THE MIDDLE GROUND
Can Research, Creation Of Knowledge Bridge The Divide?
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1  Dean's Letter
2  Emotional Engagement
   Study Suggests Emotions’ Impact On Democracy
4  Differences
   Opening The Frame Can Expand The View
6  Voting Rights
   Election Day Offers Time For Celebration, Vigilance
8  Monumental Debate
   Historian Puts Confederate Memorials Into Context
10 Health Care Revival
    National Health Reform Creates New Politics
12 One Nation Divisible
    Nation’s Past Can Guide Us Forward
14 Meeting In The Middle
    Deepening Divisions Create Challenge
16 Terrorism
    Issue Is Not Always So Black And White
18 Immigration
    Receptivity And Integration Offer A Key
20 Filtered And Fake
22 On The Sidelines
    Professional Athletes’ Actions Signal Social Protest Change
24 Ethical Dilemma
    Bioethical Questions Arise As Aspect Of Changing Times
26 Water Regulation
    Science, Citizen Engagement Essential To Water Health
28 Climate Change
    Science Considers How We Can Respond

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte is open to people of all races and is committed to equality of educational opportunity and does not discriminate against applicants, students or employees based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, or disability.
A year ago, Keith Lamont Scott, a black man, was shot by a police officer less than a mile from our university. Students on our campus – just like Americans everywhere – asked fundamental questions about our nation’s identity and values, its history, and its future. There were peaceful demonstrations, panel discussions, lectures, vigils, and many other positive and constructive activities and programs that expanded this important conversation throughout our university. One student asked us in the Dean’s Office how he could identify courses that contained content presented in a way that reflected diversity. This was an easy fix, we thought. We asked academic departments in the college to forward us the titles of already existing courses that they felt responded to this request. We then posted this list on our website and have updated this list once or twice since 2016. You can look for “Diversity Courses” on the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences website (clas.uncc.edu) to see these courses.

In late September of this year, several national media outlets ran stories about this list, and at one point, reporters from three local television stations came to campus to interview administrators and students.

This unexpected attention to our curriculum provided the impetus for the shape of the current issue of Exchange. The creation and dissemination of knowledge are the dual mission of the university and the college. The brief “15 minutes of fame” through this media attention affirmed for faculty and staff alike that this mission is our contribution to our country’s national conversation and that it is important, now more than ever, to sustain our mission.

National surveys have confirmed for us what we already know: our country is deeply polarized. It seems as though our nation is made up of many different communities, all of which hold immutable beliefs that seemingly cannot be challenged and may not coexist with other beliefs that dissent from them. We see this in some of the long-standing culture wars over the right to life, gay rights, and gun rights.

Now there are other topics that roil our nation: social activism and sports, Civil War memorialization, the role and power of our federal institution, economic inequality. Scientific findings, which in the past have had broad acceptance as knowledge that is based on irrefutable evidence, are also being challenged in policymaking in issues such as safe water and climate change.

Even more deeply, the sense of who we are as a nation and who gets to call themselves Americans is the starting point for discussions of immigration policies and voting rights. Finally, the First Amendment, possibly the most critical, defining aspect of our democracy, is weakened if the cry of “fake news” undercuts responsible journalism. Our ability to hear only what we want to hear on our electronic devices isolates us from differences of opinion and makes us impatient with opinions other than our own.

In this issue of Exchange, we ask our faculty researchers to meditate on the state of their discipline and to look to the future. Can their explorations of their primary research questions help to decrease this polarization? Can the creation of knowledge bring us together as a national community? For us in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, we hope that fulfillment of our mission to create and share knowledge will help to bridge the divide confronting our communities.
Over half of Americans point to our current social divisiveness as a major source of stress in their lives. The American Psychological Association’s “Stress in America™: The State of Our Nation” report, published this fall, found that 59 percent of respondents believe we are at the lowest point in our nation’s history that they can recall.

Divisive political topics such as terrorism, climate change, health care, and news media all serve as sources of stress. This issue of the College’s Exchange magazine delves into these subjects, among others. These topics, while divisive, have one key thing in common – they generate strong emotions. Emotions matter politically because they guide our behavior, particularly when triggered by issues of importance that correspond with our core values. Debates about how to solve pressing social issues can incite people on differing sides of an issue to feel angry, threatened, or hopeless. Recognizing the nature of our emotional reactions and how we manage them can help to channel strong emotions into productive political engagement.

To explore the role of emotion in politics, we have embarked on a new National Science Foundation-funded study called “Emotion Regulation, Attitudes, and the Consequences for Political Behavior in a Polarized Political Environment.” We are conducting the research with our colleague Lonna Atkeson, a political scientist at the University of New Mexico.

This study considers how people manage strong emotional responses to politics, and explores whether some approaches to managing emotions are better for democracy than others. We conducted a nationwide representative survey of 4,000 people in June 2017 and found that most Americans had strong, negative emotions about politics: 64 percent of Americans reported strong feelings of anger, disgust, fear, or sadness when they think about “recent political news,” and 18 percent reported strongly feeling all four emotions.

On the one hand, feeling strong emotions about politics is good. Emotion is an important signal to the brain to pay attention. From the standpoint of democracy, emotion is crucial – an emotionally engaged and active public can ensure that elected officials hear
their concerns. Anger, in particular, plays a special role in motivating change because anger is an action-oriented emotion.

Our survey found that 68 percent of those reporting strong levels of anger about political news also reported participating in political activities, such as contacting an official, signing a petition, joining a political group, or participating in a rally. In comparison, those feeling little or no anger were much less likely to report participating in these activities (41 percent). Anger, while unpleasant to feel, serves a valuable function in democracy by motivating political engagement to seek change.

On the other hand, how strong emotions are managed may matter a great deal for whether people engage productively in politics. This emotion management process, termed “emotion regulation,” is an important and growing area of study in psychology. It examines how individuals use goal-oriented strategies to transform the intensity and content of their initial feelings about an event or situation. Some individuals tend to regulate negative emotional reactions such as anger, disgust, or anxiety through strategies of disengagement. These strategies include avoidance, distraction by focusing on other activities, and suppression by not expressing or acknowledging negative emotions. Others tend to manage their emotion through engagement strategies called reappraisal. This is when we view upsetting information in a different light to change its meaning. Reappraisal offers the most promising way forward from the perspective of the norms and values of democracy. This process requires individuals to engage with an event to reinterpret its meaning with respect to broader personal or social goals.

We found that 55 percent of Americans reported using frequently at least one engagement reappraisal strategy to manage their emotions. Some focused on the longer-term meaning of news (reported by 27 percent), others sought information to place events in a larger context (reported by 28 percent), and many tried to understand the feelings of those with different opinions (reported by 37 percent).

At the same time, people also said they used disengagement strategies frequently, with 28 percent reporting they frequently avoided political news, while 44 percent said they distracted themselves from politics, and 34 percent said they kept their emotions about politics to themselves.

We assessed the overall combinations of strategies people used and found that 41 percent relied more heavily on disengagement than engagement strategies, while another 40 percent favor engagement strategies over disengagement. The remaining 19 percent relied on both equally.

Importantly, 68 percent of those who relied more frequently on engagement strategies to regulate their emotions reported engaging in political activity. Only 54 percent of those who relied on disengagement strategies did so. This suggests that those who are adept at managing their emotions by using reappraisal strategies are better able to channel those emotions into meaningful political action.

Psychologists have identified ways in which individuals can change their patterns of emotion regulation. Over time, these habits can shift in response to new experiences, and people can learn how to use particular regulatory strategies in particular contexts. In addition, by highlighting their personal or social goals, people can be cued to use specific reappraisal strategies. This is important because research shows that the reinterpretation that occurs during reappraisal can have a sustained impact. In other words, it can persist to change a person’s understanding of the long-term meaning of an event or situation.

While reappraisal offers a way for our emotional reactions to become aligned with our goals, reappraisal does require effort. It can be challenging to shift one’s emotional perspective about an event or situation, and the more intense the emotion, the more difficult the shift.

However, the effort can be worth it. Our research suggests that we should be wary of disengaging from our emotions. Although sometimes difficult to process, emotions are designed to impart meaning. If managed well, they can help us by facilitating our communication and our action.

We find that 54 percent of those who relied most frequently on engagement-oriented emotion regulation strategies were more likely to try to talk about issues with people whose opinions differed from their own. Whereas, among those who relied more frequently on disengagement regulation strategies, 37 percent sought conversations about politics with people with different opinions.

Psychologists and neuroscientists who study emotion find that by recognizing the source of emotional reactions in ourselves, we are also more able to recognize the source of emotional reactions in others. If we become more aware that emotion signals meaning, perhaps we can use this shared knowledge as a foundation to engage meaningful dialogue around issues of importance.

Words: Sara Levens, assistant professor, Department of Psychological Science, and Cherie Maestas, Rauch Distinguished Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration

* The survey mentioned in this article was conducted by YouGov from June 17 through July 5, 2017. Data presented in this article are weighted to reflect a representative sample of the U.S. adult population. The margin of error is +/- 1.6%. 
The scene through a window in our homes can differ radically from the view our neighbors see from their windows. Similarly, our individual view of the world is shaped by our unique frame of reference, influenced by factors such as class and income level, gender, race, nationality, native-language, and ideology.

“Everybody looks through a particular window,” says Ann Gonzalez, professor of Spanish and chair of the Department of Languages and Culture Studies. “And, the frame of the window is determined by many different things. Basically, we may all be looking at the same thing, but we see it from a different angle, and we interpret what we perceive in a different way.”

Our singular points of view affect not only our world view, but also our daily lives. This includes how – and whether – we engage with people we perceive as being different from ourselves, Gonzalez and other College of Liberal Arts & Sciences scholars say. Their research and teaching are particularly relevant when considering how society’s pressing issues are exposing or exacerbating the differences between people.

“What Is Identity?” says Sean McCloud, a professor of religious studies who teaches, researches, and writes about American religions, and religion and culture. “One thing that I hope students are getting out of this class is this idea that identities are multiple. Identities are not things you just invent on your own. The people around you and your past history play such a huge role in forming identity. We have this kind of fantasy that “I can be whatever I want, do whatever I want,” but how much of what you want to be and do is something that has already been inculcated into you from your past?”
The instilling of knowledge and values begins at an early age. In her work as an associate professor in the Department of English, Janaka Lewis’ research considers what children can learn about themselves and others through literary narratives. As director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at UNC Charlotte, she also considers the ways in which people view studies of minority groups, notably those identified by ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

“I perceive that the fear of difference is an attempt to preserve one’s role in mainstream culture,” Lewis says. “Many believe or are taught to think that if society defines the mainstream in one way, anything ‘other’ must be less than or something to be afraid of. What we can do is be willing to give up or share power – which in the extreme turns into supremacist action or behavior – to meet the larger goals of whatever the group is. This is easier said than done, but it definitely starts with children who are taught that they have to keep a certain position to be better and extends across all of these categories of difference.”

Power – who has it, who lacks it, who wants it, and how it is used – is an important concept when thinking about the divisions that can drive a wedge between people, says sociology professor Lisa Walker, whose research focuses on small group interaction, nonverbal behaviors, identity, emotions, gender, and expectations.

“We talk about social stratification, as sociologists, and generally we shorthand that with race, class, gender,” Walker says. Social stratification refers to how society groups people into rankings of socioeconomic tiers.

“On the one hand, race and class and gender are very, very real things,” she says. “On the other hand, most of us have a lot more in common than we have that divides us or that is different between us. Ask questions of people about what’s most important to you, and we have very similar values. Especially people in the United States tend to have very similar ideas of what is the right way for things to be.”

Yet, society also has taught us to be wary of others who are not like us, she says. “We have to look out for the socialists, or we have to look out for the immigrants stealing our jobs,” Walker says.

As a quantitative social scientist, Walker spends quite a bit of time sifting through data to see what it says about these struggles. She also considers ways to broaden how we think about these issues.

“So, for me, part of it is data,” she says. “Part of it is social literacy, we could call it. We know what literacy is. We know what quantitative literacy is; it’s become a pretty common term. We know what financial literacy is. I think social literacy is the piece that’s missing. People don’t really understand the dynamics and the history that has led us to where we are. Race-based policies go back pretty deep in this country, to the 1600s.”

“Many believe or are taught to think that if society defines the mainstream in one way, anything “other” must be less than or something to be afraid of.”

— Janaka Lewis

Discussions about equity can be seen as trying to take something from others, such as when debating gender equality, Lewis says.

“But, when you look at these things they are often fundamental rights or needs – equal pay, equal opportunities to work, the ability to participate in the public sphere without assault or harassment,” she says. “I think when we start to think about not just respect, which should be enough, but also humanity, people from different perspectives will remove the blinders to those who are simply not looked at or treated as equal. We also need to put the word equity in the conversation on a social, corporate and institutional level, which takes us back to natural rights and not just a want for equal status.”

One way to open up our frame of reference is by intentionally engaging with people who are different from us, such as people from cultures that vary from our own, Gonzalez says.

“With differences, if you don’t open that window, you may not even recognize difference,” she says. “Or you may discount or devalue differences. If what you perceive through your window is that this is the way things are and should be, then anybody who doesn’t fit within that perception is outside of your perceptual field, or outside of what you think is legitimate, or outside of what you think is normal.”

In the Department of Languages and Culture Studies, faculty encourage students to study and learn from a broad array of cultures, particularly through study abroad.

“A lot of what we try to do, at least in our department, is to establish bridges between the self and the other, between the self and other groups, and between the self and other countries,” Gonzalez says. “Study abroad changes that window forever. When you come back, you may never be as comfortable at ‘home’ as you once were, but you are a much more tolerant and understanding person.”

Stepping out of our comfort zone can be difficult, McCloud says.

“People are very comfortable in stasis, not thinking and doing things very differently than what they have done in the past,” he says. “It makes sense. We’re all reared to find certain things comfortable or uncomfortable. And those rarely come up for discussion until some sort of event occurs that forces it into conversation. Some of those things have to do with class and race and gender, as we can see just from the last couple of years.”

Social forces, however, can push or propel people to move in new directions and open their eyes to what others are experiencing, he says. This can occur, for example, between people from different groups who come together to work on social change.

“It’s in those moments of forced change, if you will, that there is that possibility, as small as it might be, for a positive change to occur, and for those who previously could not see the struggles and lives of others to see those and feel differently and develop some sort of empathy for those who are not like them,” he says. 

Words and Image: Lynn Roberson
Election Day Offers Time For Celebration, Vigilance
When Martha Kropf walks into her voting precinct each Election Day, she experiences the moment as if she is two different people.

The first Kropf is a UNC Charlotte researcher who is analyzing the scene, noting any potential glitches with equipment or procedure, listening to the conversations around her, and placing her observations into the context of her scholarship. The second Kropf is an American voter who revels in the community nature of voting and its progress.

For Kropf, professor of political science and public administration and director of the Public Policy Ph.D. Program, Election Day is a reminder that voting rights face new threats in a nation marked by political divisiveness. Her research, however, suggests that the most pressing issues are not necessarily the ones people mention the most. Outside entities can and do tip the way elections unfold, yet it is the perception of those forces at work that can sometimes matter most, she says.

Kropf has long studied the voting process and the implications it holds for democracy. One of her books, Institutions and the Right to Vote in America, examines how U.S. institutions have affected citizens' ability to take part in the political process of choosing leaders. "The legitimacy of our governmental system is the most important thing; it's tied to voting rights," she says. "What people are most concerned about is how secure our elections are from hacking. I'm much less concerned about this issue than the average citizen is."

The reason? Simply put, American democracy is messy and would be difficult to hack.

"Think about how hyper-decentralized elections are in this country," she says. With more than 3,000 counties in the United States, thousands more locations within the counties where voting takes place, and differences in how elections are run state-by-state, the entire process is confusing even to someone familiar with the system, she says. To an outsider, it would be almost incomprehensible. Added to that, electronic voting machines are not connected to the internet.

"I am not saying we shouldn't be vigilant, because we should," Kropf says. "This is our democracy and we have to take care of it. But I don't think we should be running around saying elections are rigged, or there are a lot of fraudulent voters out there. I think in general, elections are run fairly well."

Concerns about other governments attempting to influence the elections continue to draw attention, as investigations into the allegations persist. Meanwhile, broad distrust in the electoral and policymaking process remains a threat to democracy, she says.

"If we don't have solid, evidence-based policymaking, that worries me very much," she says. "It worries me when elected politicians are using rhetoric to justify plans that seem to be tipping voting rights."

Gerrymandering – the drawing of political boundaries to give one party a numeric advantage over an opposing party – can imperil voting rights, Kropf says, because the process is significantly more sophisticated than it once was.

"I think the real problem is the way people are able to manipulate maps these days and the kind of micro-targeting people are able to do," she says. "That means it's very easy for partisan politicians to choose their voters."

Voter ID requirements also threaten democratic practices, Kropf says. "Studies have shown that a voter ID law doesn't necessarily reduce turnout," she says. "But there is a reduction in voter registration among minorities when a government-issued photo ID is required."

Not everyone has a driver's license, she says, and it is not always a straightforward process to obtain a copy of a birth certificate. Seniors, people with disabilities and African American citizens are among the most likely not to have government-issued photo IDs, studies have found.

"We set up these roadblocks that require someone to navigate a system and have time to navigate a system that wasn't built to be easy to navigate," Kropf says. "And it's discriminatory to people at a low socioeconomic level."

Last year, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit struck down North Carolina's strict voter ID law. In doing so, the court found that state legislators had worked "with almost surgical precision" to craft a law that excluded nonwhite voters.

Kropf also is concerned about the funding undergirding the voting process, which she considers a more subtle threat to the system. Elections mostly are funded at the county level. The last serious federal infusion of funding came after the infamous hanging-chad election of 2000. Counties got new voting equipment, but many machines are aging out and will be costly to replace before they malfunction.

An interdisciplinary team of UNC Charlotte scholars is building a database of North Carolina election expenditures by county, Kropf says, with the aim of scrutinizing the cost of elections and where corners are possibly being cut.

"There are a lot of budget tradeoffs county governments need to make," Kropf says, "But we don't want elections to be one of them."

Despite the vigilance needed to protect Americans' right to vote, Kropf is encouraged by what she sees both in her research and in the scene she observes on Election Day.

"At the country's beginning, people with property who were white men got to vote," she says. "And now I get to vote. Many people get to vote. My college students get to vote. Our country has made a lot of progress involving rights. We have backsliding. Policymakers will pass laws that may reduce voting rights. But in general, we've made a lot of progress." ☑️

Words: Amber Veverka
Historian Puts Confederate Memorials Into Context
The larger-than-life figure sits astride its bronze horse overlooking Charlottesville, Virginia’s Emancipation Park, memorializing Confederate General Robert E. Lee ever since its placement in 1924. In recent months, this statue has emerged as a symbol of the divisive national debate over Confederate monuments and their broader meaning.

During an overcast weekend this August, the thunder of drums and snap of billowing flags announced the presence in the park of supporters and opponents of the Unite the Right movement. White nationalists and counter protesters gathered on the park lawn, with shouts and chants rising around the monument. Violence broke out, and the bloody protest spilled into the streets of Charlottesville, leading to one death and dozens of injuries.

While the Charlottesville events stand out for their ferocity, they certainly do not stand alone – and neither does the Robert E. Lee statue. Over 700 Confederate monuments dot the landscape, mostly in the American South. What does history tell us about the placement of these Confederate monuments, many in public spaces, such as on the grounds of county and state courthouses? Are they innocuous memorials of Confederate heritage, as supporters say, or symbols of white supremacy? What should their future be?

“We know for a fact that a majority of these Confederate monuments that are currently being debated were placed between 1895 and 1920, which parallels the rise of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), the organization that is responsible for almost all of these monuments,” says Karen L. Cox, a professor of history and author of books including Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture and, most recently, Goat Castle: A True Story of Murder, Race, and the Gothic South.

Cox’s careful study of the historical record, placed within the context of its time, finds that the monuments were part of a concerted effort to portray the Southern cause in the Civil War as just and to define slavery as a benevolent institution. The monuments’ installation occurred during the Jim Crow era, and they were intended to support revisionist history of the Civil War, or “the War Between the States,” a term used by Confederate heritage organizations.

“This is the time when white legislators across the South were enshrining segregation into law, and in some ways what the women were doing with the placement of the monuments was providing the cultural underpinning of the politics of the time, so they’re supporting the politics of white supremacy through these monuments,” she says.

The lasting impact of the narrative that the powerful and pervasive UDC created can be seen even in modern times, as people oppose calls for removal of the monuments and point to connections to their families’ heritage, she says.

“Monuments by themselves mean nothing, but they’re embedded into this larger UDC narrative regarding what the Civil War was about or wasn’t about,” she says.

Although the debate has grown more fervent, this is not the first time that Confederate monuments have been subjected to scrutiny. “African Americans have said from time to time that these monuments, these symbols, are offensive to them, but no one’s listened to them,” Cox says.

Critics briefly focused on Confederate flags and monuments in the aftermath of the murder of nine black people who were attending prayer at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015. Dylann Roof was condemned to death by a federal jury in January of this year for the killings. While photographs of Roof before the murders showed him with Confederate flags and other symbols, the calls for removal of symbols from public spaces slowly faded away.

“It was Charlottesville that brought it back, with the Unite the Right rally,” Cox says. “I recognized it immediately as something very different. This event signalled that something else was going on, and it was about more than the monuments.”

An important aspect to this debate is how the South is changing. “Today’s South is a very different place,” Cox says. “We are racially and ethnically diverse, and the demographics of the South are changing. There are also generational differences. Where at one point, whites would have been on the same page about what monuments were and meant, this is not the case anymore.”

Those who question the wisdom of removing the monuments ask what comes next and submit that the removal would erase history. Cox counters that even if these monuments were removed, the history of the Civil War is recorded and that the action of removing the statues would not change history itself.

To move forward, communities need to consider what would happen to the monuments if they were removed or altered, she says. Some suggest placing historical markers near the monuments to give context to them. Some call for placing these monuments in museums. Cox notes their size, their large number – over 700 monuments, with hundreds of other items of commemoration – and the cost of moving them. Cox says that whatever is done, it is important that people still have access to learn from them.

“We also need to do a better job about listening to the black community about this and hear from more African American scholars on this issue to provide the racial context for these monuments,” she says.

Cox is committed to helping non-historians gain greater insights through the historical record; she founded UNC Charlotte’s Public History Program as part of this commitment. She also has written articles and been quoted on the Confederate monument issue in national and international publications, including The New York Times, CNN, The Washington Post, Newsweek, The Daily Beast, and U.S. News.

“People are getting their historical information from a variety of places, not all of which are reliable,” she says. “As a historian who can provide them with reliable information I have a responsibility to do that where I can.”

Words: Madison Bradburn | Image of Confederate Monument in Concord N.C.: Lynn Roberson
When the Affordable Care Act picked up its “Obamacare” label – a name reportedly given to the legislation by a lobbyist – the die was cast. The 2010 comprehensive national health care reform law would thereafter be branded as partisan policy and would struggle to gain widespread legitimacy.

There certainly is some truth to the perception that the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, is not bipartisan. The legislation received no Republican votes at final passage, and while some consider it President Barack Obama’s greatest legislative achievement, others say it has proven costly and has caused numerous Americans to lose their health insurance.

Understanding public perceptions of the ACA – particularly understanding how people perceive the ACA’s beneficiaries, those who consider themselves to be among the ACA’s beneficiaries, and the individual and contextual sources of these beliefs – can offer important lessons as the nation wrestles again with how to move forward in health care reform, says UNC Charlotte political scientist Jacqueline Chattopadhyay.

Political scientists widely note that the ACA actually draws not only from liberal principles but also from conservative tenets. “Three arguments suggest that the Affordable Care Act built upon America’s past health policy arrangements and represents an ideological middle ground,” says Chattopadhyay, who researches social and health policy.

First, to expand health coverage to millions of previously uninsured people, the ACA relies on existing public and private forms of health insurance. The law expands and simplifies eligibility for Medicaid, which is a public insurance program, but also facilitates and subsidizes broader access to private insurance. This duality echoes prior U.S. health policy, Chattopadhyay says.

Second, while the ACA expands federal regulation of health insurance companies and markets, the states retain extensive health policymaking power within their borders, she says. This sub-national
power has shaped the law’s implementation. For example, states have the choice to run their own health insurance exchanges or partner with the federal government. In addition, while a majority of state governments have implemented the ACA’s Medicaid expansion as of November 2017, many have opted against expansion.

“Third,” Chattopadhyay says, “the ACA incorporates historically Democratic and Republican policy ideas – its likeness to Massachusetts’ 2006 health reform law, signed by Governor Mitt Romney, being but one example.”

Despite its bipartisan legacy and Obama’s view that the law benefits all Americans, not all Americans see it as beneficial. Differences of opinion tend to stack up along ideological and demographic lines. While opinion patterns are somewhat sensitive to how ACA support is measured, generally, favorability toward the ACA is higher among Democrats than Republicans, among ideological liberals than conservatives, and among African Americans than white Americans.

Chattopadhyay’s research finds that middle-income earners are less likely than lower-income earners to say they have personally benefited from the ACA thus far. This income difference shows up among Democrats and Republicans.

Chattopadhyay and other researchers want to better understand how policies can spark and sustain broad citizen coalitions, especially policies that – like the ACA – were passed into law amidst partisan polarization. To do so, they are studying why citizen responses to a policy may be fragmented. In one of her academic papers analyzing public reaction to the ACA, Chattopadhyay proposes new ways to study how the feedback logic model – the chain of events through which some policies acquire robust citizen support – can get interrupted.

At the individual level, self-interest in relation to a public policy is not a straightforward calculation. “Growing research suggests that symbolic considerations, including but not limited to partisanship, may inform how people evaluate policy,” Chattopadhyay says. “This means that people’s partisan views may affect their assessments of the impact of the ACA on them personally.”

At the contextual level, media content may influence the public’s evaluation of healthcare policy, she says. “Media content can generate claims about whom a policy helps and hurts,” she says. “Mass media, along with political elites, can also make certain considerations more or less prominent in policy discussions.”

These contributions to the informational context around a policy can at times widen, or activate, possibly dormant divisions between people.

“Greater research on health insurance literacy and on citizen responses to health insurance regulations – which potentially impact everyone – would also advance our understanding of citizen engagement with health policy,” she says.

The nation’s task of debating and shaping health care policy to meet the demands of an increasingly diversified population is monumental. Yet, groundbreaking policy decisions of the past demonstrate it can be done – with perseverance and insight.

“American federal health policy is historically contentious,” Chattopadhyay says. “Expansive health reforms proposed by Presidents FDR, Truman, Nixon, and particularly Clinton, failed to become law,” she says. “The ACA’s enactment broke this pattern; scholars describe it as a policy event on par with the New Deal, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and civil rights laws.”

Social Security also saw serious contention in its first decade, which can be a lesson from the distant past to guide our thinking today, Chattopadhyay says. “The ACA may not follow suit in becoming a “third rail of American politics,” as Social Security has been called, but it has been the law for nearly eight years, and many people and institutions have adjusted their behavior around its provisions,” she says.

When thinking about the future of American health policy, she also notes that substantial policy changes can take place through quiet, low-visibility legislative and administrative mechanisms that fly under the radar, with little public attention or awareness.

Future research should also continue to consider how states, and public administrators at all levels of government, are implementing current health care policy, and what impact those different implementation approaches have on citizens, she says. “The determinants and upshots of states’ divergent health policy trajectories will continue to merit study, particularly in light of evidence that cross-state health policy variation relates to aggregate health disparities,” she says. “Also, partly due to congressional polarization, the executive branch will continue, as it has in the past, to significantly shape American health policy.”

Words: Caitlin Mauk | Image: Lynn Roberson

“Growing research suggests that symbolic considerations, including but not limited to partisanship, may inform how people evaluate policy.”

— Jacqueline Chattopadhyay
Divisiveness in our nation is nothing new. What makes the current situation more toxic than usual is that we have many more outlets to express our discontent, particularly through social media. But even when there were relatively few outlets to express opinions, debates could become toxic. The Civil War is an obvious example of that.

With the exception of World War II, even foreign wars failed to generate consensus, either in Washington or among the general public. Some historians have depicted the two decades after World War II, from 1945 to 1965, as the Era of Consensus. That’s because much of the legislation that we associate with modern America was passed during those two decades: civil rights, gender equity, environmental protection, medical insurance for the elderly and infirm, and immigration reform. This bonanza was possible primarily because of the efforts of three presidents – Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Lyndon B. Johnson. It was not easy, and the backlash from these measures eventually overwhelmed the sentiment for an activist federal government.

The fractures in society – generational, geographic, class, racial, and ethnic – existed well before the early 1960s. There were always those who were fearful of change, fearful of new groups asserting themselves, suspicious of new economic forces, new religious ideas, new music and literature, and just about anything that smacked of divergence from the status quo or deviated from a mythical era of harmony somewhere in the recent past.

Since the late 1930s a coalition of conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats had blocked Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives. The Republicans feared that Washington would usurp state and local government prerogatives, and the Southern Democrats worried that an active government might challenge white supremacy.

In 1944, a frustrated FDR pitched a plan to his 1940 Republican presidential opponent, Wendell Willkie: “We ought to have two real parties – one liberal and the other conservative.” The conservative coalition thwarted Harry Truman’s initiatives in civil rights and immigration leaving him to wish “that there might be organized a liberal party in this country so that the Southern Democrats could go where they belonged into the conservative Republican party.”

When the Republicans finally controlled both Congress and the Presidency after the 1952 election, conservatives hoped for a repeal of the New Deal. Eisenhower, however, would have none of it, and the result was gridlock. He fumed that unless Republicans could “develop and enact . . . a progressive, dynamic program enhancing the welfare of the people of our country . . . it does not deserve to remain in power.” Sure enough, the voters returned the Democrats to majorities in both houses of Congress in the 1954 mid-term elections.

The conservative coalition battled Eisenhower’s nomination of Earl Warren for Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, cognizant of Warren’s reputation for reigning in corporate power and promoting civil rights. Enough party members finally fell in line to secure Warren’s nomination.

John F. Kennedy experienced the same frustrations with the conservative coalition as Truman and Eisenhower. The major difference, though, was that JFK, looking toward his re-election in 1964, rarely challenged the Congress. Since Southern Democrats dominated key congressional committees, Congress sat on its collective hands. In November 1963, The New York Times complained, “Rarely has there been such a pervasive attitude of discouragement around Capitol Hill and such a feeling of helplessness
to deal with it. This has been one of the least productive sessions of Congress within the memory of most of its members.”

After Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson pressed his late predecessor’s agenda with considerably more vigor and acumen. No longer beholden to a conservative Texas constituency, LBJ relished the opportunity to employ government for the greater good. “Now I represent the whole country, and I have the power. I always vowed that if I ever had the power I’d make sure every Negro had the same chance as every white man. Now I have it. And I’m going to use it.”

And he did, leading efforts that ended racial segregation by law and guaranteed African American voting rights in the South, abolished discriminatory quotas on Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, provided legal redress for gender and racial discrimination, established Medicare and Medicaid, and passed clean air and clean water legislation. LBJ was able to accomplish this because, for a little more than 18 months following the 1964 election, the Democrats had a super-majority in Congress, marginalizing the Southern wing of their party, neutralizing conservative Republican opposition, and overcoming well-financed lobbyists from the medical, chemical, and evangelical communities. But Vietnam and racial revolts in the nation’s cities provided openings for the opponents of an inclusive and activist federal government.

An early indication of the opposition’s appeal occurred during the 1964 presidential election campaign. Alabama Governor George Wallace garnered 34 percent of the vote in the Wisconsin Democratic primary. In Maryland, Wallace carried 43 percent of the vote in the Wisconsin Democratic primary. Working class whites, concerned about declining industry, contested Democratic primary vote. Younger Democrats, including Gary Hart of Colorado and Bill Clinton of Arkansas, recognized two emerging verities about American politics. First, a knowledge economy was emerging, and, second, minorities – particularly African Americans – had nowhere to go for a political home except to the Democrats. The Democrats began to focus their electoral appeals on the growing population of professional, educated, suburban voters.

The apotheosis of this strategy was the Clinton presidency from 1993 to 2001. In 1996, Clinton famously said, “The era of big government is over.” Clinton’s deregulatory initiatives and welfare reform would have found comfortable niches in a Reagan policy portfolio.

After the Great Recession of 2008, and with the formation of the Tea Party in 2010, the fissures in American society that have existed at least since the 1930s grew larger and sharper. Geographic divisions between the coasts and inland America, economic divisions between large metropolitan areas and small towns, and lifestyle divisions between those who have and those who have not increasingly characterize America. We continue to see the middle class shrink and the working class struggle.

When Republican candidate Donald Trump proclaimed “Make America Great Again,” Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton offered, “America is Already Great.” Trump looked back toward an imagined glorious past when Protestant white men ran things, and smoke was the sign of progress and prosperity. In the process, prejudices – which had been there all along, as George Wallace demonstrated – bubbled to the surface again and reinforced the growing estrangement in American society.

Hillary Clinton’s campaign ignored the fact that a sizable portion of the population was hurting; that the status quo was not sustainable for these people, nor, ultimately for America. Her inability to rise above identity politics – itself a divisive strategy – and her unwillingness to take on interests from which she derived a sizable income, reinforced the idea that she lived in a bubble of unreality.

So, we are a divided nation. Yet, in the immediate postwar years, we had leaders such as Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson who, often well ahead of public opinion, understood that we are a commonwealth and that we needed to create a country that could broaden opportunities for all Americans. At this particular moment of divisiveness, it may be instructive to turn to our nation’s history to find our path forward.

Words: David Goldfield, Robert Lee Bailey
Professor of History and author of a new book, "The Gifted Generation"
MEETING IN THE MIDDLE
Deepening Divisions Create Challenge
Eric Heberlig, professor of political science, considers political divisiveness in this Question & Answer feature. Heberlig’s book Congressional Parties, Institutional Ambition, and the Financing of Majority Control, published with Bruce A. Larson, received the 26th D.B. Hardeman Prize from the LBJ Foundation as the most significant book on the U.S. Congress.

Q. Are we really more polarized today than ever before?

A. The Civil War era wins for the most divided era. The Vietnam War era was certainly divisive and involved a number of changes to the social order, including changes in civil rights and women’s rights, that were visibly on display. Still, party divisions in congressional voting are now similar to the Civil War era and are much more evident than in the 1960s. In terms of our ability to measure divisions with public opinion polls, which has been since the 1930s, more of the public is consistently liberal or consistently conservative now than in the past. Fewer people describe themselves as moderates, and voters have matched their ideology to their party more now than in the past. So, the Democratic Party is more consistently liberal, and the Republican Party is more consistently conservative. Additionally, these political divisions show up in all kinds of areas outside of politics, such as what kind of stores we buy from, what types of media we use, and what type of communities we prefer to live in. The fact that social, informational, and political divisions are now mutually reinforcing makes the divisions seem deeper and harder to overcome.

Although it seems easy to blame Donald Trump or Nancy Pelosi with the current state of dysfunction in Washington, they are the symptoms of the issue, not the cause. Successful politicians package policies and frame messages in ways that large groups of political activists, donors, and voters respond to. Their policies are more extreme than the average swing voter because swing voters tend to be inconsistent in what they demand from government – for example, low taxes, high benefits, and balanced budgets. Swing voters also react more to the state of the economy than the productivity of Congress, so politicians respond to more extreme activists who consistently pay attention to what Washington is doing and who consistently reward – through donating time and money, and casting votes – the politicians who advocate the policies they prefer.

Q. Is the U.S. acting like a pendulum that has to swing from one extreme to the other before adjusting in the middle?

A. In the past, there were moderates in Congress who could talk across party and ideological lines and create policies that were satisfactory to many on both sides. Right now there is no middle in Congress to create compromises. When the Democrats win, they pass policies that are more liberal than most of the public prefers, and when the Republicans win, they produce policies that are more conservative than most people prefer. And despite the fact that voters always say they want compromises, they say that because it is the socially desirable answer. When they say they want compromise, they mean they prefer that the other side capitulates to them. They prefer that their side wins and sticks to its principles, and they reward politicians accordingly. Politicians are aware of this and are not inclined to take risks that would upset their supporters.

Q. What impacts are we seeing from polarization?

A. Conflict is not going away. People have different interests and different visions of what makes a good society and are at liberty to express those differences. The risk in the current state of affairs is that because our political, friendship, community, and traditional and social media networks largely overlap, we are only exposed to information sources that confirm our pre-existing points of view. So when we encounter someone with different beliefs and priorities, we cannot understand where they are coming from, so we dismiss them as immoral or treasonous. When you see someone as immoral or treasonous, you are not going to make an effort to build consensus or find compromise.

Q. Does polarization threaten the separate but equal branches of Executive, Legislative and Judicial?

A. The founders of our nation did not want political parties because they feared that parties would place their electoral and policy self-interests above the public good. They created separations of power and checks and balances to maximize deliberation and compromise. But the system does not work as well when we refuse to deliberate or compromise. That said, the founders thought inaction was a perfectly acceptable result because of the risk of social division from acting before there is public consensus on the right course of action. One reason the founders created a system of checks and balances, separation of powers, and the complicated system of selecting officials – such as the Electoral College and judicial appointment and confirmation – is that they distrusted public opinion. They thought the public was too self-interested, shortsighted, and easily manipulated by politicians. They would not be keen on the current environment that seems to value ideology, grievance, and sound bites over policy expertise and governing experience.

Q. We have lived with this system for almost 250 years. Is it time to rethink it?

A. Parliamentary systems would provide quicker and cleaner reactions to public opinion. But if you do not support the team that wins an election, you have fewer protections to keep “bad” policies from being implemented. More broadly, Americans love democracy. But they tend to equate democracy with liberty and freedom, not with public engagement in community decision-making or deliberation and compromise. We tend to think there is an easy “right” answer out there, and if public officials are arguing rather than acting, it’s because they are serving themselves rather the public or serving special interests. Identifying the goals of economic growth, peace and security is easy, but how to achieve them and who pays the costs are much more difficult questions and will and should cause legitimate disagreement.

Q. Broadly speaking, how did we get here, and where are we headed?

A. The 1960s was a key part of the current polarization. The Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, the anti-war movement of the 1960s pushed conservative Southerners out of the Democratic Party. The rise of conservative Christians in the Republican Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s pushed less religious voters on the coasts towards the Democratic Party. The Southern white working class has been Republican for a generation, but the Northern white working class largely stuck with the Democrats until Trump. We will have to study if Trump’s election causes a permanent change in the behavior of white working class voters, if the Republican Party adapts its economic policies to continue to hold them, and what the Democrats will do in response.
The world often debates the complex issue of terrorism by focusing on one solution over another, as a sort of binary choice. Yet, UNC Charlotte terrorism researchers James Walsh and Justin Conrad say the optimal way to understand and ultimately confront systemic acts of terror actually requires a more nuanced approach.

Take the seemingly opposed concepts of fighting terrorism and protecting citizen rights, for instance. “This issue is often framed as a trade-off between liberty and security – we can have more liberty, but at the cost of less security from terrorism and other threats, or we can sacrifice some liberty for greater security,” Walsh says. “Framing the issue in such general terms, though, is not really useful. It suggests that we must choose which value – security or liberty – is most important. A better approach is to devise policies that minimize the threat to liberty from enhanced security.”

The key challenge is collecting detailed and specific intelligence on the activities of terrorist groups, Walsh says. “This challenge is unlikely to be met with security policies that are indiscriminate, in the sense that they reduce the security of all or most citizens,” he says. “A better approach is to ensure that intelligence collection is precisely focused on indicators of specific threats. One way to ensure such a focus is to maintain laws and practices that ensure close oversight of intelligence activities by the legislature, judiciary, and press.”

Another apparently black-or-white choice arises from discussions about diplomatic and military actions. Strategists and pundits debate whether the United States and its western allies should exert their will to build solid democracies in foreign countries in hopes of combating extremism, or whether they should establish an indefinite military presence. Research suggests, however, that taking an either-or approach can lead to long-term failure. Consider the events of the past two years in Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State has lost most of the territory it had controlled. “This is the result of careful diplomacy between the United States, the Iraqi government, and other actors in the region, along with the integration of American and coalition air power and the deployment of local ground forces,” Walsh says.

Despite this dramatic progress in combating terrorism in the region, history predicts that the Islamic State will find ways to persist, much as its predecessor in Iraq did by regrouping after sustaining military losses between 2007 and 2009. “This occurred because of the civil war in Syria and the short-sighted policies of the Iraqi government at the time, which failed to consolidate battlefield gains by fulfilling promises of fair treatment and reconstruction in areas where the militants held sway,” Walsh says.

This experience, as well as those of many other campaigns, indicates that ending political violence is a fundamentally political process, not a military one. “While military force can undermine militants’ ability to seize and hold territory, a long-term solution requires addressing the underlying causes that give rise to militancy...
could have predicted the direct costs suffered by the Iraqi people over the last 15 years, for instance, would our decision in 2003 have been the same? If the U.S. could have predicted its own costs in military and economic terms, would the decision have been the same?”

Ethical and legal debates exist as well, such as whether externally imposed regime change can even be justified in the current international system, he says.

Similar debates emerge around the issue of torture and coercion. Torture and its effectiveness have proven a sharp point of disagreement among politicians in particular. The debaters often split into two camps: those who advocate that torture be used versus those who argue for a more humane approach, including rapport-building.

“It is difficult to provide iron-clad scientific evidence on the relative effectiveness of these two approaches,” Walsh says. “But on balance, most of the evidence indicates that torture is particularly ineffective, even if its victims provide useful information. The use of torture validates the terrorists’ claim that they face an inhumane opponent, making it easier for them to recruit supporters and to justify their own use of indiscriminate violence.”

Torture can also alienate domestic groups and the international community, often when their support is most urgently needed, he says.

Terrorist tactics appear to have grown more ruthless than in the past, Conrad says, pointing to the instance of Russian anarchists who killed Alexander II yet intentionally chose to spare civilians. “ISIS, of course, has no such reservations and regularly kills and tortures civilians,” he says.

The organizational structure of these groups also has evolved over time. “Whereas even as late as the 1990s, many groups were organized along quasi-military hierarchical lines, today’s groups are more decentralized,” Conrad says. “And groups like ISIS are increasingly relying on “inspiring” violence rather than actually ordering members to conduct attacks.”

While their tactics may have changed, a careful study of history shows that terrorists’ motives in many respects have never changed, Conrad says.

“Terrorists have always sought political change by spreading fear,” he says. “ISIS, which seeks a political change by overthrowing Middle Eastern governments, is not far removed from anarchist terrorists of the 19th century who also sought to overthrow governments.”

No matter their tactics, or their motivations, one thing that remains constant is their lack of long-term success, Conrad says.

“Recent studies of terrorist organizations have revealed that they are rarely successful in achieving their stated political goals,” he says. “Only in about 5 percent of cases do terrorist groups achieve the broad political change that they pursue. In that sense, terrorism is largely a failure. But we cannot ignore the massive human and economic costs that these groups have imposed on people around the world. While terrorism may ultimately be a losing strategy, it is one that has had a dramatic impact on our modern world.”

Meanwhile, the need for citizens to understand terrorism also persists, in part so we can assess the actual risks and the complexities of defeating it, the UNC Charlotte researchers say.

“Too often, terrorism is treated in simplistic terms by the media, which undermines our efforts as a society to combat it,” Conrad says. “For instance, the recent Las Vegas mass shooting has been referred to as terrorism, despite the fact that it does not meet many of the existing definitions of terrorism. Lumping all acts like this into a single category significantly hinders our ability to learn from, and counteract, true incidents of political terrorism. While the military, law enforcement and others are on the front lines of the counter-terrorism effort, they need an informed public to support that effort.”

Words: Brian Halliburton
IMMIGRATION

Receptivity And integration Offer A Key

Heather Smith is a professor of geography and a faculty fellow with the Levine Scholars Program. Claire Schuch is a post-doctoral fellow in receptivity, inclusion and community engagement. They are co-founders and directors of the RISING Research Group. In this Question & Answer feature, Smith and Schuch consider the nation’s ongoing debate about immigration. How do communities build an environment that provides immigrants access to resources and opportunities to be happy, healthy members of these communities?

Q. What does your research suggest are some of the most important issues that we as citizens should consider as we think about the topic of immigration?

A. (Smith) Receptivity and integration are key because they are the foundation upon which immigrants build new lives in new places and navigate their way into the fabric and opportunity structures of U.S. society. While receptivity addresses the extent to which a place or community is, or is not, welcoming to immigrants, integration is the process through which both immigrants and the communities in which they settle become interwoven across cultural, social, economic, and political spheres. A lack of receptivity can lead to integration challenges, which can lead to blocked mobility, exclusion, discrimination, and hardship for the immigrants, as well as stunted growth, ethno-racial tension, and unmet potential for the community at large. Research shows that communities thrive when they welcome immigrants and develop services and resources that help support the two-way process of integration, including English-language training, cultural competency, access to higher education, and work skills development.

Q. What are some of the things you think that the media or others talking about immigration “get wrong” or should discuss more deeply?

A. (Schuch) We must acknowledge the wide variety of cultures, nationalities, socioeconomic statuses, and immigration statuses of immigrants. In an era of contentious politics, where immigrants are misrepresented and generalized, pushing back on stereotypes and oversimplifications is important. There are, for example, widespread assumptions that immigrants take more than they give, but that is not the case when you look at stories as well as statistics. Across the country, immigrants contribute to the economy, cultural diversity, and social wellbeing of our communities. In urban areas, economic recovery rates are higher when cities are more diverse and count immigrants among their populations. Also, rural areas experiencing declining populations have been revived because of immigrants and their children.

Q. Your work is focused on community-engaged scholarship around this issue. What does that mean, and why are you approaching the topic and your research this way?

A. (Smith) Community-engaged scholarship brings the university and the community together in a mutually beneficial and non-hierarchical partnership to conduct research, teaching, and outreach in a way that leverages the knowledge and resources of all partners to address pressing issues. Our particular approach also designs and builds community-based interventions addressing the challenges identified through our collaborative research and engagement. For example, Claire’s research with immigrant youth around issues of access to the labor market and higher education led to the development of Youth ADAPT NC, a support group and web-based resource offering tips and insights into the job search process.

Q. What does the term new gateway mean, and why is it an important concept to understand?

A. (Smith) Charlotte is among a subset of U.S. cities experiencing exponential immigrant growth since the 1990s. The pace and character of this growth has garnered Charlotte designation by the Brookings Institution as a major emerging immigrant gateway. Unlike traditional gateways such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles or Miami, new gateways have little previous immigration history or experience integrating foreign-born and culturally distinct populations into their communities. As such, new gateways are in a reactive rather than proactive position. They are trying to respond to the needs of foreign-born newcomers absent the infrastructure of receptivity and integration, and are doing so in the context of communities that are unaccustomed to cultural difference and rapid change. Understanding that new gateways have an opportunity to learn from old gateways is an important part of recognizing that cities have a choice to welcome and embrace immigrants in ways that can benefit the community, and to avoid the inequities and injustices that can lead to social and economic instability.

Q. What does rescinding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) mean to undocumented young people in our communities?

A. (Schuch) Rescinding DACA is devastating. In 2015-2016, I conducted a study of Hispanic immigrant youth labor market incorporation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Of the 36 participants, 24 were DACA recipients. DACA allowed recipients to obtain a Social Security number, giving them access to a driver’s license and employment, and making it more likely for them to stay in school and enroll in college. Beyond that, DACA’s deportation protection drastically shifted the way youth go about their daily lives; they felt safer, more empowered, and confident. They were more likely to be involved in their communities and set higher aspirations for themselves. Lastly,
obtaining a Social Security number is symbolic because it recognizes people as official members of society. A “clean” DREAM Act can bring back hope to DACA recipients. That alone is not enough, though. The U.S. needs comprehensive immigration reform.

Q. How can the United States create an efficient and attainable path towards citizenship for immigrants seeking refuge?

A. (Smith) Immigrants to the U.S. are not a uniform group. Not all are seeking refuge – most leave their countries of origin to reunify their families or to take advantage of economic opportunities. Similarly, not all immigrants elect to become U.S. citizens. The choice is a personal one. It can be constrained by resources, since it is expensive, or regulations in the country of origin that restrict dual citizenship, for example. That said, given the current contention and uncertainty about the future course of immigration policy, citizenship applications among eligible visa holders – those having held green cards for at least 5 years – are on the rise. A recent article in The New York Times cited an 8 percent increase in citizenship applications in the first three quarters of the 2017 fiscal year over the same period in 2016.

Q. How can we create a culture that promotes happy and healthy community members regardless of nationality?

A. (Schuch) Healthy, happy communities are places where there is equity in access to opportunities, where people feel empowered, and where people believe their contributions matter. As such, we need to build towards equity to fix current imbalances. This includes creating a culture of appreciating rather than discriminating against difference (in culture, skin color, accent, language, etc.) Moreover, we need to adjust policies to match the reality on the ground. Current U.S. immigration policies are out-of-date and inflexible; they don’t accommodate our globalized and rapidly changing economy. Backlogs are also a big concern; people can wait 10, 15, 20 years to get their green cards. Immigrant integration needs to be addressed at the local, state, and federal levels, and involves collaborations between government, non-profits, the private sector, immigrants, and U.S.-born residents.

Q. What can we learn from other countries’ approaches to immigrants?

A. (Schuch) I don’t think any country has gotten it right across the board in terms of immigration policy and immigrant integration. In countries with differing immigration policies, parallel questions regarding belonging, who has the right to enter/stay in a country, and fear of “the other” gaining power or bringing sociocultural change and taking jobs or resources consistently emerge. Still, we can identify specific efforts that have been successful and adopt what works. Countries and cities can inform themselves about best practices and research, and adapt effective efforts to their own context. Scaling it down to the neighborhood or city level can give back influence over immigrant integration and receptivity to local government and residents. In doing this, it is essential to be proactive. ☺
Crafting national policy can be a brutal process, prompting fierce debate. By the
time a bill winds its way through Congress, observers have digested weeks, months
or even years of blow-by-blow accounts delivered by their favorite news outlets and
social media.

The way this reporting unfolds can shape the public’s perception not only of
individual legislation, but also of government in general, leaving some convinced that
government is dysfunctional, research shows.

“There’s a lot of evidence showing that public affairs reports tend to focus on
the combative process of policymaking in Washington, as opposed to the substance
of proposed legislation, and that this focus has negative effects,” says UNC Charlotte
political scientist Mary Layton Atkinson.

“The focus on conflict between political elites lowers public trust in government
institutions and elected leaders.”

Atkinson’s new book, Combative Politics, (The University of Chicago Press) explores
how this emphasis on conflicts between policymakers can dampen support for
legislative reforms, using a combination of experiments, case studies, and observational
analyses in her work.

“When reform legislation becomes the focus of a partisan debate in Congress – and
the news media amplify that conflict with their coverage – many Americans judge the
proposals at the center of the debates more harshly,” she says.

Heated debate and conflict can signal a broken system to observers, she says.
“Lots of Americans want to see lawmakers working together to solve problems, and
believe that solving problems would be a fairly straightforward task if politics and
partisanship didn’t get in the way. This is especially true for folks who don’t have
strong opinions about policy and aren’t ideologically motivated. This is a big slice of
the public.”

It is important to note, however, that while people can view conflict as a sign
that the system is broken, that does not mean it actually is broken, Atkinson says.
“Debate has an important role to play in our democratic system,” she says. “This is a
subtle but important distinction.”

Still, people who are less ideologically

through debate and compromise, we hope
they will reach creative solutions that
will improve our country,” Atkinson says.
“Highlighting these legitimate differences
of opinion, and outlining the relationship
between societal problems and the solutions
being developed to redress them, might help
Americans better understand the need for
debate and its potential to be useful.”

If the media used its lens of conflict-

in false reports, exaggerations and hoaxes

highlighting these legitimate differences

in false reports, exaggerations and hoaxes
 sometimes lumped under the general heading of “fake news.”

The modern version of “fake news” first captured widespread public notice in 2016. That year, print news stories mentioning “fake news” increased six-fold over the preceding year, Atkinson says. While she notes that “fake news” has a centuries long history, the new dynamic is the speed by which such reports spread, much of it over the internet.

The mainstream press has worked to combat “fake news” reports, particularly through fact-checking sites that document and debunk these reports. Some news outlets have inadvertently passed along “fake news” and had reporting errors. Some policymakers and third-party groups pass along "fake news." While journalists and others seek to educate citizens about “fake news,” lawmakers are coping with changing news habits in part by reaching out directly to citizens with unfiltered messages using their websites, social media and other digital resources. They also at times cope by taking their debates and discussions behind closed doors.

Atkinson’s research finds that past legislation that drew broad bipartisan support attracted less media interest. This may suggest, she says, that the strategy with the most promise for lawmakers who want to avoid critical or conflict-focused press may be to focus on bipartisan action. 

Words: Lynn Roberson
Dan Grano remembers the moment in 2016 when he noticed Colin Kaepernick, the then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback, take a seat on the bench during the national anthem. “Now that,” Grano thought, “takes a lot of guts.”

If Grano was struck by the athlete’s protest against injustice, he was even more riveted by what unfolded over the coming months. Within a few weeks of Kaepernick’s act, teammate Eric Reid joined Kaepernick in sinking to one knee during the anthem. They chose the gesture, Reid says, for its humility, respect and resemblance to a flag at half-staff during tragedy. They intended it as a peaceful protest of police brutality, the criminal justice system and systematic oppression against people of color.

In short order, their action spread through the NFL and into college sports, and even high school athletics. Critics defined the acts as signals of disrespect for the flag, for U.S. military and the nation itself. President Donald Trump latched onto the controversy, with scathing comments on social media and in speeches.

Grano, an associate professor in communication studies who researches public advocacy and sports communication and culture, realized something more than a momentary message was being sent by the players.

“It’s a different moment in the history of sport,” he says.

Grano’s book on sports and religion, The Eternal Present of Sport: Rethinking Sport and Religion (Temple University Press) reflects on elite athletes representing especially powerful embodiments of religious and social conflict. He is also working on a co-edited volume with Michael Butterworth, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, that specifically addresses sport and political struggle.

Grano’s research rethinks the relationship between professional sports figures and points of political and social rupture. Increasingly, elite athletes are emerging as activists, embracing how their positions and their power provide a platform to make statements on societal issues, he says.

“I think sport has changed, and that change feels more lasting than the current political environment,” Grano says. That means that fans will either accept a side dish of activism with their sports, or they will check out, he says.

Sports protests may have reached a watershed moment, but athletic contests have long been intertwined with ideas of politics, religion, and patriotism. Consider these historical moments: Muhammad Ali and his protests against the Vietnam War; U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos and their 1968 black power salute; and WNBA players and their T-shirts in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The list goes on.

Sports, says Grano, have been a crucible for so many of the issues prominent in the larger culture – racial segregation, sex segregation, labor rights, public funding of stadiums, and other issues.

“The national anthem is a really good example of how politics is in the everyday life of sport,” Grano says. “Anthem ceremonies have historically been used in sport to celebrate a usually militaristic notion of patriotism.”

At times that military-focused display has been less a spontaneous expression of support of U.S. troops and more a feature of a quiet, well-orchestrated plan by the federal government, he says. In 2015, a federal oversight report revealed that the Department of Defense for years had been paying millions in taxpayer dollars to sports teams and leagues to stage events promoting the military in a program referred to as paid patriotism.

The program ended after the report was published. But Grano says the fact that military flyovers, the anthem and military-focused displays are seen as a normal part of a game shows just how embedded politics is within sports.

“Sports’ patriotic rituals have historically been adjusted around specific ideas of patriotism, such as military patriotism, which is only one demonstration of patriotism,” he says. That is a factor in why the NFL player anthem protests have struck such a nerve.

While athletes have been clear that they are protesting racial injustice from the start of the protests, others have established what Grano terms a competing narrative.

“Opponents to the protests or people who have not followed it closely and aren’t clear about the original intentions say that the protests are about the flag and patriotism,” Grano says. That was accelerated when Trump weighed in on the protests, calling the protesting players an unprintable name, saying they should be fired, and describing the athletes as disrespectful of the nation.

“The idea that the protests are about the flag, patriotism, and respect for the military did not come out of thin air,” Grano says. “These competing interpretations are in place because interested actors are interpreting the protest according to their political perspective or commercial interest. I don’t think it’s very unusual for protests – especially about race – to be obscured in the public space.”

Here’s perhaps the surprising thing: this misunderstanding of the protesters’ intent, willful or otherwise, may not matter.

“It may not be the most important thing in the world that everybody understands exactly what the protest is about,” Grano says. “That’s not necessarily an achievable goal for any protest, especially right now. I think it matters a great deal that the players are using a very public stage to do something that continues to call attention at the very least to the protests themselves.”

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that, despite his stellar athletic record, Kaepernick has remained unemployed since he opted out of his 49ers contract in the spring when he decided they would take action against him. He has filed a grievance against the NFL, arguing that teams have colluded in not signing him.

Even if the intensity of the current protests abates, the participating athletes may have created an environment in which players will continue to use their platform to express their opinions on social justice issues, while the NFL as a business seeks its path through the debate.

“If history teaches us anything, it’s that a commercial model for sports is extremely flexible, and networks and institutions will find a way to enfold activism into their business model,” he says. “I think we’re in a moment now where professional athletes are probably set up to be more activist and more outspoken. We’re going to enter into a state of development in sports leagues and sports production where people get used to absorbing sports and politics together.”

Words: Amber Veverka
ON THE SIDELINES

PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES’ ACTIONS SIGNAL SOCIAL PROTEST CHANGE
In this Question and Answer feature, Distinguished Professor of Healthcare Ethics Ruth Groenhout addresses bioethical questions that are confronting society currently. Groenhout, a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy, specializes in bioethics, ethical theory, and feminist philosophy.

**Q.** What are the bioethical issues that are the most pressing and critical today?

**A.** The three most pressing issues in bioethics today are access to health care, global coordination in the face of new contagious diseases, and the challenge that the expenses of new technology pose for funding. These issues are all related in central ways. Too many people lack access to basic health care, whether because of poverty, distance from providers, lack of insurance, or lack of knowledge. The world is debating the ethics of using CRISPR/Cas9 technology to produce expensive genetic cures, while rates of maternal morbidity/mortality in the U.S. more than doubled between 1990 and 2013, according to a 2015 WHO report. If we aren’t willing to spend the fairly moderate amounts necessary to provide adequate access to prenatal care and to use the data we have about best practices to review and upgrade the provision of care, spending millions of dollars on technology that will be available to only a very few fortunate individuals seems questionable. The issue of coordination of care also contributes to an inability to coordinate worldwide health initiatives. With these outbreaks, we need to coordinate care across international boundaries, have reasonable amounts of funding available to respond effectively, and develop the sorts of shared trust among the global community to be able to share the task of responding. Yet, it feels as though all of these are being eroded or attacked rather than supported.

Finally, because health care has now developed so many extremely expensive interventions, even middle-class Americans find themselves struggling to afford insurance, and the costs of health care simply keep rising. We need to think carefully about what sorts of treatments are most important for us to develop and fund, and be realistic about the many things that may be too expensive to provide for everyone.

**Q.** How do bioethical issues change as technology and digital medicine advance?

**A.** Clearly we can do many things now that would not have been possible only 10 years ago. In many of these cases we look for technological solutions to problems that are deeply human, and too often the technology does not really address what needs fixing. Take the issue of so-called digital pills that allow caregivers to monitor clients’ medication use and schedules. The pills contain minute traces of a heavy metal that reacts when it comes into contact with stomach acid. The patient wears a patch that detects the signal and records usage. A recent study estimates that less than 45 percent of people take their medications as directed, perhaps due to confusion, cost, and other reasons. No evidence shows that having a big-brotherish nanochip recording one’s medication will address most of the reasons why people don’t take their pills. What this new technology does do is make medicine more expensive. Meanwhile, patients with...
long-term psychological conditions such as schizophrenia would lose frequent face-to-face interaction with clinicians, which does more to keep them on-track than the technological solution likely could.

Q. How do deepening political and societal divides affect these issues?

A. Political divisions are making it increasingly difficult to reach any consensus on anything in health care. Labeling news that one doesn’t like as "fake news" makes it almost impossible to discuss policy issues in ways that respond to facts and statistics. While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has strengths and weaknesses, we can’t address the weaknesses, or build on the strengths, if people won’t actually take the time to know what has been working and what hasn’t worked. The inclusion of birth control in the package of basic services that insurance companies provide, for example, also lowered the rates of abortions in regions that implemented the ACA, and that should be considered a success, regardless of politics.

Q. What ethics are involved with the debate over a national health plan?

A. One of the central questions we’ll need to confront is the question of what structural model we should use for providing health care. England, for example, saves large amounts of money by having a single-payer model for the provision of most of its health care. That means the government provides the clinics, pays the health care professionals, and people’s treatment is covered by tax dollars. It works much the same way as our own system of providing public education. Other countries use insurance plans to provide access to care, but they regulate the coverage heavily, requiring insurers to provide basic packages to every customer, and limiting the profits insurance companies can make, much like with regulated utility companies here. Either of these models can work, but both would require us to come to some agreement about what we owe to each other as citizens, and about what the role of government oversight should be. They also would require us to recognize that there have to be limits to how much health care can be provided. Consider the fact that Medicaid currently will cover the cost of an organ transplant, but will only cover the anti-rejection medications that are needed to keep the organ functioning for three years. In the case of kidney transplants, which are cheaper in the long run than dialysis, this policy dooms a lot of low-income folks to dialysis, which is tremendously expensive. Should we change that policy and cover anti-rejection medication? These are the sorts of discussions we need to have.

Q. What are the ethical dilemmas related to CRISPR/Cas9?

A. One of the basic questions is the question of basic economic fairness: if this technology has been developed using tax dollars that all of us contribute, then should the developers of the technology be allowed to make it so expensive that only the wealthy can afford to use it? This is a particular concern as we think about the potential for "genetic enhancement" – that is, the possibility of using genetic modification to increase individuals’ talents, immunity to disease, longevity, or other biological features. A second concern that this technology raises is that the use, so far, has been on human embryos. On the one hand, altering an embryo’s genetic make-up could be a wonderful way to avoid certain genetic conditions. On the other hand, experimenting on an embryo, by definition, is experimentation on individuals who cannot consent. They would have to live for the rest of their lives with that intervention, which could include unintended long-term problems.

Finally, any genetic editing technology raises questions about what is considered a "defect" to be edited out. The history of medicine has some pretty horrible examples of powerful groups trying to use medical techniques to erase other groups they considered inferior. Technology that allows us to manipulate the genes of future generations has even more powerful potential to be misused for eugenic purposes, and we should always guard against that.

Q. Are these ethical issues, broadly speaking, actually different for us depending on our demographics?

A. Ethics always looks different from different positions in society. For people who hold good, upper-middle class jobs, getting insurance through one’s employer just seems natural. But for the worker trying to survive on multiple part-time positions, or in the new gig economy, the idea that one should rely on an employer for insurance makes no sense. In another example, in recent years we’ve seen how issues such as the opioid epidemic have tracked the difference between rural and urban communities. Rates of opioid abuse are far higher in rural communities, in part because access to treatment programs is so much weaker in rural areas. Other ethical issues really do depend on demographics in concrete ways. Members of ethnic groups that have traditionally been quite isolated, for example, are more likely to have fairly rare genetic diseases. The more rare these conditions are, the fewer resources society in general tends to be willing to devote to treatment or prevention. So, clearly, deep ethical disagreement will occur in these cases.

Q. What are ways for us to find "the middle ground"?

A. One of my favorite moral theorists, Eva Feder Kittay, suggests that when we are thinking about how to share resources, or when we find ourselves disagreeing about policies, we need to see each other as “some mother’s child.” The idea is that every person out there matters, and needs to be met with care and respect. If we could talk with each other from that perspective, even when we disagreed, at least we would be able to listen to each other. It’s also the case that we need to remember that access to health care is something that we can all recognize as valuable. Those of us with health care needs know how important it is, of course, but even people in robust health can value the way that keeping people healthy is good for the economy, good for equal opportunity in the workforce, and good for people’s lives. Those should be values that we share, no matter where we fall on the political spectrum.

Image: Lynn Roberson
Science, Citizen Engagement Essential To Water Health

One of the first things Sandra Clinton has the students in her water resources class do is complete a water footprint calculator to estimate their total water use.

“What it teaches them is that water is in everything,” says Clinton, a research assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences. “Water’s in your clothing; water’s in your car. It’s in your energy source. Every time we have the lights on, we’re using water. Some of the biggest impacts we can have on water have nothing to do with taking shorter showers.”

Clinton includes the exercise in her syllabus to help her students think more broadly and intentionally about this finite resource. Gone are the days, if they ever did exist, when we could turn on the faucet to fill our glass, with little thought of where the water came from and if it would keep flowing.

“There is a growing realization that if you don’t pay attention to your water sources, the impacts are real, immediate, and expensive,” says Craig Allan, professor and chair of the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences. “It’s not fun living with bottled water.”

Contaminated drinking water in Flint, Michigan and other communities, toxic algal blooms in reservoirs, and the impacts of climate change serve as stark reminders of how important water is to health and the vitality of communities.

The general public can directly impact water quality by being keen observers of their surroundings, says Clinton, whose research is focused on understanding human impacts on the structure and function of stream ecosystems.

“Citizens are the first to notice things,” she says. “There are just not enough people to test every single thing every single minute of a day, even when the system in general works well in terms of drinking water quality.”

When water looks or smells bad, or when people see sediment runoff from a development, they can report the problem. In some places, social media and phone apps are available for people to take a photo and send it along for investigation. An app is found on the charlottenc.gov/stormwater site in Mecklenburg County, for example.

Another issue with implications for water research is climate change, with impacts for North Carolina that will reach much further inland than the coast, Allan says. “Climate change is a big deal for this state, even if you ignore or attempt to minimize the impacts of sea level change, which some in this state are trying to do,” he says. “The fact is, except for the communities on the Catawba River, most of the other major communities in the state have headwater reservoir resources, which respond really quickly to changes in precipitation patterns.”

Climate change is already having significant effects on water resources, says David Vinson, an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences whose research examines the processes that control element occurrence in natural and human-modified waters. Regarding climate change, he particularly sees the impact and the interplay with other factors affecting water sources.

“The climate change effects are superimposed on top of what humans have already done for a long time to directly impact water quality and water availability,” he says. “By no means is that to discount the impact of climate change in any way. But, humans have been manipulating the water cycle for a long time, so those local actions will continue to matter.”

While people agree on the need for clean and ample water, they disagree on how far regulations should go.

The debate is playing out most notably at the federal level, centering on a 2015 regulation that sought to clarify water resource management under a provision of the Clean Water Act of 1972. Because of court challenges, the rule was not implemented, and the Trump administration has listed its rollback as a top priority.

The EPA and U.S. Department of the Army are proposing that the 2015 rule would not be applicable until two years after the action is finalized and published in the Federal Register. This amendment would give the agencies the time needed to reconsider the definition of “waters of the United States,” the agencies say. (See epa.gov.)

Critics of the 2015 rule, including farmers, ranchers and business owners, say it went too far in defining the “Waters of the United States,” also known as “navigable waters.”

For Allan, the expansion of water stream protection rules to beyond what he calls “the blue lines on maps” into lower-order streams, smaller streams and headwaters was a significant move.

“When you look at the total stream length miles within somewhere like Mecklenburg County, these small ones add up to far more miles than the bigger streams do,” he says. “To date, places like Mecklenburg County are spending millions on trying to make streams swimmable and fishable. It’s kind of like trying to stop up the end of a fire hose with your hand. You have all these problems that originate – a lot of them – not in the main stem but in these headwater regions, and you really need to treat those and protect those to see improvements downstream.”

The contested waters include those that do not have water at some times of the year, Clinton says. Some flow for short periods of time each year, and are connected to the larger drainage system. The rule also protected wetlands associated with the systems.

“There’s lots of scientific research that demonstrates the importance of those regions to downstream water quality,” she says.

The rescinding of other regulations, such as the stream protection rule, raises questions for these researchers about the impact on water quality. This regulation prohibited the dumping of mine tailings into headwater streams. “With the mountaintop
removal, all that land has to go somewhere, and it's often dumped into the valley,” she says. “The valley is where we find headwater sources for streams.”

For the UNC Charlotte researchers, the ongoing debate emphasizes the need for scientists to continue to share their knowledge and their science. Citizens, organizations, and policymakers can benefit from the information scientists can share, particularly longitudinal data.

“Hydrologists, water quality specialists, and public health professionals in many other fields rely on long-term data collection to assess trends,” Vinson says. “Long-term data collection is going on, like stream gauging, which is how much water is flowing through rivers. These are globally important measurements for understanding how the hydrology of the planet is changing.”

These types of datasets can help expand the knowledge of an array of people interested in water quality.

“To assess these long-term trends requires long-term data collection,” he says. “Academics are part of that. Public agencies are part of that. Continual datasets are essential information for assessing these long-term trends and making policy. One of the ingredients for good regulations is good research.”

Words: Lynn Roberson
UNC Charlotte atmospheric scientists Brian Magi and Jacob (Jack) Scheff approach their climate research within the global context. As members of an international community of researchers considering this critical issue, they are helping to explore possible responses.

When they teach students or talk to community members about climate change, they use this global perspective as a backdrop for a more localized take on the topic.

They might ask people to envision the impact of climate change on a familiar place, perhaps a favorite beach town or coastal city. At times they turn to web mapping tools to simulate rising sea levels and flooding, so that people can see what all the numbers mean.

“We look at this problem in pieces, because that’s how we understand things, and because it’s relevant to you, relevant to your family, relevant to someone you know,” Magi says. “But we have to remember what’s driving this. What is the envelope that all this change is occurring in? That’s the global side of the issue.”

They also stay attuned what others are saying about climate change, including government agencies.

The federal position on climate change is fluid. Over a dozen federal agencies in November released a scientific report that says human activities are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century. Yet, the report comes not long after President Donald Trump’s decision to walk away from the Paris climate accord.

“In addition to warming, many other aspects of global climate are changing, primarily in response to human activities,” the report states. “Thousands of studies conducted by researchers around the world have documented changes in surface, atmospheric, and oceanic temperatures; melting glaciers; diminishing snow cover; shrinking sea ice; rising sea levels; ocean acidification; and increasing atmospheric water vapor.”

The report also documents the incidence of large forest fires and changes in water resources, the areas that Scheff and Magi primarily study. Magi researches the connections between fire, land, atmosphere and climate – and the role humans play in that mix. He is using diverse fire data to advance methods used in global fire simulations, which themselves are a part of the international effort to model future climate.

“We begin to take that puzzle apart, and we say, what parts of the world do we know something about in terms of fire, not only how that ecosystem might respond, but what it is that’s driving changes in fire regimes,” he says.

Scheff’s research is about how global climate change affects precipitation, evaporation, river flow, and water scarcity, both in the geologic past and in our warming present and future.

“My research considers if we don’t do anything about global warming, what is that going to do to our water resources and to our ecosystems and to everything else that depends on water on planet Earth,” Scheff says.

The impact of climate change on the future water cycle is well documented, Scheff says. “The thing we really understand about water cycle change as we warm up our planet is that when it rains or snows, it’s going to rain or snow harder,” he says. “When it comes down from the sky, it will come down harder. That applies to ordinary rainstorms. It applies to hurricanes. It applies to snow. That’s because when it’s warmer, the air can hold more water. Warm air can soak up more water before it’s saturated.”

An example is recent hurricanes that have dumped tremendous amounts of water and caused significant flooding and deaths.

Despite these wetter individual storms, some places will receive more total precipitation while others will receive less total precipitation.

“We’re really not clear on which those are going to be,” Scheff says. “We have some educated guesses, but we’re still trying to figure all that out. That’s where my research comes in. I’m using some different approaches to try to understand where is it going to precipitate more overall because of global warming, and where is it going to precipitate less overall because of global warming.”

Warming temperatures also mean that some places that in the past had snowfalls will receive some of their precipitation as rain in the future.

“That really matters out in the West, where they depend on mountain snow piling up in places like California or Colorado for it to melt as water to use during the growing seasons to irrigate crops,” Scheff says. “Now, more and more, that’s coming down as rain during the winter, which is flowing into the ocean or somewhere where it’s not useful instead of sitting there on the ground as snow and becoming useful during the summer.”

These changing water resources, along with hotter temperatures, can have a devastating impact on our food supply and other aspects of our lives, he says.

Students want to understand steps they can take as citizens and in their future careers to help address climate change.

“Fundamentally, I think students are the stakeholders for the future,” Magi says. “They are the most important stakeholders that I think we sometimes neglect. I think that’s where universities absolutely shine, and we need to shine more brightly now than ever. We need scientists in the room working with students on these problems, because students are the ones who are going to be making the decisions in the future.”

Magi looks around his classrooms and sees great interest in making headway on the issue. “They’re quite hopeful that they’re going to be creating a better place, and rightfully so,” he says. “They just want to know what they need to know to do that.”

When Magi and Scheff provide information to students and community members, they do so in the interest of informing people of the consequences of choices.

“I don’t think our research can really make the decision about what we should do,” Scheff says. “That’s a values decision. That’s a political decision. So all our (scientists’) research can do is indicate that if we don’t do something, we’re going to warm up this much, or it’s going to increase the intensity of the storms this much, or it’s going to increase the fire risk this much. Then, it’s still up to society to say how important that is.”

Words: Lynn Roberson
CLIMATE CHANGE

Science Considers How We Can Respond
DIVERSITY IN OUR NATURAL WORLD

The web of life is complex, with its foundation built upon the diverse plants covering our Earth. Nowhere else in Charlotte can you explore this foundation as deeply as the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens, with the quality and diversity of the plant collections offered. Pictured are cones, needles, twigs and other natural elements gathered from where they had fallen in the woodland Van Landingham Glen and the Susie Harwood Garden. Learn more: gardens.uncc.edu

Image: Lynn Roberson