LITS UPDATE

Studies Ph.D. Program

NOVEMBER 2026

NEWSLETTER

Volume 15 issue 1

New Cohort Members

Join us in welcoming our newest cohort of students! Welcome to the Literacy Studies Ph.D. Program!

Chaz Poole
Suruchi Keenheel
Jane Hayes
Jackie Jenkins
Sara Clarish-Page
Mandy Berrell
Erin Lowrie
Zandra Benefield
Eno Richardson
Brandice Haley
Marissa Cooper
Leah Wasserman
Dawn Golson-Saunders
Kristen Tinch
Mark Sandoval
Alex Fender
Barb Quintard



New Faculty Member

Dr. Nayoung Yoon is a new Assistant Professor in the Literacy Studies program at Middle Tennessee State University. She earned her Ph.D. In Special Education, with specialization in Learning Disabilities and Behavioral Disorders, from the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on evidence-based reading intervention, response to intervention, and co-occuring reading and behavioral difficulties.





Full Professor

Congratulations to Dr. Katie Schrodt on your promotion to Full Professor!

Grant News

MTSU Researchers Awarded $65,000 to Study Early Literacy Curriculum in Pre-K



Dr. Katie Schrodt, Dr. Stuart Bernstein, and Literacy Studies Ph.D. Candidate, Shauna Sweeney received a $65,000 private grant sponsored by Dr. Jeannine Herron. The project, *Efficacy of the Encoding to Decoding Curriculum in Prekindergarten: A Quasi-Experimental Study with Longitudinal Follow-up*, was conducted in the Spring. The team examined how the Encode to Decode curriculum, which builds reading skills through early spelling and writing, supports prekindergarten children's literacy development. The work adds to growing evidence that young children's writing can be a powerful pathway into reading.

$1 Million Private Grant for Fall 2026

The anonymous foundation provides national funding to programs that strengthen the pipeline of teacher educators who are deeply knowledgeable about the science of reading and skilled at translating research into practice.

Specifically, the foundation aims to expand both the number and the quality of high-caliber doctoral programs in reading—such as MTSU's—and to attract more exceptional candidates to these programs.

MTSU has received $1 million from this foundation to prepare more doctoral students who will graduate and take on influential leadership roles driving meaningful change in literacy education.



Media Appearances

Dr. Katie Schrodt

- "Inside MTSU's Award Winning Teacher Education Program," Murfreesboro.com (July 2026)
- "MTSU on 2" segments, News 2 / MTSU News (June–July 2026)

Lauren Spenceley

Spenceley, L. M. (2026, May 14). *Reading Big Words: What It Looks Like in the Classroom, the School, and the State.* [Invited presentation]. Secondary Literacy Community of Practice, National Literacy Committee. https://thesecondaryliteracycommons.substack.com/p/reading-big-words-what-it-looks-like

Student Highlights

COMPLETED PRACTICUM!

Fall 2025:
Leora Coleman, Lauren MacDonnell
Spring 2026:
Heather White, Brandi MacDonald, Robin Miranda, Courtney Pippenger, April Senkow, Shauna Sweeney
Summer 2026:
Philip Eller, Amanda Freeman, Lindsey Lowery

COMPLETED PRELIM EXAM!

Spring 2026: Heather White, Katy Kloberdanz
Summer 2026: Sydney Banda, Shauna Sweeney
Fall 2026: Debs Pingitore, Philip Eller

DISSERTATION DEFENSE!

Fall 2026: Thankful Davis, Shauna Sweeney

GRADUATES!

Dr. Holly Cunningham – Fall 2025

"The Impact of Print and Digital Texts on Adolescent Reading Comprehension"

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Eric L. Oslund
Dr. Amy M. Elleman
Dr. Katie M. Schrodt

Dr. William Puckett – Fall 2025

"The Role of Mathematics Vocabulary in College Algebra Performance: Examining Reading Comprehension, Task Type, and Vocabulary Alignment"

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Eric L Oslund, Chair
Dr. Amy M. Elleman
Dr. Sungyoon Lee

RESEARCH & TEACHING HONORS



Thankful Davis –
Spring 2026 Outstanding Paper Award for "An Exploration of the Impact of Quality Illustrations in Children's Picture Books on Preschool Student Narrative Ability"



Macklin Zehr –
Smyrna Primary School in Rutherford County
2025–2026 Teacher of the Year

OUTSTANDING STUDENTS 2025-2026





Katy Kloberdanz & Caitlyn Osborne Parris

Scholarships

Ethel Bowden Stricklin Scholarship Recipients-Spring 2026:



Katy Kloberdanz



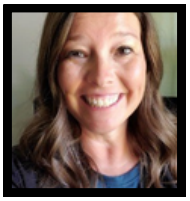
DeAnna Osborne



Caitlyn Osborne Parris



Erin Paske



Shauna Sweeney

Sawyer-Rudler Research Fellowship in Literacy Recipients



Jieun Park
Spring 2026



Clarissa Hooper
Fall 2026

Conference Highlights

Big Sky

Dr. Amy Elleman spoke during the grand rounds about reading comprehension research. She then joined doctoral students, Katy Kloberdanz, Rebecca Loera, Lisa Brill, and Lauren Spenceley in presenting how to apply comprehension research in the classroom and leadership level. Dr. Timothy Odegard also presented how the science of reading movement compares to the medical field. Other LITS students, Robin Miranda, Anna Geiger, and Leah Wasserman also attended the summit.



AERA

MTSU Literacy Studies faculty and students contributed to the 2026 AERA Annual Meeting in Los Angeles. Dr. Yucheng Cao and colleagues presented research on the multidimensional structure of reading and writing self-efficacy. Jieun Park shared a longitudinal research on executive functions and reading development in a poster and e-Lightning Ed-Talk session. Dr. Janna Brown McClain led the Vocabulary SIG business meeting.



ACCESS

Dr. Janna McClain, DeAnna DeBow Osborne, and Caitlyn Osborne-Parris presented at the Tennessee State Department of Education's ACCESS conference, a conference focused on equipping teachers, principals, and district leaders to server special populations at their schools (ESL students, Special Education students, and RTI2 / RTI2B students).



The Reading League

Members of the MTSU Literacy Studies Ph.D. Program recently represented our program at The Reading League Conference! The trip was a resounding success, headlined by stellar presentations from our own faculty and researchers, Dr. Amy Elleman and Aviva Coyne-Green.

Beyond the presentation stages, our department made the most of every opportunity for community growth. We hosted a vibrant vendor fair table where we connected with fellow educators, built great connections with potential future students, and showcased everything our degree programs, resources, and outreach initiatives have to offer. We are excited to bring this momentum home as we continue leading the way in evidence-based literacy!

SSSR

Students and faculty from the Literacy Studies Ph.D. program attended and presented at the **Thirty-Third Annual Conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Reading** in Rotterdam, Netherlands in July!



UPCOMING CONFERENCE OPTIONS:

(Click the conference links for more information)

Literacy Research Association:
December 2-5, 2026, Honolulu, HI

Pacific Coast Research Conference:
February 10 - 12, 2027, Coronado, CA

National Elementary and Secondary Education:
February 23- 25, 2027, Louisville, KY

MTSU Literacy Research Conference
February 27, 2027, Murfreesboro, TN

American Association for Applied Linguistics
March 13-16, 2027, Atlanta, GA

Society for Research and Child Development
April 8 - 10, 2027, Atlanta, GA

American Educational Research Association:
April 14-18, 2027, Toronto, Canada

Society for the Scientific Study of Reading
July 14-17, 2027, Santiago, Chile



MTSU Conference Highlights

MTSU LITERACY RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2026



Opening Keynote Speaker: Dr. Tim Odegard

The 13th Annual Literacy Research Conference, hosted by the Literacy Studies Ph.D. Program, was held on February 21, 2026. Dr. Tim Odegard delivered the keynote address, *Lost in Translation: Using Learning Science to Update the Literacy Map*, in which he discussed the language foundations of literacy acquisition.

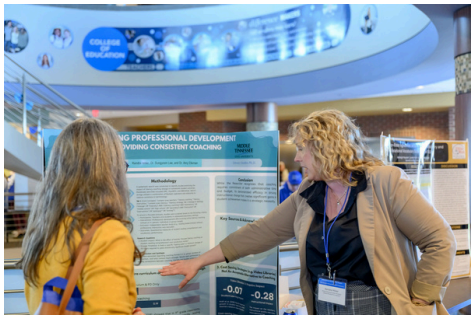
Closing Keynote Speaker: Dr. Danielle Thompson

Language Is the Work: Stewarding a Course Correction in Literacy Leadership

The conference brought together approximately 180 in-person attendees and 40 virtual participants, including researchers and practitioners, for lively discussions on evidence-based literacy practices, comprehension strategies, vocabulary instruction, and diversity in literacy classrooms. The MTSU Literacy Studies Department was well represented, with faculty and student researchers delivering 22 oral presentations, 8 poster presentations, and 3 symposia.







A special thank you to our 2026 conference sponsors!

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MTSU LITERACY RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2027



February 27, 2027
MTSU College of Education
Murfreesboro, TN
Submission Now Open
Submission deadline: December 7, 2026
Registration open: December 14, 2026
Registration deadline: January 31, 2027

Keynote Speaker:
Jane Oakhill, Ph.D.
University of Sussex
Presentation Title:
The development of children's reading comprehension: From research to practice

Social Outings

Several LITS faculty members and students attended and presented at the SSSR conference in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Although the trip was focused on professional collaboration and research, there was also plenty of time to enjoy the experience and explore the city!



Holiday Gathering 2025

LITS faculty and students gathered at Dr. Elleman's home in December for our annual holiday party. The evening was filled with great fun, fellowship, and an opportunity to celebrate the season together outside of our academic work!





New Arrivals in the Program

Some of our best memories this year are the arrivals of our new program babies! We are elated to introduce some of the bundles of joy that have come while their parents have been a part of the program!



Baby Poole

Baby Clark



Program Publications

Aitken, A. A., Graham, S., **Cao, Y.**, & Nusrat, A. (2026). The impact of writing instruction for English language learners: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 38*(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-026-10197-6

Bernstein, S. E., Magne, C. L., Rebolledo-Diaz, M., & Raley, J. (2026). Managing inconsistency in adult spelling: Feedback consistency, prosody, and lexical quality. *Reading and Writing*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-026-10875-5

Briggs, L. C. (2026). Expert pathways in multilingual classrooms. *MinneTESOL Journal, 24*(1). https://minnetesoljournal.org/expert-pathways-in-multilingual-classrooms/

Busse, V., **Cao, Y**., Kischnick, J. M., Sieveke, P., & Graham, S. (2026). Improving writing through evidence-based teaching. *Learning and Instruction,* 104, 102361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2026.102361

Cao, Y., Hsiang, T. P., Graham, S., & Lin, C. (2026). The validity and reliability of a writing self-efficacy scale for Chinese students in grades 4–9. *Reading and Writing*, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-026-10790-9

Cao, Y., Kim, Y.-S. G., & Wang, Y. (2026). Socioeconomic status and literacy achievement: A meta-analysis of correlations and disparities in reading and writing skills. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0001059

DaSilva, A., McClain, J. B., Magne, C., & Elleman, A. (in press). Organization, stance, and writing quality: A quantitative analysis of middle school EL and non-EL essays. *Reading and Writing*.

Davis, T., Schrodt, K. M., & McClain, J. (2026). Enhancing prekindergarten narrative skills through picturebook art exploration. *The Reading Teacher, 80*(1), e70055. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.70055

DeSantis, M., Hulme, C., Snowling, M. J., & **Thompson, D.** (2026). Reading is language: Closing the oral language gap to unlock literacy for all students. *The Reading League Journal, 7*(5), 49–57. https://leftsidestrongllc.com/assets/DeSantis-Hulme-Snowling-Thompson-2026_Reading-Is-Language_TRLJ.pdf

FitzPatrick, E., **Schrodt, K. M., Davis, T., Lee, S.**, & Towson, J. (2026). Foundations for writing: Preschool oral storytelling following visual design and story grammar instruction. *Reading and Writing*. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.70055

Graham, S., Camping, A., **Cao, Y.**, Collins, A., & Ciullo, S. (2026). Teaching argumentative writing: A meta-analysis with school-aged students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0001034

Nave, K. M., Hannon, E. E., Snyder, J. S., Alexandrov, E., Allen, S. C., Barbosa, F., Breen, M., Celma-Miralles, A., Chain, T., de Leeuw, J. R., Ferreira-Santos, F., Fitzroy, A. B., Geng, N., Gilmore, S. A., Gordon, R. L., Grahn, J. A., Har-Shai Yahav, P., Holm, K., Huettig, F., Keitel, A., Keitel, C., Ladanyi, E., Liu, Y., Loui, P., Lourie, G. A., Macedo, I., **Magne, C. L.**, Møller, C., Moreau, D., Nayak, S., Ostarek, M., Pasion, R., Pereira, M. R., Pinto, D. S., Poort, E. D., Renzelman, M., Russo, F. A., Stupacher, J., Tichko, P., Wight, L., Yu, C. Y., & Zion Golumbic, E. M. (in press). Registered report: Replication and extension of Nozaradan, Peretz, Missal and Mouraux (2011). *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*. https://doi.org/10.1177/25152459261443491

Park, J., Elleman, A. M., Magne, C., Pingitore, D. A., & **MacDonald, L. M**. (2026). The effects of syntactic skill intervention on passage and sentence-level reading comprehension in PreK-12 students: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543261466253

Scartozzi, A. C., **Wang, Y**., Coleman, P. L., Du'Mottuchi, X. L., Henechowicz, T. L., Gustavson, D. E., Petty, L. E., Highland, H. M., Creanza, N., **Magne, C. L.**, Gísladóttir, R. S., Cox, N. J., Below, J. E., Nayak, S., & Gordon, R. L. (2026). Genome-wide investigation of prosody perception: Evidence for shared genetic influences between speech rhythm, musical rhythm, and reading traits. *Human Genetics and Genomics Advances*, 100581. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xhgg.2026.100581

Program Conference Presentations

Aitken, A. A., Graham, S., **Cao, Y.**, & Nusrat, A. (2026, February). *Writing works: A meta-analysis of interventions for English learners* [Poster presentation]. 34th Annual Pacific Coast Research Conference, Long Beach, CA, United States.

Anderson, T., McClain, J., & Cao, Y. (2026, July). *Spanish L1 language comprehension and English L2 reading comprehension: A meta-analysis of cross-linguistic transfer* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Bernstein, S., Schrodt, K. M., Berkowitz, M., Deckard, C., Hester, L., & Miranda, R. (2026, July 15-17). *Developing lexical quality: Fluency, consistency, and frequency effects in spelling* [Symposium]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Briggs, L. C. (2026, February 11). *Writing is expensive: A neurocognitive framework for understanding and supporting L2 writing development* [Conference presentation]. First Online International Conference on Second Language Writing, University of Tlemcen, Algeria.

Briggs, L. C. (2026, May 9). *Expert pathways: Expanding access to complex texts through seasonal literature* [Interactive workshop and learning lab]. ORTESOL Spring Virtual Conference: Language, Culture, and Equity, in collaboration with the Oregon-Washington chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education (ORWA NAME).

Briggs, L. C. (2026, October 10). *Emotional resonance as a missing lens for multilingual assessment interpretation* [Roundtable presentation]. Midwest Association of Language Testers (MwALT) Conference, Iowa City, IA.

Brill, L. N., Loera, R., Kloberdanz, K., Spenceley, L. M., & Elleman, A. M. (2026, August 29). *Activating genius in reading comprehension leadership* [Conference session]. 2026 Big Sky Literacy Summit, Big Sky, MT, United States.

Cao, Y., Hsiang, T. P., Graham, S., & Lin, C. (2026, April). *Mapping the structure of literacy self-efficacy: Multidimensional and correlated constructs in reading and writing* [Roundtable session]. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, CA, United States.

DaSilva, A., Fields, S., Cao, Y., Lee, S., Ahn, P., & LePore, M. C. (2026, July). *A meta-analysis of AI-integrated interventions for K-12 EFL learners across reading, writing, listening, and speaking domains* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Elleman, A. M. (2026, August 29). *The architecture of reading comprehension: Instructional insights from meta-analyses* [Conference session]. 2026 Big Sky Literacy Summit, Big Sky, MT, United States.

Freeman, A., & Cao, Y. (2026, July). *Classroom dialogue and literacy achievement: a meta-analysis of grades 4-12* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Kim, Y.-S. G., & **Cao, Y**. (2026, June). *The working memory–writing connection: Meta-analytic evidence* [Paper presentation]. SIG Writing Conference 2026, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur, Switzerland.

Lawrence, E., Eum, J., Kunnath, A., Hiser, W., Tamati, T., **Magne, C.**, & Nayak, S. (2026, April 13–15). *Musical rhythm discrimination and speech-in-noise recognition in older adults: Exploring the role of lexical stress sensitivity* [Poster presentation]. National Conference on Undergraduate Research, Richmond, VA.

Lawrence, E., Hiser, W., Eum, J., Tamati, T., **Magne, C**., & Nayak, S. (2026, March 27). *Musical rhythm discrimination and speech-in-noise recognition in older adults: Exploring the role of lexical stress sensitivity* [Poster presentation]. Scholars Week 2026 University-Wide Exposition, Murfreesboro, TN.

Program Conference Presentations continued

Lawrence, E., Hiser, W., Eum, J., Tamati, T., Nayak, S., & **Magne, C**. (2026, April 25). *Rhythms in syllable emphasis: Exploring lexical stress sensitivity in older adults with links to speech-in-noise perception, rhythm skills, and musical training* [Oral presentation]. Middle Tennessee Psychological Association Conference, Murfreesboro, TN.

Lawrence, E., Kunnath, A., Hiser, W., Eum, J., Rosenberg, J., Faulkner, B., Sevich, V., Tamati, T., **Magne, C.**, & Nayak, S. (2025, September 12–14). *Characterizing relationships between musical rhythm discrimination, prosody (speech rhythm), and speech-in-noise perception in older adults* [Poster presentation]. 17th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Neurobiology of Language, Washington, DC.

Loera, R., Brill, L. N., Kloberdanz, K., Spenceley, L. M., & Elleman, A. M. (2026, August 29). *Activating reading comprehension expertise through the POEMS framework* [Conference session]. 2026 Big Sky Literacy Summit, Big Sky, MT, United States.

Magne, C., Zugarramurdi, C., Beier, E., Kojima, K., Powell, S., Liu, J., Davis, K., Korsnack, K., Myers, B., Lense, M., Nayak, S., Gordon, R., & Oganian, Y. (2025, September 12–14). *Cortical tracking of speech meter during natural storytelling* [Poster presentation]. 17th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Neurobiology of Language, Washington, DC.

Park, J., Elleman, A., & Cao, Y. (2026, April). *The role of executive functions in reading development: A longitudinal multilevel modeling approach* [Poster presentation]. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, CA, United States.

Pingitore, D. & Cao, Y. (2026, July). *Science vocabulary interventions for adolescents: A meta-analysis* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Pippenger, C. & Cao, Y. (2026, July). *Effects of syllabication intervention on polysyllabic decoding: A meta-analysis (pre-K to grade 10)* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Powell, S., McNeil, G., Shumate, A., Nayak, S., Gordon, R., & **Magne, C**. (2025, September 12–14). *Speech rhythm sensitivity and reading skills: Investigating behavioral mediators and EEG resting-state functional connectivity* [Poster presentation]. 17th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Neurobiology of Language, Washington, DC.

Senkow, A., Powell, S., McNeil, G., Shumate, A., McBride, C., Lui, K., Nayak, S., Gordon, R., & **Magne, C**. (2026, July 15–17). *Beyond vocabulary: The specific link between prosodic awareness and word-level reading fluency in adulthood* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Meeting, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Shea., Z. & **Cao, Y**. (2026, July). *Reading activities in kindergarten classrooms and children's academic gains: moderation by home language and family poverty* [Poster presentation]. Society for the Scientific Study of Reading Annual Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Zugarramurdi, C., Beier, E., Kojima, K., Nayak, S., Gordon, R. L., **Magne, C.**, & Oganian, Y. (2025, September 14–18). *Neural tracking of stress and meter in continuous speech* [Poster presentation]. 8th International Conference on Auditory Cortex, Maastricht, Netherlands.

Program Alumni Accomplishments...



Dr. Zack Barnes (2018) is leading the newly established Center for Literacy at Austin Peay State University, which aims to bridge the gap between literacy research and classroom practice. Under his leadership, the center has secured over $55,000 in grants to support literacy initiatives, including reading interventions, author visits, and free books for local students. One major initiative, the Govs Literacy Fellows Program, will place future teachers in Title I schools to provide reading support to approximately 500 second-grade students. Through this work, Dr. Barnes is helping strengthen literacy instruction, prepare future educators, and build partnerships with local schools and communities.



Dr. Laura Clark Briggs (2017) was selected for the U.S. Department of State English Language Specialist Program in July 2026 and is serving her second consecutive year as a Virtual English Language Educator. She currently partners with the U.S. Embassy Kyiv and a teacher preparation institution in Ukraine to teach English language instruction courses to future educators. She has also taken on a new leadership role as Adult ESL Teacher Mentor and Advisory Team Member at The Branch of Nashville, supporting fellow ESL instructors. Additionally, she continues her work with Metro Nashville Public Schools, where she has served since 2000.

Speaking Engagements

Briggs, L. C. (2026, September 16). Seasons of learning: Autumn narratives for comprehension and vocabulary instruction [Invited webinar presentation]. U.S. Department of State, American English Live: Teacher Development Series 25 (OPEN/FHI 360), global broadcast.

Briggs, L. C. (2026, November 18–19). AI, cognitive offloading, and L2 reading across scripts: What should readers keep in their heads? [Invited keynote address]. First Hybrid International Conference on Strategic Integration of AI, Startup Ecosystems, English, and Translation for Academic Innovation, University of Moudjahid Abdelhafid Boussouf-Mila, Mila, Algeria.

After serving as an adjunct, Dr. Joanne Coggins (2016) has joined MTSU's University Studies team as a full-time lecturer. This fall, she is teaching READ 1000, helping incoming freshmen develop the reading and academic skills needed for college success. Inspired by the support she received as a first-year college student, she hopes to make that same difference for her students. Outside the classroom, she spent six weeks camping and fishing this summer and caught an impressive 30-inch walleye!





Dr. Danielle Thompson (2011) The Transformative Reading Teacher Group, is supporting three large-scale random control trials over the next several years in Wyoming as part of their Comprehensive State Literacy Development Program.



The data retreat offered personalized, one-on-one consultations focused on quantitative analysis for participants' research projects. Whether participants were looking to refine their data analysis techniques, explore statistical methods, or interpret complex results, the retreat provided tailored guidance to support their projects' specific needs.
The writing retreat provided dedicated time for students and faculty to work collectively yet independently on various aspects of their ongoing writing projects. Whether participants were working on manuscripts or organizing references and annotations, projects of all sizes and stages were welcomed.

The Literacy Studies Ph.D. program is designed to address one of education's most pressing needs—the shortage of scholars, practitioners, administrators, and policymakers who are equipped to translate literacy-related research to effectively inform educational policy, practice, and professional preparation. Graduates of the program pursue careers as college professors, leaders at the state and district level, literacy consultants, and reading specialists/coaches.

Application Deadlines

December 1st, 2026 is the application deadline for priority consideration for 2027 fall admission and assistantships.

April 1st, 2027 is the final deadline for fall 2027 admission and assistantships.

For program details and application information, visit

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Literacy Studies
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Addressing the national literacy crisis—
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