

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Welcome to the Gulf Scholars Program (GSP) Conference, our third conference bringing together students, faculty, and staff from across 24 GSP campuses! We're delighted to hold this year's conference at the University of South Alabama.

The GSP Conference brings together students, faculty, and staff from GSP campuses to connect, explore ideas, and build energy for the future of the Gulf. Specifically, the conference:

- Connects GSP students and faculty/staff with one another.
- Offers lessons, information, and ideas around GSP activities and projects.
- Explores challenges, visions, hopes and opportunities for a thriving GSP network and Gulf region.
- Inspires action for a thriving GSP network and Gulf region.

We will begin the conference learning about the range of students' Gulf Impact Projects and other GSP activities such as oral history in Pensacola, the role of Ghost Crabs in ecosystem restoration, revitalizing Biloxi's main street, inspiring sustainability through art, addressing food insecurity in the Gulf, and much more. The conference will also feature more than 40 student posters about these and other GSP Impact Projects and activities.

Keynote speaker Jo Bonner, President of the University of South Alabama and former U.S. Congressman, will be joined by a panel to share perspectives on the topic, **Towards a Sustainable Gulf Coast: Looking Back and Moving Forward 15 Years after the Deepwater Horizon Disaster.**

Helping students understand and guide change is a primary objective of a Gulf Scholars Program and in our next session Dr. Maria Wallace from the University of Southern Mississippi will engage conference participants in a conversation about how agile reform-based thinking can be applied to the unique challenges and opportunities of the Gulf region. Through interactive discussions, participants will collaboratively analyze real-world cases situated in the Gulf.

During breakout sessions, students will have opportunities to work with their peers across GSP institutions and disciplines on an interdisciplinary Gulf challenge, sharing GSP projects and interests, and a collage poetry workshop. They will also have opportunities to meet with early career professionals and grad students that will help them consider their next career or academic step. Meanwhile, GSP faculty and staff will engage in a series of sessions exploring program design, management, pedagogies, and student activities.

We conclude reflecting on key insights from the conference and translating conference discussions into practical next steps. Through these sessions and activities, participants will leave the conference with connections, information, and ideas to guide them through the important work ahead. The conference will guide us forward with a clear commitment to action and a renewed perspective on how to navigate change with agility and purpose for a more sustainable, resilient, and healthier Gulf region.

Thank you for joining us!

AGENDA

Thursday, March 27

TIME	DESCRIPTION	LOCATION
8:00-9:00	Registration & Breakfast <i>Ongoing Activity: Mapping the Gulf Scholars Network</i>	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
9:00 – 9:15	Welcomes Tim Filbert, GSP Program Manager, GRP Dr. Melissa Forbes, Deputy Executive Director, Gulf Research Program Dr. Steven Scyphers, Associate Professor and Director, Center for Socio-Environmental Resiliency, University of South Alabama	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
9:15 – 10:00	<i>Plenary Session</i> Student Presentations	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
10:00 – 11:00	Keynote Presentation: Towards a Sustainable Gulf Coast: Looking Back and Moving Forward 15 Years after the Deepwater Horizon Disaster <i>Introduction:</i> Dr. Andi Kent, Executive Vice President and Provost, University of South Alabama <i>Keynote speaker:</i> President Jo Bonner, President of University of South Alabama & former United States Congressman <i>Keynote Panel:</i> Dr. Ashley Williams, Trauma Surgeon, Assistant Professor - University of South Alabama College of Medicine, and Director of National Academies STEMM Scholars for Environmental Justice Program Judy Haner, Coastal Programs Director, The Nature Conservancy Dr. Sean Powers, Director of the Stokes School of Marine & Environmental Sciences & Senior Marine Scientist III at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab <i>Moderator:</i> Steven Scyphers	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
11:00-11:15	Break	

11:15 – 12:30	<i>Plenary Session</i> Gulf Conversations: Agile Perspective Taking for Transformative Change	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
12:30-1:30	Lunch	McQueen Alumni Center Lobby
1:30-2:45	<i>Student Breakout Session</i> Interdisciplinary Thinking to Address Gulf Region Challenges	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
1:30-2:45	<i>Faculty/Staff Breakout Session</i> Staff Mixer and State Meetings	Student Center, Terrace Room
2:45-3:00	Break	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
3:00-4:15	<i>Student Breakout Session</i> Collage Poetry: Building Meaning One Phrase at a Time	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
3:00-4:15	<i>Faculty/Staff Breakout Sessions</i> <u>Session A:</u> Telling the Story of the Gulf Scholars Program through Evaluation – (Re)Introducing the GSP Regional Logic Model, Cross-institutional Learnings, and Paths Forward <u>Session B:</u> Conversations on Transformation and Resilience: Gulf Scholar Programs, Courses, and Students	Student Center Session A: Terrace Room Session B: Room 212
4:15 – 4:30	Break <i>March Madness Poetry Bracket</i>	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
4:30 – 5:30	Student Poster Session	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
5:30 – 7:00	Reception	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom and Lobby
7:00 – 8:00	Wrong Answers Only Dr. Gabriel de Oliveira	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom

Friday, March 28

TIME	DESCRIPTION	LOCATION
8:30 – 9:00	Breakfast	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
9:00 – 9:15	Overview of the Day	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
9:15 - 10:15	<i>Student Breakout Session</i> Roundtables on Gulf Issues & Interests	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
9:15 - 10:15	<i>Faculty/Staff Breakout Sessions</i> <u>Session A: Building and Sustaining Gulf Scholars Programs: Frameworks, Tools, and Lessons Learned</u> <u>Session B: Approaches to the Dissemination of GSP Projects</u>	Library Session A: Room 181 Session B: Room 171
10:15 - 10:30	Break	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
10:30 - 11:45	<i>Student Breakout Session</i> Early Career Mentorship and Connection-Based Networking to Support the Journey of Young Scholars	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
10:30 - 11:45	<i>Faculty Breakout Session</i> Sustaining and Expanding Gulf Scholars Programs in a Shifting Landscape	Library, Room 181
11:45- 12:15	Gulf Conversations: From Insights to Action - Navigating Reform for Transformative Change	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
12:15 – 12:30	Closing Remarks	McQueen Alumni Center Ballroom
12:30 – 1:30	Lunch (option to grab and go)	McQueen Alumni Center Lobby

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Ongoing Conference Activities

Mapping the Gulf Scholars Network: Institutions, Interests & Impact

Attendees will physically map the GSP network onto a print-out of the Gulf region with information their Gulf interest and project areas. GSP institutions (GSP schools) will be identified in approximate geographic locations on the map. After mapping is complete, each participant will do a gallery walk of the mapped network, exploring connections between their interest, project, and impact areas with 1-2 others that share a similar in focus.

March Madness: Environmental Poetry

Conference participants will have the opportunity in this activity to read a selection of short pieces by Gulf region poets and writers and to vote through a March Madness Poetry Bracket for the pieces that most meaningfully engage their ideals, concerns, and aspirations for the Gulf region and GSP.

Main Stage/Plenary Sessions

Perspective Taking for Transformative Change

Moderator: Maria Wallace, University of Southern Mississippi

Higher education and community engagement efforts in the Gulf region often navigate competing priorities, from expanding access and inclusion to addressing systemic challenges and envisioning new approaches. This plenary session will engage Gulf Scholars and Program Directors in a conversation about how agile reform-based thinking can be applied to the unique challenges and opportunities of the Gulf region. Through interactive discussion, participants will collaboratively analyze real-world cases situated in the Gulf, focusing on issues related to higher education, environmental justice, Indigenous land rematriation, and economic development. By exploring how different strategies function at different moments in time, attendees will gain practical tools for navigating tensions, contradictions, and shifting paradigms with intentionality and flexibility.

Gulf Conversations: From Insights to Action - Navigating Reform for Transformative Change

Moderator: Maria Wallace, University of Southern Mississippi

The momentum of transformative change relies not only on bold ideas but on the ability to adapt, strategize, and act with intention. This interactive session builds on the insights from the "Gulf Conversations" plenary, guiding participants in translating conference discussions into practical next steps. Through reflection and peer dialogue, attendees will explore how their takeaways align with different reform approaches—institutional engagement, grassroots mobilization, or alternative system-building—and identify how shifting strategies can enhance impact. Participants will leave with a clear commitment to action and a renewed perspective on how to navigate change with agility and purpose in their own work and communities.

Student Sessions

Collage Poetry: Building Meaning One Phrase at a Time

Moderator: Amy Patterson, University of South Alabama

Through collaboration and creative expression, participants will combine phrases from published works to render a new collaged poem that speaks to current concerns and future ambitions.

Interdisciplinary Thinking to Address Gulf Region Challenges

Moderator: Olivia Melvin, Center for Evaluation Research

Students will collaborate with peers from different disciplines and institutions to develop an interdisciplinary response to the Gulf Challenge on the prompt at their table. Each group will craft an action plan to learn more deeply about and address their Gulf Challenge. Each group will share out their elevator pitch plans and identify points of alignment and divergence with other groups working on the same challenge.

Student roundtables on Gulf Issues & Interests

Moderator: Amanda Hagood, Eckerd College

This session helps connect students with shared interests, and Gulf Impact Projects. Students will join roundtables organized around GSP topic areas and subregions and discuss their GSP interests, activities, and projects with their peers across the GSP network.

Early-Career Role Models, Mentorship, and Connection-Based Networking to Support the Journey of Young Scholars

Moderator: Stephanie Houser, Gulf Research Program

From campus to career – what do you need to know? This interactive session is oriented to early-career mentorship and role models for continuing education and professional development of young scholars. The session will use a group “speed dating” format to talk about different life journeys, mentorship, networking, and the importance of interpersonal skills for catapulting early career success.

- Faith Aubrey, Gulf Coast Center for Ecotourism and Sustainability
- Sarah Brannum, LSU Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences
- Kelsey Carpenter, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Sydney Cramer, Mobile Arts Council
- Madeleine Dotson, City of Mobile
- Tokie Dunn, Mobile County Health Department
- Christiana Eziashi, Gulf Research Program
- Emilee Foster, Mobile Baykeeper
- Stephanie Houser, Gulf Research Program
- Julia Kristman, University of South Alabama

- Alaina McFadden, Gulf Coast Center for Ecotourism and Sustainability
- LoRen Modisa, University of South Alabama Medical School
- Vianey Rueda, Gulf Research Program
- Faith Walton, LSU Department of Geology and Geophysics
- Qiyamah Williams, PLACE SLR, Mississippi Sound Estuary Program

Faculty/staff sessions

Faculty/Staff Mixer and State Meetings

Moderators: Mark Besonen, Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi, Azita Amiri, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Harish Ratnayaka, Xavier University of Louisiana

This session will begin with a mixer activity, followed by a brief discussion on Gulf Scholars Program and MissDelta connections. Then, attendees will have time to meet with GSP institutions in their state to discuss common interests and issues facing their specific region.

Telling the Story of the Gulf Scholars Program through Evaluation – (Re)Introducing the GSP Regional Logic Model, Cross-institutional Learnings, and Paths Forward

Moderator: Olivia Melvin, Center for Evaluation Research

The purpose of this session is to share progress to-date and findings from the regional evaluation of the Gulf Scholars Program (GSP) to facilitate continued discussion and iteration of site-level programming and evaluation efforts in service of sharing the story of each GSP. The session will first introduce the regional GSP logic model developed by the NASEM team and used to inform development of the regional evaluation plan. Second, the regional evaluation questions will be previewed to highlight what the cross-site data-collection efforts are seeking to answer holistically. Next, findings on GSP cross-site implementation, facilitators, and barriers will be shared. The remainder of the session will focus on small group discussion on how GSP programming and evaluation efforts at each site align or diverge from the materials presented. Participants will be provided with physical copies of the logic model and evaluation plan and asked to note reflections on a shared flipchart at each table.

For sites that are new awardees or may be in early phases of planning/program implementation, the evaluation team will provide ad hoc technical assistance around “backward design processes,” mapping back from program goals to activities needed to meet those goals, inputs needed to make activities happen, and, ultimately, low-effort data-collection activities that can be adopted to capture the success story of the program.

Conversations on Transformation and Resilience: Gulf Scholar Programs, Courses, and Students

These three conversations will create a discussion that involves course design, student experiential learning, and campus/community experiences.

- ***How do you deal with threats? An Inquiry about Gulf Resilience*** (Eckerd College). How do you elevate resiliency from an academic concept within academic disciplines and campus planning to a focus for an academic program, while contributing to campus and community resiliency? Our question comes from a place of climate precocity coupled with political concerns and financial tensions. These questions are also part of many of the Gulf Scholar communities' concerns.
- ***Integrating Systems and Futures Thinking for Socio-Environmental Resilience and Sustainability in the Gulf of Mexico*** (Texas A&M University, College Station). This presentation introduces a new course that equips students with systems and futures thinking skills to address socio-environmental resilience and sustainability in the Gulf of Mexico. The course covers key concepts like causal loop diagramming, soft systems modeling, and foresight approaches to analyze complex systems and explore alternative futures. Students engage with case studies and practical applications by examining the interconnectedness of the socio-environmental systems of the Gulf and envisioning innovative solutions for their resilience and sustainability challenges. The presentation highlights a student-developed case study on the Gulf wetlands, demonstrating applied learning outcomes and actionable insights.
- ***Creating Opportunities for Student Transformation: How to “Have an Experience”*** (Prairie View A&M University). Drawing on John Dewey’s essay, “Having an Experience,” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s quote, “I change myself, I change the world,” this talk explores how everyday acts can become opportunities for transformation. According to Dewey, the distinction between ordinary and meaningful experiences is that in the latter, emotions are attached; it involves a surrender, and knowledge is attained. Such an encounter is not a passive; it is an active choice to be transformed. Taking Dewey’s ideas as inspiration, I offer examples of how to encourage students to “have an experience” inside and outside the classroom- to choose moments of transformation- on their journey to change the world.

Building and Sustaining Gulf Scholars Programs: Frameworks, Tools, and Lessons Learned

Moderator: University of Florida and Texas A&M University Faculty

Launching and sustaining a Gulf Scholars Program requires adaptable frameworks, strategic tools, and responsiveness to institutional challenges. In this session, the University of Florida team will present their “Gulf Streams” framework, a flexible approach to interdisciplinary engagement, along with administrative tools for tracking enrollment and assessment. The Texas A&M team will share lessons learned from launching their first cohort of TAMU eNGAGE (Next Generation of Advocates for the Gulf Ecosystem), discussing early challenges, learning community feedback, and future plans. Attendees will gain practical strategies for strengthening their own programs.

Approaches to Disseminating GSP Projects

- ***Partnering with Graphic Design faculty and students to create Gulf Impact Projects magazine*** (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi). This project involves the discussion of collaboration between Graphic Design program faculty and students and the Gulf Scholars Program faculty and students to prepare a magazine that showcases the Gulf Scholars' Gulf Impact Projects (GIPs). GIPs are the culmination of the Gulf Scholars Program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Draft GIPs will be presented.

- **Strategies for publishing GSP related projects** (*Florida Gulf Coast University*). This presentation highlights different venues to publish GSP related projects. Utilizing an online journal system (OJS) already in use as an example, we will highlight both how Florida Gulf Coast University's campus student research journal, *Aquila*, and the Florida Undergraduate Research Association's statewide journal, the *Florida Undergraduate Research Journal*, could be adapted to highlight GSP research. This platform could also be used to create a GS publication. The publication of GSP related projects not only arguments participants' CVs but it exposes more students to GSP and to hopefully become involved at different levels.
- **The Gulf Uncovered Podcast - Echoes from the Deep** (*University of Central Florida*). *Echoes from the Deep* is the first season of the UCF Gulf Scholars' podcast series called *The Gulf Uncovered*. In this first season, students take listeners aboard research vessels in search of information about Florida's elusive and endangered Rice's Whale. In their quest to learn more about the whale, the UCF Gulf Scholars also learn about the greatest challenges affecting the Gulf of Mexico and the communities that surround it. Produced, written and edited by students, *The Gulf Uncovered* podcast aims to inform and inspire listeners while also providing a hands-on, creative and collaborative learning environment for UCF's Gulf Scholars. This presentation will be both a listening party where episodes of the pod cast will be played and a question and answer for several of Cohort #1 students.

Sustaining and Expanding Gulf Scholars Programs in a Shifting Landscape

Moderator: University of Florida and University of Alabama at Birmingham Faculty

Gulf Scholars Programs must navigate shifting political, cultural, and institutional landscapes while remaining responsive to the needs of students and communities. As dynamic conveners, these programs have the potential to serve as think tanks that bring together faculty, staff, administrators, and students to address pressing **environmental and social** challenges—both within their universities and in the broader Gulf Region. This roundtable will explore how adaptable GSP programs are in responding to evolving university priorities—such as DEI initiatives—while maintaining their core learning objectives. We will discuss strategies for ensuring student and program resilience amid uncertainty and examine how institutions have successfully secured funding beyond traditional university sources. Attendees will gain insights into leveraging institutional and external networks to sustain and expand the impact of their programs.

Speaker Bios

President Jo Bonner

Jo Bonner has been a fixture in Alabama civic and political circles for more than two decades, and today leads the University of South Alabama as the Flagship of the Gulf Coast. Previously, Bonner served as chief of staff to Alabama Governor Kay Ivey. But it was in Washington, representing Alabama's First District in the United States Congress, where he began to earn a reputation as a respected and influential voice of reason. He was a member of the House Appropriations Committee and chaired the House Ethics Committee. His crowning Congressional

accomplishment came in 2012 when Airbus announced plans to build its first U.S. Final Assembly Line in Mobile. At the University of South Alabama, President Bonner launched Jag Days to bring high school students to campus for spirited VIP tours. His upbeat message builds on South's journey of progress and renews its promise to students and their families: A degree from the University of South Alabama is a first-class ticket to a brighter future.

Dr. Ashley Williams Hogue

Dr. Williams is a trauma surgeon at USA Health, an assistant professor of surgery at the Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine, and the Director of the Center for Healthy Communities. Her work is centered around the partnership between medicine, research, and the community, and she is well known for her work addressing healthcare disparities and promoting community-based initiatives. She is the founder of Project Inspire and in 2023, Dr. Williams was named a Future Trauma Leader by the American College of Surgeons (ACS). Dr. Williams is currently leading a National Academies funded project on STEMM Leaders for Environmental Justice.

Judy Haner

Judy Haner has been the Coastal Programs Director for The Nature Conservancy in Alabama for the last 15 years, where she oversees marine restoration, coastal ecology, regional conservation efforts, and linking communities with resources. She serves on the Advisory Committees for the MS-AL Sea Grant Consortium, East Gulf Coast Plain Joint Venture, and the Peninsula of Mobile, as well as being appointed as Affiliated Research Faculty with the University of South Alabama. During her career, Judy has secured more than \$92M in competitive grants to implement coastal planning and restoration projects that link science and management with on-the-ground actions and communities.

Dr. Sean Powers

Dr. Powers is the Angelia and Steven Stokes Endowed Professor and Director of the Stokes School of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama. Dr. Powers has published more than 150 peer-reviewed scientific articles and has been awarded more than \$46 million in grant funding for his work. His research focuses on the ecology and management of coastal and marine fisheries. He has extensively studied the environmental impacts and restoration following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Wrong Answers Only



Dr. Gabriel de Oliveira joins host Chris Duffy and an incredible panel of comedians for this science comedy game show! Produced by LabX, a public engagement program at the National Academy of Sciences, Wrong Answers Only is science comedy game show featuring comedic guests who play games and quizzes while learning about exciting research with the help of a scientific expert.

Gabriel de Oliveira is an Assistant Professor in the Stokes School of Marine and Environmental Sciences at the University of South Alabama where he uses his unique expertise of research in the Amazon to help protect the largest river delta and wetland in Alabama.

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Use this platform to connect with people you meet at this conference, share any pictures you take, and continue important conversations once the conference has adjourned! This platform is for both students and faculty.



If you have not joined our **GSP LinkedIn Group** yet- scan this code to join!



Conference Sustainability



The Gulf Scholars Program is partnering with Sustainability @ South to make this conference a low waste conference. We ask that you read the following suggestions and take whatever actions you can to assist us in this endeavor.

Suggestions:

1. Bring a water bottle and fill it at our water stations.
2. Recycle paper and plastic materials.
3. Carpool or walk to and from the conference venue.

Campus Map



Red boxes - Parking lots for conference attendees.

Blue box - McQueen Alumni Center