



# THE PROMPTER

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ANNUAL REPORT  
FOR ALUMNI & FRIENDS

2025



## A LEGACY OF CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

MC celebrates the careers of three outstanding educators  
whose decades of service shaped generations of students

INSIDE  
DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS  
NEW COMMUNICATION FACULTY



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## **FACULTY & STAFF**

Bretton Crosby  
*Instructor*  
Lindsey Dancy, Ph.D.  
*Assistant Professor*  
Madison Dean  
*Instructor*  
Mignon Kucia, Ph.D.  
*Professor*  
Christian Patterson, Ph.D.  
*Assistant Professor*  
Reid Vance, Ph.D.  
*Professor & Chair*  
  
Shiyan Collier, Emma Ellard,  
Chloe Newton, Cara Pridemore  
*Writers*

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## **GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

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Public Relations (Certificate)

FROM THE CHAIR

# WHAT THE BEST COLLEGE TEACHERS DO



Researcher Ken Bain has identified several things the best college teachers do. His list includes knowing students well, expecting more of them, and trusting that they really want to learn. I'd add to these best practices the message of this photograph I took in 2009 while visiting friends in the Colorado Rockies.

Of all the pictures I captured on that trip, I initially gave little thought to this particular image. Other photos were more visually striking -- it's not hard to find a breathtaking

vista in the Rocky Mountains -- but this picture of the camp's fenced-in lake featuring the familiar fisher's rule soon became a personal favorite as I considered how its message applied to my work as a professor.

Teachers in Christian higher education know the importance of "catch and release." We work hard to catch our students, recruiting them as prospects. We meet with moms and dads. We provide students an academic program that prepares them for success with their words, skills, and lives. We invite them into our campus community, our offices, and even our homes. We strive not just to teach, but to inspire, challenge, and love. And after a few years, we release them into what's next. ("Throw them back"? A bit harsh.) It's the natural rhythm of our vocation. We'd love to keep some of them around a while longer, but we catch and release for good reason. When our graduates' MC years are done, it's time for them to succeed and change the world.

Our department is blessed with faculty and staff who excel at catch and release. Our two longest tenured faculty, Cliff Fortenberry and Merle Ziegler, retired this summer. It speaks to the influence of these two outstanding educators that five of our faculty in the coming year will have emerged from their classrooms. You can read about their legacies in the pages to follow. Vicki Williams, our longtime secretary, also retired from her full-time assignment and will remain with us in a part-time role. Vicki remains an indispensable help to me and has been to so many MC faculty and administrators. More importantly, she is a constant source of spiritual encouragement and support for our students. She holds us all together.

All three of these special people had an immeasurable impact on generations of MC students. I'm personally grateful for their influence on me as both their student and as a colleague. Their professional legacy can now be found in workplaces, churches, communities, and homes around the world, in the lives of their former students who continue the catch and release tradition by making a difference in the lives of others.

Their fishing poles now belong to our two new faculty members, Bretton Crosby and Christian Patterson. The standard for teaching in our department is purposefully high, and I'm excited for our alumni to get to know each of these exceptional individuals who will faithfully serve our students for years to come.

A framed copy of my catch and release photo now sits atop the bookshelf in my Aven Hall office, a reminder of my daily work. Thank you for fishing alongside us -- we couldn't do it without you!

-- Reid Vance ('95, '05)

## DEPARTMENT NEWS

# RETIRING PROFESSORS LEAVE A LASTING IMPACT

Students in the MC Department of Communication said goodbye this spring semester to two of their most beloved and respected faculty members. Cliff Fortenberry and Merle Ziegler, who dedicated much of their careers to shaping the lives of generations of MC students, retired from their full-time teaching roles at the university. Their departure from their positions as tenured professors marks the end of an era for the department, leaving behind a enduring legacy of education, mentorship, and leadership.



Fortenberry joined the MC faculty in June 1986 and served as department chair for over 20 years. The job was a natural fit for the south Mississippi native who came from a family line of educators. Both of Fortenberry's parents and his paternal grandfather were teachers.

"I always thought it would be great to work in higher education," Fortenberry said. "You could impact young folks and hopefully make a positive impression in their life so that when they make future decisions, they'll be able to look back to

some of the lessons that they learned in the classroom. I think critical thinking and decision making are probably the best things that we can teach in college."

Fortenberry's goal was to be a professor at a community college until the then-president at Southeastern Louisiana University gave him the opportunity to teach at the Hammond campus. Fortenberry later applied the lessons from his SLU experience to his work at MC.

"I placed high expectations and challenged students to meet those expectations," Fortenberry said. "They often didn't really care for it that way, but I had so many students years later say to me, 'Thank you. You made me work harder than I thought I could.'"

Alongside former MC Communication chair Billy Lytal, Fortenberry oversaw significant numerical and academic growth within the department. But the accomplishments he's most proud of are his impact on students and of watching his own children lead successful lives. Fortenberry's son Ryan and daughter Elizabeth both earned Communication degrees at MC. And his wife, Melanie, was a longtime leader and instructor in MC's Health Services Administration graduate program.

With nearly 1,000 acres of family-owned land in south Mississippi, Fortenberry is eager to finally spend more time outdoors and with his wife, children, and grandchildren, something he missed while teaching and leading administratively on the Clinton campus. The Fortenberrys also plan to travel more, with a special goal of experiencing the autumn aspens turn golden in the Colorado Rockies.

## DEPARTMENT NEWS

Merle Ziegler, who came to MC in 1994, confirmed the news of his retirement with his signature humor. "That is one rumor that you should believe."

Ziegler's path to MC began in Bolivia where his parents were missionaries working with the Ayoreo, a largely uncontacted South American tribe. As a young teenager, his family relocated stateside. But a missionary mindset has always guided his career as a Christian educator.

"My favorite Bible verse is 'Thy word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against thee,'" Ziegler said, referencing Psalm 119:11. "If I know God's word, and I'm familiar with it, it's not going to be a problem for me to apply it."

Soccer also featured prominently in Ziegler's journey. "I can never remember a time where I didn't have a passion for soccer," he said. "In South America, little boys grow up kicking a soccer ball." That passion led Ziegler to Cedarville University in Ohio where a knee injury ended his dreams turning professional. Eventually earning his doctoral degree at Bowling Green State University, Ziegler taught first at Liberty University in Virginia before being recruited to MC by department chair Billy Lytal.

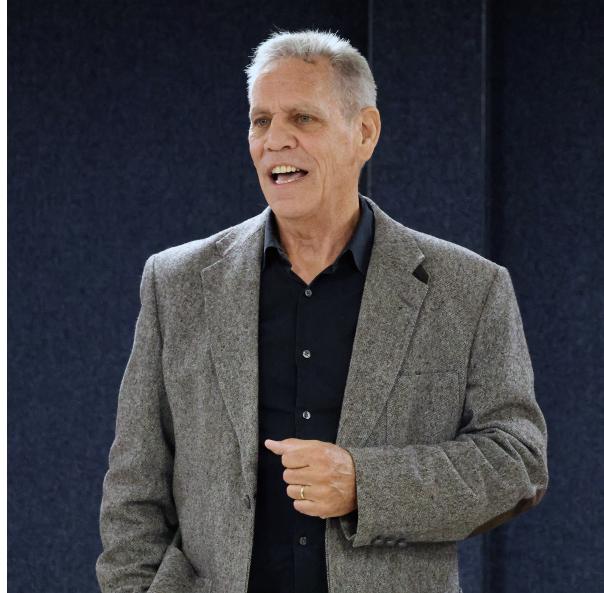
Ziegler coached MC's soccer team when he first arrived on the Clinton campus, leading the program from club to varsity status within a decade. He also led the MC speech and debate program and served the Mississippi Communication Association in a variety of roles. "I've tried to do whatever came my way, whatever the Lord put in front of me."

Several factors led to Ziegler's decision to retire now, including his wife's recent retirement and a personal feeling that it was the right time to step back from his full-time duties at MC.

But Ziegler will keep moving, with more biking and travel to the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone in the works. He's also looking forward to spending more time with his grandchildren. And there's likely more soccer in Ziegler's future, too, as he continues his volunteer work with area youth teams.

Ziegler believes the Department of Communication is well-positioned for future growth and success. "I think that it's going in a good direction," Ziegler said. "I wouldn't want it to change."

Countless Communication alumni owe much of their professional and personal success to Fortenberry and Ziegler. Future students will benefit, too: In their retirement, both professors will teach one course each semester at MC. Ziegler will teach his increasingly important Communication Ethics class. Meanwhile, Fortenberry will continue challenging new generations of MC students in his signature Communication Law course.



## 2024 DISTINGUISHED YOUNG ALUMNUS

# MICHEAL WALLEY (BS '14)

TEAM LEADER FOR LIVE CREATIVE FOR CAMPS & EVENTS  
LIFEWAY CHRISTIAN RESOURCES, NASHVILLE, TENN.

Micheal Walley entered the workforce just as social media became a vital communication tool. The interests he developed at MC uniquely prepared him for the role he would eventually take at Lifeway Christian Resources, the world's leading nonprofit provider of ministry resources for the local church.

Because of his impact as a young communication professional and his future potential, Walley was named the MC Department of Communication's 2024 Distinguished Young Alumnus Award recipient.

The Waynesboro, Miss., native initially resisted becoming a Choctaw. But a conversation with longtime MC trustee and Mississippi Baptist pastor Frank Gunn convinced Walley to give MC a chance. He wanted a degree program that kept him involved in campus activities and allowed him to pursue his love for the performing arts. Like many students before him and since, Walley quickly found his home in the Department of Communication.



Walley wanted to work at a summer camp from a young age. During his college days, he spent summers working with Lifeway's CentriKid Camps, building key relationships that would eventually lead to his current job. Meanwhile, MC was building its emerging social media presence. Known as the "Photo Guy" around campus, Walley managed the new platforms, helping to establish the university's brand voice and connecting with new audiences, a process he generously describes as learning on the job. "None of us knew what we were doing, but we were very scrappy. It really was throwing things against the wall and seeing what sticks."

This combination of classroom-based learning, experiential education, and opportunities to develop performance skills led Walley to accept a job offer from Lifeway immediately after graduation. He's remained with Lifeway since, moving upward to new roles and responsibilities over the last decade, including camp actor, director, and pastor.

Walley now serves as the Team Leader for Live Creative, leading in writing, directing, and producing for CentriKid, a camp ministry with over 20 locations that welcome kids to learn more about the message of Jesus.

Walley is confident that he's following God's divine design for his life and work. "The Lord has designed me in certain ways and given me gifts and abilities and interests. I feel like my job right now was created around my talents and my skills and my interests, and I'm so blessed to be able to do that."

As Lifeway and the world around it has evolved, Walley has learned to adapt, especially in his transition to working much of his time from home. "You have to stay involved with changes in communication," Walley said. "It is so easy, especially after college, to get stuck in your ways. Life is busy, and it's hard to adapt to new technologies or to get on board with new ways of doing things. But you don't have to be an expert. You just need to maintain a curious mindset."

MC is family in many ways for Walley. He and fellow MC alumna Anne Marie Parke met on the Clinton campus and were married in historic Provine Chapel. And Micheal's father-in-law, Ivan Parke, is a longtime professor of Christian Studies at MC.

Micheal and Anne Marie currently live in Nashville where they are the proud parents of Edly, a dachshund named after their favorite barbecue restaurant. In his spare time, Walley continues to cultivate his passion for performance by staying active in the Nashville theater community.

2024 CLIFF FORTENBERRY DISTINGUISHED ALUMNUS

# DYLAN McLEMORE (BS '08, MS '10)

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SPORTS MEDIA, ESPN+ ANNOUNCER  
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY, STILLWATER, OKLA.

Dylan McLemore's career path has taken him to classrooms and press boxes across the Southeast. But his career in communication started just down the road from his Pearl, Miss., home, on the MC campus where his student experiences prepared him for an exemplary career as an educator and broadcaster.

For his achievements, McLemore's was named the MC Department of Communication's 2024 Cliff Fortenberry Distinguished Alumnus Award recipient.

McLemore started announcing Choctaws sports as a student working at WHJT-FM, MC's former campus radio station. "I enjoyed my college experience. It's a defining time in life. You discover who you are outside of a profession, and you just learn about life. I like the opportunity to now guide new students through that."



After several years of teaching at the University of Central Arkansas, McLemore recently joined Oklahoma State University's prestigious School of Media and Strategic Communications as an Associate Professor of Sports Media where he continues his broadcasting work for ESPN+, calling college football, basketball, baseball, softball, volleyball and soccer for the Worldwide Leader in Sports.

Teaching and learning represent a large part of McLemore's mission as a professional. "Even though I'm teaching for a living, I'm still learning," McLemore said. An accomplished scholar, McLemore has received several awards for academic excellence including recognition by the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication as a Promising Professor and a University of Central Arkansas Career Champion and Teaching Excellence Fellow. He's also been nominated for the Golden Mic Award which honors the best national broadcasters in college softball.

McLemore is a strong and vocal advocate for public scholarship which he describes as "a movement to try to tear down walls, to make academic research in plain language and more readily available so that professionals and the public can benefit. It's something that we're uniquely positioned to do well. We're communications students. We should know how to translate these messages better than anybody."

The MC alumnus believes that all communication fields, from podiums to podcasts and beyond, are opportunities to create clarity and understanding and to shine the light of Christ.

"You can be a witness anywhere. We have careers where we have a large audience. We have a lot of people listening to us. And the people we work with, in the newsroom or in the broadcast booth, a lot of them don't know Jesus, or don't know Him in a real, meaningful way. Our opportunities to spread the Gospel can be right there."

McLemore's approach to his professional life and public communication includes a focus on practicality, humility, and seizing opportunity. He encourages young professionals to take opportunities as they come, just as his own career was built on capitalizing on chances to gain experience, develop skills, and discover his own goals and preferences. "You're not going to know if you don't go for it."

McLemore holds a bachelor's degree in Communication with a concentration in Public Relations and a master's degree in Communication from MC, and a Ph.D. in Communication and Information Sciences from the University of Alabama, where he was a graduate council research fellow, a graduate teaching fellow, and a National Communication Association doctoral honors scholar. He is married to Dr. Heather McLemore, an emergency room physician and fellow MC alumna.

2025 DISTINGUISHED YOUNG ALUMNUS

# COREY RHOLDON (BS '19)

SPORTS ANCHOR AND REPORTER  
KKTU NEWS, COLORADO SPRINGS, COLO.

Corey Rholdon covered Caitlin Clark in her Iowa Hawkeye days and Kim Mulkey during the LSU women's basketball team's national title run. He's now on the sidelines in Denver reporting on the NBA's Nuggets, the NFL's Broncos, the Air Force Academy, and the University of Colorado Buffaloes. And he does a pretty good Coach Prime impression, too, as sports anchor for KKTU in Colorado Springs.

In an emerging career that has taken him from his Louisiana home (and back again) to the Midwest and the Rocky Mountains, Rholdon has demonstrated a determination to succeed. His accomplishments and future promise have earned Rholdon the MC Department of Communication's 2025 Distinguished Young Alumnus Award.

Rholtodn earned his B.S. in Communication from MC in 2019 with a concentration in Sports Media. Between studying and playing football for the Choctaws, Rholdon helped shape the early multimedia offerings of the MC journalism program as its sports editor, demonstrating in his college career a doggedness admired by his fellow students and the willingness to take initiative to learn and become better at his craft.

The New Orleans native took two internships in his hometown in preparation for his career as a broadcaster. His first professional stop was WHBF in Rock Island, Ill., where he covered the University of Iowa Hawkeyes of the Big Ten Conference. After a year in the Midwest, WBRZ in Baton Rouge called. There, Rholdon followed LSU athletics as the Tigers contended for national championships in multiple sports. He now covers major college and professional teams and athletes for the CBS affiliate KKTU in the greater Denver region.

Rholtodn admits that sports media is a rapidly changing profession and often demanding career. But the same fast pace and intense demands of his career have challenged and sharpened him as a broadcaster. "I had to get really good really fast. You have to think differently about the way you speak. You have to write differently. All of it ultimately made me a better reporter."

But Rholdon has also seen up close how sports can give people hope and inspiration, and he uses that experience to help keep him going. He remembers his hometown New Orleans Saints' first game after Hurricane Katrina in 2006, a win that stirred the emotions of all Americans. "I saw seventy thousand people cry in the Superdome," Rholdon said. "The Saints became a symbol of hope for the city, and they went on to win the Super Bowl four years later. That showed me the impact that sports can have, seeing my city rallying around that team and people finding hope in a place where they needed it most."

Rholtodn says the passion, resilience, and fearless determination of his fellow Louisianans help sustain him as he pursues his professional goals.

"A lot of people are terrified to take a chance, to risk something, but there is no reward without risk. I used to write this on the board in Aven Hall all the time: There is no failure if you learn. It's just a lesson."

As for his current television work in Colorado, Rholdon says he enjoys being both informative and creative. "I like to say that I'm both educational and entertaining," Rholdon said. "I'm crazy. I'm your typical Cajun. I even dress like Deion Sanders, with the glasses on."

Rholtodn and his wife Victoria were married earlier this year and live in Colorado Springs.



2025 CLIFF FORTENBERRY DISTINGUISHED ALUMNA

# TRACEY HARRISON (BS '91, MS '94)

VICE PRESIDENT FOR COMMUNICATION & BRAND MARKETING  
BIOLA UNIVERSITY, LA MIRADA, CALIF.

Before she was shaping the voice of Biola University in Southern California, Tracey Harrison was doing the same for her alma mater. As Vice President for Communication and Brand Marketing at Biola, she continues to use lessons from her academic and professional experience at MC to advance the cause of Christian higher education.

Based on her exemplary career, Harrison has been named the recipient of the MC Department of Communication's 2025 Cliff Fortenberry Distinguished Alumna Award.

Harrison received her B.S. in Business & Communication and the M.S. in Communication from MC and subsequently served the university in various faculty & staff roles for over 25 years. "I had the privilege of helping shape the message and mission of a place that profoundly influenced me," Harrison said.



The Clinton, Miss., native's first professional tenure at MC included work as an admissions counselor and instructor in the School of Business. After a period of serving churches in Florida, Harrison returned to Clinton in 2007 as the university's Director of Public Relations. She would soon be named to serve as Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications.

Harrison took on the same responsibilities at Biola University in February 2024, a move that took her and her family from the Deep South to the West Coast. "Perhaps one of my most significant moments of growth came when I said yes to Biola," Harrison said.

"Leaving a place I loved and stepping into the unknown was daunting, but it taught me to trust God's leading even when the path isn't entirely clear. That leap strengthened my faith, sharpened my adaptability, and it reminded me that growth often requires courage."

"The move also involved adjusting to a new pace, a different culture, and a much more complicated commute. But on a deeper level, the transition has expanded my perspective in ways I hadn't anticipated. Living and working in California has deepened my awareness of how strongly I am rooted in my Mississippi heritage. Growing up in the South gave me a sense of groundedness and hospitality that I carry with me."

Harrison says those Southern roots and MC education are foundational to her professional practices and life journey. Her experiences this side of the Mississippi have equipped her to communicate everywhere with purpose and wisdom. "Whether I was helping to define the university's brand, mentoring students, or leading campaigns, I constantly drew on lessons learned as a student: how to listen well, speak truth with clarity, and stay grounded in values." She encourages today's MC students to be fully present during their college experience. "Don't rush through these years trying to get to the next thing. The relationships you build, the mentors who invest in you, and the challenges you face are shaping you more than you realize."

Harrison's experience in Christian higher education and in the local church confirms for her the enduring power of communication to unite, clarify, inspire, and glorify God. "In my work, I've seen how powerful words can be, not just in what they convey but also in how they are expressed. Effective communication can unite people around a cause, clarify misunderstandings, and even instill hope during difficult times."

Harrison and her husband of 35 years, Jim, live in Yorba Linda, Calif.

# MC WELCOMES NEW COMMUNICATION FACULTY

The MC Department of Communication is pleased to introduce two new full-time faculty members to its family beginning with the 2025-2026 academic year.



## CHRISTIAN PATTERSON

After a distinguished career in military and public service, Christian Patterson joins MC as Assistant Professor of Communication. Patterson most recently served as the 12th Commander of the Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Vicksburg, Miss. His prior assignment was as Director of Communications of the Corps for which he led the unit's journalism and public relations efforts.

Patterson earned a Ph.D. in Communication from Liberty University, a master's degree from Belhaven University, a bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University, and an associate's degree from Hinds Community College. He also earned a certificate in strategic communication and leadership from Seton Hall University.

As the recipient of numerous awards in public affairs and journalism, Patterson will lead the department's growing journalism program and will spearhead the launch of the new Master's of Science degree in Public Affairs Communication.

The Jackson, Miss., native is a decorated veteran of assignments in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo. He will continue to serve as an active duty U.S. Army reservist during his tenure at MC.

Patterson and his wife, Latrice, and his children, Avery and Sam, live in Clinton.



## BRETTON CROSBY

The newest Instructor of Communication at MC is a familiar face to members of the Choctaws family.

Bretton Crosby has worked as the university's Audio-Visual Director for the last two years after many years of service to local churches in media ministry, including Dawson Memorial Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., and Broadmoor Baptist Church in Madison, Miss.

Crosby is a two-time graduate of MC, earning both the bachelor's and master's degrees in Communication. He was the recipient of the department's Graduate Research Award for work on his thesis titled "Streaming Preachers: Parasocial Relationships and Live Streamed Sermons."

The Brookhaven, Miss., native will lead the department's increasingly popular Ministry Communication program which prepares students for careers of service in local church, denominational, and parachurch media-related ministry roles. He'll also continue to work with students in campus media productions including Choctaws athletics.

GIVING BACK

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- experiential learning opportunities
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