

STEPPING INTO NEW, VIRTUAL TERRITORY



Dr. Nancy Hodges

Department Head and Burlington Industries Professor

Dr. Kittichai "Tu" Watchravesringkan

Associate Professor

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The Bryan School's Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies (CARS) has always been a trailblazer among its peers when it comes to teaching technological advancements in the apparel industry. From being one of the first programs in the U.S. to gain access to virtual prototyping software to owning a full-body scanner that creates digital avatars, CARS is always on the cutting edge. That's because – as department head Dr. Nancy Hodges puts it – they have to be.

"We've always had to be what I call 'externally facing,'" Hodges said. "We have to constantly change and evolve our program because the industry is constantly changing and evolving."

When the recipients of the USDA Higher Education Challenge grant were announced in 2020, it came as no surprise that CARS was one of a few projects in the U.S. selected for funding.

The \$528,000 grant allows Hodges, Project Director and Co-Principal Investigator, and her CARS colleague and Co-PI, Dr. Kittichai "Tu" Watchravesringkan, to collaborate with researchers from other universities and study the next big thing. That "big thing," Hodges said, is developing best practices for teaching students how to use 3D technology to create for the virtual world and metaverse.

"Students are really good at being in a virtual environment through gaming and esports, but when it comes to learning to use applied technology that's virtual for doing a task or completing a job-related responsibility, that's a whole different ball game," Hodges said.

The final outcome of the three-year project, which is on track to wrap in the next year, will be a website that houses course materials, video libraries, and other resources for faculty across the U.S. to utilize in order to effectively teach virtual and 3D technologies. Included in the research are pre- and post-tests developed by the project team that can be given to students to measure their self-efficacy with virtual technology.

This project marks the third Higher Education Challenge project the team has had funded by the USDA. But that doesn't mean Hodges or Watchravesringkan are getting comfortable – they know how fast this industry can change.

"When we submitted this grant proposal in 2019, no one was talking about the metaverse," Hodges said. "But, they are now. While it's easy for a professor to sit in an ivory tower and say, 'I'll teach my students what I want,' that's not how it works for programs like CARS. We are serving an industry and we have to change."

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