Two Post-Doctoral Fellows Join CEHS Through Innovative NSF-Funded Program

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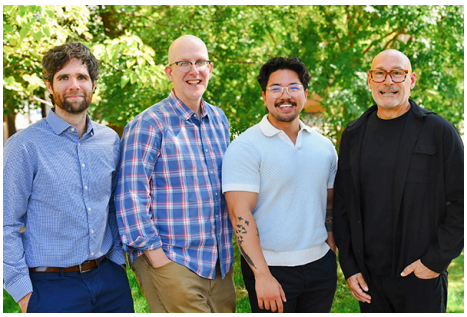

New CEHS postdoctoral fellows with their respective department heads (left to right):
Dr. Eric Kirk, Dr. Andy Walker (ITLS), Dr. Khanh Tran, and Dr. Steven Camicia (TEAL)

A 2024 grant award from the National Science Foundation has enabled the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) and the Department of Instruction Technology and Learning Sciences (ITLS), both departments within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, to each hire a post-doctoral fellow into a unique program that aims to transition them directly into tenure-line positions within the college at the completion of the two-year program.

David Feldon, associate vice provost of the school of graduate studies and professor in ITLS, and Shawn Whiteman, interim dean of CEHS and professor in Human Development and Family Studies, applied jointly for the grant last year. Both leaders saw limitations to the traditional postdoctoral model, so they designed the new program to address them.

In addition to a potentially receiving a tenure-line position upon completion, fellows will participate in interdisciplinary research projects that already have data collected, which enables them to immediately get involved in projects within their expertise and to start publishing early. Next, the program requires interdisciplinary research with the specified theme of access and accessibility in STEM. They will also receive extensive mentoring from faculty from multiple disciplines. Each aspect of the program is intended to benefit the college, the participating departments, and the post-doctoral fellow.

On August 1, 2025, two new post-doctoral fellows, Eric Kirk and Khanh Tran, formally joined CEHS as part of the inaugural program.

Eric Kirk, Ph.D.

Eric Kirk joined the ITLS faculty with an additional interdisciplinary focus in TEAL. He earned a Ph.D. in the Learning Sciences and Psychological Studies program from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his research focuses on helping students learn science in ways that enhances how they navigate day-to-day life.

Dr. Eric Kirk (at center) with mentors Dr. Sarah Braden (left) and Dr. Lisa Lundgren (right)

“As problems like pandemics, climate change, water use, and food security become more pressing,” Kirk said, “people are more likely to need to make informed decisions about these problems at the grocery store, voting booth, etc. Understanding science and being able to use science to make those decisions is incredibly important and empowering.”

Kirk looks forward to the professional development opportunities being made available to him through the innovative program. “Many postdoc positions place the primary focus on supporting someone else’s work, so the mentorship and scholarly development aspects can get relegated to the background,” he said. “This position gives me opportunities to learn by working on existing projects with great scholars, but the primary focus is on my professional development.”

Kirk also sees the interdisciplinary aspect of the program as a benefit. “My interest in helping people use science to make day-to-day choices is inherently interdisciplinary because many of these choices involve civic participation or personal decisions that also require drawing on knowledge from other fields like economics, civics, or sociology,” he said. “Additionally, most of my work sits at

the intersection of understanding what helps people learn science and how we create classrooms that help them learn. Being able to work closely with both ITLS and TEAL really blends both of those interests."

Kirk will be mentored by professors Lisa Lundgren in ITLS and Sarah Braden in TEAL. His work at the intersection of science learning and creating environments to encourage science learning has already led to Lundgren and Kirk re-examining Lundgren's previous work on science learning and interest at comic cons. Lundgren said, "From our first meeting, Eric brought in a new perspective that helped open a brand-new avenue for research with my comic con research. I appreciate being able to work with a talented researcher who is already adding so much to the research I do."

Khanh Tran, Ph.D.

Dr. Khanh Tran (at center) with mentors Dr. Mario Suárez (left) and Dr. Lisa Lundgren (right)

Khanh Tran joined the TEAL faculty with an additional interdisciplinary focus in ITLS. He earned a Ph.D. in biological sciences from Purdue University and then completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship on K-12 STEM education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue.

His research explores how education can impact marginalized communities by making teaching and learning identity-affirming and identity-extending. "I am particularly interested in how STEM learning environments can center students' cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and ways of knowing," said Tran. "For instance, how can high school physics students learn about mechanics while also extending their rural identity, without feeling the need to choose one or the other? My work seeks to understand how youth navigate and negotiate STEM, uses STEM as a tool for social/community transformation, and shows how educators and communities can co-create spaces that recognize and sustain their rightful presence in STEM."

When learning about the postdoctoral program at CEHS, he said the new mentoring model was appealing to him. "Having the opportunity to be mentored and supported by multiple faculty within the college is extremely valuable as it allows me to hone different areas of my scholarship and broaden my expertise."

Tran says his mentors—professors Mario Suárez as primary mentor and Lisa Lundgren as secondary mentor—are "genuine, brilliant, and passionate," and he looks forward to the opportunity to learn from and with them. "What is great about this duo is that they share a converging research interest in supporting queer and trans (gender) youth, while also supporting my development through their individual expertise," he said. "Dr. Suárez is helping me grow as a critical quantitative scholar, with a focus on QueerQuant, and Dr. Lundgren is guiding my development as a learning scientist by examining how people learn in informal STEM spaces."

Tran's goals for the next two years include publishing and securing grant funding as well as supporting underserved youth, including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and rural youth. "I aim to collaborate with community partners to design and implement culturally sustaining programs that not only address the needs of youth in Utah, Indiana, and California but also honor their localized cultures, lived experiences, and ways of knowing," he said. "My goal is to build lasting, reciprocal partnerships that position youth and their communities at the center of educational transformation. I'm excited to do this work and amplify our youth's voices."

"Dr. Tran is a joy to work with and to mentor," said Suárez. "He has hit the ground running as we have already submitted a book chapter with our research team, conference proposals, and a small grant proposal. His research centers placed-based ways of knowing and learning that honors what students and educators bring to the table through a rightful presence framework. He already has a very strong qualitative methods background, so by working with me, he will work on enhancing his quantitative methods skills as we work through more complex methods, manuscripts, and grants together as a research team. USU and TEAL are lucky to have him as a colleague, and our students will benefit from working with such a talented and accomplished scholar who is so well respected in science education. I look forward to the day he will be part of the faculty."