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College of Arts and Sciences

Western Michigan University

Paving the Way to Improving Pedestrian Safety Nationwide



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.

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Bridging Barriers: A Firsthand Look at Immigration Issues



Feet away and worlds apart, a small group of WMU students speaks to two young brothers through the bars of a tall, rust-covered fence separating El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. These students are getting an inside look at what some are calling the “border crisis,” examining the driving forces behind record numbers of migrants making credible fear claims, hoping to be granted asylum in the United States.

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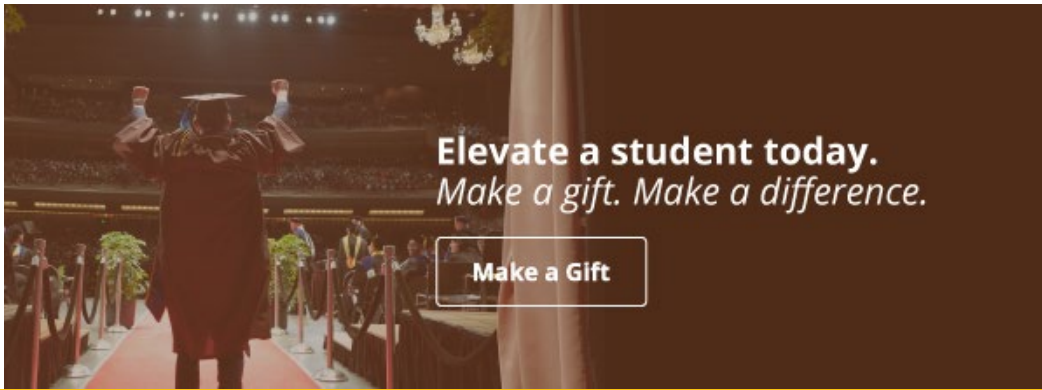
Giving Impact: Marla Miller Smith



In the 60s, Marla Miller Smith ('66) was a featured twirler who received more than 250 twirling awards, including the Indiana State Fair Championship, and after graduating from high school, she brought her talent to Western Michigan University. Decades later, The Marla Miller Smith Bronco Marching Band Endowment would become the first endowment at WMU to provide long-term funding for the band, while preserving Marla's legacy.

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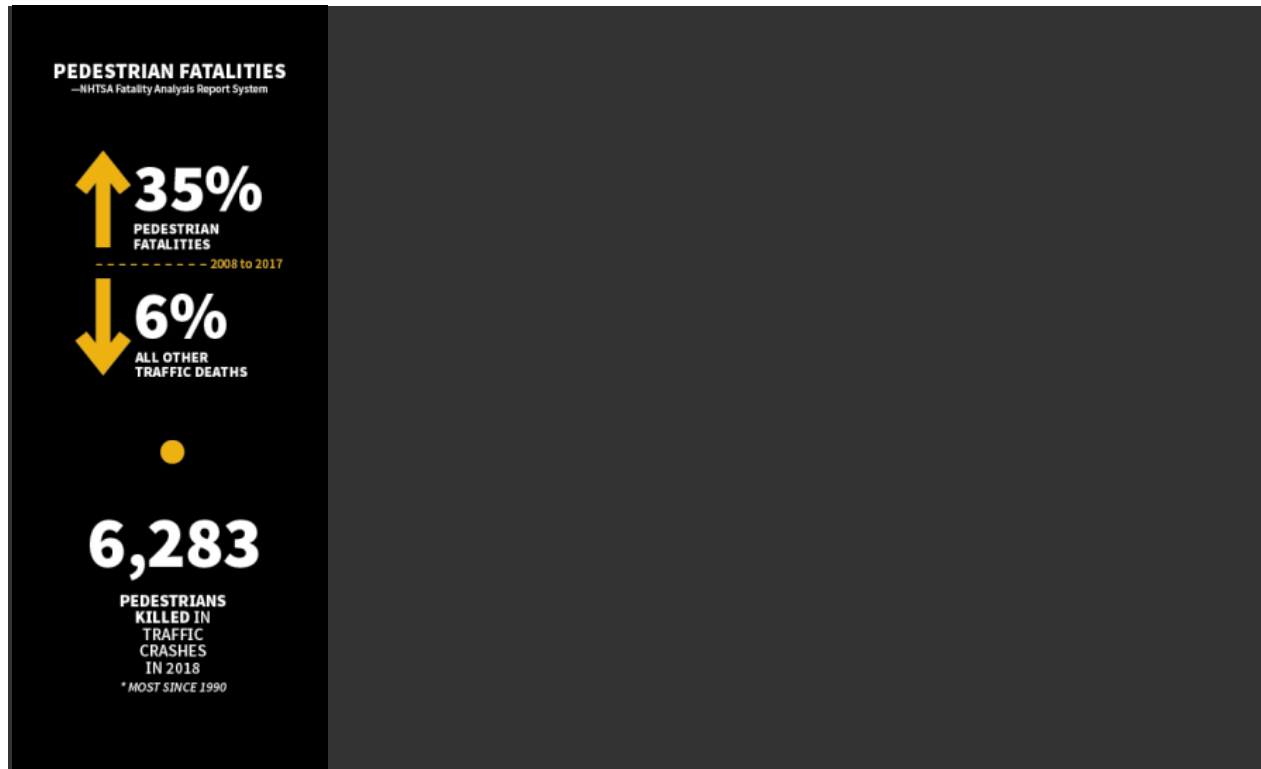
WMU professor's research paves the way to improving pedestrian safety nationwide

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."

OTHER RESEARCH



Van Houten has crossed many roads for his research, which spans decades.

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."

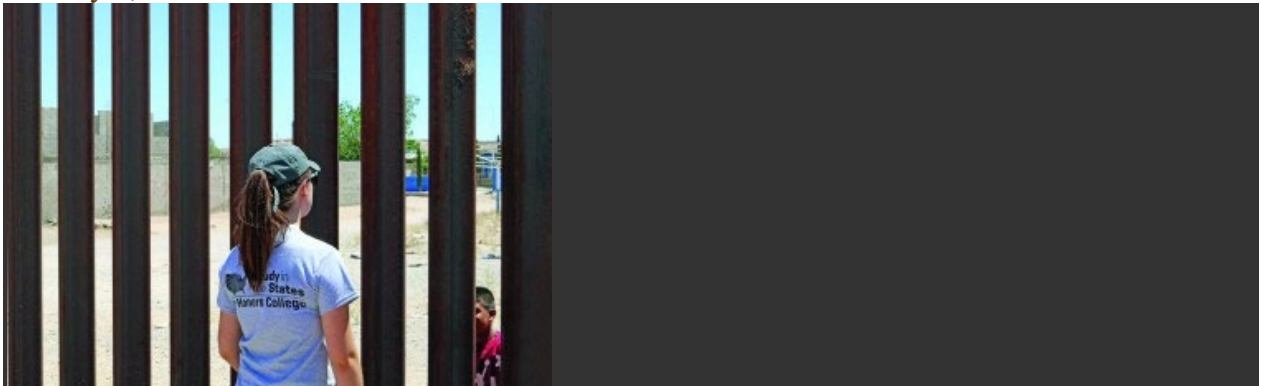
Hochmuth also helped Van Houten with a project in Grand Rapids involving the enforcement of a five-foot passing law for bicycles.

"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."

Bridging Barriers: A firsthand look at immigration issues

Contact: [Erin Flynn](#)

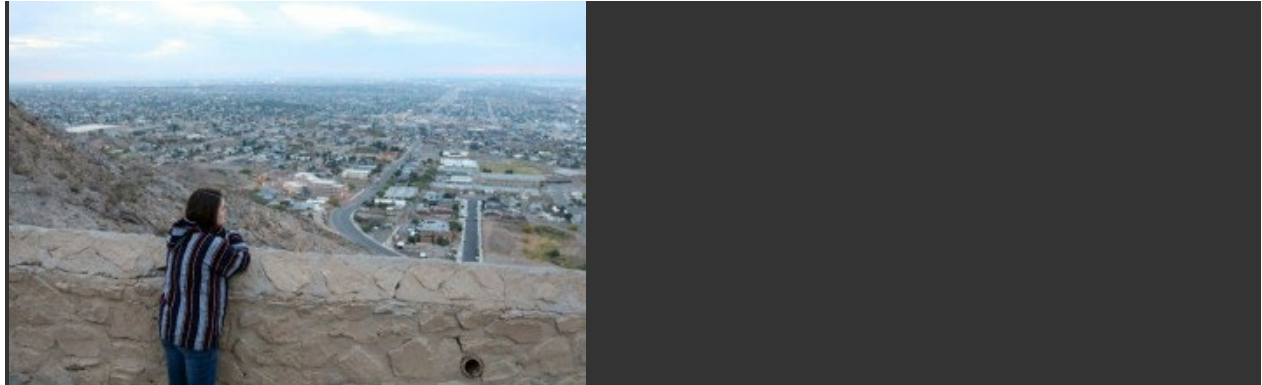
January 9, 2020



A student speaks with a child on the other side of the border fence.

Feet away and worlds apart, a small group of WMU students speaks to two young brothers through the bars of a tall, rust-covered fence separating El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

“We were just chatting about school, what they do for fun,” says Dakota McCracken, an economics major from Kalamazoo. “One of the little boys asked me, ‘Are there bad guys over there?’ I said, ‘Yes, we do have some bad guys,’ and he said, ‘Oh, we have a lot of bad guys over here.’ Then he just kept playing and wrestling with his brother.”



McCracken is among a group of honors students learning about immigration issues at the U.S.-Mexico border. They’re getting an inside look at what some are calling the “border crisis,” examining the driving forces behind record numbers of migrants making credible fear claims, hoping to be granted asylum in the United States. It’s part of the Study in the States program offered by Lee Honors College.

“It’s a hands-on learning experience,” says Kaylee Tegethoff, a political science major from Bloomington, Michigan. “You make connections and you get to develop yourself as a person versus just as a student.”

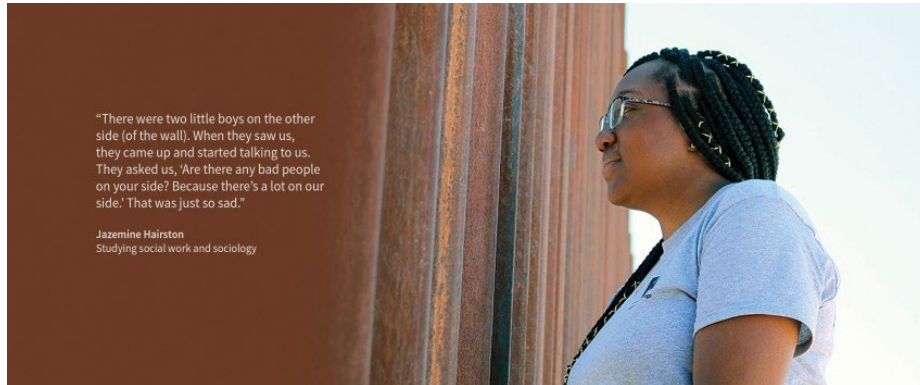
Denise Bowen, associate professor emerita of physician assistant studies at WMU, organized the trip. She designed the course to give students a front-row seat to the immigration issues making headlines and sparking debate across the country.

“I wanted them to be able to engage with people later, to talk about this and to maybe get rid of some of their misconceptions and help other people do that, too,” Bowen says. “It was definitely an immersion experience.”

“We were right there,” Tegethoff says. “You hear on the news thousands of people are coming to the border, and then you walk through the refugee center and there are hundreds of cots, hundreds of people, and it’s just, like, ‘Whoa!’”

MEETING MIGRANTS

Students stayed for a week at Annunciation House, a Catholic charity in El Paso that offers temporary shelter for refugees and migrants. As detention facilities along the border soar past capacity, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement releases people into the organization's care— sometimes to the tune of 700 per day. Most, says Bowen, are from what's been dubbed the "northern triangle," which consists of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.



"There were two little boys on the other side (of the wall). When they saw us, they came up and started talking to us. They asked us, 'Are there any bad people on your side? Because there's a lot on our side.' That was just so sad."

Jazmine Hairton
Studying social work and sociology

"There are groups of hundreds of people that are coming. They're coming with their families. They want their families out of there; they just don't want to be raising kids there anymore," Bowen says. "The majority of the driving factors pushing people here are violence and poverty, I would say."

The WMU students helped out at the shelter, cooking meals and handing out items to people as they were processed. The experience gave students the opportunity to interact with people in various stages of the immigration process.

"We talked with people who were just released from detention, who had ankle bracelets on (awaiting court dates), who were just granted asylum or who just got here from another country and were undocumented and were going to turn themselves in," Tegethoff says.



Students play soccer with people staying at Annunciation House.

Of the 10 students in the class, only two were fluent in Spanish. Bowen prepared them for culture shock when they first arrived at the border.

“I tried to warn them that they’re going to feel uncomfortable,” says Bowen, stressing the fact that students would be surrounded by people who speak a different language. “But it didn’t mean that they couldn’t engage. There are a number of ways you can engage someone.”

It turned out, the key to breaking down those barriers was playing games with the people in the shelter.

“The kids were taking blocks and building towers. Pretty soon all these women came over and they all wanted to do it,” says Bowen. “So, there were all these teams of women who were building towers. Then the students would come and ask them questions and see them the next day and engage.”

Students were able to get to know some of the migrants, staying with them and hearing their stories of hope and heartbreak.

“One pregnant woman who was there toward the beginning of the trip was really excited because her husband and older child were already in Florida and she was going to meet them,” says McCracken. “She hadn’t seen them in months.”

“There was a young father and his baby staying at the house we were at. The baby’s mother had gotten deported again, but the little baby was there and had some serious health issues,” Tegethoff says. “The dad let me hold the baby, and I love little kids! But just to be there and know that they don’t necessarily know what’s going to happen to them next was sad.”

THE PROCESS



Tegethoff Looks through materials at the Border Patrol Museum.

From touring the border fence and Border Patrol Museum to observing immigrant court proceedings, students were able to examine immigration issues from a variety of perspectives.

“We saw some different immigration courtrooms. They’re so backed up. In the detention center, there are four rooms and four judges,” says Tegethoff. “They hear over 25 cases a day. Every morning, that’s just their daily workload, and it just grinds on and on. They’re backed up for months.”

The sheer volume of people detained at the border is overwhelming. Bowen originally set up an interview with border patrol for her class, but officers were so busy while they were in El Paso that the meeting was canceled.

“Border patrol is overwhelmed,” says Bowen. “I think the majority are just outside of their comfort zone, and they can’t do their regular job, either, because they’re dealing with this mass amount of people coming over.”

A PROBLEM WITH NO EASY SOLUTION

“The whole issue is radically more complicated than I ever realized,” Tegethoff says. “Mentally and physically and emotionally it was just exhausting. You saw all these people you wanted to help, you saw all these issues and you wanted to help, and you know the policy implications and want to do something, but it’s not clear how.”

Bowen says the situation at the border is much different today than it was the last time she visited several years ago.

“I read in one day alone, 1,700 people were apprehended at the border just in the El Paso sector, where we were staying,” says Bowen. “They’re coming with their hands up in the air saying, ‘Take me, please. We need to get to the United States.’ They’re not being chased down or anything, which was the case a year ago. Now it’s just this whole voluntary thing and the people who are coming are different. It’s family units.”

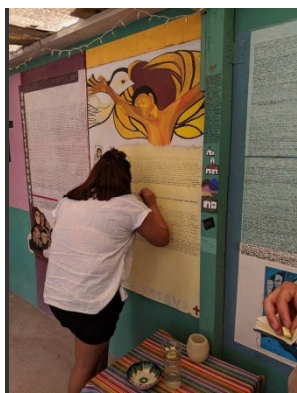


Once migrants attempt to claim asylum, they're detained and given a credible fear hearing in a matter of days. If ICE officials determine their fear is justified, they'll place the person on a list for an asylum hearing and send them to a detention center.

"If they're not deported right away, and they have someone in the United States that's a sponsor and they have children with them, then they'll be released to their sponsors," says Bowen, who goes on to say that many of those people stay at facilities like Annunciation House while they work out transportation to get to their sponsors. Then, they wait for their hearing. The process can take weeks or months.

"As somebody who's rather impatient—I don't like waiting six weeks for my passport to be mailed to me, and these people are waiting weeks, months, maybe even years to find out where their next home is going to be—that was kind of shocking and just makes me really think about it," Tegethoff says.

AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY



A student writes a message of hope on a mural.

The students also had a chance to hear the stories of young lives lost to violence across the border.

“That wrecked me,” says McCracken, whose ultimate goal is to be an economic development consultant working on policies to stop human trafficking. “I’m a youth group leader, and when I started my group was all 15-year-old girls. And the name on the paper I was given, she was also 15. I bawled like a baby.”

The victim Tegethoff learned about was 26 years old—not much older than her.

“This person died because of the violence in their city, with rampant crime and drugs and gangs and corruption in the government and enforcement. I just thought, ‘Wow,’ because I don’t have to worry about that, and I’m thankful for that,” Tegethoff says. “This is why rule of law and security are important, so that isn’t my story. But it was her story, so how can we help keep more people from experiencing that?”

THE TAKEAWAYS

The politically charged climate surrounding immigration and border security often puts people on one side of the fence or the other. Students on this trip—who all had very different views on the issue going into the class—came away seeing the lines are much more blurred.

“I’ve had some of the best conversations I’ve ever had with students during this trip, because we actually wanted to learn and we actually cared about the situation that was going on there. Even though we maybe had different core values or different beliefs, we just came together,” Tegethoff says. “I was definitely inspired and realized you actually can have discussions, believe completely different things and have good, helpful discussions that get you both to a better place.”

Bowen says while many students came away with different views on the priorities of the problems on the border, they all believe refugees deserve to be treated with dignity.

“If you stop treating people with dignity and respect, then everything falls apart,” Bowen says. “I don’t think anyone walked away thinking that they shouldn’t be helped somehow. There was no agreement on how, but at least some agreement that they’re all human beings and they all have these very real issues.”

“I learned more in the week I was in El Paso than I have in my whole life about immigration,” Tegethoff says. “I do think that everybody should go to the border who can. But if you can’t actually make it down there, you can still have conversations. You can still look at reputable sources. You can still talk to people on both sides of the issue to see where they’re coming from, even if you don’t agree with them.”

Some 1.34M hours of service helps earn WMU coveted Carnegie recognition

Contact: [Joy Brown](#)

January 31, 2020

KALAMAZOO, Mich.—For the second consecutive time, Western Michigan University has received the **Carnegie Community Engagement Classification**, which recognizes higher education institutions across the country for their outstanding institutional commitment to transformative collaboration locally and beyond.

Only 359 colleges and universities maintain the classification, an elective endeavor that requires institutions to voluntarily submit information describing the impact of their community engagement initiatives, ranging from class projects that address local needs to engaged research that maintains national or international reach.

WMU is one of 119 institutions in the country to be awarded the designation in the 2020 cycle, one of only 13 doctoral-granting universities with a “high research activity” classification to receive this recognition, and one of 11 in Michigan to be named.

The University’s application documented that, in one year’s time, its faculty, students and staff:

- Contributed 1.34 million hours to community-engagement initiatives;
- Partnered with over 1,500 unique community organizations; and
- Offered 333 credit-bearing, community-based learning courses representing more than 75% of its academic units and programs.

This classification is the second consecutive time WMU has been recognized for its community-engagement efforts by the Carnegie Foundation. Since its most recent classification in 2010, WMU’s community-engagement efforts have increased sizably.

WMU’s selection means the institution’s dedication to dynamic and noteworthy community engagement runs through its mission, culture, leadership, allocations, and practices, says **Kara Wood**, associate vice president for community partnerships and co-chair of the University’s Civic Action Planning Team.

It also illustrates The University’s commitment to co-creating learning and public-impact focused research opportunities with community partners to develop innovative and sustainable solutions to critical societal issues such as poverty, racial equity, access to affordable healthcare, and the environment.

“WMU has a long history of public service and community partnership, including experiential learning opportunities that allow faculty and students to apply their work and produce useful solutions for business, government and nonprofit agencies,” Wood says.

“This recertification brings prestigious recognition and visibility to the accomplishments of our faculty and students.”

HISTORY

The 2020 Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement was developed by the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](#) in the early 2000s. The foundation, which works to improve American education, understands community engagement as transformative.

Carnegie officials say that community-engaged partnerships can “enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.”

The classification parameters recognize schools that prioritize the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

The application’s lead author, **Dr. Brian Gogan**, associate professor of English and co-chair of the Civic Action Planning Team, notes that the 2020 application was significantly more rigorous than the one completed in 2010.

“The 2020 application asked for much more specific pieces of data, such as the number and employment status of faculty who offered community engaged courses to their students,” Gogan says. “And, the 2020 application process further required the University to submit names of 15 community partners, who were contacted for confidential assessments of WU’s community engagement work.”

The University’s community engagement practices with public and private entities are longstanding, widespread, and diverse, as its [Community Engagement Geo-Map](#) shows.

Noteworthy collaborations include:



WMU students studying PFAS contamination at a site in Richland, Michigan.

[Hydrogeology field courses](#) focused on hazardous man-made chemicals known by the acronym PFAS. Taught by **Professor Matt Reeves, Ph.D.**, the courses have introduced several students to PFAS-contaminated sites and government agency-collaborative remediation efforts. Reeves is also pursuing Michigan Department of Natural Resources funding to study the Huron River Watershed, and he is working with a WMU doctoral candidate in chemistry on developing destructive technologies to break down PFAS.

- [Southwest Michigan Children's Trauma Assessment Center](#). The center provides comprehensive neurodevelopment trauma assessments for children who have experienced trauma or adverse childhood experiences. College of Health and Human Services students provide thousands of fieldwork hours at the center as part of their professional training.
- The [Kalamazoo Literacy Council](#) hosts an annual Adult Literacy Research and Training Symposium with WMU, which has impacted nearly 875 adult learners and has improved instructional capabilities of almost 300 volunteers. One major objective of the symposium is to facilitate cooperation between academic research of best practices in adult literacy and community-based application of this knowledge in the community, including service learning and internship opportunities for students.
- [WIRE Youth Development Programs](#). These free offerings have benefited more than 1,000 youth between the ages of 7 and 13. The STEAM-focused programs help youth envision themselves in college and in desirable careers, and provide culturally sensitive guidance and instruction to help them get there.

MOVING FORWARD

WMU's 2020 Carnegie application, which included comparisons to information submitted with its 2010 application, demonstrated a significant increase in the depth and breadth of community engagement efforts.

“We aim for the University to build upon our past work by promoting the assets of our faculty and students to showcase even higher quality community partnerships in the next reclassification process,” Wood says. “Our goal is to increase the strength, impact, and sustainability of our partnerships, all the while contributing to our students’ educational experience and effecting positive societal change.”

For more information, contact **Margaret von Steinen**, executive assistant senior in the Office of Government Relations, at (269) 387-2972 or Margaret.vonsteinen@wmich.edu.

GIVING IMPACT: MARLA MILLER SMITH

In the 60’s, Marla Miller Smith (’66) was a featured twirler who received more than 250 twirling awards, including the Indiana State Fair Championship, and after graduating from high school, she brought her talent to Western Michigan University. Decades later, The Marla Miller Smith Bronco Marching Band Endowment would become the first endowment at WMU to provide long-term funding for the band, while preserving Marla’s legacy.

Marla was the featured twirler for the Bronco Marching Band for 1965 and 1966. After completing an associate’s degree in business, Marla went on to have a long career as a secretary, executive assistant, and eventually the office manager for a law firm. Her experience at WMU left her with a lifelong impression and passion for marching bands, which is why she decided to do something transformative for the Bronco Marching Band.

Unfortunately, Marla passed away before she could fulfill that wish, so her husband, Tony Smith, wanted to make the gift in her memory.

“Marla’s lifelong love was the marching band,” Tony said. “She knew firsthand that a lot of hardworking students were putting in many long hours for its success, and the lack of external support was frustrating to her because of this. Her gift will provide a foundation to build this financial support, so others can have the same experience that she cherished.”

The Marla Miller Smith Bronco Marching Band Endowment forever codifies Marla’s legacy as a twirler, WMU alumna, and career woman; while helping to create a sustainable foundation for the band. Because of her gift, generations of students can continue to benefit from the discipline, musicality, and leadership skills gained as a member of the band.

The \$330,000 endowment will provide funds for the annual Marla Miller Smith Travel Game, so band members can travel with the football team, as well as Marla Miller Smith scholarships. It all fits into a larger plan to restructure the band to ensure long-term success.

Earlier this year, the WMU College of Fine Arts instituted the Bronco Marching Band Restructure and Sustainability Plan. It involved reducing the overall size of the band, establishing a travel band, creating an audition and selection process, and creating an essential studies course so band members can earn more credit and fulfill a requirement for graduation through band participation. The college also set a goal of raising \$1.5 million while setting aside \$50,000 in annual funds to provide small scholarships to every student, as well as essential band needs like instrument repair and uniforms. It doesn’t just make the band more sustainable, but helps to maintain the high quality for which the band is well known.

For Tony and his family, it fulfills Marla's desire to provide a means for the band to be able to travel and represent the Broncos at events all across the state and country, as well as provide important scholarship funds to its hardworking members.

In late September, Marla's family traveled to WMU to spend time with the Bronco Marching Band at a home football game. As tribute to, and gratitude for, Marla's grand legacy, the post-game concert was dedicated in her honor, playing favorites like "Amazing Grace" and Bronco Marching Band staple, "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo."



Marla featured in a WMU Brown & Gold Yearbook



Tony Smith along with daughter Dede Panarisi and grandson Bobby Panarisi with the Bronco Marching Band