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DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

HOW FAKE NEWS IS DUPING MILLENNIALS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

GABRIELLE LEIGH CILEA
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Russell Frank
Associate Professor of Journalism
Thesis Supervisor and Honors Adviser

Matthew Jordan
Associate Professor of Film/Video and Media Studies
Faculty Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.
ABSTRACT

The term “fake news” dominated the media in 2017 as Collins Dictionary Word of the Year. Donald Trump insists that the mainstream media is creating information and pushing it to the public in an effort to sway their opinions on policy. With this growing sense of confusion, the public is tricked by professional “fake news writers,” who push clickbait stories in order to make a profit. In a more simple time of media literacy, one in which most individuals consumed their information through print, radio, or television sources, weeding out nonsense stories was easy. Web-based news has created a space for chaos and confusion among readers who do not know how to interpret journalistic value. This paper will evaluate the combination of reasons as to why millennials (specifically ages 18-29) are the most susceptible to believing fake news on the internet and draw conclusions from a study of Penn State students evaluating a fake news story. Finally, this paper will identify ways to fact-check and understand how social media is combatting this problem.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1 Introduction to Fake News ....................................................................................... 1
   Evolution of Fake News ........................................................................................................ 3

Chapter 2 Relationship between Fake News and Social Media ............................................ 6

Chapter 3 My Survey at Penn State ........................................................................................ 9

Chapter 4 How to Combat Fake News for 18-to-29-Year-Olds ............................................ 19
   Understanding Clickbait and Fact Checking ...................................................................... 19

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................... 22
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Facebook and Twitter usage .................................................................6
Figure 2: This is an example of a doctored tweet ..................................................7
Figure 3: Screenshot 1 ..........................................................................................10
Figure 4: Screenshot 2 ..........................................................................................11
Figure 5: Pie Charts ..............................................................................................14
Figure 6: Percentages of those 18-29 who would share on Facebook ......................15
Figure 7: Rat meat sold as chicken .......................................................................17
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Chapter 1
Introduction to Fake News

Fake news, for the purpose of this paper, is a web-based story reporting on sensational or current events with false information to garner readership. Since the beginning of Trump’s presidency, confusion regarding what exactly news is has changed the way Americans view the media. President Trump explains, via Twitter, “I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair ‘press,’ now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent “sources” are used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure fiction!” (@realDonaldTrump).

As President Trump criticizes the mainstream media as unfair, the press reports on those statements, which perpetuates the cycle of “media distrust.” In an effort to be informed citizens, Americans traditionally would tune into a variety of news platforms to seek information. The government has implemented many regulations in order to ensure an unbiased, free network of information sharing. As watchdogs, television media groups have strict guidelines to maintain by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). According to the FCC and the Communications Act of 1934:

The obligation to serve the "public interest, convenience and necessity" is demonstrated through myriad broadcast policies. Licensing requirements, the equal-time and candidate access rules, the Fairness Doctrine and the Public Broadcasting and Cable Acts are just some examples of regulations, which are implemented to safeguard the public from the possible selfish motives of broadcasters (Zechowski).
However, in the digital age, there are no such restrictions on news or guidelines mandated by the government for websites. There is ongoing criticism with the FCC and the Communications Act of 1934, in relation to its role in monitoring the web. The web operates under Net Neutrality, which is the idea that internet users should have equal access to information online, without favor to one server or another. This guiding principle regulates the means by which users access their internet, but does not regulate content.

In 2002, it [FCC] ruled that most forms of broadband Internet access did not qualify as telecommunications services, and were therefore not subject to Title II’s common carrier regulations. Supporters of net neutrality, who believe that the Internet must be kept free and equally accessible to everyone, argue that the FCC should establish new regulations to include broadband Internet services or that Congress should pass another law to expand the FCC’s authority (Roosevelt Institute).

Therefore, information on the web is conditionally regulated by an individual website’s terms and conditions. Online news sources choose to follow ethical guidelines of journalistic practice to maintain credibility and trust with their viewers.

When creating a Facebook account, a user agrees to follow its “Community Standards,” which are a series of conditions to regulate the content on profiles in relation to hate speech, nudity, and graphic violence. Depending on the story, “Sometimes we [Facebook] will allow content if newsworthy, significant or important to the public interest – even if it might otherwise violate our standards” (Community Standards). In relation to fake news, the terms of Facebook and the unregulated nature of the internet provides for a feeding frenzy of sharing misinformation. Without watchdogs to set standards, it is up to web organizations to create an internal network for identifying these stories. With the ease of sharing that Facebook users have,
diverse populations are exposed to fake news articles. This differs from mainstream media, as conglomerate networks must follow strict guidelines when reporting on stories to maintain their credibility. In my study, I poll students about the accuracy of a web story that says rat meat is sold in supermarkets as chicken. ABC News would never go straight to reporting on a story about rat meat being sold as boneless chicken wings without consulting the FDA, multiple sources of the claim, and reaching out to grocery stores. It is easy for someone to create a fake website with that story and blast it out to an audience without any checkpoints to publishing. The unregulated nature of information on the internet is what gives users power and agency to create content, but fails to protect users from misinformation.

**Evolution of Fake News**

There is a spectrum of fake news from satire to misinformation. Satire criticizes a hot topic, using humorous writing. One of the most famous forms of satire writing is Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, in which Swift mocked problems of overpopulation and food shortage. His suggested strategy to combat the famine was to eat babies, which would reduce the problem of overpopulation. Through this plan, Swift mocks the country of England, as it had not sent any resources to the starving Irish. This writing drew attention to the cultural and economic problems that the Irish and English had, without explicitly stating it. The purpose of satire in this writing was effective in changing the minds of Englishmen.

In the modern web era, *The Onion* is a satire publication that has sustained popularity by writing current event stories. *The Onion*, boasting over six million “likes” on Facebook, is a top
source for satire news for over 30 years. The website mirrors that of a standard news site, with tabs for various topics like “politics, sports, and local.” Each article features a picture, some Photoshopped, others authentic to an event. They feature short video clips, from movie reviews to sports “highlights.” However, *The Onion* also creates thought-provoking journalism. After each mass shooting since 2014, the website shares the article, “No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens” (Beals).

Yellow journalism was a form of fake news which sensationalized stories during the 19th century in order to sway public opinion. One of the most famous examples of yellow journalism is story of the U.S.S. Maine sinking in the Havana Harbor in 1898. With growing US sentiments against Spain, newspapers rewrote the explosion as a premeditated plot by the Spanish. Because of continuous stories with anti-Spanish coverage:

Yellow journalism of this period is significant to the history of U.S. foreign relations in that its centrality to the history of the Spanish American War shows that the press had the power to capture the attention of large readership and to influence public reaction to international events” (U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895-1898).

When the purpose of fake news is to mislead its viewer, then the article is not fulfilling a journalistic purpose. Critics may say that all news pushes the viewer to follow the agenda of the news outlet. Nevertheless, this is not the same as the purpose of fake news stories that are meant to deceive readers with exaggerated or false information. Fake news websites would report on something in the most absurd way to get the most website clicks.

The differences between older forms of fake news and the modern age of fake news are the purposes they serve. Newspaper companies and fake news sites both share untrue stories to make money. Authors of key literary pieces published to stir change. Online satire websites have
a balance of comedy and seriousness. Fake news websites create stories to purposely mislead and harm readers.
Chapter 2 Relationship between Fake News and Social Media

According to a report by the Pew Research Center, “81 percent of Americans get at least some news through websites, apps or social networking sites” (Mitchell et al. 1). Furthermore, 29 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds often get their news online, while 50 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds get their news online. Figure one demonstrates that millennials (those ages 18-to-29) are the most frequent social media users, with 88 percent of those using Facebook and 36 percent using Twitter (Greenwood et al.).

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**Figure 1: Facebook and Twitter usage**

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Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size. Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016. “Social Media Update 2016”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
When making an account on a social media website, by signing up you agree to terms and conditions that ensure you follow the guidelines that website abides by. However, these websites spread fake news other ways. For example, Twitter has an ongoing problem with “doctored tweets,” or when a tweet is made to seem like it is coming from a reputable source. Usually the tweet includes text or a photo that is uncharacteristic to the person tweeting it. An instance of this is when accounts replicate the verified accounts, with similar Twitter handles to celebrities, politicians, or news sources, complete with identical bios and avatar pictures.

Doctored tweets are not only limited to accounts, but can be singular screenshots that have ridiculous statements. When doctored tweets like the one in Figure 1 link to other Twitter accounts or on websites, Twitter itself has little ability to recall the link as the tweet is put out. Twitter relies on “bystander intervention,” or when users report tweets or accounts for a multitude of options (hate speech, nudity, etc.)

![Figure 2: This is an example of a doctored tweet](image)

With such a large majority of Americans using the internet to get news every day, it is important that they know how to distinguish when websites and information online is not true.
Fake news websites are designed to mimic real websites. Most have names that sound like real news websites. “For example, abcnews.com is a legitimate news source, but abcnews.com.co is not, despite its similar appearance,” according to Wynne Davis, a writer for NPR. In his article, “Fake or Real? How to Self-Check the News and Get the Facts,” he discusses differentiating between fake and real news sites. These websites model after real ones because it is a way to build credibility with the reader. On social media, these websites are easily shared and garner viewership, which helps their search-engine optimization and exposure.
Chapter 3

My Survey at Penn State

For the purposes of my research, I created an online survey about a fake news website. I chose the website in my research because I saw it firsthand on my own Facebook dashboard. When one of my friends shared the article, assuming its factual correctness, there was a stream of comments until one person shared a link to a Snopes page debunking the claim.

I was able to collect responses from 73 individuals. I used Google Forms to create my survey, as it is an easy website to navigate and helps create charts of your data in the responses page. I was able to send my survey out to professors in different Penn State colleges that teach undergraduate students. I did not want to create a bias toward one specific college or undergraduate status. I collected my data over the course of four days, while the survey was accepting responses. I provided an incentive for students to complete my survey, as it would take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. I randomly generated one student, using the email address they provided, to win a gift card. The individual information I collected about the respondent was their age. Gender, race, and political affiliation were not factors for this study.

During the duration of the survey, those responding had the ability to look at the screenshot of the website headline and body of the article. I chose not to put a direct link to the website because I did not want those answering distracted by sidebar articles. Within the body of the article there were no embedded links to other articles, therefore there was no information the reader would be lacking by not having direct access to the website. I cut off the very bottom of
The purpose of this survey was to collect data about college-educated Americans between the ages of 18-to-29. I believed that Americans 18-to-29 with college education would outperform the general population of 18-to-29, which is the sample of the Pew Research Center study, “The Modern News Consumer.” According to Pew Research Center, 67 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds think that completely made-up news has caused “a great deal” of confusion about basic facts of current events. I wanted to see how these statistics hold up to an individual report of a specific story, one not related to politics or international news. I chose the story “Million Pounds of Rat Meat Being Sold As Boneless Chicken Wings In U.S.” because boneless chicken wings are a relatable food choice among millennials. Additionally, there are grammatical errors in the headline, which should be a dead giveaway for any journalistic credibility.
My first questions on the survey were about the general layout of the news page. Fifty-three percent of respondents said that the image was the most striking part of the story at first glance, while 46 percent said the headline. No respondents chose the trending story on the sidebar, which was an article linking to a different new story about people dying of heart attacks after seeing the movie “IT.”

![Figure 4: Screenshot 2](image)

The second question asked if the respondents had heard of the website tmzbreaking.com before reading the article from the survey. TMZ is a popular celebrity news and gossip website, which also has its own TV show. I chose this article because I know many millennials read this website and I concluded that they would think this fake news site is a branch of TMZ. Sixty percent of respondents said they had not heard of the website before, while 10 percent said...
maybe, and 30 percent said yes. It is unclear whether the respondents who said yes think that this is the real TMZ site or if they have been on tmzbreaking.com before.

I created a short answer form, which asked if the respondent had heard of the story before. If they had not heard the story before, they were not to check any boxes. The majority, 63 percent, of respondents heard of the story before. Of the people who heard the story before, 65 percent said it was from a social media website. Thirty-seven percent of those who had heard it said it was from a family member, while four percent said they had heard it from another news outlet, whether that be TV or online.

My next set of questions asked about the reputability and believability of the story on tmzbreaking.com. Reputability means the website in terms of it seeming established, while believable means to reference to its credibility. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said the photo with the Channel 5 News banner made the site reputable. Eleven percent believed that the website URL was reputable, while another 11 percent believed the variety of social media sharing options at the top of the page (Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest) made it reputable. Ten percent believed that the selection of other articles make the website reputable.

Furthermore, when asked about the features of the website or the content of the story that makes the story believable, respondents were able to type in their own response. Twenty percent of respondents said nothing was believable to the website or story. One respondent’s response was, “There are no statistics, names of inspectors, or actual citation included proving the story to be real.”

Therefore, 80 percent of respondents believed that the story was true for a variety of reasons. Forty-one percent of respondents said that writing about the FDA made the story believable. Eight percent thought it was because it looked like a real website, while another eight
percent said that the website used a “Channel 5 News” TV shot. Five percent believed this was true because stories about meat are newsworthy. One respondent said, “meat products are usually highly debatable in where they come from,” while a different respondent said, “the headline is believable because I have heard of many other stories like this, such as horse meat being found in McDonalds burgers.” Another five percent said that this story was believable because of the photo on the website. The amount of content seemed to be a deciding factor for five percent. Lastly, four percent believed there was an inability to disprove the article in general.

After seeing two full shots of the website, those surveyed answered if they believed the story was well-written and used proper grammar, to which 40 percent said yes and 60 percent said no.
The last section of the survey was questions about how they feel about the news. I chose to include this as part of my study so I could compare it to the Pew Research Center’s statistics.

The majority of those surveyed preferred using social media to keep up with news. When asked if they believe they are up-to-date with the news, nearly half said maybe. Comparatively to the Pew Research Center, the students of Penn State were more up-to-date with the news. Thirty-one percent of students believed they were up-to-date with the news, compared to 27 percent of those surveyed by Pew Research who believe they “follow news all or most of the time,” (Mitchell, 22).
The Pew Research Center found that “the fact that young adults have greater interest in news on social media does not result in greater engagement with news there, as they are no more likely to share/repost news stories or comment on news stories than others” (Mitchell, 23). Only 11 percent of social media news consumers ages 18-to-29 share news stories on social media “often,” and 36 percent do “sometimes.” This is comparable to other age ranges who often repost news stories, with 13 percent of those 20-49 and 10 percent of those 50-64. I wanted to test this statistic, as the Pew Research Center is basically explaining that those ages 18-to-29 have the highest level of social media usage, but are the least likely to be engaged on their platforms.

I would share this website on my Facebook because....

Figure 6: Percentages of those 18-29 who would share on Facebook

This conclusion is upheld by my study’s result, in which 82 percent of respondents said they would not share this story on their Facebook. Those who answered that they would share this on their Facebook could to select a combination of the three answers as to why. The majority of those who would share this story chose to because they “want to make sure my Facebook friends are cautious.”
The Conversation is an online web source that only allows people with a proven expertise to write about that single, specific subject. In the article, “How to Spot Fake News – An Expert’s Guide for Young People,” Beth Hewitt, a Senior Lecturer in Media Practice at the University of Salford, explains her study in the U.K. about the impact of fake news on young people. She provides a detailed list of ways people can distinguish between fake and real news. I used these guidelines when I chose this story.

The first rule was read about the source. “Look at the website where the story comes from to see if the story is well-presented, if the images are clear, and if the text is written well and without any spelling errors or exaggerated language” (Hewitt). There is problematic grammar, one photo with no context to the “Channel 5 News” report, and no direct quotes. To Hewitt, these are all giveaway signs of a fake article.

The second rule is to find out more about the specific author. The author of this story is “admin,” with no contact information for those interested in the story.

Her third way of deciphering fake text is to “Check that the article contains references and links to other news stories, articles and authors. Click on the links and check if they seem reliable and trustworthy” (Hewitt). If this news story were true, there would be a statement from the FDA and other sources. There are no links within the body paragraphs of the story. On the screenshot of the main body paragraphs to the article there is a sidebar article link to the same story, which is ineffective in terms of garnering readership. The article only identifies the
problem (rats are being processed and sold as chicken meat), but does not provide information to what the FDA or manufacturers are doing to fix the problem.

Her last tip is to see if, “the story you are reading about is being shared on any other mainstream news outlets, such as BBC News or Sky News.” If a reader was to Google “Rat meat sold as chicken,” the first two articles are issued by verified sources. If a young person does not
know the purpose of Snopes, confusion may grow as the rest of the search results are other fake news websites.

The outcome of my survey results fall within the conclusions that Pew Research Center had drawn in their reports, “The Modern News Consumer,” and “Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion.” In the report, “Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion,” the research is broken down by age and then further to education level. “The Modern News Consumer,” does not consider education level. By using Penn State students as a sample, I was including education as a factor, because I thought that the more educated a young person was, the more engaged they would be with the news. Additionally, the Pew Research Center found that 34 percent of those 18-to-29 get their news from websites/apps and 32 percent from social networking sites. My study concluded that those ages 18-to-29 prefer getting news mostly from social media (63 percent of respondents). News websites only garnered 27 percent of the vote. Ultimately, online news presence (defined as social media, websites/apps) is the primary source of news for nearly four-in-ten Americans (Mitchell, 5). However, when looking at age in my study, I found that nearly nine-in-ten college-educated 18-to-29-year-olds prefer keeping up with the news online. This trend toward digital information is crucial evidence that understanding and reading news online is the future of millennials and media.
Chapter 4

How to Combat Fake News for 18-to-29-Year-Olds

Understanding Clickbait and Fact Checking

On social media, young adults must be aware of the information they are choosing to read, believe, and share. The internet and fake news writers is changing rapidly. Writers understand what kinds of stories will create visceral reactions, incite emotion, or entertain. These types of stories pose a danger to society because it blurs the line of fact and fiction. Researchers from the Stanford Graduate School of Education conducted research to groups of students in middle school, high school, and college to evaluate their abilities to recognize fake news on the internet. The study’s results show that the majority of all the three groups of students did not know how to distinguish fake news that the researchers thought was “reasonable” by age range.

Eighty percent of middle school students believed that native ads were real stories. High school students evaluated an unattributed photo of morphed-looking flowers, which claimed to be the result of Fukushima radiation. “They didn't ask where it came from. They didn’t verify it. They simply accepted the picture as fact,” said Sam Wineberg, one of the lead authors of the Stanford study.

The researchers of the Stanford study concluded, “The study demonstrates that U.S. classrooms haven't caught up to the way information is influencing kids daily” (Domonoske). "What we see is a rash of fake news going on that people pass on without thinking," he [Wineburg] said. "And we really can't blame young people because we've never taught them to do otherwise." This inability to differentiate between fake and real news poses a serious problem for misinformation for the generation of millennials going forward.
There are other conditions that affect students’ abilities to discern facts. Frequently in school computer labs, there are protective blocks that disable students from accessing social media websites and non-educational resources. Because of these protected search engines, only legitimate, reliable sources filter into students’ results. This is detrimental to students who search for their own sources because it does not teach them how to read critically and analyze sources. When only filtered, trustworthy Google searches show up in order of reputable websites, students do not learn how to evaluate multiple sources because an algorithm has already done it for them. Additionally, these protective blocks insinuates to students that the order of results listed indicates trustworthiness, which is not true. Google results filter by how well they reflect the user’s query and how long they have been on the internet (Strickland). There are advertisements also placed within the search results. It is an important skill to be able to read critically for search results with the most relevant, factual information. It also would strengthen students’ skills to differentiate advertisements from workable results.

Social media websites have been doing their share to fight against fake news spread online. Facebook, following the 2016 presidential election, created new watchdog features and responses to fake news stories. One of the biggest problems Facebook had during the presidential election was the “Trending” stories part of users’ dashboards. As fake stories were shared on Facebook, the stories increased the popularity and moved upward on the “Trending” page. “Zuckerberg's plan to combat misinformation spread on the platform involves asking Facebook's users whether they find particular news sources trustworthy,” according to an Al-Jazeera article “Facebook Plan to Combat Fake News Draws Scepticism.” Critics of the Facebook plan explain that the ability to make the reader as the watchdog for misinformation is counterintuitive, as they do not know how to look for fake articles. “Facebook announces it will start asking users to
decide which publishers are trustworthy in order to filter out news content. The same Facebook users who constantly fail to spot Fake News and share it widely,” said Max Navarra, Head of Social Media at The Next Web (Facebook Plan to… Skepticism).

Education is the only tool to inform young internet users against the perils of fake news. Grassroots organizations, like the News Literacy Project, “works with educators and journalists to teach middle school and high school students how to sort fact from fiction in the digital age” (News Literacy Project). They want to teach the importance of the First Amendment and explain what the role of a watchdog means to maintaining a standard for quality journalism. Students need to learn that not everything they read on the internet is fact.
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ACADEMIC VITA

GABRIELLE L. CILEA

Permanent: 10 Bella Vista Ct, Marlboro, NJ 07746
732.610.6370 | gvc5179@psu.edu
http://gvc5179.wix.com/eportfolio

EDUCATION
The Pennsylvania State University
Schreyer Honors College | Paterno Fellowship Program
University Park, PA
*Class of May 2018*
*College of Communications* | Bachelor of Arts in Print Journalism
*College of Liberal Arts* | Bachelor of Arts in Italian Language

RELATED EXPERIENCE
Pennsylvania State University Pattee and Paterno Library
Librarian and Interlibrary Loan Liaison
University Park, PA
*Aug 2016 – Dec 2016*
- Organized and followed a timely schedule of materials checked out and checked in to maintain accurate records
- Communicated with domestic and international libraries to support their readership programs
- Effectively used new technology to electronically send copies of documents to Interlibrary Loan database

Push The Envelope Public Relations
Public Relations Intern
Manalapan, NJ
*May 2016 - August 2016*
- Collaborated with others to produce quality press releases in a timely fashion for a variety of small fashion companies
- Pitched short and long leads to editors for print and digital platforms
- Researched and finalized over 10 social media projects with bloggers to publicize for our clients’ products

Victoria’s Secret
Campus Brand Ambassador and Social Media Manager
University Park, PA
*Jan 2015 – May 2016*
- Organized and implemented a comprehensive social media schedule for the Facebook and Twitter accounts
- Produced timely and exciting social media campaigns
- Coordinated events on and off campus to represent the PINK brand

Springboard Public Relations
Marketing Intern
Holmdel, NJ
*May 2015 – Aug 2015*
- Prepared press releases to support various media campaigns for local businesses.
- Researched appropriate reporters and supported media outreach activities.
- Arranged interviews and secured media coverage for stories, event coverage, and press releases.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
The Flaws of Media Following the Kitty Genovese Case
Scones and Scholarship Presenter
University Park, PA
*Jan 2016 – May 2016*
- Compared and contrasted the media ethics of the 1960s and 2010s to prove the ethics of the case were problematic
- Culminated my research with a 30 minute presentation to Schreyer Honors College staff and students

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE
Schreyer Honors College Student Council
Student Recruiter
University Park, PA
*Nov 2014 – Present*
- Held presentations in New Jersey high schools about the Schreyer Honors College application process through student assemblies
- Directed student and parent tours of the Schreyer Honors College residence halls and facilities for prospective students

AWARDS AND SKILLS
- Awards: Schreyer Honors College Academic Excellence Scholarship, Provost’s Award, Paterno Fellowship, Jean Lapton Memorial Scholarship, Stanley E. Degler Scholarship in Communications