We can't, we're afraid!” they responded. “Come to the edge,” he said. “We can't, we will fall!” they responded. “Come to the edge,” he said. And so they came. And he pushed them. And they flew.”

This is her teaching philosophy in a nutshell, as she prepares students to reach for more than they imagined they could, as they step to the frightening edge and learn to fly.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her M.Ed. degree from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Most recently, she taught Business Communications at Samford University.

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