

# ANNUAL *Connections* 2021



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**Cover details:**  
Blackburn Advisory Board member Alex Smith and student Nayeli Pineda (2019) celebrate the pinning of new Fellows during the 2021 Spring Networking Dinner at the Tuscaloosa River Market.



Division of  
Student Life  
Blackburn Institute

*Annual Connections* is published each year by the Blackburn Institute staff with contributions from students, Fellows and Advisory Board members. Our community encompasses a diversity of perspectives, and opinions expressed by members are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Blackburn Institute or The University of Alabama.

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*"My vision is to develop a community of ethical leaders who collaboratively accomplish good and noble ends. A good community is comprised of more than one generation; embraces transcending values that esteem each citizen; and creates a sense of oneness, where individuals set aside personal gain, benefit or goal for the sake of the group."*

Dr. John L. Blackburn

The past year has been challenging for us all due to the ongoing pandemic that has disrupted our personal, professional, and civic lives. This has been undoubtedly true for the 2020 Blackburn Class who experienced a new student year like no other. We are thankful for the continued support and presence our Advisory Board members and Fellows who helped bridge the gap by mentoring students remotely, participating in Zoom panels, coordinating guest speakers, and logging on to share their wisdom in small group discussions. We could not have successfully delivered our programming and student curriculum in a virtual and later hybrid format without their time and contributions.

Amid this backdrop, the Institute held its first virtual symposium with speakers, presenters, and panelists doing great work all around the state and nation. In part because of this successful event, our staff were recognized as 2021 recipients of the University's Sam S. May Commitment to Service Award. Since then, with the support and commitment of our university administration, we have been able to rebuild our staff with a permanent director, new assistant director and program assistant, and a full-time coordinator of alumni programs.

As we resume in-person events, I look forward to gathering together, learning from one another, and celebrating our community. The theme of the 2021 Annual Symposium is "The Next Normal: Dynamic Leadership in Changing Times." Sessions will feature speakers and panelists sharing current strategies for improving the lives of people and communities in Alabama and beyond. We will

recognize the fantastic work of our Fellows (alumni) with the presentation of the inaugural Fellow of the Year Award.

We have an exciting year planned for our full community. Building on our success conducting a safe student retreat, spring dinner, and in-state summer events, we plan to return to fully in-person activities in the fall with our travel experience to Northwest Alabama and a Blackburn tailgate for the home football game against the University of Arkansas. However, we will continue online engagement opportunities for members near and far to include Fellows Forums and digital networking via Blackburn Connect.

I am pleased to share this magazine featuring Blackburn students, Fellows, Advisory Board members, and their work. I hope readers will appreciate the diversity of interests, backgrounds, and perspectives across our community and that each person will be inspired to answer their unique call to action. In this hour, we need more "leaders who understand the challenges facing the state of Alabama and the nation and who are committed to serving as agents of positive change."

**JERRAN S. HILL**



## BLACKBURN SOCIETY MEMBERS

MR. BILL BAXLEY	DR. HARRY KNOPKE	MRS. HOLLY PIPER
MRS. GLORIA BLACKBURN	DR. F. DAVID MATHEWS	DR. MALCOLM PORTERA
DR. CHEREE CAUSEY	DR. E. GAYLON MCCOLLOUGH	MRS. JULIA SMEDS ROTH
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MR. DAVID DONALDSON	MR. BILL O'CONNOR	MR. DON SIEGAL *
MR. DAVID ELLWANGER	MR. D. RAY PATE	MR. DONALD STEWART
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DR. SANDRAL HULLETT	MR. TOM PATTERSON	DR. LOUISE THIBODAUX
MRS. ANN JONES	MRS. BEVERLY PHIFER	MR. EDGAR WELDEN

\* DECEASED

## OVERARCHING VALUES

<b>FACILITATING A DIVERSITY OF OPINION</b>	by providing opportunities for students to experience all sides of issues impacting their communities as well as creating situations for open dialogue focused on fostering the resolution of issues rather than their mere identification.
<b>BEING CALLED TO ACTION</b>	by inspiring active citizenship as individuals and collectively by identifying and implementing strategic initiatives for the common good.
<b>NETWORKING THROUGH THE GENERATIONS</b>	by providing opportunities for students and Fellows to engage in dialogue and personal contact with Advisory Board members, faculty, community leaders, scholars, and political leaders.
<b>INSTILLING A LIFETIME COMMITMENT</b>	by providing a rich collegiate experience so that, upon graduation, Fellows are encouraged not only to continue to foster relationships with the Blackburn Institute and its members, but to also uphold the ideals of the Institute in their daily lives.



## 2021 ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

CATHERINE ALEXANDER-WRIGHT *	BEN FOSTER *	DAVID MATHEWS	PAT REYNOLDS *
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JOHN COVINGTON	FRANK LASSITER	BILL O'CONNOR ^	LYNWOOD SMITH
BRADLEY DAVIDSON ^ *	TAMARA LEE	CAROL PATTERSON ^ #	DONALD STEWART ^
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LEEANN DENHAM *	MATTHEW LEWIS *	ANDRES PEÑA *	LOU THIBODAUX ^
DAVID DONALDSON ^	PETER LOWE	HOLLY PIPER	ROBERT TURNER *
	FARAH MAJID	CHUCK PRICE	JOSHUA WHITE *
	MARK MARTIN *		TAMMIE WILLIAMS

^ BLACKBURN SOCIETY \* FELLOW # TEMPORARY SABBATICAL (as of 07/01/2021)

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE AND OFFICERS

**GORDON G. MARTIN**  
Chairperson

**ALEX SMITH**  
Vice-Chairperson

**ROBERT HARRIS, III \***  
Secretary

**MARION MCINTOSH \***  
At Large Member

**MIKE HOUSE**  
Immediate Past Chairperson

**ERIKA MASON-IMBODY**  
Student Life Designee

**JERRAN HILL (EX OFFICIO)**  
Director



**85%  
OF ADVISORY  
BOARD MEMBERS  
ARE IN STATE.**

## Nominate a Board Member

Nominations for Advisory Board members are actively solicited from current and past board members, students, and Blackburn Fellows. Nominations are reviewed by the Leadership Development Committee and, after initial conversations, forwarded to the Advisory Board for a vote by the full board. The Advisory Board strives to be a diverse body, representative of the state of Alabama, that can ensure “the Blackburn Institute maintains sufficient civic, business, political, and financial resources to carry out the mission of the institute.”

[blackburninstitute.sa.ua.edu/advisory-board/prospective-advisory-board-members/](http://blackburninstitute.sa.ua.edu/advisory-board/prospective-advisory-board-members/)



# STUDENT Spotlight

*Alli Swann*

*Alli Swann is a senior from Tuscaloosa, Alabama double majoring in Political Science and English with a minor in Social Innovation and Leadership. In May 2019, she lived and served in Marion, Alabama as part of the University Fellows Experience, where she was engaged in facilitating youth leadership and civic engagement camp focused on bridging gaps between middle-school-aged students through a shared passion for leadership and their community. On-campus, Alli is the team leader of Vote Everywhere UA, a campus chapter of the Andrew Goodman Foundation and a member of the Anderson Society, The XXXI Women's Honorary, and Honors College Ambassadors. In addition, she serves as a student recruitment intern in the Honors College. Alli is particularly passionate about engaging with her home community of Tuscaloosa and has interned at the Tuscaloosa County Courthouse and with Congresswoman Terri Sewell's district office. She's passionate about child advocacy and currently serves as a "big" with Big Brothers Big Sisters of West Alabama. Following her graduation in May 2022, Alli aspires to attend law school where she hopes to further cultivate her passion for juvenile, civil rights, and public interest law.*

*By Alli Swann*

When we look back on history, specific years become pivotal points of remembrance. We recall the years that bookend wars, the years where generational transformations turn the tide of history, and those where we take essential strides towards fully recognizing our shared humanity. 1776, 1865, 1945, 1965 are years like these, to name a few. The year 2020 is sure to join this list. From the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic to reckoning with racial injustice to watching the democratic process play out, 2020 was a year that defied a single story.

The historic twelve months that we witnessed impacted us all in many ways. For me, isolation reinforced the healing power of community; national unrest emphasized the importance of listening to others and engaging in critical discussion; watching the various ways in which leaders responded to challenging events taught me valuable leadership lessons. As I've assembled the pieces of 2020's challenging puzzle, I've seen Blackburn's mission in action. I've witnessed individuals – whether they knew it or not – living out the legacy of Dr. John L. Blackburn. The Blackburn Institute is a catalyst for building a community of individuals prepared to face challenges like those presented

by 2020. It empowers us to make change and history along the way.

I entered the Blackburn Institute with excitement and an immediate sense of belonging. The New Student Orientation had me eager to soak up all the Institute had to offer, to learn about the ways in which individuals and ideas are moving the state forward, and then, two weeks later, March 13th rolled around – a defining day in the year's timeline. Following the suspension of the school year and the several months of isolation that followed, I found myself pondering on what could have been. I felt defeated by the challenges that the world was facing. The eagerness that I felt at Orientation began to dwindle. I struggled with how I could grow when it became so easy to stay in place, both physically and perceptively.

In my life, community has always encouraged me to persist and seek out hope in difficult situations. It was the outpouring of support of the Tuscaloosa community that fed my resilience after losing my home in the April 27, 2011 tornado. Last year, cultivating community was put through an extreme test. However, even despite the barriers of living on Zoom and spending most of the year in my room, I was

able to discover community in the Blackburn Institute.

Soon I recognized just how much hope and determination could be found in the Blackburn community. In the face of a challenging year, I realized how meaningful it could be to consistently ask and answer Dr. Blackburn's question "What have you done today?" I also realized how hopeful it is to listen to the answers that others have to that question. I could see the student officers and staff heeding their calls to action through their adaptable and determined leadership amid an unusual year. I listened to the answers of community leaders at the Burt Jones Rural Community Experience, which took place in Tuscaloosa, my lifelong home. Listening to how local leaders have embraced their call to action reinvigorated my identity as an Alabamian and strengthened the sense of connection I had with my community. The rural travel experience easily became one of my favorite experiences of the year as it introduced me a wide array of individuals who cared deeply about their community and it created a

space to seek out the community that I had been craving with my class.

Blackburn has a unique way of situating us for remarkable lives of leadership. Yet, it also inspires hope for progress, facilitates the ability to be heard, and provides a space where revolutionary community can flourish. The community that blooms from the Blackburn Institute is one unlike any other I've experienced; it is defined by passion, persistence, and the hope for progress. For these reasons, I am incredibly honored to be a part of the Institute and as a student officer, I intend to strive towards helping create the bonds that form this special community. As we move through life and inevitably face future years that are as challenging as 2020, I have confidence and hope because I know there exists a robust network of people out there - in Alabama and across the world - pushing for change and asking themselves: "What have you done today?" 🌱



**2021-2022 Blackburn Student Officers: Trinity Hunter, Vice-Chairperson; Mary Eliza Beaumont, Chairperson; and Alli Swann, Communications Director.**



# Blackburn Institute



Collin Ahmad



Anika Ames



Sean Atchison



Malea Benjamin



Makenna Berry



Olivia Davis



Peyton Deese



Cassidy Diamond



Taylor DiCicco



Jordan Evans



Noah Jacobs



Jordan Jones



Emma Kenny



Turner Koch



Lauren Lafrades



Preston McGee



Caroline McGrath



Madison Moore



Ellen Nicholson



Lorin O'Rear



Sharle Samuel



Seth Self



Walt Shelton



Sally Grace Shettles



Lacy Smith



# 2021 STUDENT CLASS



Reid Blackmon



Spencer Bowley



Brock Burks



Brianna Byrd



Alexis Cumbie



Lewis Fisher



Nyla Hayes



Ashton Howser



Ella Huffaker



Katy Hurd



Riley Lovejoy



Malcolm Lowe



Lilly Martin



Marcella Martinez



Hugo McCarthy



John Pace



Jehme Pruitt



Amelia Pugh



Lexie Riggins



Sam Robson



Paola Sommer



Anneliese Taggart



Caleb Thome



Joseph Tucker



Mackenzie Walker



# PROGRAM Spotlight

## *D. Ray Pate New Student Retreat*

*Lexie Riggins is a transfer student to The University of Alabama from Wallace State Community College where she played volleyball on a scholarship for two years. While at Wallace State she held many leadership positions, worked part-time, maintained a 4.0 grade point average, and became a two-time conference tournament MVP, 1st team conference select, two-time conference Player of the Week, and NJCAA 2nd team All-American.*

*At The University of Alabama, she continues to stay involved across campus with Public Relations Council of Alabama, the National Society of Leadership and Success, and the Community Cultivation project where she helps deliver marketing materials to local Tuscaloosa non-profits for free. She still achieves high academic success while being in an accelerated course of study to earn her Master of Arts in Advertising and Public Relations with a concentration in media strategy. Lexie currently works as a Marketing and Opportunities Development Consultant at People Optimum Consulting, LLC. where she is responsible for helping grow the small minority-owned business with the mission to create a more human-centered workplace. Lexie aspires to continue down her path of leadership and diligence by becoming an entrepreneur or working at an elite public relations agency.*

*By Lexie Riggins*

I was sitting in my living room one day, glued to my laptop like most students were due to a majority virtual semester, when I got an email that I had been nominated for another organization on campus. I usually read these emails and almost always trash them right away. I had decided that I wasn't going to join anything else for the sake of just boosting my resume. If I was going to participate in something it was going to be impactful, life-changing, and memorable for me and who I wanted to become. As I continued to read the email invitation, I saw a name I had never seen before—Blackburn Institute.

I spent the day researching this group. Its history, its values, its mission, and it didn't take long for me to conclude that I had to apply. I immediately saw Blackburn Institute as an opportunity. An opportunity to make new friends since I transferred to The University of Alabama as a junior. An opportunity to network with groundbreaking leaders, and most importantly, an opportunity to impact my home state for the better. I was very eager (and a little nervous) when I was accepted into the Institute and was told to mark my calendar for a two-day weekend event called the D. Ray Pate New Student Retreat. However, as the weekend came and went, I quickly realized there was absolutely no reason to be worried but many reasons to be excited.

My initial perception of the Blackburn Institute being full of opportunities is still very much true, but I now see there is much more to it than that. I recognize Blackburn Institute as a safe place that will challenge you to think out of the box, empathize with those who seem drastically different than you, and drive you to be the leader you've probably always had inside of you.





*I recognize Blackburn Institute as a safe place that will challenge you to think out of the box, empathize with those who seem drastically different than you, and drive you to be the leader you've probably always had inside of you.*

Participating in the New Student Retreat, I met people of all different ages and backgrounds from all across the nation. Each one had their own passions, dreams, perspectives, and somehow, we are all becoming a unified group representing something much larger than ourselves. I will never forget us all tentatively watching and listening to everyone during show and tell, conspiring against other teams while playing Alabama Jeopardy, and I will always remember the funniest part of the weekend being the choreographed skits we performed which quickly turned into badly made music videos.

Simply, it was refreshing to be with people again, even if that meant following COVID-19 guidelines. We all were so grateful to meet each other, create new relationships, and not be behind a screen, that our interactions were more genuine and intentional than they may have been

before the pandemic. We were vulnerable to each other in all our activities. Whether it be the perception exercises where we saw how everyone comes from varying life paths or just brainstorming ideas for the Daniel Community Scholars Program—we were willing to have the difficult conversations that most people try to avoid.

Ultimately, my experience at the D. Ray Pate New Student Retreat gave me something to look forward to. I look forward to our small group discussions throughout the semester, creating deeper bonds, and fostering more challenging conversations. I look forward to the accomplishments this class will make with the hope Blackburn has given us to be heard and to make change. Although, I've only known my peers for a few short months—I know that type of hope is all we need to be relentless in transforming our communities. 🌱

# Inspiring Civic Engagement through Film

By Meredith Riley Stewart



Meredith Riley Stewart is an actor, producer, and content creator. Born and raised in Phenix City, AL, Meredith has spent the past two decades living in 3 of the 5 largest cities in America, now calling Los Angeles home. Her most recent feature film, *The Greatest Inheritance*, starring Mena Suvari and Jaleel White will premiere in late 2021. As a

multimedia producer, Meredith has created multiple digital series (*Flip The Script*, *AutocorrectFU*), short films (*Orphan is the New Orange*, *American Dream*, *Miss Underwater*) and even a virtual reality experience (*See Me*, which screened at Birmingham's Sidewalk Film Festival). Her next feature is aiming for Georgia in late 2021. She currently serves as a Women In Film Peer Mentor. Above all, Meredith is passionate about using media as a platform for social change.

Shaping Our State, funded through the Daniel Community Scholars Fellows' Program Grant, is a series of three short videos aimed at educating, encouraging and empowering young women in Alabama, especially young Black women, to engage in all levels of government, from voting to running for office ([www.shapingourstate.com](http://www.shapingourstate.com)).

The animated videos, released in fall 2020, use the three branches of state government as the overarching

theme, with the first video focusing on Alabama's legislative branch, the second focusing on the executive branch and the third focusing on the judicial branch. Throughout all three videos, viewers hear the voices of actual Alabamians as they talk about how they see their state and their future in it. The voices both challenge and encourage, with a nod to helping young women in Alabama see that they can have a hand in creating the future they want to inherit.

At every level of Shaping Our State, Blackburn students and Fellows have been involved. From the outset, Meredith Riley Stewart took the lead, serving as manager for the project. All but one of the young women lending their voices to the videos is involved with Blackburn, including students Trinity Hunter, Lauren Chambliss, and Caitlin McTier, and Fellow Amber Scales. Additionally, Blackburn Fellows Anna Ruth Williams, Danielle Cassady, Lillian Brand, and Hallie Bradley as well as students Josh Britt, Kate Fountain, and Carina Villarreal were instrumental in public relations for the launch.

An important part of Shaping Our State is the presence of African American individuals involved in the creative process, making up two-thirds of the creative team. The creative team includes celebrated filmmakers and creators, including multiple Emmy-award winners and NAACP awardees, who have credits on films and shows such as *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, *Donnie Darko*, *30 Rock*, *Archer* and *Scandal*.

With the videos created, the second phase of implementation began—promoting the videos within the target constituent group. This is a multi-level rollout including partnering with community organizations to show the videos as part of existing programs as well as integrating the videos as a highlight in high school curriculum units dealing with government. Thus far, Shaping Our State has been viewed by participants in the 2020 YMCA Youth Legislature program, Ready to Run Alabama, and as a curricular component for all high school students in the Montgomery Public School System.



As we reach the peak of the promotional phase, we are honing our curriculum and continuing to work with our community partners to ensure the audience for Shaping Our State increases. If you would like to see Shaping Our State in your school or community organization, reach out to us at [hello@shapingourstate.com](mailto:hello@shapingourstate.com). 🌱





*Mary Eliza Beaumont is a junior from Homewood, Alabama and is excited to be serving as the 2021-2022 Student Chairperson. She is currently majoring in environmental science and minoring in political science. She is involved in the service organization Al's Pals, volunteers as a storybook illustrator for Reading Allies, serves as a member of the Environmental Council, and enjoys participating in the Art Club. She is also the Director of Campus Outreach on SGA's Environmental Affairs Cabinet where she works to serve students and better the campus as a whole. She is also an active member of Alpha Omicron Pi fraternity where she serves as the Assistant House and Sustainability Chairs. She also works to raise money for their philanthropy, the Arthritis Foundation, which helps kids with arthritis and teaches families how to better care for their children after a diagnosis. Outside of classes and extracurricular activities, she enjoys attending speaker panels on campus, dancing, and creating art. After graduating from The University of Alabama, Mary Eliza plans to attend law school and pursue a career in environmental policy law.*

## Uniontown Environmental Campaign

*By Mary Eliza Beaumont  
2020 DCS Team 5 Community Outreach Specialist*

Our Daniel Community Scholars project was a year in the making. From watching the Uniontown documentary my freshman year, to getting my team on board with focusing on Uniontown, to carting away hundreds of pounds of recycling to UA, this project took enthusiasm and dedication. Philip Harden, Aaron Frederick, Johnny Baxley, Justin Branum and I came together to make this multifaceted project happen, and I am so proud and thankful to be a part of the Blackburn Institute.

At the beginning of our project, we had one goal in mind: to help the people of Uniontown because pollutants in their area had diminished their quality of life and resulted in environmental degradation. Originally, my group was unaware that the drinking water cleanliness was of great concern for the community. Through Aaron's research over the summer of 2020, our group learned of the high levels of arsenic in Uniontown's water supply that rendered the tap water unsafe for consumption. This realization, alongside information gathering during several conversations with our community partners, Black Belt Citizens, led our team to narrow the scope of our project. If the community needed clean drinking water, we would find a way to provide it.

Through additional research—and email communications with John Wathen, a local riverkeeper in Alabama who had written articles on tests he had run on Uniontown's water supply—our group realized that donating individual bottles of water would be the best option for residents.

The impact of our project had three facets: informing Alabama residents and leaders about Uniontown's plight and how to help, delivering copious amounts of clean



drinking water to the community through Coca-Cola's kind donation, and relieving the community of their stored recycling. For the long term, educating individuals through a documentary and letter-writing process would encourage people to look into issues in Uniontown and their communities and seek justice. Also, removing the 500 lbs. of recycling from the community would let the townspeople fill their reservoir for about another year instead of creating trash waste. In the short term, residents would have over 1,500 cases of water to fulfill their daily water intake needs, per the community's request.

My main points of contact throughout the project were Perry County Commissioner Ben Eaton and Adam Johnston of Black Belt Citizens. Mr. Johnston and I spent countless hours emailing, calling, and texting throughout the past year to ensure our project was something the people of Uniontown would appreciate. From the start of the project, our team set out to help in whatever way the community felt was best, and Mr. Johnston was an incredible and reliable point of contact.

Completing a community project takes many hours and lots of planning, and adding COVID-19 made everything even more...interesting. My team was clear from the beginning that health and safety was a priority, so we had two separate plans for most of the year: a COVID plan and a hopeful

"life-goes-back-to-normal plan." You can surmise which plan we had to implement.

Our budget specialist Justin Branum had to take into account hand sanitizer, gloves, and even "wetting pens" to seal envelopes so individuals didn't use saliva. All of these materials were to ensure student safety during the screening of the Uniontown documentary with its optional letter-writing campaign. Everyone was required to wear masks, stay socially distanced, and use sanitizer upon entering the building where the screenings were held.

Taking part in this project greatly developed my leadership capabilities. It not only improved how I work with others, but it even altered the direction of my career aspirations. The people of Uniontown touched my heart, and I will continue to work with the Black Belt Citizens this upcoming school year to set up a water drive on campus through a separate organization in which I hold a leadership position. This project brought our team close together, I bonded with the Blackburn staff, and I found my favorite home on campus in the Blackburn Institute. The experience of creating and executing this initiative has positively impacted our entire team, and I hope to continue helping communities with environmental issues, like Uniontown, to seek justice for the rest of my life. 🌱

## *Civic Engagement at Central High School in Tuscaloosa*

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*By Patrick Dutton  
2020 DCS Team 10 Research Specialist*

Promoting civic engagement in Alabama has been a passion of mine since I was young. As an Alabama native growing up in Jasper, I was fortunate enough to have a civically engaged family that instilled those same values in me and pushed me to become involved with local Chamber of Commerce programs, multiple non-profits, and summer experiences like Alabama Boys State.

The Blackburn Institute has allowed me to continue on this path of promoting civic engagement in the state of Alabama through the Daniel Community Scholars (DCS) Program. My group quickly honed in on a shared interest in trying to increase civic engagement in the youth of Tuscaloosa.

According to our research, Tuscaloosa County scores very high on potential youth influence on elections but low on community civic culture; Alabamians 30 and over vote at rates nearly twice as high as Alabamians under 30 years old; and according to the David Matthews Center, involvement in community affairs in Alabama trends up in parallel with level of education. Additionally, the Stanford's Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project found that out of 12,200 school districts surveyed across the nation, the Tuscaloosa City School System ranked 15th in the nation for white-black achievement gaps, meaning the gap between White students' success and Black students' success in Tuscaloosa is among the largest in the entire nation.





*Patrick Dutton is an award-winning composer and multi-instrumentalist from Jasper, Alabama, with multiple premieres across the nation. He is a Senior studying Music Composition under Dr. Tyler Bradley Walker and an MBA Candidate on the CREATE Path to the MBA through the Honors College and the Manderson Graduate School of Business. His leadership experiences include Music Supervisor for the Yonder Contemporary Dance Company, Assistant and Head Music Liaison for the Dance Alabama Film Festival, and CREATE Path to the MBA Ambassador. His involvement experiences include membership in the professional business fraternity Alpha Kappa Psi, as well as interning with the Jean O'Conner-Snyder Internship Program, a partnership between the David Matthews Center for Civic Life, Alabama's New College, and the Walker Area Community Foundation.*

It was evident to us that work needed to be done to engage minoritized students in Tuscaloosa City School System. Because of this, we focused on implementing civic engagement classes at Central High School, which has a student population that is 98% Black. Our community partners were Central High School and the David Matthews Center for Civic Life. We owe a massive thanks to Blackburn Fellow Margaret Lawson, as she initially connected us with the David Matthews Center through her own work with them, as well as her willingness to connect us with administrators at Central. The curriculum used in this project came from an already successful civic engagement course taught by the David Matthews Center. Through conversations with them, we were able to tailor this course to the three sections of Mrs. Chadwick's 10th grade History class at Central High School and allow them to explore their own interests in the realm of civic engagement. These interests include a service project that one group outlined which would create a canned food drive at Central High School. Through the curriculum, which involved community-based asset mapping and interviewing community members, the students were able to come up with the canned food drive project on their own.

As with anything that has operated in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, our project had to remain flexible. Some of the practical challenges we ran into when implementing this project were UA health and safety policies limiting student volunteers from working in-person with minors during the pandemic. We had to entirely rework the role of the 12 volunteers from our Blackburn class so that we could continue to follow the university's guidance. Besides that, practical issues related to internet connectivity issues at the school sometimes presented a challenge in collecting data from the students, as well as connecting them to our volunteers.

That being said, the data collected in relation to this project demonstrates that it was a success. There were positive increases in student confidence related to questions such as "Do you think you have skills to offer the Tuscaloosa Community," "How comfortable are you with public speaking," and "How well do you think you know the Tuscaloosa community"? Even with only five classes amounting to just under four hours in instructional time over 6 weeks, this shows that the civic engagement course was successful because it gave the students an increase in their own confidence related to their abilities and understanding of their community. After a successful semester implementing these classes in Central High School, there will most likely be a continuing partnership between the David Matthews Center and Central High School, and there will likely be a steady increase among students in the aforementioned categories that already show positive growth.

Personally, this project has meant the world to me. I was the Issue Research Specialist for the initial project proposal, and during the implementation I also took on the responsibility of a managerial role, as well as training the volunteers. Seeing a project created by five college students go from concept to execution, as well as turning a nine-page project implementation plan into reality, all while dealing with the uncertainty of a global pandemic, was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had in my life. 🌱



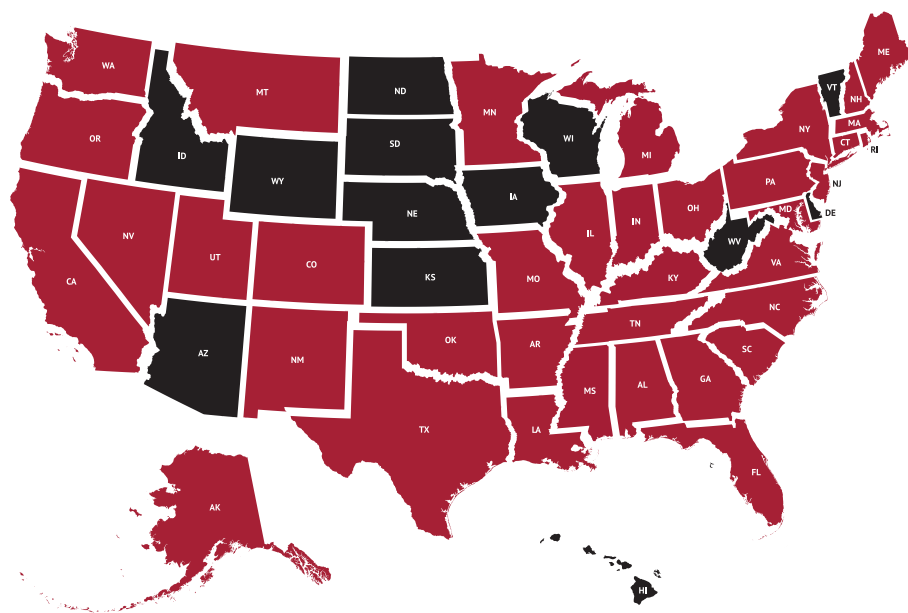


## 2021 PINNED FELLOWS

Angela Barajas Salcido, Johnny Baxley, Emma Bearden, Marian Bolin, Justin Branum, Josh Britt, Aleah Brown, Anna Cain, Lauren Chambliss, Eva Curran, Iyana Diaz, Brady Duke, Tana Early, Mariah Ellis, Kate Fountain, Logan Goulart, Rebecca Griesbach, Preston Hall, Brittany Hamner, Eric Harrison, Payti Harrison, Will Henson, Benjamin Honan, Ebone Ivory, Ariel Jones, Carter Kampakis, Hannah King, Margaret Lawson, Cambridge Layfield, DeAnna Lockett, Vito Lombardi, Emma Mansberg, Perry Martin, Caitlyn McTier, Abba Mellon, Henry Pitts, Kate Pitts, Allysa Rapadas, Sam Reece, Taylor Roberson, Alex Sandlin, Pruet Singleton, Tyler Thull, Jana Venable, Lita Waggoner, Shannon Walsh, John Martin Weed, and Ford Williams



# WHERE ARE THE BLACKBURN FELLOWS?



UNITED STATES

**730**

ABROAD

**20**

TOP U.S. LOCATIONS  
OUTSIDE OF ALABAMA

Georgia (55)

Texas (44)

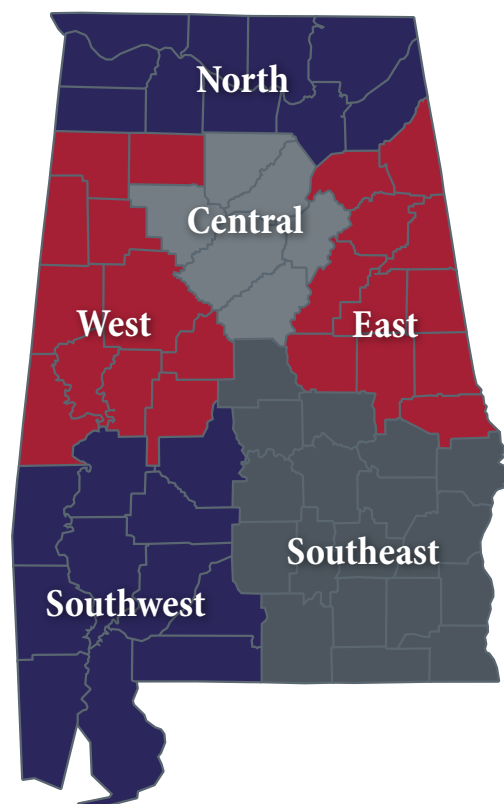
DC (36)

Tennessee (37)

New York 29

California 21

<b>CENTRAL</b> (161)	Blount, Cullman, Jefferson, St. Clair, Shelby, Walker
<b>WEST</b> (57)	Bibb, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Marion, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, Tuscaloosa, Winston
<b>NORTH</b> (46)	Colbert, DeKalb, Franklin, Jackson, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marshall, Morgan
<b>SOUTHEAST</b> (38)	Autauga, Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Chilton, Coffee, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Elmore, Geneva, Henry, Houston, Lowndes, Macon, Montgomery, Pike, Russell
<b>SOUTHWEST</b> (19)	Baldwin, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Escambia, Marengo, Mobile, Monroe, Washington, Wilcox
<b>EAST</b> (9)	Calhoun, Chambers, Cherokee, Clay, Cleburne, Coosa, Etowah, Lee, Randolph, Talladega, Tallapoosa





# MOVING COMMUNITY FORWARD: *The Common Thread*

While in high school, I served as the State President of Alabama Future Business Leaders of America. This role landed me in the President's box at a University of Alabama football game one weekend. There I met Blackburn Fellow Deidra Diaz! Deidra told me that I had to go to UA, join the Blackburn Institute and join Diaz's sorority. Two out of three is not too bad!! (I never did seek membership in any Greek-letter organizations.) As a Tuscaloosa native, I never seriously considered going anywhere for college other than The University of Alabama. I recall waking up on gameday Saturdays while a young girl, putting on my finest UA gear and loading up the family vehicle with my brother and dad to ride down University Boulevard, roll down the windows and yell "Roll Tide" at fans walking by. Going to the University of Alabama was always my plan, and I loved every minute of it!

I was a member of the inaugural First Year Council, representing the Parker Adams Living Learning Community. From there, I went on to become a member of the Student Senate, representing the College

of Arts and Sciences, to serve as Chief Policy Advisor to SGA President Cason Kirby and to come within 2% points of clinching the SGA Presidency in 2009. I am proud to have also authored and implemented a comprehensive recycling initiative that led to comprehensive recycling across the University campus that remains today. But among all of my campus experiences, I count my experience in Blackburn as one of the most meaningful and transformative of my collegiate career. Alabama 101 really opened my eyes to the needs and uniqueness of Alabama's Blackbelt. And I have carried that with me throughout her professional journey.

After graduation, I moved to Washington, D.C. as a part of the Truman Scholars Summer Institute programming. I then accepted a job with the D.C. Public Schools as their legislative liaison to the D.C. Council—a job I learned about from Blackburn Fellow Elizabeth Jones Flaschbart. I then answered the call to work for her hometown member of Congress, Congresswoman Terri A. Sewell. In the role of Staff





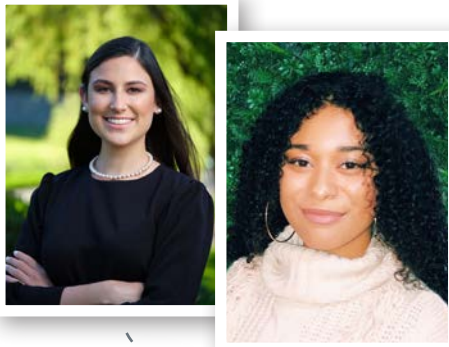
Assistant and then Legislative Aide, I enjoyed working on issues affecting the people of Alabama everyday and most especially Alabama's Black Belt.

After law school, I found my way to a community development focused practice at Maynard, Cooper & Gale, P.C. in Birmingham. There I worked on complex real estate transactions financed through federal incentives like New Markets Tax Credits, Low Income Housing Tax Credits and Opportunity Zones designed to facilitate investment in low-income communities. I then transitioned to Hope Enterprise Corporation and Hope Credit Union (HOPE), where she served as Senior Vice President of Community and Economic Development and Alabama Market Leader. In this role, I led HOPE's entry into the Alabama market and developed innovative approaches to capital access gaps for businesses and communities. I was recognized as an Oasis of Hope Essential Hero for her work to facilitate access to critical Paycheck Protection Program and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds across the State of Alabama.

My love of community comes from my parents. Every week, my parents made sure the City's young people felt loved and seen. Every job opportunity that I have had, including working in a corporate law firm, has been community focused. I have always used my talent and treasure to move communities forward. Dr. Blackburn's question, "What have you done for Alabama today?" is a central driver in my life and decision making. Whether living near or far, I always have a heart for service and always aim to have a demonstrated answer to Dr. Blackburn's ageless question. 🌳

*Kendra Key is a 2007-2008 Blackburn Fellow and 2008-2009 Blackburn Student Chair. She graduated from the University of Alabama in 2010 magna cum laude with a BA in Political Science, a minor in Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies and a Certificate in Global Studies. She also holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence from Vanderbilt Law School where she graduated in 2015 with honors. Kendra currently serves as Senior Vice President, U.S. Business Partnerships in Community Investing and Development at Citibank, N.A. where she oversees Citi's initiative to strengthen and support Minority Depository Institutions (MDIs), an initiative that is part of Citi's Action for Racial Equity -- a \$1 billion commitment to leverage business capabilities and resources to help address the racial wealth gap in the U.S.*

# Building Relationships Across the Miles



STUDENT **MARCELLA MARTINEZ** [2021] &  
FELLOW **MARISSA AYANA NAVARRO** [2017]

Blackburn Connect allowed me to talk to individuals in the workforce who share similar job interests to mine. I was especially excited to meet with Ms. Marissa Navarro, as she works with Higher Education in Washington D.C. We shared stories about our time at the University of Alabama, and she explained how she got to where she is now. As a Latina woman as well, Ms. Navarro suggested some organizations and tools that I may be interested in and could benefit my work aspirations. Our conversation was especially beneficial to me as I too aspire to one day live in the D.C. area. In terms of the platform, I was very satisfied to find out it is easy to use. I would definitely suggest the platform to anyone interested, as it facilitates a connection between students and Fellows.

**MARCELLA:**

This past Spring semester,

**MARISSA:** Marcella is a member of the newest class and was interested in learning more about my experience in public policy as well as if I knew of any opportunities for internships. Within two weeks we were able to schedule a video chat that gave me the opportunity to learn more about the issues she is passionate about. I was able to learn more about her experience partnering with Higher Education Partnership and what initially drew her to higher education policy. I definitely recommend using Blackburn Connect to meet with the 2020 and 2021 class. It was very user friendly and is a great way to stay involved as a Fellow. One of my main goals is to be able to share paid internship opportunities with student members, especially those wanting to come to DC. Since graduating I've maintained a list of paid internships that I hope will help students who are interested in public policy. My call to action for others would be to find ways to open doors for students who may not have access to certain spaces.



FELLOW **LITA WAGGONER** [2015] &  
FELLOW/ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER **DANIELLE BLEVINS** [2007]

**LITA:** My law school graduation was rapidly approaching, and looking for a job during a pandemic was challenging, to say the least. I wanted to compare being a government lawyer at the municipal, state, and federal levels, so I looked at Blackburn Connect to find people who worked in those roles. I reached out to Danielle Blevins about her experience working for a federal agency in Washington, D.C. As I transition from being a student to a young professional, meeting with Danielle about her career path was very helpful, because she was in my shoes not too long ago. My biggest takeaway from our conversation is to do what makes you happy, even if that path is



In May 2020, the Institute adopted Blackburn Connect (<https://blackburn.wisr.io/>), a private online membership database and communications platform. The website was highly anticipated, and nearly 500 students, Fellows, and Advisory Board members have activated their profiles in its first year. Members have benefitted from the ability to directly message one another to build relationships. They've made an amazing 440 connections so far! Here are just few of their stories.



FELLOW **SAMANTHA RUDELICH** [2015] &  
FELLOW/ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER **PAT REYNOLDS** [2017]

**SAMANTHA:** Pat and I connected on Blackburn Connect because he saw that I had experience as a Financial Analyst. He was looking to move into that industry and had questions about my experience. We setup a Zoom call and I shared my experience with him about how to leverage prior experience when entering into the Financial and Data Analytics sectors. I enjoyed being able to share my perspective and hear about Pat's evolving interest in the industry. At that point that Pat reached out, I was still deciding between attending law schools in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta. It was great to connect with another Fellow that I had not spoken to since graduating and give him updates on how my post-graduation plans were unfolding. Pat very graciously offered to help me with transition of moving cities by offering his connections regardless of which city and school I decided on. I'm very grateful that Pat reached out because it was great to catch up and remember that the Blackburn community will always show up to support in any way that they can.

Blackburn Connect is a great way to connect with other members and ease into new transitions in our lives – I would encourage everyone to reach out to one new person and see where it leads!

**PAT:** Relationships are currency. Over the past year, I have leveraged Blackburn Connect to grow my wealth and that of others. I used it to reconnect with Sam, to check in and to offer her my network. Before joining Blackburn Connect, I was not aware that she had enrolled at Georgetown University (GU) Law. I used to work at GU, so I reached out to inform her that I would connect her to any of my old colleagues if she would like me to do so. I've had the opportunity to connect with more experienced members who have guided and helped develop me. I've also benefited from speaking to younger cohort members helping encourage them in their passion. My call to action is to leverage the platform to stay connected to our community. There's nothing we can't accomplish by working with and through people.

non-traditional. I highly recommend using Blackburn Connect to meet people with similar interests.

**DANIELLE:** As a student, a Fellow, and now an Advisory Board member, I know what power the Blackburn network can wield. I try to keep some flexibility in my calendar to be able to speak with those who reach out with questions or those who just want to talk. Lita Waggoner reached out to me on Blackburn Connect. After a few messages, we chatted about her background, her studies, and her next steps via Zoom. I shared a bit of my journey, including the ups and the downs, and about how I carved out my present space, both professionally and personally. We discussed the toll of the pandemic on our lives. Brainstorming some ideas, I offered suggestions for possible future workplaces. I was so glad to hear she was able to land a position in the state to begin her post-law school career. Blackburn Connect allowed us to instantly make the time, the space, and the availability to share what a lifetime commitment can look like.

We invite all our members to visit Blackburn Connect, activate or update their profiles, and use the member search feature to meet a student, Fellow, or Advisory Board member. If you can't find anyone who matches your interests, contact the office for additional information about the community. 🌱



# ADVISORY BOARD *Spotlight*

## *Q&A with Brad Newman*

Brad Newman was recently appointed President of Shelton State Community College by the Alabama Community College System Board of Trustees. He arrives to this position with twenty-eight years of leadership and management experience.

Prior to his appointment at the College, Brad served as plant manager for ZF Chassis Systems, LLC in Tuscaloosa, one of the company's top performing facilities in the world. In this role, he worked cooperatively with Mercedes-Benz U.S. assembly plants in nearby Vance, Alabama. Before his employment with ZF, he was plant manager at various suppliers and initially began his career at General Motors as a manufacturing engineer.

A leader in West Alabama, Brad is Chairman of West Alabama Works, Board Member and Vice-Chair for Education and Workforce Development for the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Ex-Officio Board Member for the Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority (TCIDA), and a member of the West Alabama Regional Workforce Council. He is also a German Business Council founding member and a member of the Alabama Germany Partnership.

Beyond his leadership roles in the automotive industry and West Alabama, Brad is committed to activities that improve the lives of others. He is actively engaged in developing young leaders, co-leads a statewide effort to improve the process for prisoner re-entry for the state of Alabama, volunteers through prison ministry, and developed the OnTrack Process for Juvenile Delinquency.

Brad has both a bachelor's and master's degree in Industrial Engineering from The University of Alabama. Together with his wife Hollie, Brad has two children and three grandchildren.

### **How did you become involved with Blackburn?**

Due to all of my civic engagement in and outside of industry, my mentor and Blackburn Advisory Board member John Covington saw that I had a heart for making things better for people. He thought that I could bring value to the Institute while also receiving value through folks with experience in industry and personal connections. I am on a lot of boards and get asked to do a lot of things. Learning the history of the Institute and that it wants to make things better for people who may not have had opportunity really sold me on being a part of Blackburn.

### **What would you say has been the most meaningful experience as a member of the Advisory Board?**

The most meaningful opportunity was speaking about the prison reentry effort and its challenges during the 2019 Annual Symposium. It was impactful for John and I to allow the audience to test what they have heard or read against what we have lived. I feel like that gave us some value as members of the Advisory Board—to be able to stand on the stage and discuss our journey with people who have an interest in prison reentry programs.



## How have your life experiences informed your passions for civic engagement here in West Alabama?

I had the opportunity to turn an operation around at ZF Chassis, to change the culture in a positive way, and to reap the benefits of staying with a good company with a strong reputation. My work put me in a great position as a plant manager. I consider myself very lucky be able to then focus on what I can do where I am with workforce development.

John Covington challenged me to remain balanced in and outside of industry by becoming involved in prison ministry. It was the first time in my life that I felt like I was going to have to let him down. I was not afraid to go to prison, but I feared my name and ministry in the same sentence. Initially, I replied that I was not qualified, but that stewed with me and I ultimately agreed. It was the best thing that I have ever done.

I had the opportunity meet with around 100 inmates in the county prison in the small groups of six to eight men. After four or five weeks you get to know them. At week nine or ten of 12 weeks, a man who had been in prison for 20 years told me that the end of his service was in two months. You are not supposed to hug in prison, but I hugged his neck. When I did, there was not a smile. His face was blank. When I asked him what was wrong, he said “Well, I have no money, and what little family I have, I do not really know them. I do not have a trade and don’t even know how to pump gas anymore. I don’t know where to go or what to do.”

I had this mindset that going into prison is bad and leaving is good. For this man, leaving prison was bad. In most cases, it was not good. As a hiring authority, that really bothered me. The unemployment rate is low, and I need workers. I looked at this man knowing that the golden egg for him would be gainful employment. I told him about my need for employees and promised, if I could get past the negligent hire status, that I would guarantee formerly incarcerated folks gainful employment with insurance and benefits.

Because of this experience in the prison ministry small group, I asked the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce to facilitate a discussion with interested parties: universities, churches, nonprofits, companies, and other similar organizations. Russell Dubose at PhiPhi and I asked these groups to use their resources to create a process that will allow us to get over negligent hiring status. With that in place, we would lead the program for prison reentry and help the formerly incarcerated land on their own two feet.

## What unique lessons have you learned about leadership?

The most valuable lessons that I’ve ever learned in a book about leadership are very simple. They came from the Bible. Be a servant leader. Be humble. Be a leader who makes it about everyone but yourself. Of course, you need to have the vision and understand what it means to lead others, but in a way that not only benefits the organization but the community and people around you. The only way to do that and be successful at it is to be humble and serve. See your position as a leader as a position to serve others, not as a position to hold over others or as a position of power.

## What role do you see Blackburn playing in the State of Alabama?

I see the Blackburn Institute as the enabler, the connector, and the consistent funnel for understanding the needs of the state and leveraging the resources to make a difference. I think we as an organization have to be careful that we don’t become less effective for Alabama by having a common thought process or way. The Institute should avoid polishing talking points, promoting specific ideologies, or suppressing certain things that may not be politically correct. We must be willing to do what John and I did, to step away from talking points and ideologies and step into the mud and wrestle with whatever the issue is. Forget the external influences, take the heart that you have, the love that you have, and apply it and see what comes from it. 🌱

# Empowering Student Leaders Throughout World

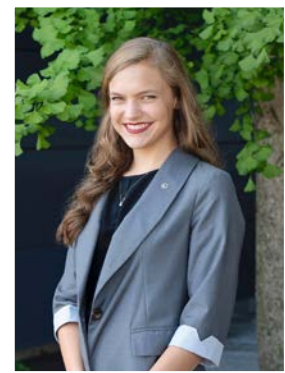
*By Tana Early, Blackburn Fellow (2019) and  
2020-21 Circle K International President*

**"My platform as president allowed me to push for racial justice by integrating it into our service and advocacy efforts in CKI, as well as empowered me with the tools to address similar issues in my life outside of CKI."**

Circle K International (CKI) is the world's largest student-lead collegiate service organization. We are a subsidiary of Kiwanis International and serve local communities in 18 different countries with over 400 unique clubs. CKI is comprised of local, regional and international levels of leadership, and I have had the honor of serving as the president of the organization for the last year. My term began in July of 2020, and the goals of my administration were heavily focused on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); quantitative organizational research; and financial sustainability in the wake of the pandemic. In my tenure, we raised nearly \$50,000 for clean water in Haiti, established the first-ever committee to focus on DEI, launched a large-scale research effort based on surveying, focus groups and cross-sectional methods, performed statistical analysis on the financial structure of the organization and reworked our governing documents to be inclusive and resilient.

Blackburn shaped me enormously this year as international president. CKI is a service organization at heart, but we often get caught up in small and meaningless service projects that feel good in the moment but do not yield significant impact over time. Blackburn inspired me to establish the CKI Civic Engagement Institute (Jerran, please do not sue me for copyright), which is a training weekend for CKI officers to learn about engaged scholarship, sustainable service and advocacy within CKI. The weekend also features community simulations that focus on our four service initiatives (environmental justice, mental health, childhood development and food insecurity) and takes a snapshot of real communities that struggle with these issues. Each team is challenged to collect data on the community, research community partners and develop a sustainable action plan to help address the issue. We hope this Daniel Community Scholars Program-like model will help our clubs make sustainable and impactful progress.





While the international level of CKI has been making progress, the pandemic has burdened our clubs, and our membership has taken a steep decline. In response, we have developed a more equitable fee structure and worked to establish an alumni program to lower the cost of membership over time. We have also distributed \$11,000 in grants to fund exceptional service projects and waived dues for clubs who were unable to meet during the pandemic.

This year has changed me as a person, as well as my outlook on the world. My platform as president allowed me to push for racial justice by integrating it into our service and advocacy efforts in CKI, as well as empowered me with the tools to address similar issues in my life outside of CKI. Our partnership with Active Minds, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising mental health awareness among college students, via peer-to-peer dialogue and interaction, forced me to reassess how I treated mental health in my life and understand the many issues college students face with mental health globally. My tenure as president also allowed me to explore my passions for water, sanitation and hygiene in low-income communities through our partnership with the UNICEF WaSH project.

This year has been a whirlwind; it has been very difficult to balance my duties as president, keep my job and maintain my grades throughout such a tumultuous time. I am fortunate to have made it through with my health and a bright road ahead! 🌱

Tana Early is a native of Northport, Alabama. She graduated cum laude from The University of Alabama with a B.S. in Environmental Science and a minor in Economics. During her time at the University, she was involved in the Honors College, Dr. Mark Elliott's engineering research lab, and Circle K International (CKI), a collegiate Kiwanis service and leadership organization. In CKI, she has held two state wide positions and two internationally recognized positions. Additionally, Tana interned for three years with the City of Tuscaloosa, working in Environmental Education and Advocacy. Aside from her environmental work, Tana enjoys hiking and volunteering with friends. She currently works as an environmental policy researcher with ICF International in Cambridge, MA, and hopes to attend graduate school for a Ph.D. in international sustainability.





# FELLOWS FORUMS BRING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCOURSE TO THE BLACKBURN COMMUNITY

BY AKIESHA ANDERSON

Last December, my fellow FIN officers and I hosted a Fellows' Focus Group designed to gather input from Fellows about the possible creation of a New Fellows Pipeline which would have been a FIN onboarding and mentorship program for Blackburn students close to graduating. During this focus group, the conversation took a pleasantly surprising twist, as Fellows began to share instead ideas about the sorts of programming that they would like to see created simply for Fellows.

For many Fellows, one of the most memorable or enjoyable experiences they had as Blackburn students was being able to regularly gather to discuss a variety of topics. Whether it was called "Hot Topics, Hot Pizza", "Coffee and Conversation", "Blackburn EATs" or something else during your tenure as a student, these moments of having meaningful conversations with Blackburn members were often a staple of our experiences as Blackburn students. Attendees at the Fellows' Focus Group revealed that what they currently desired most from the Blackburn FIN was programming designed just for Fellows that mirrored those experiences we had as students. In response to this expressed desire, "Fellows Forums" were birthed.

Fellows' Forums serve as an opportunity for Fellows to learn and talk about various topics of interest. These Forums take place every other month and are nimble enough in structure to allow Fellows the opportunity to lead, host, facilitate, or serve as panelists while topics are discussed. So far, we have hosted three Fellows Forums, in January 2021, March 2021, and May 2021. Although we took a brief summer break to focus on Blackburn Summer Networking Events and Symposium planning, Fellows Forums are slated to resume in September 2021. Below is a description of each of the past three Forums.

On Monday, January 25 the Blackburn FIN officers joined 24 attendees for the first ever Fellows Forum. This event was designed to give Fellows an opportunity to discuss and process personal sentiments regarding the January 6th Capitol siege as well as to discuss Fellows' thoughts regarding what role anti-racism should play in our individual and collective capacities. In March, we hosted a second forum entitled "Tips from Hill Staffers: How to Engage with Elected Officials". This event was moderated by Fellow and Advisory Board member Danielle Blevins, and Fellows Meghan Stringer and Kendra Key served as panelists. Attendees received invaluable information from the panelists about the inner workings of Federal Legislative offices.

## "AN AVENUE FOR FELLOWS TO GET TOGETHER TO DISCUSS A BROAD RANGE OF TOPICS OF INTEREST."

Our May Fellows Forum focused on the environment, with a panel discussion moderated by FIN Internal Vice-Chair Olivia Bensinger. Fellows Mallory Flowers, Clint Light, and Jimmy Young served as the panelists for "Energy Policy in the Climate Change Era." This event was opened to students, Fellows, and Advisory Board members, and attendees learned about the current state of energy policy in our country.

Resuming in September, Fellows Forums will continue to be hosted every other month and will serve as an avenue for Fellows to get together to discuss a broad range of topics of interest.

We welcome any format including reading and reflecting on articles, skill building workshops, discussion panels, and class reunions. 🌱

**If you have a topic idea or would like to host a forum (either alone or with a group of friends) please email the FIN Internal Vice-Chair Olivia Bensinger at [ofbensinger@gmail.com](mailto:ofbensinger@gmail.com).**



Mrs. Akiesha Anderson is a Montgomery, AL native that received her law degree from the University of Alabama in 2017. She currently serves as the Policy Director for Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. In this role, she focuses on policy development, legislative advocacy, coalition building, and engaging with elected officials. Prior to attending UA, Akiesha received a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Alabama State University and a Master's in degree in Public Administration from Auburn University-Montgomery. Upon completing her J.D., she also received a Certificate in Government Affairs from UA Law. Over the years, she's had the honor of working with several civil rights organizations, elected officials, a university, and a think tank: the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), Human Rights Campaign (HRC), U.S. Congresswoman Terri A. Sewell (AL-07), the Montgomery County Commission, UCLA School of Law, and the Williams Institute. Beyond the Blackburn Institute, Akiesha is a member of several other community and service-oriented organizations including Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; she also serves as co-chair for the Alabama Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, and as Legal Redress Chair for the Montgomery Metro Chapter of the NAACP.

# Networking *Through the* Generations

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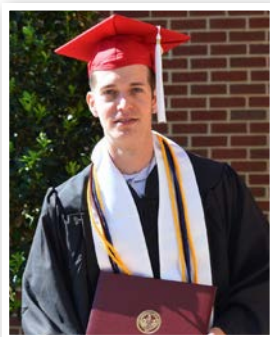
r Blackburn stated in his vision for the Institute that a “good community is comprised of more than one generation.” Due to his wisdom, over the last 27 years Blackburn students, Fellows, and Advisory Board members have networked together. From one-time conversations to long-term mentoring programs, the connections made have benefitted mentor and mentee alike.

During the pandemic, The Institute was unable to host in-person events where students typically connect with other Blackburn members. Instead, Blackburn staff paired students with mentors who shared career and civic engagement interests. The 55 matches made in April of 2020 were a success, and staff have continued to facilitate similar connections for the 2021 cohort. From the 2020 student class, two mentoring relationships stood out as sustained and meaningful. We hope these relationships inspire your networking this year.

## Fellow **Eric Harrison** (2020) & Advisory Board member **Isaac McCoy**

Eric searched Blackburn’s Advisory Board Listing on the website to learn about possible mentors. He remembered, “I saw that Isaac McCoy shared interests in nonprofit development and entrepreneurship, which aligned with a nonprofit I was in the process of creating – Survivors of Addicted Parents.” Blackburn Institute Director Jerran Hill connected them through email. Isaac recalled, “When I was contacted, I did not know exactly what made me stand out, but I was excited to meet this dynamic individual.”

As an undergraduate student, Eric expected their conversation to be out of his league, but it was the opposite



that surprised him. “I was able to openly share about my passion towards helping youth impacted by mental health and substance abuse and learned that Isaac had a history of working with the organizational side of mental health and criminal justice program implementation.” Similarly, Isaac found that “Eric was open with his academic

path and professional aspirations which allowed me quickly to support and connect Eric with individuals in my network that he would add value to and vice versa.”

They were soon talking multiple times a month about everything from projects Eric was working on to the social justice movement of 2020. Isaac connected Eric with the



director of the Jimmie Hale Mission in Birmingham, AL, who was willing to assist him in a project he implemented at a local alternative school. Eric expressed, “Our conversations about the changes surrounding the social justice movements of 2020 towards racial justice also helped me understand my role in contributing towards this change. All this while also taking the time to thoroughly explain the business side behind social entrepreneurship made this a connection that has changed my life today.”

Eric’s connection with Isaac embodied the four overarching values of the Blackburn Institute – facilitating discourse, taking action, networking through generations, and instilling a lifetime commitment embodying Blackburn’s ideals. He said,

“I am now confident in the direction my life is going today, and I know that I have someone who is willing to walk with me throughout the uncertainty to come so I am certain to know where to go.”

For his part, Isaac related that “Eric was impressive in his understanding of how to effectively nurture a relationship. It is called a “mentoring” program or connection, but I do not use the phrase ‘mentor/mentee’ relationship because it implies a one-sided relationship in terms of resources and information sharing. Eric helped me grow as much as I have supported Eric’s growth, so our relationship is more ‘iron sharpens iron’ than ‘mentor-mentee.’”

## Student **Ibby Dickson** (2020) & Fellow and Advisory Board member **Britney Garner** (2006)

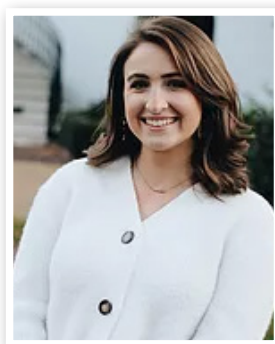
Just like for Eric, Ibby looked over a list of potential Blackburn matches, learned about their experiences, careers, and hobbies, and chose who she believed would be a great mentor for her. Jerran then connected her with her mentor, Britney, over email to schedule their first phone call. Ibby was eager to meet because “I really wanted to learn more about Britney’s experiences in the political field because of her career goals to get involved in politics.”

They easily hit it off because of their similarities in college experiences, political opinions, and career goals. They started discussing their own experiences at the University of Alabama and how much it’s remained the same, but how it’s also changed in so many ways. From there, it was easy conversation and they discussed how they can communicate in the future.

They agreed that “besides sharing and reminiscing on college experiences, one topic that was quite consistent in all of our conversations was getting involved in politics from a female perspective. We thought it was important to have those discussions as women who are motivated to change the state of Alabama through public service.”

Britney was able to share many of her experiences and positions as a female in politics, while Ibby was able to learn from those conversations. Ibby explained, “I was ultimately motivated and encouraged by Britney’s experiences, knowing that many before me were able to accomplish incredible things in Alabama politics.”

Britney had a Fellow mentor that she still keeps in contact



with to this day. She feels that “being able to keep this cycle of wisdom and experience going to Ibby has been a wonderful experience. I valued the guidance my mentor was able to provide and hopefully I have given the same to Ibby.”

Ibby and Britney’s connection was successful from the start because they were freely able to discuss and go back-and-forth on

issues. Additionally, their relationship thrived because “our conversations were very relational and relaxed. This allowed us to feel more comfortable communicating more frequently. Staying consistent with communication was incredibly beneficial and one of the main reasons our mentor/mentee relationship was successful.”

While the content of these mentoring relationships was different, at the core they were the same. Both involved a mentor who was generous with their time and passionate about sharing their experiences with the next generation of Blackburn students. Likewise, each relationship started out with a student who reached out for guidance and maintained the mentoring relationship. The Blackburn Institute is proud to continue serving the vision of Dr. Blackburn by connecting Eric and Isaac, Ibby and Britney, and countless others.

The connections between Blackburn members power the work of positive change in Alabama. If you want to be more connected—for formal mentorship or a short consultation—contact the office staff. We can find just the right avenue for engagement for you. 🌱

# BLACKBURN STUDENTS SERVE WITH UA ADVISORY COUNCIL ON WELLNESS

The Advisory Council on Wellness seeks to advise the Associate Vice President for Student Health and Wellbeing, Dr. Ruperto Perez, as to the salient issues and concerns directly related to student wellness and health at the University of Alabama. One of the major annual undertakings of the Advisory Council is the publication of a white paper that explores the contemporary issues of student health and wellbeing for UA students. The recommendations produced in previous white papers have been implemented to increase resources, programs, and services to respond to the health and wellness needs of students.

This year, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a unique challenge to student health and wellness, and the Advisory Council jumped to the effort of tackling this crisis head on. Our white paper focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic and psychological wellbeing of students, and the Advisory Council pursued new venues to present our findings, ranging from a virtual panel presentation at a statewide NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) conference, and a poster presentation at UA's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Conference, as well as meetings with a variety of UA leaders and administrators.

The nature of virtual life posed a new challenge to the Advisory Council, especially considering so much of our work done during normal circumstances hinges on collaborative meetings in in-person environments. For example, a major factor contributing to the success of each white paper is the data that the Council collects from focus groups of UA students. Adapting to virtual meetings was initially a challenge when designing our focus groups, as we were concerned that the virtual environment may limit student's ability to be open and honest about their struggles. Luckily, this was not the case, and our focus group participants reported incredibly insightful thoughts about their experiences as students during the pandemic that ultimately equipped the Advisory Council with powerful personal anecdotes to use when designing recommendations for the University.

Our presentation of the white paper at NASPA-Alabama's Virtual Conference was the first public presentation of the work of the Advisory Council, and we are thrilled with the success we encountered. We found that our work is unique in a number of ways, as not only is our white paper the only student-authored white paper addressing the COVID-19 pandemic that has been published nationally, but the Advisory Council on Wellness itself is unique among other institutions. We hope to not only continue the work of the Council at UA in the coming years, but we hope to be a model for other institutions seeking to establish student advisory councils of their own. The work of the Council is unique and meaningful on UA's campus, so we hope that other schools have taken notice and appreciate the work that student advisory groups can contribute to benefit their respective universities.

Our experiences in the Blackburn Institute certainly prepared us for our roles on the Advisory Council, particularly in equipping us with the skills to facilitate tough conversations on sensitive



**NASPA**  
Alabama

topics, while also promoting an open and respectful dialogue among Council members, focus group participants, and University of Alabama administrators. These tough conversations were especially important to know how to navigate amidst a tense time of constant developments regarding the pandemic and differing publicized opinions amongst the student body and all those invested in the livelihood of the University. Council meetings were opportunities for members to share their own perspectives on challenges that the University needed to address and overcome, and being able to facilitate these discussions -- as well as focus groups -- in a way that promoted an inclusionary environment for all perspectives was critical. These skills are certainly promoted by the Blackburn Institute, and we felt better equipped for these situations because of our experiences with Blackburn.

Our experiences on the Advisory Council on Wellness have been incredibly meaningful and have solidified our call to action with providing us an opportunity to serve Alabama, the University, and students in a unique and impactful capacity. Our work has shown us the importance of student health and wellbeing (especially in the midst of a global pandemic) and we have seen that community engagement is particularly important to the advancement of measures and initiatives that improve the experiences of members of those communities. We have certainly been reaffirmed in our belief that when crafting policy and making decisions that impact students, university leaders would be wise to listen to those students directly, as they are the issue experts simply by virtue of being the ones who live through the consequences of decisions that are made at the top. Therefore, we hope to continue to pursue strategies in the future that engage community members in decision making for the betterment of their own community as a whole. 🌱



**Jack Kappelman** (2019 Blackburn Class) is an accelerated graduate student from Austin, Texas. He is currently pursuing his master's in Public Administration and finishing his major in Political Science and minor in Public Policy, with a focus on firearms violence prevention policy. He is involved with the University Fellows Experience, the Advisory Council on Wellness, Men Against Rape and Sexual Assault, and has served as a member of the Student Government Administration. Outside of school, Jack enjoys hiking, camping, and shooting archery. He hopes to pursue a joint JD/Ph.D. program after graduation.



**Allysa Rapadas** is a Blackburn Fellow from the Class of 2019. She graduated summa cum laude in May 2021 with a Bachelor of Science in Public Health, focusing on Health Education and Promotion, and a minor in Spanish. Allysa has accepted a position in Birmingham, Alabama as a Street Outreach Specialist with duties of case management for people experiencing homelessness wanting to gain federally funded housing and supportive services. While a student at The University of Alabama, Allysa was involved with the Center for Service and Leadership's various programming teams such as Beat Auburn Beat Hunger, Beyond Bama, Serving Bama, served in the Advisory Council on Wellness, interned under Alabama Health Education Center amidst vaccine distributions in Shelby County and Pickens County, and worked as a Program Assistant at a men's homeless shelter in Birmingham, Alabama. Outside of school, Allysa enjoys hiking, creating art, and traveling. Allysa hopes to pursue a master's in social work and a master's in public health in the future.





# Premier Awards

The University of Alabama established Premier Awards to recognize UA students, faculty, and staff who exemplify the highest standards of scholarship, service, leadership, and character. The Premier Awards consist of the William P. and Estan J. Bloom Award, Judy Bonner Presidential Medallion Prize, Morris L. Mayer Award, John F. Ramsey Award, Catherine J. Randall Award, and the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award. The Sullivan Award is the oldest of the Premier Awards first awarded to UA students in 1928. The most recently endowed Premier Award, the Judy Bonner Presidential Medallion, was first awarded in 2016. Each of these awards honor the legacies of activists, academics, and individuals who made important intellectual and inspirational contributions to their communities.

Premier Awards winners have a long legacy of excellence at The University of Alabama. Since their inception, there have been 87 recipients among current Blackburn Society members, Advisory Board members, Fellows and students. This year Advisory Board member Dr. Rosalind Moore-Miller received the Judy Bonner Presidential Medallion Prize, and students Caitlyn McTier (2018) and Eric Harrison (2020) received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award.

View the list of past Blackburn recipients at [blackburninstitute.sl.ua.edu/about/premier-award-recipients/](https://blackburninstitute.sl.ua.edu/about/premier-award-recipients/)



Dr. Moore-Miller is a former military dependent, born in Vicenza, Italy with a number of places she calls home. She received an undergraduate degree from Jacksonville State University (Jacksonville, AL) with a double major in English & Political Science, a master's degree in Counselor Education with an emphasis in College Student Personnel. She is a graduate of The University of Alabama where she received her Ph.D. in Social & Cultural Foundations of Education. She is the Executive Director of Student Engagement, where she is responsible for the co-curricular engagement of students at The University of Alabama in purposeful involvement and leadership opportunities, which include oversight of the Office of Student Involvement, the Center for Service and Leadership, and University Programs. In the past, Rosalind has served professional associations as the NASPA Region III Representative for the Administrators in Graduate & Professional Student Services Knowledge Community, advisory board member of the National Association of Graduate & Professional Students (NAGPS), and Internship Coordinator for a minority initiative called the Southeastern Greek Leadership Summit (SEGLS). Prior to her work in the Student Engagement, Rosalind gained experiences in Housing and Residential Communities, Greek Life, Assessment, and Student Parent support programs. Her research areas focus on education access, intersectionality, policy analysis, and marginalized student experiences. Rosalind is a member of the Student Selections Committee of the Blackburn Institute.



Some things in life don't always come easy. That's just the story for Eric Harrison. After facing an addiction for years and watching the devastation of a community, he is now dedicated to giving back to at-risk youth while majoring in Psychology with a minor in Addiction and Recovery Studies and Computer Technology and Applications. While at the University of Alabama, he completed the Transfer Emerging Scholars Program, which led to him conduct research on college students' awareness levels and willingness to utilize resources on campus through a website called The OnCampus Connect, [www.oncampusconnect.com](http://www.oncampusconnect.com). He also volunteered with PRIDE of Tuscaloosa, a drug prevention organization, speaking to youth in Tuscaloosa County in the schools, churches, and juvenile justice system. This has led to him have his own weekly class at the Tuscaloosa County Juvenile Detention Center teaching life skills that contribute to the juveniles' re-entry in the community through lectures, guest speakers, and multimedia activities while developing and implementing a 12-week program in a local alternative school. Eric also founded a nonprofit named Survivors of Addicted Parents, [www.survivorsap.org](http://www.survivorsap.org), that aims to raise awareness and facilitate resource use for children who have lost a parent to addiction. Eric was awarded as the 2020 Outstanding Transfer Student and the 2021 Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award recipient at the University of Alabama. He plans to continue using these skills as he attends The Pennsylvania State University's Human Development and Family Studies graduate program to earn his Ph.D. His dream is to take his personal experiences and help others beat the odds themselves!



Caitlyn McTier is a recent graduate of The University of Alabama where she majored in News Media and is a proud native of Sylacauga, Alabama. Her social impact initiative is Project FIERCE which stands for Food Insecurity, Education, and Recharging Civic Engagement. Caitlyn is extremely dedicated to ending food insecurity on college campuses across the state of Alabama and is a founding member of the state's coalition focused on fighting student poverty. At UA, she served as the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in SGA, and as a member of Capstone Men and Women, the Blackburn Institute, and her sorority Chi Omega. She also served as president of The University of Alabama's only all-female honor society The XXXI which annually recognizes the top 31 female students and faculty who have positively contributed to the University. Caitlyn is one of the recipients of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award which is The University of Alabama's oldest of the six Premier Awards first awarded to UA students in 1928. This award recognizes one man and one woman of the academic year's graduating class for excellence of character and service to humanity and is considered to be the highest award that an undergraduate student can receive. Caitlyn now works full-time in Sales and Marketing for WarnerMedia in their sports division in New York City.

# UA RECOGNIZED BLACKBURN STAFF FOR *Exemplary*

*By Kathryn Drago, Coordinator of Alumni Programs*

Blackburn Institute staff are proud to report that our ability to serve our community and state thrived during 2020, despite the unprecedented and unrelenting challenges of the year. For our exemplary customer service with diverse students, Fellows, Advisory Board members, Blackburn Society members, University departments, community partners, and other stakeholders, The University of Alabama's Department of Human Resources awarded us The Sam S. May Commitment to Service Award. This Capstone Award honors the legacy of an individual who worked for the University as a Custodian in the Chemistry Department from 1911 to 1941. In presenting the accolade at the virtual 2020 Fall Campus Assembly, Executive Vice President and Provost Dr. James T. Dalton described Mr. May as "a remarkable staff member...who in addition to his regular duties volunteered many hours of his own time to tutor generations of students." The Sam S. May Award recognizes a department, team, or center that provides exceptional service through commitment, innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement. In 2020, The Blackburn Institute was the only Division of Student Life department honored with this award. Our nomination materials illustrated how we, in the face of persistent understaffing, the COVID-19 pandemic, and racial turmoil, have done "an impeccable job in creating an environment where students and alumni feel valued and well-equipped for civic engagement." Our letter of recommendation cited innovative use of technology to build and strengthen relationships such as launching the networking platform Blackburn Connect, hosting our first virtual Annual Symposium, increasing our social media presence, redesigning the Fellows and dormant Advisory Board newsletters, and hosting 13 virtual Summer Networking Events reaching Blackburn members worldwide. Additionally, our targeted outreach and recruitment efforts yielded increased Fellow and Advisory Board involvement, the most prospective Blackburn student nominations, and a new student class whose diversity exceeds that of the University.

We couldn't have won this award without numerous community members writing generous letters in support of our nomination. The staff were touched by the ways in which these letter-writers describe how our actions, small and large, have made a difference in the lives of Alabamians. We hope you also enjoy reading these excerpts.





## Customer Service

"I was delighted that director Jerran Hill was determined to hold the symposium via technology since we were unable to host in person. And while COVID prevented the group from gathering, the symposium program was second to none."

— **Dr. Kathleen Cramer (Blackburn Society member)**

"They have been nimble and innovative in creating new platforms and opportunities for everyone to engage in the work of the Institute, with an emphasis on race and social justice issues."

— **Mr. Gordon Martin (Blackburn Advisory Board Chairman)**

"...with such a large and diverse community, it is by no means a small feat when I state that Blackburn staff do a stellar job at consistently and continuously providing services that benefit so many Fellows and are the reason why so many Fellows remain engaged despite their graduation from The University."

— **Ms. Akiesha Anderson (Blackburn FIN Chairperson)**

"Each year has been a reminder of how well the Blackburn staff serves our community, facilitates lifelong learning, and endears a deep commitment to the wellness and future of this state."

— **Mr. Dana Sweeney (Blackburn Fellow)**

"To see this creative outlet the Institute used to ensure all students and Fellows were able to not only learn, but also connect with each other, during a pandemic with a significant social injustice movement occurring speaks volumes on the ambition and creativity all staff members of the Blackburn Institute possessed during these trying times."

— **Mr. Eric Harrison (Blackburn student Class of 2020)**

"Darcel Green, the person on the other end of the telephone assisted me with logging in, patiently walked me through how to move around on the new platform and assured me that they were there if I had any other questions."

— **Dr. G. Christine Taylor (UA Vice President/Associate Provost Diversity, Equity and Inclusion)**

"In addition to cultivating and mentoring emerging scholars, the Blackburn Institute has committed to hosting countless pioneering programs with transformative potential for our campus and extended community."

— **Dr. Elle Shaaban-Magaña and Dr. Jackie Northrop (Executive Director and Assistant Director of the UA Women and Gender Resource Center, respectively)**



"Thanks to the Blackburn staff's assistance, Judge Watkins' presentation, "Judge Frank Johnson's Role Upholding the Constitution" was a resounding success that complemented this year's Symposium theme, "Leadership in Times of Crisis.""

— **Mr. Thomas Rains (Executive Director of The Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. Institute)**

"...I am honored to state that we have been able to influence and collaborate with an audience that otherwise would have been unreachable if it were not for the exceptional commitment and innovative programs of the Blackburn Institute."

— **Ms. Erika P. Jones (Resource/Foster Care Supervisor at Tuscaloosa Department of Human Resources)**

It was truly an honor to be recognized by the University for expanding upon the Institute's legacy of service during a time of crisis. The Sam S. May award came with a gift, \$500 to be used for staff professional development. However, our motivation remains the promise of carrying out the Institute's mission: "to develop a network of diverse leaders who understand the challenges facing the state of Alabama and the nation and who are committed to serving as agents of positive change." The staff remain committed to changing the state through civic engagement and leadership development, and we look forward to building upon our accomplishments for years to come. 🌱



## SEPTEMBER

- Mark Martin's Build UP Birmingham was featured in the Alabama NewsCenter article "Build UP Birmingham changing families' lives one home at a time."
- Fellow Kendra Key and AB Member Mashonda Taylor were recognized by the Birmingham Business Journal in their article: Birmingham's New Power Players: 12 Emerging Influencers to Know.
- Samantha Rudelich moved to Washington, DC to begin pursuing her JD at Georgetown University Law Center.
- Martha Griffith began her role as Assistant Dean for Administration and Communications at The University of Alabama School of Law.
- Jilisa Milton graduated from the 2020 class of Emerge Alabama by completing the program preparing her to run for elected office.

## OCTOBER

- Trey Sullivan announced that he will be a part of the Teaching Assistant Program in France this year, teaching in Thonon-les-Bains.
- Dr. Creshema Murray discussed the Breonna Taylor case on the podcast Town Square aired on Houston Public Media.
- Jackson Bryant began a new job as a Cyber Risk Analyst at Deloitte in Huntsville.
- Amber Scales began a position with Fair Fight Action as their new Culture, Media, and Entertainment Fellow.
- Victor Luckerson announced the launch of a new non-profit to help student journalists at UA fully execute on their visions to change the culture of student media: Media Alumni Seeking to Highlight Equity and Diversity (MASTHEAD).

## NOVEMBER

- Katie Boyd Britt was elected to the Board of Trustees of Stillman College.
- Fellow and AB member Bradley Davidson and Mark Martin launched a new Scholarship Granting Organization that allows individuals and businesses to direct their

taxes to fund scholarships for students zoned for failing public schools.

- Marion McIntosh (Fellow and AB member) started The Electorate Political Talk Radio, and Prince Cleveland (Fellow and AB member) was a recent guest. It is available via Spotify.
- Teddy Phillips was recognized for his artwork and activism and partnered with MLB, Major League Soccer, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, and many more.
- Cameron Smith published an opinion piece, "Individual liberty without compelling moral vision leads us down a dangerous path," in AL.com. He also started the Triptych Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, which engages media, business, and public policy to lay the foundation for a better cultural trajectory.
- AB member John Covington published a book titled "Don't Do Anything Stupid; A White Man's Guide to Racial Harmony."
- Sarah Ann Hughes and John David Thompson both passed the Alabama bar.
- Aaron Brazelton announced he is back to Alabama in Huntsville to lead the Alabama School of Cybertechnology and Engineering's Enrollment Management and Admissions Program. (*see below*)



## DECEMBER

- Gina Rigby-House received a 2020 Top Lobbyists award from the National Institute for Lobbying & Ethics (NILE).

- Sarah Ann Hughes started a job at Legal Services of Alabama.
- Anne Matthews started a new job in Birmingham as a People Development Business Partner at Daxko.
- Cameron Smith had his opinion piece "You're a Republican. If Biden asked for your help, how would you answer?" published in AL.com.
- Amber Scales was quoted in the AL.com article "'A stunning moment' as women leaders in Alabama reflect on first female vice president."
- Dr. Creshema Murray was interviewed by radio station KHOU "on the significance of VP-elect Kamala Harris."
- Stephen Grover started a new job with Protective Life as an Innovation Analyst.
- Samarria Munnerlyn Dunson was sworn-in as a Montgomery municipal judge.
- Ryan Truitt began a new position at Proctor and Gamble as Senior Product Manager.
- Peter Inge was promoted to Executive Vice President of Finance at NXTsoft.
- John Hammontree interviewed Whitney Miller-Nichols and Kyle Buchanan about the future of the South on the his Reckon podcast.
- Victor Luckerson's article "The Defacement and Destruction of Black Lives Matter Murals" was published in The New Yorker.
- Rev. Dr. Robert Turner received the Oklahoma Conference of Churches' Community Service Award for his work feeding the Tulsa community and leading the charge for reparations for the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921.

## JANUARY

- January 11, 2021, Kimberly Goins began work as the new Academic Coordinator for the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative.
- Pedram Maleknia won the Culverhouse College of Business Class of 2020 Dr. Robert M. Morgan Outstanding Leadership Award "in recognition of the STEM or CREATE Path to the MBA student who best exemplifies outstanding character through the virtues of leadership."
- Super Lawyers selected attorney Vincent J. Graffeo to the Mid-South 2020 Super Lawyers

list for business litigation, an honor reserved for those lawyers who exhibit excellence in practice.

- Advisory Board member Gordon Martin's United Way of Central Alabama's (UWCA) Tocqueville Society ranked number one in 2020 for most funds raised out of all United Ways across the nation, beating out large cities like Houston and Chicago.
- Jilisa Milton was elected as the Vice-President of the National Lawyers Guild.
- David Simpson's research into the Alabama prison system showed that despite decreasing population incarcerated individuals faced increasing rates of homicide and violence.
- Amber Scales discussed the Georgia Senate runoff election, the future of the South, and how Black women continue to build movements that shape America with Reckon South.
- Lindsey Smith created an endowment fund for UA's Chair of Gender and Race Studies, Dr. Utz McKnight, to use in supporting his students.
- Cameron Smith wrote the opinion article "Reclaiming a republic in doubt" in AL.com about his perspective on the Capitol siege.
- John Hammontree co-wrote the article "Capitol riot: The 48 hours that echoed generations of Southern conflict" for Reckon South.

## FEBRUARY

- Eddie Koen, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio, was interviewed about how they've been able to actively work with police and the community to help address police reform and excessive force.
- Camille Carr announced that she will be teaching Math to students at her alma mater, Heritage High School in Wake Forest, for the semester. Her new dates for her Fulbright grant are August 2021-May 2022.
- Holly Caraway McCorkle, Executive Director, Alabama Council for Behavioral Healthcare, was named as one of the 25 "2020 Women Who Shape the State."
- Ally Williams started a new position as a Recruiter at Insight Global in Huntsville. She also encourages anyone on the Huntsville

area job market to reach out to her.

- Alicia Lewis became the head of Kelley Kronenberg's new land use and zoning practice group in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She will concentrate her practice on assisting her clients with environmental, land use, municipal, procurement and zoning laws.
- Jay Cunningham testified in support of Senate Bill 5116 to establish "Accountability and Transparency Standards for Automated Decision Making Systems" before the Washington State Senate. This legislation would establish guidelines for government procurement and use of automated decision systems in order to protect consumers, improve transparency, and create more market predictability.
- Shawn McGee started a new job as a product manager at Podchaser, a podcasting database in Birmingham, AL.
- Will Sorrell began working as Investment Solutions Manager at OneAscent Financial, working to curate and communicate investment products that align with their clients' values.
- Jilisa Milton passed her Masters Association of Social Work Boards Examination.

## MARCH

- Chris Lancaster moved from Chicago to Nashville to begin a new position as the Vice President, Treasury Management Officer at JPMorgan Chase & Co.



- Joe Hawley and his wife Meghan welcomed their second son, Jackson Olijah Christian Hawley on December 24th, 2020. They are thankful for all the support they received and look forward to starting their life in Northport, AL. (*see on left*)
- Caroline Smith Dean was awarded a Fulbright in December and will be teaching English at an elementary school in Ourense, Galicia, Spain until mid-June. She will be continuing at UA Law in the fall.
- Joan Smith was promoted to Group Vice President at PeopleTec. In her new role she will be leading her own group guiding efforts and increasing the company's presence in aviation programs.
- Andrew Nix began a new position at Regions Bank as chief governance officer on March 17.
- Sophia Warner was accepted at the Fletcher School at Tufts to begin a Masters program this fall in Law and Diplomacy.
- Jackson Bryant started a new position as Associate Software Engineer at Deloitte in Huntsville.
- Joe Ballard started a new position as Public Affairs Associate at KPM Group DC.
- James Kemp and his father were featured in the Birmingham Times as software platform innovators at their business KMS.
- Teddy Phillips shared in Popsugar what brings him joy as a Black artist.
- Dr. Creshema Murray spoke with KHOU-11 about how Black History Month 2021 might be different.
- Dr. Scott Batey received \$2.97 million for a program aimed at improving access to treatment for those with HIV.
- AB member Julia Smeds Roth was inducted into the Alabama Law Hall of Honor.

## APRIL

- Meredith Riley Stewart was interviewed on WFSA about the Shaping our State films that were created through an ongoing Fellows DCS project and are being shown at a Women in Training event to encourage young women to get involved and run for government positions.
- Advisory Board member Brad Newman was named the new President of Shelton State



Community College.

- Amitabh Shah has impacted close to 700,000 less-privileged children across 1,800 government schools in India through his not-for-profit Yuva Unstoppable (video).
- Alicia Lewis was interviewed by Bloomberg Law about "affordable housing, how she changed a community's mind about a new development, and the importance for new lawyers to master the material related to their practice area."



- Advisory Board member Dr. Henna Budhwani was recently named a Visiting Professor at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS). She will be spending 6-weeks a year for the next three summers on the UCSF campus learning novel methods to address the HIV epidemic through biobehavioral prevention techniques, advanced study design, and scientific intervention development and efficacy testing. *(see above)*
- Mark Martin's BuildUP gained national attention in the CNN article "This Alabama school wants to turn its students into future homeowners." BuildUp was also featured in a Fast Company article announcing plans to start a "second school in another neighborhood in Birmingham, and then one in Cleveland." Finally, Mark was also recognized by the Birmingham Business Journal as part of Who's Who in Nonprofits 2021.

- Advisory Board member and Fellow Robert Harris, Director of Diversity & Inclusion and Director of Lending, BancorpSouth Bank, co-panneled the webinar "Creating an Anti-Racist Culture in Your Organization."
- Victor Luckerson is now posting his "images of black Oklahoma history along with excerpts from [his] ongoing dig through the archives" on Instagram at @runitbackarchive.
- Kristin Schneider-Muñoz published her company's first 2021 volume of Women's Enterprise Magazine (WE USA) about women in leadership and business.
- Cameron Smith was a panelist on AL.com's first Facebook townhall discussing what's happening in the state legislature.
- Ibukun Afon, representing UAB's School of Health Professions, Health Services Administration discipline, was named an 2021 Alabama Schweitzer Fellow.
- Jay Cunningham was awarded a 2021 National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship (GRFP).
- Creshema Murray was chosen by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to be 1 of 32 exemplary, senior-level higher education professionals in the Millennium Leadership Initiative 2021 class.
- Dana Sweeney made a fun video that went viral on TikTok.
- FIN Chairperson Akiesha Anderson was selected for the Spring 2021 Emerge cohort, an organization which provides candidate training for progressive women.
- Cameron and Kristen Harris (nee Chambliss) welcomed Ava Presley Harris on February 25, 2021. Ava is in perfect health and adored by her mom and dad!

## MAY

- Meghan Stringer started a new position as the Senior Policy Advisor, Product and Commercial Policy at America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP).
- Jessica Tolbert graduated from the University of Alabama Birmingham with a Masters of Science in Management Information Systems.
- Mollie Wade announced that she will be a Summer Legal Intern at New Orleans

Independent Police Monitor.

- Matthew Kiszla was selected by the Alabama Department of Public Health, with funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Public Health Training Center, to streamline Alabama's collection of data regarding HIV prevention and care.
- Alex Flachsbart's Opportunity Alabama announced a \$13 million OPAL Fund to invest in real estate projects and engage minority and woman-owned business ventures in development and management.
- Terrance Lewis announced that he will begin a PhD program in Social Science Education this summer at Auburn University.
- Abby Horton successfully completed her dissertation defense on Friday, April 30 and will graduate in August 2021. The title of her research project is "Analyzing the Mental Health and Resilience of Undergraduate Nursing Students During the COVID-19 Outbreak."
- Advisory Board member and Fellow Danielle Blevins's non-profit was profiled in the Reckon South article Mission Reconcile helps Southern churches dismantle racism through food, fellowship.
- In the Spring 2021 Alabama Alumni Magazine, the following Blackburn members were mentioned:
  - Meg McCrummen Fowler for her service on the SGA in 2011 during the deadly tornado (p 35)
  - Virginia McKibbens for being promoted to shareholder at Maynard Cooper (p 59)

## JUNE

- Fellow and Advisory Board member Rev. Dr. Robert Turner was featured in the CNN documentary Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street and along with other faith and political leaders dedicated the Prayer Wall for Racial Healing at his church Vernon AME Church during the centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.
- Victor Luckerson was a panelist at the NMAAHC program Historically Speaking: In Remembrance Of Greenwood and published

The New Yorker article The Women Who Preserved the Story of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

- Katie Boyd Britt filed a statement saying she's running for Richard Shelby's U.S. Senate seat.

(see right)

- Caroline Shook married Riley McDaniel in Birmingham, Alabama on May 22, 2021.

(see below)



- Marquis Hollingsworth was named Teacher of the Year at J.H. Phillips Academy School in Birmingham.
- Tracie Ransom was the Signature Trainer for The Ohio State University's 26th National Conference on Diversity, Race and Learning. This academic year, she also joined the John Glenn College of Public Affairs family by teaching a strategic inclusive leadership course and presenting to 900+ student athletes for their first ever Athlete Civic Engagement Conference.
- Jenna Bedsole was nominated for two Southeast EMMY Awards for her documentaries "Women's Suffrage in Alabama" and "Deep South Science: Frances Grace and Southern Research."
- Kendra Key joined Citi as their Senior Vice President, Community Development Group Manager. In this position, she will oversee Citi's initiative to strengthen and support Minority Depository Institutions (MDIs), a part of their initiative to address the racial

wealth gap in the U.S.

- Paul Strickland finished his term as Chief Resident at JPS Health in Fort Worth, Texas, and he'll be staying for an additional year with the Maternal-Child Health track.
- Faythe van Pelt is celebrating becoming the Director of Event Management at JW Marriott Nashville after 13 months of furlough/job loss due to her industry being hit hard by the pandemic.
- Abba Mellon started a new position with Central Casting.
- Rebecca Griesbach started as a full time reporter with the Alabama Education Lab through a Report for America fellowship. If you have any connections to individuals who know about the educational opportunity gap in Alabama, please email her at rgriesbach@al.com or call at (205) 247-6434.
- Phillips Thomas Hornbuckle announced that she will be starting a new position as Director of the Center for Student Diversity at Towson University.
- Deidra Diaz accepted a position with the University of Alabama as the Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations.
- Antonio Saunders invites you to listen to his podcast "The Promised Land." It is described as: "Our podcasts tell the riveting, previously untold narratives of those working on the periphery of society building the world as it should be."
- Aaron Brazelton was accepted into The University of Alabama's College of Education "40 Under 40" program.
- Teddy Phillips announced his partnership with (RED) for the Collab (Red) Collection. He pitched a new word "Unbothe(Red)" to promote giving zero cares about outside opinions and celebrating individuality.
- Advisory Board member Milton Davis was selected as Chairman of Alabama Community College System Board of Trustees.
- Jay Cunningham was named to the University of Washington's Husky 100, an honor given to just 100 students across all UW's degree programs and 3 campuses



annually to students making a difference on campus, in their communities, and for the future through their passion, leadership, and commitment.

- Ryan Flamerich graduated with his MBA from Harvard Business School, and successfully orchestrated graduation events for the 2021 class.
- Three Fellows were recognized at the UA Council on Community Based Partnerships' 15th Annual Excellence in Community Engagement Awards:
  - Payti Harrison for developing a High School STEM Innovation Course in which UA STEM/MBA students work with high school students to identify an issue in the community, to develop a solution for that issue, and deliver a pitch on the idea to a panel of judges.
  - Ibukun Afon for running Leave it to Us a non-profit that offered fee-free grocery shopping and contact-free delivery of groceries and medication to senior citizens, allowing them to remain in the safety of their homes during the pandemic.
  - Samuel Reece for his expanding the offerings of with Vote Everywhere UA including an Alabama Voting Summit, Get Out the Vote Collaborative, voter registration drive, voter education, and a Get Out the Vote Celebration Station.
- Camille Carr won a 2020-2021 Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship Award and is expected to finally be able to travel along with this year's cohort to Colombia.

# 2020-2021 ANNUAL GIVING CIRCLES

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# NEW STAFF INTRODUCTIONS

In 2021, the Blackburn Institute announced the hiring of Maria Espinoza as Program Assistant and Cokie Thompson as Assistant Director. Additionally, the interim tag was removed from Director, Jerran Hill on April 1, 2021. Finally, Kathryn Drago transitioned from part-time to full-time Coordinator of Alumni Programs over the summer. We are excited to have a full staff back in the office as we return to a full programming schedule of in person events. Get to know our new hires below.



## COKIE THOMPSON

In August, Ms. Cokie Thompson returned to The University of Alabama after two years as Coordinator for Leadership & Service at Louisiana State University. A native of Memphis, she attended UA where she earned a B.A. in Journalism and an M.A. in Higher Education Administration. Cokie is a Blackburn Fellow (2018 Class) and an active member of the American College Personnel Association where she currently serves as the Vice Chair for Research and Assessment for the Commission for Student Involvement.

At LSU, Cokie designed, implemented, and assessed leadership development programs for undergraduate and graduate students, including Tiger Year One and Leadership LSU. For the LSU Food Pantry, she developed an online ordering system in the spring of 2020 and helped plan the inaugural University Food Pantry Summit in March 2021. Cokie facilitated Welcoming Diversity and Controversial Issues workshops for students, faculty, and staff as a member of the National Coalition Building Institute team.

Previously at UA, Cokie worked for Housing & Residential Communities as a Community Director in Blount and Ridgecrest East and West. As a graduate intern with the Center for Service and Leadership, she contributed to the Multicultural Leadership Summit, Bama Year One, and Beyond Bama. As an undergraduate student, she developed mentoring curriculum for Honors Year One in the Honors College and served as a Jean O'Connor Snyder Intern with Jasper Main Street through the David Matthews Center for Civic Life and the Walker Area Community Foundation.



## MARIA ESPINOZA

Ms. Maria Espinoza graduated from the University of Alabama at Birmingham with a B.A. in History and comes to the Blackburn Institute from Automation Personnel Services where she was their Bilingual Talent Coordinator. In addition, she has experience in event planning and hotel management. She started working for the institute on March 29, 2021 and since then has helped with the 2021 Spring Networking dinner, Blackburn EATs, End of the Semester Student Social, Assistant Director search, and many New Student Curriculum events. She has enjoyed meeting students, Advisory Board members, Fellows, and many other members of the Blackburn community and UA staff.



## SAVE *the* DATE

**AUGUST 2** New Student Nominations Open

**AUGUST 27-28** Annual Symposium and Fall Advisory Board Meeting

**SEPTEMBER 2,8,14,20** Small Group Values Discussions  
*Facilitating a Diversity of Opinion*

**OCTOBER 7,13,19,25** Small Group Values Discussions  
*Networking Through the Generations*

**OCTOBER 27-30** Burt Jones Rural Community Experience  
*Northwest Alabama*

**NOVEMBER 4, 9,10, 16** Small Group Values Discussions  
*Being Called to Action*

**NOVEMBER 15** New Student Interest Session

**NOVEMBER 19** Daniel Community Scholars Poster Presentations and Reception

**JANUARY 19** New Student Interest Session and New Student Nominations Close

**JANUARY 20-21** Protective Life Government Experience  
*Montgomery, AL*

**FEBRUARY 3, 9, 15, 21** Small Group Values Discussions  
*Instilling a Lifetime Commitment*

**FEBRUARY 15-17** New Student Group Interviews

**FEBRUARY 24-26** New Student Individual Interviews

**FEBRUARY 28** New Student Class Announcement

**MARCH 6** New and Returning Student Reception

**MARCH 25-26** D. Ray Pate New Student Retreat

**APRIL 11** Spring Networking Dinner and Spring Advisory Board Meeting

**JUNE & JULY** Summer Networking Events



# LOOKING FORWARD *giving back*

Throughout the history of the Institute, taking thoughtful and strategic action has been at the core of our work. The curriculum incorporates learning outcomes associated with facilitating students' personal development, enhancing their organizational capacity, and expanding their cultural and historical understanding of Alabama. Through immersive learning opportunities, travel experiences, and a collective civic engagement project, students hone their abilities to engage in civil discourse, collaborate as a team, demonstrate empathy toward others, and exercise ethical leadership. Upon graduation, they leave The University of Alabama as Fellows prepared to advocate for positive, systemic change and work for the betterment of our state and nation.

Whether adding to an existing endowed fund, creating a fund to support new programs, or providing general support to the Institute, donors can help shape the experience of Blackburn community members for years to come. Make your one-time or recurring contribution today at: [blackburn.ua.edu/giving](https://blackburn.ua.edu/giving)



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