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NSF AWARDS TWO FACULTY MEMBERS FOR STEM ADVANCEMENT IDEAS

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A YEAR OF NUMBER 1S AT WESTERN

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WMU PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH PAVES THE WAY TO IMPROVING PEDESTRIAN SAFETY NATIONWIDE

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ON THE FRONTLINES OF COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING NATIONWIDE

LEARN MORE

GEOGRAPHY PROFESSOR RECOGNIZED FOR WATERSHED HYDROLOGY WORK

LEARN MORE
Bringing social issues to light

Contact: Kathleen Refior

Passion. Stories. Film. These are the words to describe film studies student Tirrea Billings. Completing her undergrad at Western Michigan University in film, video, and media studies, Billings returned to the University to complete her master's in communications where she will graduate this spring 2020.

“WMU is really where I discovered who I am, who I want to be and my purpose,” says Billings.

As an undergrad at WMU, Billings developed her skills, learning that film and media can be utilized in ways more than for pure entertainment.

“My time as an undergraduate student at WMU is where I really developed my passion for film and storytelling,” says Billings.

Through her mentorships with Dr. Jennifer Machiorlatti and Kelly Wittenberg, professors in the School of Communication, she pushed the envelope on what it means to tell a story.
“Their mentorship really pushed me to create films,” says Billings. “They both have motivated me to not only be an artist, but to use my art and passion for social justice-oriented media in a way that can shape policy and culture by aiming to create better messages and engaging stories that can shift public opinion, help build a participatory (political) culture, advocate for civic and social action, and transform the public.”

After earning her undergraduate degree, it was hard to find a job in her field. Billings began freelancing, picking up gigs where she could. Eventually clienteles starting coming in more regularly, leading to the development of her company. With the help of her partner, Monte Jones, they created what was first For The Culture Films, eventually changing to Reflct Media Group this past year.

PUTTING PASSION TO WORK

“Reflct Media is a docu-style storytelling company that highlights personal narratives, social issues and underrepresented voices in marginalized communities,” says Billings. “We aim to tell compelling stories that inspire our audience to think deeply about issues and experiences that impact the lives of human beings.”

Her partner, Jones, manages the back-end, focusing on contracts, website management, invoicing and music composition. Billings handles the creative work, preproduction, filming, editing, and so forth. Emma France, a film, video, and media studies major at WMU, works as their production assistant.

Through her company, Billings has created two documentary films, “Painting Dreams: The Story of Johnson Simon” and “Toward a Futureland.”

“We believe that all people through all walks of life deserve a platform to tell their story, and we work to ensure that humans who have been marginalized and silenced are heard,” says Billings.

The films follow the lives of individuals not confined to the stereotypical average person. By combining documentary-style storytelling with a social justice framework, Billings and her team work to make the stories, experiences and truth come to live.
“Over the course of my film journey, I have been able to combine my interest in storytelling with social justice by telling stories and advocating for change in areas such as food insecurity, accessibility for people who are disabled, racial justice, and body awareness/healing, child/maternity health, and more,” says Billings.

**CREATING AN IMPACTFUL STORY**

“I never really go into a project with a strictly set plan,” says Billings. “I have directional ideas and question prompts, but overall, I usually let the story tell itself and edit together pieces based on what I got from interviews.”

The stories Billings tell are difficult, stemming from complex issues that people are going through.

Reflecting on one of her call-to-action videos about the Bronson Park Freedom Encampment, Billings switched to her listening side, hearing every word the Kalamazoo residents had to say. Approaching the storytelling in an authenticate way, her video told the story of homeless pregnant women, children, infants, people with disabilities, seniors and veterans with no place to go.

“It was heartbreaking hearing their stories. Yet, it was necessary to tell in order to spread awareness of the issue.”

People watched. People listened. People acted.

“It’s never about me and my perspective. It’s about the people and their lived experiences,” Billings says. “I’m just the filmmaker that puts it all together.”
LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

After finishing her master’s, Billings plans on focusing on herself and her company.

“I plan on taking a gap year to focus on the direction I want to take my company, applying to film fellowships that have an emphasis on social justice storytelling, and continuing to work at the Kalamazoo College Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership as the communications manager,” says Billings.

Not straying away from academia, she plans on applying for doctoral programs in communication with a concentration in media and culture. Applying her academics and work experience, her end goal is to be a creative or executive director of a documentary production company while continuing her work through Reflct Media and teaching communications at a college level. Creating a culture of storytelling and social justice, Billing hopes to keep impacting individuals for years to come.

“Go confidently in the direction of [your] dreams, be passion-driven and stay the course even when things become challenging,” says Billings.
A National Science Foundation panel awarded two WMU professors for their big ideas that aimed to shape the future of science, technology, engineering and math research nationwide.

Dr. Todd Ellis, assistant professor of geography and science education, and Dr. Bilinda Straight, professor of anthropology and women's studies, each received $1,000 cash prizes for their entries in the NSF Idea Machine 2026 competition. Their ideas were among 12 selected for advancement to a Blue Ribbon panel— pared down from 800 submitted by institutions across the country, including Harvard, Columbia and Duke. They were not, however, selected for grand prize consideration.
“We’re extremely proud of the innovative next level ideas of our faculty members developed to help shape the future of STEM,” says Dr. Terri Goss Kinzy, vice president for research and innovation. “It’s a huge accomplishment for WMU to receive two of the 12 Blue Ribbon panel slots and see the world-class work our researchers are doing being recognized on a national stage.”

Ellis’s idea, The STEM Teaching and Learning Incubator, focused on empowering K-12 educators to develop new approaches to teaching and learning STEM disciplines by providing a regional hub for instructors that offers support for design, implementation, evaluation and dissemination of their ideas. He also won the top award in the internal Bronco Big Idea competition.

Straight’s idea, Reversibility: Future of Life on Earth, asked how the reversibility, irreversibility and tipping points of different types of systems are determined and how this could potentially impact the future of life on earth. Addressing this question requires novel ways to examine interconnections between systems that may include human experience and motivation.

2019: A year of No. 1s at Western

Contact: Erin Flynn
December 20, 2019

Nearly 1,700 Broncos earned degrees at WMU’s fall commencement ceremonies.

Check out WMU’s top news of 2019.

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Hidden gem. Innovation leader. WMU is garnering national accolades for its programs propelling students to success. Whether it's the University's commitment to
student experiences, dedication to sustainability or emphasis on embracing diversity, Broncos earned high praise in 2019.

"What makes Western Michigan University special is the learning outcomes for all of its students," says the College Gazette, which gave WMU top billing on its list of Best Hidden Gem Public Universities.

Washington Monthly also highlighted WMU as the best public university in Michigan for graduate success based on 10 years of earnings following enrollment. The University ranked No. 1 in graduate earnings and No. 2 in graduation rates as measured among students across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine applauded WMU's commitment to embracing diversity and inclusion, highlighting the MLK Academy in naming the University a Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award recipient.

The University's commitment to enhancing and highlighting student experiences is getting noticed. WMU Signature recently received the Innovative Program award at the NASPA Region IV-East annual conference. Students who complete WMU Signature receive a co-curricular designation on their diplomas signifying one of nine pathways they can choose to focus on. WMU is the only university in the nation offering the high-level student endorsement.

For the second time in the award program's 15-year existence, a Bronco has won the prestigious Wuerffel Trophy. Quarterback Jon Wassink, who is pursuing a master's degree in accounting, rose to the top of all football players across the country for his service to the community and excellence both on and off the field. He was also a finalist for the William V. Campbell Trophy, considered the "Academic Heisman" by many, for his outstanding performance in the classroom.

The College of Aviation soars high above the competition, consistently ranked among the top programs in the world. This year, the National Air Transportation Association recognized the
college with its Industry Excellence Award for excellence in pilot training. It's the first time a four-year institution has been selected for the honor since the award's inception in 1987.

Eddie Codrington plays saxophone during a show.

WMU’s renowned jazz studies program hit some high notes this year. Graduate student Eddie Codrington received the 2019 Herb Alpert Young Jazz Composer Award, which recognizes the most promising jazz artists in the country under the age of 30. Andrew Rathbun, associate professor of saxophone and jazz studies and Codrington’s mentor, earned international recognition this year, as well. His album, "Atwood Suites," was nominated for a JUNO Award for best jazz album.

The Haworth College of Business continues to impress industry leaders, ranked a top sales program by the Sales Education Foundation for several years running. On a program level, sales and business marketing has garnered a top ranking from Study.com this year and every year since 2007. The integrated supply management program also cracked the top 10 of Gartner’s list of Top U.S. Supply Chain Undergraduate Programs for a fourth consecutive year.

A study published in the Journal of the Association for Communication Administration ranks WMU’s School of Communication the top master's degree granting program of its kind in Michigan based on faculty research and productivity.

A number of other accolades and initiatives of note are detailed in the University's top stories of 2019.

For more WMU news, arts and events, visit WMU News online.
WMU professor's research paves the way to improving pedestrian safety nationwide

Contact: Erin Flynn
January 6, 2020

It’s not why the chicken crossed the road, but how drivers behaved when it did, that interests Dr. Ron Van Houten. The Western Michigan University professor's pedestrian traffic safety research is garnering national attention—and saving lives in the process.

"Everybody knows speeding is wrong and hitting people is bad, but there are still a record number of pedestrian injuries and fatalities," says Van Houten, professor of psychology, whose research earned him an Outstanding Traffic Safety Achievement award from the Governor's Traffic Safety Advisory Commission in Michigan as well as the Institute of Transportation Engineers.
Much of the recognition Van Houten is receiving is for his work developing the gateway treatment—placing signs on the edge of the road near crosswalks that drivers have to travel between.

"It not only increases yielding, it reduces speed at crosswalks," says Van Houten. "We went from baseline at some sites of 3% to 80% of drivers yielding to pedestrians."

SAVING LIVES

His research, which has yielded remarkable results, includes a first-of-its-kind study years ago in Orange City, Florida, where a troubling number of children had been hit by cars going to and from school.

One major contributing factor, says Van Houten, was a lack of sidewalks. But he also noticed that hardly any drivers were actually following the posted speed limits. So, he suggested
enlisting police to strictly enforce the law when children were walking to and from school, along with an education campaign that highlighted the current crash statistics.

Some worried about pushback and public outcry, but Van Houten drove home the motivating factor of the enforcement: child safety. Turns out, he was right.

"Not one more kid was hit going to and from school in the next three years. That was the end of the speeding. That's what it takes to make a change. You've got to get people to believe first, because if they don't, they're going to fight it."

Word quickly spread, putting Van Houten and his students in high demand. He's since trained police on pedestrian operation enforcement across the country, from New Mexico to New York.

THREE 'E' FORMULA

Education, engineering and enforcement make up the recipe for success Van Houten has implemented time and time again. In fact, his gateway treatments increasing the yielding distance for drivers around crosswalks have driven such impressive results that the Federal Highway Administration is considering modifying standards in the Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices to reflect his findings.

That change could happen once Van Houten wraps up a yearlong study with the Florida Department of Transportation, analyzing gateways at 30 different sites across the state.

"We're doing this study to prove it's not just a regional effect," Van Houten says.

Jon Hochmuth, a doctoral student, has been helping Van Houten with the research.

"A lot of the reason the research has had such an impact is the difference in our methodology from sort of what people typically do," says Hochmuth. "It's much more detailed and targeted. We put these signs in the road and you watch behavior change right away. It's crazy. And that's not something that you see in a lot of research; it usually takes a lot of time."

The research also seems to have lasting results. Four years after a study in Florida, yielding continued to increase even though no more signs were added near crosswalks around the city.

"In a sense, what's changed is culture," says Hochmuth. "When you make a certain thing the most common behavior, even people who never experienced the treatment or intervention are going to learn from what's being modeled."
Van Houten and his student researchers have also worked extensively with rectangular rapid flashing beacon—RRFB—technology, which involves placing a flashing light at crosswalks. It's a treatment that has become popular across the country.

"They reduce crashes by half," says Van Houten. "One of my graduate students—Jim Shurbutt—who led that study under my direction was hired by the Federal Highway Administration."

Hochmuth also helped Van Houten with a project in Grand Rapids involving the enforcement of a five-foot passing law for bicycles.

"Ron is doing work that produces real change in communities which, if I could only do one thing, is what I want to do: help people. And on the biggest possible scale I can."
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: FROM WALDO LIBRARY TO THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“From managing the production of billion-dollar budgets to assisting visitors to Capitol Hill, my WMU public administration degrees have provided a solid foundation for a lifetime of public service.”

Mark Schermerhorn (B.S.'74; M.P.A.'77) knew early on that he wanted to work in the public sector, and after enjoying a long and wonderful career in municipal and state governments, he continues his public service as a volunteer for the largest library in the world.

After completing his undergraduate degree in public administration, Mark was encouraged by Dr. Leo Stine, who served as a political science professor and graduate college administrator and assistant dean, to further his education as one of the first students in WMU’s Master of Public Administration program.

“Dr. Stine was a big influence, even just in terms of human decency,” Mark recalled. “I was in an environment that recognized the tremendous value of public service.”

The Bay City native’s grand plan was to remain in Michigan, working in either Detroit or Grand Rapids, but as it would be, neither of those panned out, and Mark found himself moving to Maryland to take an entry level job with the City of Baltimore.
“Leaving Michigan was the most difficult decision, but I had to do it. Out of adversity comes new experiences that lead to personal and professional growth.”

And that turned out to be true, after working for the City of Baltimore for 20 years, and the Maryland Transit Administration until his retirement in 2009, Mark found himself in the federal volunteer sector.

In terms of volunteerism, Mark says what you do matters. Whether it’s a food bank or a V.A. Hospital, on the state or national level, volunteerism helps to provide a level of service above which an organization can provide within their budget. He says volunteers are not meant to replace paid employees, but to help enhance the quality of services provided to the public.

It began with a clinical trial at the National Institutes of Health. The experience was so moving for Mark that he decided to become a volunteer. For the next four years, he provided support to patients participating in medical research studies, largely helping them navigate the 360+ acre NIH Bethesda campus—which also happens to be the largest clinical research hospital in the world. Mark said it was all an incredible experience and he became friends with other volunteers, which led him to his next experience.

“I was having lunch with fellow NIH volunteers and one of their spouses was a docent for the Library of Congress,” Mark said. “As soon as she spoke the words, I knew I had to do it.”

After completing his training, Mark became one of 120 docents, serving as a Visitor Engagement Volunteer. In this role, Mark conducts congressional constituent, public, and VIP tours of the Thomas Jefferson Building. Aside from researching and writing the original tour covering the history, art, and architecture of the building, Mark welcomes and assists visitors and helps direct researchers, congressional staff, and special visitors to correct departments.

The library is home to millions of books, recordings, photographs, and newspapers, and is the research arm for the U.S. Congress and also houses the U.S. Copyright Office. Last year, the Library of Congress saw 1.9 million visitors from all over the world.

“The Library of Congress is a five-star attraction,” Mark explained. “It’s interesting because at the end of the day, we are not a theme park, we are a library!”

While tourism is huge to Washington D.C., Mark says the sheer number of visitors to the library indicates people still care very much about the preservation of our history, the advancement of civilization, the dissemination of knowledge throughout the world.

It all ties back to Mark’s time as a student at WMU, some 49 years ago, when he found refuge in a different library.

“I always loved Waldo.” Mark recalled. “It served me well for my entire WMU experience, and I will always have a special place in my heart for it and the incredible people who work there.”
Throughout the year, there are unexpected needs that arise all across campus. When these opportunities to elevate our University are presented, The Fund For Western helps to close the gap in funding. Whether it’s used for scholarships and financial aid, to cover the expenses for experiential learning and career readiness, or to upgrade buildings and technology, The Fund For Western can support anything on campus.

Your gift to The Fund For Western will not only help us close the gap, but it will elevate our campus and the student experience at WMU.

ELEVATE WITH A GIFT
WMU alumna's personal experience will drive national strategy to combat human trafficking

Contact: Erin Flynn
December 4, 2019

WASHINGTON, D.C.—A Western Michigan University alumna is on the frontlines of combatting human trafficking nationwide. President Donald Trump appointed Bella Hounakey to the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking.

"It's an honor to serve not just our country, but to also be part of a bigger system that is working on behalf of vulnerable populations," says Hounakey, a Seita Scholar who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from WMU.

An advocate for refugee and foster children at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, Hounakey knows firsthand the horrors of trafficking. She was just 9 years old when her dreams of a better life in the United States were shattered by a trusted relative.

A BETRAYAL OF TRUST

Hounakey grew up in the West African country of Togo, where becoming a lawyer was more a daydream than a realistic goal for a young girl.
"My biological parents knew the community in which I was being raised didn't have the resources to get where I wanted to be," remembers Hounakey.

But her aunt—a confidant who introduced her to the Christian faith and often had her over for visits—offered her hope.

"She understood that I wanted a better education," Hounakey says. "When she came by and said that she saw potential in me and she wanted me to come with her to the United States, my parents sent me without question."

So she traveled to her aunt's house, two hours from her hometown in Togo. She anxiously waited four months until it was time to travel to her new life in the United States. Along with seven other girls related to her aunt through marriage, she boarded a plane to New Jersey.

Her aunt had a house in Newark—a seven-bedroom estate in a prominent neighborhood, something Hounakey had only seen on TV before. But the fairy tale came to an abrupt halt when she walked through the doors.

"When we arrived, there were 22 girls in the house," says Hounakey, who recalls sleeping with up to ten girls in a room. "That's where the horror started. We were working about 18 hours a day. We were just working robots."

Hounakey's aunt owned a hair salon where the girls were held as slaves in plain sight, working all day long creating intricate braids for customers. Each girl was given a false identity; the aunt would wake the girls up in the middle of the night to learn a script.

"We were children, so in order to live in the false identity that (my aunt) had assigned us, we had to practice," Hounakey says. "So, if you came across me at the salon and would ask, 'You're so young, why are you working here and why are you not in school?' we would have answers for you. We literally worked so hard to live a false life."
FINDING HOPE

Hounakey spent several hours every day braiding hair in a salon for no pay.

While the salon was like a prison, the house the girls stayed in was no better.

"You would think it was the braiding that was making (my aunt) money, but it was actually sex trafficking that was making her money."

For five years, Hounakey lived a nightmare.

"Hope is the worst thing to lose, because at that point you are not sure if there's any gateway for you," she says. "I never thought I would get a second chance. I never thought that I would be in the situation I am today."

She often fantasized about her freedom.

"I used to do this lady's hair," recalls Hounakey. "I did her hair for two years at the salon. She came the same time every single month, and I would look at her and just wanted her to know that I was in pain. She never really asked me questions.

"I was so upset at her because every month when she came, I would say, 'This month she's going to know that something's wrong and take me with her.' But she didn't. I wanted her to be this savior, and I was so angry at her."

On an early morning in November 2007, though, that changed. Hounakey and the other girls woke up to police and FBI agents in their house, helicopters circling overhead. Finally—a light at the end of the tunnel.

Hounakey and the other survivors who were still minors were placed into the foster system in Michigan while the case against her captors worked its way through the court system. And it turns out, the woman she longed to save her played a key role in their rescue.
"She was actually working for the FBI and helping with the investigation," Hounakey says. "She told me in court, 'I wanted to take you every single time I came, but if I did, we wouldn't have saved everybody.'"

A NEW LIFE

Hounakey earned bachelor's degrees from WMU in criminal justice and Spanish in 2015.

At 14 years old, five years after watching the door slam shut on her dreams of a better life, Hounakey finally had hope.

"I was highly thankful for the people of Michigan, because for the first time there were people that helped me without condition," she says.

While she was free from the shackles of modern-day slavery, however, the trauma of five years of torture remained.

Because of behavioral issues, Hounakey was in and out of foster care homes and juvenile detention centers.

Eventually she found support at a home in Grand Rapids and also reconnected with her faith. Hounakey found her stride and graduated high school, earning acceptance to WMU as a Seita Scholar, which supports students who have lived some or all of their teenage years in foster care.
"When I came to college, I left a community where I had support in my foster home with my mother, Laura Carpenter, but I was entering another community on campus where we shared the same struggles," Hounakey says. "I needed continued support … with Western, there was a whole community."

Seita Scholars receive academic, career, financial and personal support throughout their time at WMU. Nationwide, fewer than 3% of foster youth graduate from a 4-year college. Since the launch of the program in 2008, graduation rates for Seita Scholars have far exceeded the national average.

"I had a choice between Western and University of Michigan, and I'm very proud to be a Bronco alumni. I wouldn't have gotten this far if I didn't go to Western because of the community that's there," says Hounakey, emphasizing the University's focus on inclusivity in education, especially for vulnerable student populations.

"WMU makes sure they have the tools, they have the support, and they have the community they need in order to thrive instead of survive."

Indeed, Hounakey thrived at WMU—in part because of the care of Mark Delorey, who helped create the Seita Scholars program and now serves as a Foundation Scholars advisor.

"Mark is my forever father. He welcomed us. He assisted me in going to Spain. He wanted to make sure that I didn't miss out on any opportunities," says Hounakey. "I now speak five languages. He wanted me to pursue all my dreams."
MISSION TO HELP

After earning bachelor's degrees in criminal justice and Spanish and a master's degree in social work, Hounakey is fulfilling that mission—advocating for the vulnerable and using her second chance to save lives.

Hounakey, center, with other Seita Scholars after commencement in 2015.

"I had a professor in graduate school who would tell us, 'Do you want to be complacent, get an office job and work until you die, or do you want to make a difference?' And that was very motivating for me. I remind myself every day to not be complacent. People are depending on me to make a change."

Hounakey's appointment to the advisory council will last two years. During that time, she will draw on her experience to evaluate policies of government agencies and help them develop strategies to create awareness, prevent and root out human trafficking, as well as provide services to survivors.

"I feel that there's a great deal of responsibility to do better and become better for (victims)," she says. "Somebody somewhere is isolated and is experiencing the same horror as I did. I'm hoping that they could use me as a source of hope."

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Distinguished professor named 2019 AAAS Fellow

Chansheng He

Contact: Kathleen Refior

The American Association for the Advancement of Sciences has named Dr. Chansheng He as a 2019 AAAS Fellow. He was elected as a Fellow honors member in October for his distinguished contributions to the field of watershed hydrology, particularly using models and spatial technology to study the dynamics of water and nonpoint source pollution.

“This is a wonderful and well-deserved recognition of Changsheng’s outstanding scholarship,” says Carla Koretsky, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

He, a professor in the Department of Geography, has been teaching at Western Michigan University since 1995. His teaching and research specializes in watershed hydrology, nonpoint source pollution modeling, ecosystem indicators, and geographic information systems and remote sensing applications. The hydrological models he developed with his collaborators have been successfully applied to over 40 North America’s Great Lakes watersheds, and watersheds in China and other countries.

He serves on a number of the editorial boards of international journals and has published over 100 articles and papers in leading national and international journals.
He was named a distinguished faculty scholar by WMU in 2015 and honored with the College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Achievement Award in Research and Creative Activity in 2007. He has earned numerous awards for his teaching and research, including the Fulbright Senior Specialist Awards for his teaching visits to Shanghai Jiao Tong University and The University of Bucharest, Romania.

"Think wisely, work diligently and achieve one goal at a time,” says He.

He earned a B.S. in agronomy from Northwestern Agricultural University, Yangling, Shaanxi, China, an M.S. in agricultural zoning and natural resources management from Northwestern Agricultural University and a Ph.D. in resource development from Michigan State University.

AAAS FELLOW HONORS

More than 400 members of the AAAS have earned lifetime distinction of AAAS Fellow, in honor of their invaluable contributions to science and technology. The newly elected Fellows represent sections, ranging from neuroscience and psychology to social, economic and political sciences. Beginning in 1874, thousands of scientists have been elected including Maria Mitchell, Margaret Mead and Thomas Edison.

He and other fellows will receive an official certificate and a gold-and-blue rosette pin at the AAAS’ annual meeting in Seattle, Washington, Feb. 12-16, 2020.