

SLATE Project Receives \$10M Grant: UNH Collaboration with New Hampshire Middle Schools Promotes STEM and Language Arts Skills

UNH's SLATE project recently received a five-year, \$10 million grant to expand its learning impact to forty middle schools across New Hampshire. An acronym for "STEM/Language Arts Teaching/learning Ecosystems," SLATE is a collaboration between UNH and New Hampshire middle schools to promote students' math and literacy skills necessary for their growth in STEM and other fields. The project promotes teachers' professional development and provides UNH tutors or mentors for middle-school students; as an "education, innovation, and research" [EIR] grant, it also yields valuable research.

At UNH, SLATE is led by Professors Julie Bryce (Earth Sciences), Christina Ortmeier-Hooper (English), Bethany Silva (Education), directors of UNH's Joan and James Leitzel Center for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering Education; NH Literacy Institutes; and Community Literacy Center, respectively.

Tutoring to Foster Middle Schoolers' Learning

SLATE's effectiveness derives from both middle-school teachers' exciting STEM-focused projects that draw on math and literacy, as well as the individual tutoring for middle-school students provided by UNH graduate and undergraduate students.

This past year, Silva reports, 42 UNH tutors conducted 950 tutoring sessions with approximately 110 students. UNH tutors receive six hours' training in math and literacy theory and practice before beginning sessions with the Manchester and Nashua middle schoolers.

Silva recalls a visit to a participating middle school: "And every single student in the class asked me, 'Is my tutor coming back? When do I start with my tutor?' It was this whole room full of students who were so excited to work with the UNH tutors."

During the sessions, UNH tutors guide middle-school students in fun, individualized activities to build automaticity and fluency in literacy and math. Without these foundational skills, Silva explains, students can struggle to learn in the content areas, including STEM. Increased skills lead to increased learning and enjoyment.

The program has benefits for the UNH tutors as well, Silva says. "Sometimes we have people who turn into teachers, which is wonderful. And other times, we have people who are already going to be teachers. And then sometimes we have people who are not going to be teachers, but now are going to be oriented towards concepts of learning that can benefit them throughout their lives."

Silva describes the UNH tutors during tutoring sessions: "You start to hear them talking in a teacherly way that supports learning, such as 'Oh, that's a really good thought process. I see how you got there. The answer's actually this, and here's why.'"

"Break[ing] Down Different Concepts" with SLATE Tutors

One such tutor is Carli Gauvin, a three-year veteran of the SLATE project. Gauvin, BA in English Teaching ('26) and MEd in Secondary Education ('27), learned of the program during her sophomore year while doing social media for the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes.

Gauvin estimates she's worked with eighteen Manchester and Nashua middle-school students over the course of her time with the program. The meetings occur in 30–45-minutes sessions via Google Meets.

"I always start off the day with a daily question, something to get their minds rolling. I try to target around some of their interests or hobbies." Gauvin also checks in with students about specific homework assignments or

projects, and she shares a daily joke or piece of trivia to make the session fun.

UNH tutors have a rich range of theories and SLATE activities to draw from. The sessions include activities such as back-and-forth reading for fluency, word ladders in which students adjust one letter at each “rung” of the activity to discover new vocabulary, or math games such as Ken-Ken.

“The kids get so excited [...] when they're figuring out the patterns and are able to complete the puzzle.” Gauvin explains the students’ thinking: “‘Yes, I’m doing math, but in a really fun way. Math can be fun.’” Gauvin credits the one-on-one sessions with encouraging students’ learning.

Gauvin’s own studies have helped her work in the program, as well. A grammar class, English 791, during her junior year provided her the knowledge to share with students: “When do we use ‘the’ versus ‘a’?” or “What is considered a countable noun and an uncountable noun? How do we even use that in a daily sense?” Gauvin explains, “For a student that English might not be their first language, some of these concepts are very confusing.” She continues, “Within my time here at SLATE, I’ve really learned how to break down different concepts.”

Gauvin recommends the SLATE project: “It’s a really great starting base if you just want work with students and see if this is something that you want to do in your future. As long as you have the passion and the patience as well—I think is really an important aspect to bring to this table, working with these students one-on-one.”

Creating an Ecosystem for Teachers and Literacy

The SLATE project fosters an “ecosystem” of middle-school teachers, supported by SLATE’s summer institute and follow-up sessions and collaborations. Grade-level

teams of science, math, social studies, and language arts teachers, for instance, develop co-curricular projects or “refine the spark,” Professor Ortmeier-Hooper says. UNH graduate students in English, Education, and Earth Sciences also participate on the SLATE team, supporting teachers’ professional learning and conducting research on the project.

Ortmeier-Hooper explains, “It’s a cooperative environment [where] teachers get opportunities to learn, but then to apply to what they’re already doing.”

In previous years, SLATE teachers created projects such as “I Am a Scientist” for sixth graders to explore different fields of science through science, art, geography, math, and language arts. Eighth graders reading *Frankenstein* also studied body systems and ethics, writing informative and argumentative pieces. And some students maintained science journals recording their observations of water and soil samples they’d collected from their own school yard.

Teachers in the SLATE program guide students to write in a variety of genres. Ortmeier-Hooper explains how teachers share an example of writing and then guide students to deconstruct it: “‘Here’s what this writer did. Why did they do that? What are some of the decisions writers make?’” Next, the class writes collaboratively, producing a group-written model. Along the way, students all contribute to the writing, revising, and punctuating. Finally, students produce their own writing individually.

“Every time you’re introducing a new genre—and we always are—you’re giving them a pathway to understand it.”

Ortmeier-Hooper talks to the middle-school students about building their “writing muscles,” just as famous athletes such as Lionel Messi or Simone Biles strengthen performance in their own sports.

Interested in contributing to SLATE and UNH’s Community Literacy Center?

Find opportunities for this semester here:
<https://unh.joinhandshake.com/recruit/jobs/11346710>



“Life Is an Adventure”: Travel Writer Laura Rodini, MA in English Literature ’04, Stays “Endlessly Curious”

What is your UNH degree and year?

I earned my MA in English Literature in 2004.

Can you tell us about your career journey since graduating from UNH?

After graduating from UNH, I started my own writing business, Paisley Green, (paisleygreencreatives.com), so I could take on assignments that excited me and travel whenever the opportunity arose. Fifteen years later, I can still say it was the best decision I've ever made.

I have written for 3 different travel publishers, including Fodor's Travel, which has 25 million monthly online readers. I also write for nonprofits, and I teach in the Communication program at Johns Hopkins University. Writing was the seed that started it all.

Many people dream of becoming a travel writer. What does the job actually look like behind the scenes that readers might not expect?

Travel writing may be the most glamorous thing I do, but expectations are high. A hotel or restaurant will roll out the red carpet for me—literally the head chef will come out to see how I like my meal—but that also means I have to figure out something brilliant to say by the time I finish chewing!

Is there a particular moment that made you realize your love for the work?

It's everything you could possibly imagine and then some.

I've had so many amazing experiences, met really cool people, and gotten myself into adventures, thrills, romance, and sometimes even trouble.

I started out working on destination guides for places like Boston, Austin, and Miami; then international destinations like Vancouver, Turks & Caicos, Budapest, and St. Petersburg, Russia. Now I write about luxury hotels. I love the feeling of waking up in a place you don't recognize and wondering how you got there... but discovering everything around you is really, really, nice. It's a pleasant disorientation.

Travel also teaches you how similar we all are. I like to call it the “unscratchable itch” because the more places you see, the more you realize how much of the world is waiting to surprise you.

Looking back on your years as a travel writer with Fodor's, is there one assignment or experience that has stayed with you?

Austria was a dream trip. I twirled in the mountains, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, and visited the breathtaking Admont Abbey library. My first morning there, I was sleepy, still jet-lagged, and craving an iced coffee.



Rodini at the Gramercy Park Hotel in NYC—according to Rodini, “a hotel so cool, it inspired its own font”
Photo courtesy of Laura Rodini

They served their Eiskaffe to me in a huge glass with ice cream, whipped cream, and chocolate shavings. I can still taste it.

How did your studies in English at UNH prepare you for this work?

I loved every minute I spent at UNH! Professor David Watters was an inspiration, and I can honestly say his Early American Literature class fomented my travel writing career. I got to spend time in New Hampshire's old graveyards, gathering names for life stories to research. For my final paper, I focused on Mary Jemison and visited the rare books library at Brown University, where I held a tiny first edition of her narrative. I also went to upstate New York, where she lived after her captivity: There's a statue of Mary Jemison next to her grave in Letchworth State Park, overlooking the Genesee River Gorge—it's one of the few statues in the world that features a woman, by the way!



Rodini with a fine-spotted cutthroat trout on the Snake River in Wyoming (spoiler alert: he swam away).
Photo courtesy of Laura Rodini

What advice do you have for current students in UNH English? (Anything you'd like to add?)

My advice is that life is an adventure, and English majors can do anything—I mean it! But you have to prove it, and you can do that by keeping the “wheels greased” and writing every day. Even if it's just journaling. That way, you'll be ready for the opportunities.

In my opinion, the best travel writers aren't just good writers—they're endlessly curious. Every destination has a story, and you need to have an open mind to hear it.

I also think students today have an incredible advantage, because they can build a portfolio before they even graduate. Whether it's a blog, podcast, or social media account, documenting your experiences and sharing your perspective gives employers a chance to see what you can do before you ever walk into an interview.

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The Writers Series

ROSANNA WARREN



Rosanna Warren taught in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago from 2012 to 2023 (now Emerita). Her book of criticism, *Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry*, came out in 2008. Her most recent books of poems are *Hindsight* (2025), *So Forth* (2020), *Ghost in a Red Hat* (2011), and *Departure* (2003). Her biography of Max Jacob, *Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters* was published in October 2020. She is the recipient of awards from the Academy of American Poets, The American Academy of Arts & Letters, the Lila Wallace Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the New England Poetry Club, among others. Her poems have been included in twelve editions of *Best American Poetry* and three *Pushcart Prize* volumes.

Thursday, September 17, 2026
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