

# MASTERS DISTANCE MONITOR

January 2026

Issue 53

## WELCOME

### New Online Masters Students for Spring 2026:

Michael Academia, VA; Jacob Adams, OH; Rohit Balay, NE; Whitney Gullett, KY; Rebecca Hamata, NE; Kelli Havner, NC; Bailey Johnson, NE; Laurie Kermmoade, NE; Elizabeth Maag, WI; Kandi McFadden, NE; Kristina Novikova, IL; Nafisa Nur, FL; Mehak Sidhu, FL; Deborah Waugh, MI; Tonya Welch, OH

### New Online Faculty



Dr. Catherine Johnson joined the UNK Department of Biology as an Assistant Professor in August 2024. She previously studied at UNK as an undergraduate student, before following family to Florida, where she completed a bachelor's degree in Biochemistry from Ave Maria University in 2019. She returned to Nebraska for her graduate studies and earned a PhD in Biomedical Science from the University of Nebraska Medical Center in 2025. Her dissertation research focused on the interactions between bone cells and bone-metastatic prostate tumor cells and how that intercellular signaling drives cancer progression and alters bone remodeling. Her current research at UNK focuses on how cancer therapies alter those interactions and impact the tumor-bone microenvironment. So far at UNK, she has had the chance to teach undergraduate General Biology II, Research Methods I, Seminar, and Anatomy &

Physiology labs. This spring, she is looking forward to teaching her first graduate level course: BIOL 838 Essential Human Anatomy.



Dr. Rashmi Rikhi joined the Department of Biology last semester and brings a strong background in immunology, research, and teaching. Her interest in biomedical science was inspired early in life by her grandfather, a researcher at a tertiary care hospital and research institute in Chandigarh, India, who often took her to his workplace. Encouraged by her family, she went on to earn her PhD from the same institute before completing postdoctoral training at two research institutes in the United States, where she focused on immunology. Since joining the department, Dr. Rikhi has taught General Biology (BIOL 106) lecture and laboratory, Cell and Molecular Biology Laboratory (BIOL 309), and an online Medical Terminology course (BIOL 325). She is actively involved in research collaboration with Dr. Catherine Johnson and enjoys integrating current research advances into her teaching. In the upcoming semester, Dr. Rikhi will also be teaching the graduate-level online course BIOL 843: Cell Structure and Function. Dr. Rikhi is passionate about mentoring students and fostering critical thinking, curiosity, and

confidence in the classroom and laboratory. She looks forward to working with graduate and undergraduate students as part of the Biology community.

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## NEWSFEED:

Dr. Melissa Wuellner, Professor, was featured in the UNK News in November. Below is an excerpt from the article entitled, “Kearney Canal project gives UNK students real-world training in fisheries biology” (see [full article](#)).

### **Kearney Canal project gives UNK students real-world training in fisheries biology**

November 5, 2025  
By TYLER ELLYSON  
UNK Communications

KEARNEY – The temperature was still in the mid-30s when they arrived at the first sampling site.

As the rising sun bathed nearby Yanney Park in a pink and orange hue, the University of Nebraska at Kearney students prepared for their morning assignment.

Protected by chest waders and neoprene gloves and armed with long dip nets, they made their way down the bank and into the chilly water – then waited for the signal.

“Is everybody set? Are we ready to go?” biology professor Melissa Wuellner hollered from downstream.

“3-2-1.”

The electrofishing backpack was activated, and they had their first specimen moments later.

“Flathead,” one student confirmed before placing the catfish in a floating sled. Over the next 30 minutes, dozens more fish followed.

It’s all part of a long-term sampling project led by Wuellner that documents fish species in the Kearney Canal each fall while giving UNK undergraduate and graduate students hands-on field experience.



### **Monitoring a Changing Ecosystem**

Wuellner began the canal study in 2018, partnering with Nebraska Game and Parks to collect data at the same three locations each year – near 11th Street, 16th Street and the UNK College of Education.

More than 30 species have been identified so far, including river carsuckers, walleye, gar, perch and multiple types of bass, catfish and sunfish.

“Rivers, streams and canals are very dynamic systems. They’re constantly changing, and the fish change, too,” Wuellner said. “By going to the same spots every single time, we have a better comparison from year to year.”

The project has already revealed surprising biodiversity in the manmade waterway – and it helps scientists monitor ecological concerns. In 2022, for example, the team documented bighead carp in the canal for the first time. Considered an invasive species, they compete with native fish for food and can disrupt entire aquatic ecosystems.

Although the carp likely can't survive long-term in the canal since the water level is lowered before winter, their presence signals activity in the nearby Platte River.

“It gives us a clearer picture of what’s happening throughout the watershed,” Wuellner said. “Nebraska has numerous canals across the state, and most of them are connected to a larger body of water. It’s important to understand how these systems influence what happens both upstream and downstream.”



Operated by Nebraska Public Power District, the Kearney Canal supplies water for agricultural irrigation and a small hydroelectric facility. It’s also used for recreational activities such as fishing and kayaking.

In addition to that system, Wuellner and her students currently work with Game and Parks on sampling projects at Lake McConaughy, Lake Ogallala, Medicine Creek Reservoir and Harlan County Reservoir, along with a statewide project that focuses on largemouth bass populations at several locations.

For Game and Parks, the UNK partnership provides valuable research support – and a [pipeline of future biologists](#).

“This partnership allows us to conduct ongoing monitoring while helping develop the next generation of fisheries professionals,” said Keith Koupal, assistant division administrator of fisheries research. “Not only do we get answers to the questions that our management and hatcheries staff might have, but we also have a

cadre of undergraduate and graduate students here who we hope to hire someday. It's been a great partnership for us."

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# CONGRATULATIONS

## December 2025 Graduates:

Tammy Beckstrom, Amanda Buckwalter, John Paul Cross, Elizabeth Ebow, April Eckert, Jamie Forbes, Hannah Gillet, Philip Green, Sara Hays, Ashley Hendrix, Peter Hodson, Kelvin Hong, Lindsay Johnson, Taylor Jones, Kristen Kramer, Kyle Kujala, Hannah Lenning (THESIS), Sara Lunsford, Angela Martire, Amanda McClelland, Aaron McCraven, Alexis Meyer, Rita Oparaocha (THESIS), Elizabeth Prauner, Allyson Richardson, Jessica Richert-Jones, Emma Rinacke, Katlyn Ross, Lenida Whited

Seven graduates were able to attend the commencement ceremony on December 19<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 am in the Health and Sports Center. UNK Online hosted a meet + greet after the ceremony. Below are some pictures from the events.



Pictured left: Allyson Richardson, Elizabeth Prauner, Rita Oparaocha, and Lindsay Johnson

Pictured below: Amanda Buckwalter



Pictured left: Dr. Surabhi Chandra, Professor and Co-Chair of the Biology Department, Elizabeth Prauner, and Dr. Nicholas Hobbs, Associate Professor

Pictured right: Brian Peterson, Online Academic Program Advisor, Elizabeth Prauner, and Rita Oparaocha

Pictured below: Lindsay Johnson



Pictured above: Elizabeth Prauner



Pictured above: Lindsay Johnson and Allyson Richardson

Pictured right: Dr. Todd Bartee, Professor and Rita Oparaocha



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# Grants, Meetings, Publications

## Meetings

- Alex, L., M. Wuellner, K. Koupal,** and A. Engel. August 2025. Trout angler distributions around a tailwater reservoir and their relation to stocking. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Poster Presentation. (Finalist for AFS Best Student Poster)
- Alex, L., M. Wuellner, K. Koupal,** and A. Engel. August 2025. Spatial and monthly dissolved oxygen and trout persistence patterns in Lake Ogallala. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Oral presentation.
- Allison, R., M. Wuellner, K. Koupal,** and A. Engel. August 2025. O Bronzeback, How art thou? Smallmouth Bass population structure and dynamics in Lake McConaughy, NE. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Poster Presentation. (Runner-up for AFS Best Student Poster)
- Allison, R., M. Wuellner, K. Koupal,** and A. Engel. August 2025. Evaluating the OTC mark readability in age-0 and age-1 Walleye in Nebraska reservoirs. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Oral presentation.
- Dolence, J.J.** November 2025. Using AI to help maximize learning in an undergraduate immunology course. 53rd Annual Autumn Immunology Conference. Chicago, Illinois. Oral Presentation.
- Jonas, J.** October 2025. Seed source and insect herbivores interact to influence early stages of grassland plant community assembly. World Conference on Ecological Restoration. Denver, Colorado. Oral Presentation.
- Lenning, H., M. Wuellner,** S. Fopma, and **J. Jonas-Bratten.** August 2025. Trends in centrarchid populations following backwater restoration in the Upper Mississippi River. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Poster Presentation. (Winner of AFS Best Student Poster).
- Lenning, H., M. Wuellner,** S. Fopma, and **J. Jonas-Bratten.** August 2025. Community responses to backwater restoration in a floodplain river: Insights from black bass. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting. San Antonio, Texas. Oral presentation.
- tenBensel, M., **Drew, B.T.,** and **Jonas, J.** October 2025. Wildlife benefits native plants in grazed semi-arid grasslands. World Conference on Ecological Restoration. Denver, Colorado. Lightning Talk.
- Roeder, J., Hoover, M., Carlson, Z., and **Dolence, J.J.** November 2025. Examining how vaping impacts the response of B cells to peanut. 53rd Annual Autumn Immunology Conference. Chicago, Illinois. Oral Presentation.

## Publications

- Bajelan, J.L. and **M.J. Harner.** 2025. Science Communication through *Cool Critters*: An Informal Learning Experience for Youth. *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences.* 45:23-61.  
<https://doi.org/10.32873/unl.dc.tnas.45.3>
- Birathi, P., Pattabiraman, M., Kalaivanan, H., (...), Agarwal, A., and **Chandra, S.** 2025. Advancements in MRI Conditionality of Spinal Cord Stimulation Systems: A Narrative Review of Recent SCS Systems and Their Associated Risks in MRI Operations. *Pain Physician.* 28(6): 451-465.

- Farrier, S.M., Koupal, K.D.,** Burger, P.R., and **Wuellner, M.R.** 2024. Application of a Conceptual Stocking Model for Two Recreationally Important Species. *Aquaculture Fish and Fisheries*. 4(5), art. no. e70006. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aff2.70006>
- Hill, J. L., Heelan, K. A., Abbey, B. M., Michaud, T. L., **Golden, C. A.**, Mercado, A., Porter, G. C., and Estabrooks, P. A. 2025. Testing Implementation Strategies for a Family Healthy Weight Program: Results From the Nebraska Childhood Obesity Research Demonstration 3.0 Pilot Trial. *Childhood obesity*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21532176251390824>
- Homrani Bakali, A., Dirmenci, T., Celep, F., and **Drew, B.T.** 2025. *Pitardia* resurrected: A new member of subtribe Menthinae (Lamiaceae). *Taxon*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tax.70053>
- Huber, T.L., and **K. Geluso**. 2025. Seasonality and occurrence of the Striped Bark Scorpion (*Centruroides vittatus*) in Franklin County, Nebraska. *The Prairie Naturalist*. 57:N1-N4.
- Paysen, J.W., D.V. Kosmicki, and **K. Geluso**. 2025. Geographic Distribution: *Nerodia sipedon* (Common Watersnake) in Franklin Co., NE. *Herpetological Review*. 56:35.
- Paysen, J.W., Kosmicki, D.V., and **K. Geluso**. 2025. Notes on reproduction, seasonality, and roost sites for Silver-haired Bats (*Lasionycteris noctivagans*) in western Nebraska. *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences*. 45:84-91.
- Rokusek, B.**, Cheku, S., Rokusek, M., Waples, C. J., Harshman, L., and **Carlson, K. A.** 2024. Heat Tolerance Assays Using the Drosophila Activity Monitor System: A Guide to an Executable Application for Data Analysis. *Journal of Visualized Experiments*. <https://doi.org/10.3791/67814>
- Smith, M.J., J.W. Paysen, D.V. Kosmicki, C. Kruse, and **K. Geluso**. 2025. Mortalities of grassland herpetofauna in warm season prescribed fires. *The Prairie Naturalist*. 57:50-59.
- Thede, S.A., D.D. Fogell, and **K. Geluso**. 2025. Distributional records of Blanding's Turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*) in Nebraska. *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Science*. 45:62-72.

Continue to send us updates on any meetings, publications, grants, or awards that you have been involved with. Please email details to [msbiology@unk.edu](mailto:msbiology@unk.edu).

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## Director's Desk from Dr. Austin Nuxoll

Greetings!

I hope you all enjoyed your holidays and that you are having a great start to the semester. As we look ahead to the spring term, I wanted to share a few important updates and reminders for our MS Biology program.

Thank you to everyone who has been spreading the word about the program to friends and colleagues. The MS Biology program has been redesigned to help students complete their degree more efficiently, saving both time and money, while still providing the training needed to thrive in a wide range of careers. We truly appreciate your help in sharing these updates.

I also want to note that BIOL 881: Current Issues in Biology is being phased out. The course will not be offered this summer, and depending on student demand, it may be offered only one additional time in the future. If this course is part of your plan of study, please plan accordingly and reach out if you have questions about alternatives.

We are excited to welcome new faces to our online graduate offerings this spring. Dr. Rashmi Rikhi will be teaching Cell Structure and Function online for the first time, and Dr. Catherine Johnson will be teaching Essential Human Anatomy online this spring. Many of you may recognize Dr. Johnson from previous communications, and we are pleased to have her bringing this course to the online graduate format.

Please also note that the spring semester will begin earlier than in previous years, starting on January 12, as there will be no J-term this year. Spring registration is now open, and several classes are already filling quickly. We encourage you to register as soon as possible. If a course you need is full, please contact [msbiology@unk.edu](mailto:msbiology@unk.edu) to be added to the waitlist, as spots often open as schedules adjust.

As always, we are here to support you, so please don't hesitate to reach out with questions about course registration or your plan of study. I look forward to working with many of you in the coming semester.

Best regards,  
Dr. Nuxoll

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## Faculty News



**Dr. Haiwei Lu, Assistant Professor**, presented at UNK Science Café hosted by Sigma Xi in October. The title of the presentation was ["Myths vs. Truths in Genetically Modified Crops"](#). (pictured far left)



**Dr. Yipeng Sui, Associate Professor**, presented at UNK Science Café hosted by Sigma Xi in November. The title of the presentation was ["The Links Between Chemicals and Cardiometabolic Diseases"](#). (pictured left)

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# Student News

**Alexia Edwards (December 2024 graduate)** is currently working at Wound Evolution as a Wound Care Clinician. In her position she assesses wounds, implants wound treatment plans, performs wound care dressing changes and documents the patients progress throughout their wound healing journey. She has also recently been accepted into a nursing program in Texas which begins in 2026.

**Sarah Hardin (December 2016 graduate)** received 2026 Nebraska Teacher of the Year. She is a science teacher at Mullen High School in Mullen, Nebraska. Her story is highlighted in a [UNK News](#) article this January.



**Becca Vossler (May 2021 graduate)** completed her 9<sup>th</sup> year in the high school classroom, 6 of which teaching dual credit biology, and completed 3 years as an adjunct professor at Doane University and Southeast Community College. She and her husband also welcomed their 2<sup>nd</sup> child, Kinsley, in February; big brother, Emmett, is completely in love with his little sister (pictured left). Becca recently took a job as the Assistant Director of Extended Learning Opportunities at Doane University, focusing on building their dual credit program and helping with their Open Learning Academy for online/non degree seeking students.

**Michael Zarate (December 2005 graduate)** was admitted into the MS Biology Online Program its inaugural year (Summer 2003). He graduated in two and a half years and was part of the initial 15 students to receive their degrees in 2005. Mike teaches Biology at Lexington High School and dual credit classes. He attended, and brought around 30 students, the Health Sciences Career Fair at UNK in late September. (pictured right with Brian Peterson, Online Academic Program Advisor)

Please let us know what is going on in your lives; email us your news at [msbiology@unk.edu](mailto:msbiology@unk.edu).



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# Office Space

## Spring 2026 Deadlines:

January 12<sup>th</sup>—Spring classes begin

January 16<sup>th</sup>—Last day to add/drop full semester class on MyBlue with no penalty

January 19<sup>th</sup>—Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, all classes dismissed and UNK offices closed

January 22<sup>nd</sup>—E-bill notifications sent to Lopermail account

February 1<sup>st</sup>—Last day to apply for May graduation

February 1<sup>st</sup>—Last day to apply for Current Student Scholarship on MyBlue

February 12<sup>th</sup>—Tuition & Fees due in full

February 24<sup>th</sup>—Early Term Grading Closes

March 15<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>—Spring break, all classes dismissed

March 29<sup>th</sup>—Comprehensive Exams (for graduating students) are due to the Biology Dept

April 6<sup>th</sup>—Early Registration for Summer and Fall 2026 classes begins for all currently enrolled students

April 10<sup>th</sup>—Last day to drop a full semester course on MyBlue (no refund at this time)

April 14<sup>th</sup>—General Registration for Summer and Fall 2026 classes begins for all admitted students

April 15<sup>th</sup>—Summer 2026 graduation application opens on MyBlue

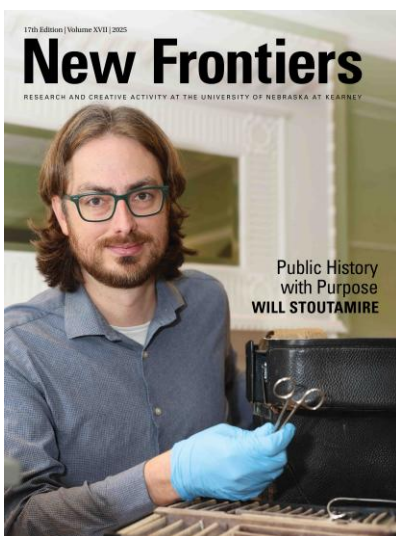
May 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>—Finals Week

May 8<sup>th</sup>—Commencement ceremony at 10:00 am in the Health and Sports Center

May 11<sup>th</sup>—Summer 2026 term begin

May 12<sup>th</sup>—Deadline for faculty to submit final grades for spring classes

**Students planning to graduate this May 2026 must apply for graduation on MyBlue.** Even if you do not plan to attend ceremony you must apply to receive your degree. The deadline to apply for spring graduation is February 1<sup>st</sup>. There is a \$25 application fee which can be paid on-line during the application process. Commencement ceremony will take place at 10:00 am on May 8<sup>th</sup> in the Health and Sports Center. Please consider making the trip to Kearney to walk in graduation and if you do, please let the Biology Department know.



The 2025 [New Frontiers](#) was released online this past November. This publication is published every year and highlights research and creative activities at UNK. Many Biology faculty members are highlighted for their work in both the INBRE (pages 17-21) and NSRI programs (pages 29-35).

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## **Degree Requirements beginning Fall 2025**

### **9 credit hours of required coursework:**

- BIOL 802 - Organic Evolution (3 hours)
- BIOL 848 - Scientific Literacy and Communication (3 hours)
- 3 credit hours from ONE of the following:
  - BIOL 827 - Concepts of Biological Statistics
  - BIOL 849 - Advanced Biological Statistics

### **21 credit hours of electives:**

- Electives can be chosen from BIOL 800-level courses, CHEM 855 can also count towards this requirement.

### **Total credit hours – 30 credits**

#### **\*\*\*For students enrolled under catalog years prior to Fall 2025:**

You have the option to switch to the new catalog year and follow the updated program requirements above. **You need to send an email requesting to switch catalogs** to the Graduate Office ([brewerc@unk.edu](mailto:brewerc@unk.edu), [gradstudies@unk.edu](mailto:gradstudies@unk.edu)); please copy [msbiology@unk.edu](mailto:msbiology@unk.edu) as well on the email. Students who have completed BIOL 820 - Introduction to Graduate Study **and** at least one credit of BIOL 881 - Current Issues will have these courses count in place of BIOL 848 - Scientific Literacy and Communication.