TAKING FLIGHT
Seven researchers who are propelling MTSU to new heights
The mission of MTSU’s Office of Research and Sponsored Programs is to support and increase research and sponsored programs across campus. MTSU has made a commitment to this priority along with several others, including fulfilling the Quest for Student Success and achieving equity in diversity and inclusion among our student body and employees.

When considering the matter of equity, I am reminded of the persistent, nationwide disparity between genders in university faculty status in the classroom and research enterprises. It is also easy for me to name many driven and successful scholars at MTSU, those who are influencing their fields and are exemplars among their peers as teacher-scholars and who also happen to be women.

Seven of these scholars share their stories in this issue of MTSU Research. Their paths and experiences are engaging and inspiring—and typify the best that university research can be. If these stories speak to you or intrigue you, let us know. We’d love to hear from you.

*True Blue!*

David Butler  
Vice Provost for Research and  
Dean, College of Graduate Studies
WHEN SONGWRITERS HAVE CREATIVE CONTROL OVER THEIR WORK, IT’S MAGNIFICENT. YOU CAN GO CRAZY WITH A CATALOG THAT YOU OWN. ALL THOSE CLICHÉS ARE REALLY TRUE: OWNERSHIP IS KING. CONTENT IS POWER.

DEBORAH WAGNON
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF RECORDING INDUSTRY

Ask Deborah Wagnon about intellectual property (IP) rights, and she answers like a woman who just got religion. When songwriters have creative control over their work, she says, “It’s magnificent. You can go crazy with a catalog that you own. All those clichés are really true: Ownership is king. Content is power.”

Power has been a major theme of Wagnon’s professional life. As an attorney in the notoriously male-dominated entertainment industry, she became general counsel of Landmark Entertainment Group in Hollywood. Later she was a partner with an international law firm representing a stable of powerhouse recording artists, including Gloria Estefan, Olivia Newton-John, and Reba McEntire.

Wagnon was lured to that high-flying position from MTSU’s Department of Recording Industry, where she taught in the mid-1990s. When she returned to the University in 2011, a timely change in copyright law gave the associate professor a unique opportunity to keep a personal promise. “I’d committed to myself that whatever I did as a professor had to be based in reality, had to be cutting-edge, and had to challenge students and nudge them to their better selves,” Wagnon said.

That challenge became the Recapture Project, which empowers students and creative artists through academic research.

Until 2011, songwriters or authors who assigned the rights to publishers of their work relinquished legal and creative control over it in exchange for royalties from sales. That left the financial fate of their work in the hands of whoever held the copyright.

But now these artists can terminate a prior copyright assignment to “recapture” a copyright after a 35-year moratorium. With restored creative control of a work, they can give it a fresh shot at profitability, Wagnon said. An old song might be rerecorded by a younger artist, or even reinvented as a Broadway play, as Carole King did with her song “Beautiful.”

Wagnon’s Recapture Project, part of her Copyright Law class curriculum, takes students back into the pop-culture past (in the case of the project’s inaugural year, back to works created in 1978 and their parents’ vinyl). Once they’ve chosen a work they consider particularly marketable, they create a plan to recapture and exploit it. Then they pitch the proposal to the class. Wagnon and two other professors with expertise in copyright law select the winning project, which she presents to representatives of the artist or author.

Photos J Intintoli
If the Recapture Project immerses students in the nuances of U.S. copyright law, the International Classroom Initiative (ICI), which Wagnon launched in 2014, drops them into the wobbly infrastructure of IP law in developing countries. So far she has accompanied 44 students to Belize, which Wagnon calls “an amazing cauldron of chaos with respect to IP.” The law is so roundly ignored there that radio stations don’t pay performance royalties.

In Belize, Wagnon’s students witnessed what she preaches about intellectual property as “the fuel that drives our world. . . . It involves trademarks, patents, rights of publicity. Without it, you have no way to claim ownership of what you’ve created and be paid for it—to survive from your talent, rather than just having it as a hobby.”

Her new companion series, The International Classroom Initiative Journal, views IP through the lens of specific “portal territories.” Volume one, ICI Journal: Belize, Central America, includes Wagnon’s own research on Belize and neighboring countries, as well as articles by each student who traveled there through ICI between 2014 and 2016. With subsequent volumes, she plans to broaden the journal’s physical reach and geographical focus, first to all of Central America and then to other continents, highlighting developing markets where strengthened IP law can improve opportunities for creativity and innovation.

As “a loving thorn in the side” of governments that fail to empower their artists, Wagnon has created one more tool with which artists can empower themselves.
When Deborah Wagnon attended Georgia Tech, enrollment consisted of only 8 percent female students. She was also a minority at Stanford Law School. Then she entered the entertainment industry, where she was usually the only woman in the room.

But she says trials can be personal turning points, like when she represented Landmark Entertainment Group in a $600 million business deal in Tokyo. The general counsel for another business refused to show up for negotiations until Landmark’s general counsel was there. Of course Wagnon was there—the only woman in the room.

Resisting the urge to have a “Helen Reddy moment,” she instead apologized for the confusion and won him over with her professionalism. “This was my moment of really understanding the power of experience and wisdom,” Wagnon said.

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- Recording studio manager
- Retail audio sales
- Sound design for film/video
- Educators in K–12 and higher education

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