



# A LIFE FULLY LIVED

**Student-professor partnership promotes a new approach to transgender health**

It began as a simple email inquiry. It became a transformative collaboration for both student and professor.

In 2015, Melissa Jacob '16, an Honors College student majoring in communication disorders, reached out to Steven Cox, Ph.D., assistant professor of communication sciences and disorders (CSD). She was interested in writing her senior thesis on voice and speech concerns among individuals who identify as transgender. Dr. Cox responded enthusiastically, taking on the role of adviser and encouraging Jacob to gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors that can impact transgender health before tackling specific voice and speech-related conditions.

The result—Jacob's published thesis, *Examining transgender health through the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health's (ICF) Contextual Factors*—is a comprehensive literature review that uses the ICF as a reference to explore transgender health.

Endorsed by the World Health Organization in 2001, ICF is a holistic framework for addressing health and health-related states at the individual and population levels. This is a noteworthy departure from what Dr. Cox described as a biomedical model, and instead views health as the "complete physical, psychological and social functioning of a person and not merely the absence of disease." The model, which has been adopted by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, also includes a range of environmental and personal factors that enable a more in-depth exploration of transgender health within various contexts.

Jacob's research on the ICF and transgender health yielded more than 150 articles, though she eventually narrowed the selection down to 41 in the final draft. These powerful peer-reviewed articles covered family and social networks, education, healthcare and socioeconomic status. But it was the intersectionality between race and age that Jacob found most compelling—two characteristics that converged on social media platforms.

"The research revealed that blogging and vlogging sites were important in being support sources for transgender youth," said Jacob. "I am a young woman of color myself who grew up making connections on various social media sites. It was gratifying to know that, despite barriers, transgender youth are finding ways to reach each other, make meaningful connections and advocate for themselves. I believe this finding is particularly important now that we see social media being a propelling force in social movements."

Ultimately, Jacob concluded that transgender individuals benefit from gender-affirming services as well as family and social support. She also shone a light on the startling impact of "double discrimination" due to the intersectional relationships between socioeconomic status, race and/or age.

Access to a wide range of literature and library resources at Adelphi was invaluable to Jacob's research. "Almost all of the articles and books I read were in Adelphi's databases," she said, "and those that were not accessible online were promptly emailed to me or delivered to Swirbul Library for my use once I submitted a request."

Dr. Cox was an equally invaluable resource, always at the ready to offer an experienced perspective on the intersection of research and clinical practice. "Open discussion, feedback and collaboration are crucial in this process," said Jacob. "Dr. Cox was a wonderful adviser because he encouraged discussion about this topic, provided feedback on the work I created and collaborated with me to shape what I had in my mind into a tangible article. Interprofessional collaboration enhances the research process and allows for optimal decision-making in research and clinical practice."

Dr. Cox sees Jacob's success as a symbol of the successful partnership between the Honors College and the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. "Adelphi University is often thought of as a teaching-first institution," he said. "However, I believe this experience highlights the possibility of teaching and scholarship of the highest degree. I am grateful to be able to work with Honors College students, and Melissa's success speaks to the caliber of students at Adelphi University."

Jacob and Dr. Cox's article has already been viewed 350 times and is being cited by other research groups working in this important area. It also laid the foundation for Jacob's graduate studies and future professional goals. "The review made me familiar with the process of intensive research when looking to answer clinical questions," she said. "It has made me a critical thinker and consumer of research, and it's also allowed me to critically analyze my clinical practices so I can find methods that incorporate present evidence, my own knowledge and the values of my clients."

**Steven R. Cox, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders and a 2017 Adelphi Center for Health Innovation awardee. His research seeks to investigate clinically based research questions focused on the human voice and how voice concerns can impact individuals' physical, psychological and social functioning. He is the co-founder of the Adelphi Transgender Voice Program.**

**An Adelphi Honors College graduate, Melissa Jacob '16 received her M.A. in Speech-Language Pathology from Lehman College of the City University of New York in 2018. She is currently a research assistant there as well as an extern at the Adler Aphasia Center in Maywood, New Jersey.**