I’m always inspired by high quality work regardless of the worker’s discipline or profession. This inspiration flows from my own efforts to write publishable articles, develop and present highly effective lectures, and provide outstanding services as an administrator. My own struggles help me understand the daunting challenges one faces when attempting to produce excellent, relevant work, especially in the face of obstacles presented by a disadvantaged background. As I read this edition of the FEF Focus, I’m deeply inspired by the quality of work by McKnight graduates and matriculating Fellows, Junior Faculty Fellows, our pre-college students, FEF staff and special guests.

You will read, for example, an excellent story written by Phyllis Reddick about MDF Fellow Ileana Pacheco-Colón’s research on how exercise mitigates the effect of drugs on adolescents and her remarkable publication record. Pacheco-Colón is highly sought for collaboration in part due to her proficiency with multiple languages and ability to infuse the humanities into the diagnostic experience.

You also will be considerably impressed by McKnight graduate Dr. Candice Ulmer’s research at the CDC, helping America’s health professionals understand the data that enables them to diagnose, control, and prevent disease. The Candice Ulmer story illustrates not only the significant success of our graduate students, but also the importance of providing opportunities as early as primary school for students to learn more science and mathematics, both pure and applied. To that end, we at FEF continue to increase such opportunities at the pre-college level, particularly as we purposefully expand the reach of our coding programs.

You will read, for example, how we helped middle and high school students in our annual statewide challenge develop mobile apps that address real-world challenges such as school safety. You’ll also learn that we’ve substantially increased the number of our summer coding camps, from seven to 15 in Northwest Miami-Dade, including our first four offerings for elementary-aged children.

The founder of our CodeMasters Program, Lyra Logan, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, trained additional instructors and secured funding for the Miami expansion as well as a second year grant to offer the coding program in Hillsborough County. Additionally, several established Tampa organizations, impressed by the success of the program last year, invited her to offer similar programs for their students. These new relationships enhance our ability to impact more students and help grow their interest in math, science, engineering and technology.

We continue this work because, in our global economy, a person’s ability to enter and succeed in the workforce requires advanced skills, greater knowledge and more rigorous academic preparation. The primary goal of the FEF is to provide both graduate and pre-college students with chances to hone skills, increase knowledge, and prepare to achieve their professional goals and objectives while they serve the global community.
McKnight Alumna Profile: Seasoned Research Chemist Dr. Candice Ulmer

Three years after earning her Ph.D. in analytical chemistry from the University of Florida, Dr. Candice Ulmer is a Research Chemist and Associate Service Fellow at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. Given her background, work ethic, and early penchant for math and science, she seemed destined for a career in chemistry, a field Ulmer describes as “the applied version of science and math.” Some credit for her accomplishments can also be attributed to the wise counsel of mentors.

She grew up in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and quickly points out that her hometown has not one, but two historically black universities—Clafin and South Carolina State. She is the older of two sisters and the daughter of educators. Her mother taught 7th grade English and Social Studies in a magnet program, and her father was a vocational instructor of auto mechanics at Denmark Technical College. Her mother strived to identify and cultivate her daughters’ interests early.

As a result, by seventh grade, Ulmer had begun attending summer STEM programs at Clafin University and Spelman College in Atlanta. Shadowing graduate students and learning to use instruments she previously didn’t know existed, Ulmer discovered a love for chemistry. “Most people don’t believe me, but I have been practicing chemistry since I was 12 years old.”

Eventually, Ulmer attended the College of Charleston, where, directed by Dr. Wendy Cory, she researched the pharmaceutical degradation of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) in the environment. In 2012, she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in chemistry and biochemistry. Without pause, Ulmer successfully applied for the McKnight Doctoral Fellowship, and by 2016, just four years after completing her undergraduate degree, Ulmer earned her doctorate at the University of Florida.

What Ulmer’s impressive CV doesn’t reflect are certain challenges encountered throughout her career—“unwelcomed reminders of my status as a woman and a minority in science.” She learned early to seek mentors for understanding, encouragement, and advice, and to work with organizations and committees who shared her values. UF’s Office of Graduate Minority Programs was very influential; it was like a family unit where you could go and talk about issues; the Black Graduate Student Organization was also helpful. Now, Ulmer is honored to mentor others.

As a graduate student, she discussed graduation requirements with her graduate committee. She made a list, and crossed items off with each accomplishment. By the third year of her doctoral program, she started applying for jobs. Her advisor suggested she apply to the National Research Council (NRC) for a post doc, and she secured a position a year prior to graduation.

The position, which NRC held for her, was as a two-year postdoctoral Research Chemist at NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology). Then, after just nine months, Ulmer received an offer for another job, a position more aligned with her career plan, at the CDC. With a timeline for wrapping up her projects, Ulmer was able to leave NIST after 14 months for the CDC.

As a clinical research chemist at the CDC, she determines whether patients are at risk for specific diseases according to their urine or blood markers. By the time Ulmer receives fluid samples, they are absent of all traces of the patients’ identities. She then helps build patient profiles, analyzing why they are sick. In contrast, at NIST, she might have to search for two or three items in three gigabytes of data, a process Ulmer likened to searching for a “needle in a haystack.”

At the CDC, Ulmer helps define the numerical ranges in laboratory reports—what normal and abnormal mean, and she travels extensively to explain these findings to clinicians. In this manner, Ulmer helps ensure the standardization of clinical measurements. “It’s nice to come into work and feel that what I’m doing is making a difference,” she said, “analyzing markers and lab reports that help America’s health professionals diagnose, control, and prevent disease.”
students declared they were saved or empowered by learning in her classes about literary voices that reflected their lives and experiences.

Dr. Ali Gordon is the Associate Dean of Graduate Affairs in the College of Engineering and Computer Science and Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at the University of Central Florida. He has received the Air Force Office of Scientific Research Summer Faculty Fellowship four times, the UCF Teaching Incentive Program Award twice, and this year, he is one of two inaugural Champions of Undergraduate Research at UCF.

A product of public schools in Washington, D.C., Gordon developed strong relationships with middle and high school faculty and became familiar with laboratory environments at a young age. His mother was an early influence; she earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology. Other influences were extended family members who liked car repair, architecture, and electronics.

Gordon advised the new Fellows to plan their exit strategies by beginning “with the end in mind.” He also encouraged them to enjoy their time as students, recalling the times he bonded over tea with fellow students from China and India.

You ought to go beyond your comfort zones, he said, because this is your time to grow and figure out what does and doesn’t work. “Let the program change you,” because later, as faculty, there is no room to fail.

Working with people is critically important in graduate studies. Having grown up as an only child and a loner, Gordon had to learn to collaborate. Learn what other students are working on, who the senior researchers are, and who could be helpful to you, he advised, to “have breadth as well as depth” of knowledge.

Doctoral students must also strategically select faculty to help them and understand that faculty expect them to contribute to their activities as well. He relies on students to put him in a position to help. “My favorite students let me know what they’re working on daily. It helps me drive the car.”

Earlier in her life, Irizarry thought her impact was limited to teaching students “how to read,” and she was fond of saying she would never save lives with her Ph.D. in English. That was before some

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MCKNIGHT DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP CLASS OF 2019-2020 (Five-Year Fellows)

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<th>Discipline Breakdown</th>
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<tr>
<td>Business (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education (3)</td>
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<td>Humanities (1)</td>
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<td>Social Sciences (13)</td>
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<td>STEM-Engineering/Computer Sciences (11)</td>
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<td>STEM-Health/Life/Physical Sciences (14)</td>
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<td>STEM-Math (1)</td>
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McKnight Doctoral Fellow Profile: Ileana Pacheco-Colón

As a child, Ileana Pacheco-Colón did not aspire to be a scientist. Hers was a happy, carefree childhood in Puerto Rico with her parents and younger brother. They lived in a rural part of Guaynabo, a city at the foot of a mountain. Always studious, Pacheco-Colón was a bookworm who loved drawing and dancing but otherwise didn’t engage in many physical activities.

In the lower grades, she was so focused on school that she wouldn’t realize when the weekend had begun. When her mother took her shopping or on other outings, she was eager to return home to study all subjects. However, she wasn’t set on pursuing science as a career. Science began to interest Pacheco-Colón only after she entered high school.

About the same time, the economy of Puerto Rico, once stable, was faltering. There were fewer tourism dollars following 9-11 and the economic downturn on the mainland. Increased competition for jobs and investments coupled with the loss of tax incentives exacerbated the problem.

Nonetheless, Pacheco-Colón’s high school academic excellence earned her a spot at Brown University to study psychology, and in 2008, she left Puerto Rico and her family for Providence, Rhode Island. Brown didn’t have a core curriculum, and Pacheco-Colón was happy to have the option to not take science courses other than biology, a prerequisite for psychology. Through biology, Pacheco-Colón discovered neuroscience, which she enjoyed so much she chose to pursue a bachelor of science rather than a B.A. in psychology.

She also benefited from Brown’s policy of allowing undergraduate and graduate students to take the same classes. As an undergrad, Pacheco-Colón had the unusual opportunity to study Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). This rare early exposure to MRI would soon become a critical factor in her career path; only later did she realize how fortunate she was.

Despite her scholastic success, Pacheco-Colón wasn’t sure about her path. She noticed that students who planned to go to law school, for instance, were already headed toward that goal. She could not identify good reasons to go to law school; nor could she afford an unpaid internship like some.

Taking the MRI course had boosted her resume, which helped when she applied for Amgen Scholars, a program that provides opportunities for engineering and science undergraduates. In 2011, the summer after her junior year, Amgen sponsored Pacheco-Colón at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There, she conducted behavioral tests and functional MRI (fMRI) scanning on typically developing children, children with autistic spectrum disorders, and adults. Her duties included preparing fMRI stimuli and collecting and managing study data.

Upon graduating from Brown the next year, Pacheco-Colón took a position at Georgetown University. Though she worked as a research assistant, she was not a student, and the position came with a degree of freedom. Fluent in English and Spanish and familiar with French and Portuguese, Pacheco-Colón often served as a translator for research participants. Furthermore, Georgetown encouraged workers like her to pursue their own projects when they had “down time.”

In 2015, after three years working at Georgetown, Pacheco-Colón successfully applied for a McKnight Doctoral Fellowship to study Clinical Psychology at Florida International University (FIU). Simultaneously, she received a three-year FIU Presidential Fellowship to study the effects of cannabis on adolescent development, and this summer, Pacheco-Colón received a two-year F-31 award from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). This award will fund research examining how exercise might mitigate the effect of drugs or other unhealthy behavior in adolescents.

Pacheco-Colón has published 17 articles (six as lead author), four book chapters (three as lead author), and one conference paper—an impressive start for a fifth year doctoral student. She advises doctoral students to go after opportunities. “Some people are intimidated about asking, but asking shows initiative, drive... [D]on’t wait for your co-worker or co-researcher to offer to include you as an author. Ask people in your department or your lab if you can help them.”

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-- MDF Fellow Ileana Pacheco-Colón

Ileana Pacheco-Colón presents results to research assistants in her lab.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). This rare early exposure to MRI would soon become a critical factor in her career path; only later did she realize how fortunate she was.

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Ileana Pacheco-Colón presents results to research assistants in her lab.
Brain Bowl Competitors Build Skills, Win College Scholarships

Each year since 1985, FEF has conducted statewide contests during which students from our 10 regional Centers of Excellence prepare for months and then vie for prizes, including 4-year scholarships contributed by Florida colleges and universities. Three contests offered scholarship prizes in 2019: History & Culture, which tests skills in critical reading; Mathematics; and NAS Voices, which focuses on speech writing and oration.

The History & Culture Competition, at the local, regional and State levels, tests the knowledge of students in grades 6 through 12 on a number of college-level books that focus on the social, political and cultural history of minorities. Questions range in difficulty, assessing knowledge of facts, use of vocabulary in context and analytical reading skills.

At the 2019 State meet, the Atlantic Coast Center of Excellence (Broward) History & Culture Brain Bowl team, the Plantation High Colonels, regained the Statewide championship title after 15 years. The team triumphed over eight other regional winning teams in a rigorous double elimination tournament consisting of 17 individual games played from 8:30 a.m. until well into the afternoon.

All champion team members are attending or will begin college on 4-year Brain Bowl scholarships by fall 2020 at Florida A&M University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Stetson University and the University of Central Florida.

For Mathematics, each year up to 30 teams compete at State in three separate contests, one for students in grades 6 through 8, one for grades 9 and 10 and another for grades 11 and 12. Winners at the 11th and 12th grade level earn college scholarships.

At the 2019 meet, the Mathletes from the Palm Beach County Center of Excellence took first place, the team’s first championship since 2013. During the competition, the team bested several others solving challenging Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II problem questions derived from the SAT.

Team members are attending or will begin college on Brain Bowl scholarships by summer 2020 at Florida State University and the University of Central Florida.

In NAS Voices, students in grades 9 through 12 compete in a high-stakes contest that requires them to exercise public speaking, writing and critical thinking skills as they form opinions on thought-provoking national and international issues.

This year, Xavier Woodley from the Tallahassee Coalition Center of Excellence won the seven-contender contest with his speech on whether college athletes should receive compensation for playing. He will use his Brain Bowl scholarship at Florida A&M University beginning in the fall of 2021.
CodeMasters Scales Up in Miami-Dade for Summer 2019

After running seven coding camps in northwest Miami-Dade for the past three years, FEF’s most recent CodeMasters grants required FEF to expand its Miami offerings to 15 camps this summer, four for elementary and eleven for middle and high school students.

In the elementary offerings, 120 students learned computational thinking and programming concepts while coding a two-piece robot called Codey (the brain) Rocky (the chassis). Many succeeded in making the panda-faced ’bot speak, display words and graphics in his display screen, recognize and respond to various colors, detect and avoid obstacles, detect and respond to light, change speeds, and follow patterns along the ground. Most students identified learning to program Codey Rocky as the highlight of the camps, where they also practiced math, reading, and social emotional learning skills and traveled on several field trips.

FEF’s eleven secondary camps taught computer programming to 270 Northwest Miami-Dade students. One focused on robotics for the fourth year, with students designing, building and programming their own Lego robots. In two camps, students developed a series of mobile phone apps, and in two others they learned HTML and CSS, built their own web sites, and earned vendor-neutral industry certification in Site Development. Depending on their college majors, students in the Site Development camps can receive three college credits for earning their certifications.

In the remaining six camps, middle and high school students designed and built digital games. High school students developed their projects using industry-standard Construct3, while middle schoolers used MIT Scratch. Middle school students also studied for and earned Digital Tool certification over the summer, signifying mastery of game design and beginning programming concepts. In addition to coding, all middle and high school camps incorporated multiple visits by career mentors and weekly excursions to colleges and STEAM-rich community venues.

CodeMasters Becomes a STEM Program Provider in Hillsborough County

Many summer camp providers desire to offer coding as part of their programs but lack the expertise or time to incorporate it themselves. Enter FEF and CodeMasters, which for the first time this year participated in vendor fairs to offer to teach kids from kindergarten through high school to code. Several partners accepted the offer and contracted with FEF to teach nine separate STEM camp components.

FEF taught Codey Rocky robotics to two classes of kindergarten through third grade students in the ReDefiners foreign language camp; game design to students attending programs at the Tampa Police Department’s two Resources in Community Hope (RICH) Houses; classes in robotics and game design at each of four camps for various grade levels conducted by the Tampa Heights Junior Civic Association, and one middle school game design class for the Corporation to Develop Communities of Tampa, Inc. (CDC of Tampa).

FEF’s Executive Vice President Lyra Logan trained instructors in robotics, game design, and mobile app development to teach these and FEF’s other summer coding programs. FEF won high praise for these efforts from our partners and their funder and intends to expand STEM-only offerings in 2020.
Like many U.S. students since the 2018 Parkland school shooting, FEF’s statewide Mobile App Challenge competitors worry about encountering danger at school. As evidence of this point, one-half of the teams in the 2019 Challenge addressed school safety with their entries, including the developers of the winning middle and high school apps.

The first-place middle school team, Gabriela Morales and Adriana Sanchez from the Tampa Area Center of Excellence, in a project cited for compelling design, provided a means for individual students to alert authorities of security issues and bullying. The champion high school team, Chai Comrie, Joshua Cajuste and Fridjinah Francois from the Atlantic Coast Center of Excellence, developed an elaborate school-wide alert system through an app that displays color and silent messages to notify the community about impending crisis. Other teams created apps useful for other purposes: one answers tech support queries that don’t require human assistance; another informs and reminds students about school deadlines and events; and another teaches online safety.

Teams began the competition day in a workshop led by FEF Executive Vice President Lyra Logan, a certified MIT App Inventor Master Trainer, learning to build projects on the App Inventor platform. The platform allows developers to quickly create apps with real-world impact that incorporate high-powered mobile technology functions.

After the workshop, students refined their app designs and began to build their projects with the help of a tech team led by Maria Migueliz Valcarlos, a Graduate Assistant in Cybersecurity Curricula at the University of South Florida. Prior to presenting their projects to the audience, teams completed written summaries highlighting their apps’ goals and key features. Projects were then judged by McKnight Doctoral Fellow Anthony Windmon and his colleague Shanice Clarke, USF doctoral students in computer science.

For competing, all teams received bags of swag, and winning team members received tech gift cards.

**Upcoming FEF Events**

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<td>Feb. 21-22, 2020</td>
<td>MDF Mid-Year Research and Writing Conference, Tampa</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 20-21, 2020</td>
<td>35th Annual Brain Bowl Competitions &amp; Florida National Achievers Society Pre-College Summit, Tampa</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 19-20, 2020</td>
<td>MDF New Fellows’ Orientation, Tampa</td>
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The FEF’s mission is to strengthen the larger community by creating and implementing programs and services that lead to greater educational advancement for historically underrepresented groups.