

# USU Celebrates ITLS Department Head Andrew Walker's Decade of Leadership and Growth

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Left to right: Kristy Bloxham, Mimi Recker, Randall Haws (a recent ITLS graduate), and Andy Walker

Andrew Walker, Ph.D., has announced his decision to step down as department head of the Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences Department (ITLS) within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) after 10 years of dedicated service. Walker credits his faculty, staff, and student colleagues for the department's past decade of successes as it has expanded its degree offerings, increased enrollment, and created a lasting culture of student support.

"I have been so impressed with how Andy has fulfilled his responsibilities with thoughtfulness and a long-term perspective. He is willing to challenge assumptions, ask insightful questions, and offer helpful perspectives," said CEHS Endowed Dean Al Smith. "I have enjoyed the opportunity to work closely with him and look forward to the many scholarly and other contributions he will make as he resumes his faculty work."

Walker earned a bachelor's degree in English from Washington State University then came to Utah State in 1998 for a master's degree in Instructional Technology. Two years later, at the invitation of his colleague Mimi Recker (who preceded him as ITLS department head), he decided to stay on to complete a Ph.D. with Recker as his mentor.

When Walker stepped into the department head role in 2016 (after assuming the role of interim department

head the year before), he navigated the job using guiding principles. "As a department head, I identified mostly as a cheerleader," he recalled. "I helped all of us to see and celebrate each other's work, whether we are going after large federal grants, growing programs, or mentoring and advising students. I tried to acknowledge that I rarely had the best idea in the room. I had an internal motto of trying anything once. I also tried to acknowledge that even—and especially—when things are going well, in general there is always at least one person who is struggling."

At the time he started as department head, one of the greatest concerns within ITLS was enrollment. The department had been a pioneer in online education, launching one of the nation's first online master's degree program in its field in 2007, but its success led to increased competition. "At peak popularity we had over 300 directly competing online master's programs," Walker said.

College leadership challenged the ITLS department to develop a plan for growth, so the faculty began a redesign of the master's program by gathering feedback from employers, alumni, and current students to better understand what graduates face in the workforce. They then revised coursework and curriculum to address industry needs.

In addition to improving the master's program, department faculty also recognized the need for expansion. They began to develop an undergraduate degree: Human Experience Design and Interaction (HEDI). Until that time, ITLS only offered a minor for undergraduates.

"What makes HEDI special is that it has to keep reinventing itself to stay current with fast-evolving technology and the needs of the market our students enter—and Andy is the person who made that constant evolution possible," said Dr. Ramy Shaaban, Ph.D., HEDI program director. "He embraced change, encouraged continuous improvement, and moved quickly to turn new ideas into reality, from championing an AI course to bringing new tools like Roblox into our classrooms."

"During Andy Walker's tenure, he championed the new bachelor's program that has proven tremendously successful," added Kristy Bloxham, professional practice faculty member. "He is leaving behind a legacy of thoughtful leadership and meaningful growth."

Student response to the new major, which was finalized in 2020, has been enthusiastic. Walker credits his colleagues for shaping the new program. "The faculty did the heavy lift of designing and eventually teaching classes in the new

undergraduate degree,” Walker recalled. “We wanted to start with 40 in the program each year and we increased significantly after our first year.”

Since then, enrollment has grown across the degree programs in ITLS. Walker noted that student credit hours continue to increase, with a 57 percent increase over the past decade. The master's degree has regained momentum and was recognized in 2025 as the fastest growing online graduate program at Utah State. The job outlook is remarkable, with 97 percent of undergraduate and graduate students finding employment in the field within three months of graduation.

Beyond enrollment breakthroughs, Walker sees the department's culture as one of its greatest strengths. Faculty members focus on supporting their students, many of whom are non-traditional students balancing coursework with full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and other life demands.

Bloxham said, “Andy has been a caring and steady presence for every faculty member, guiding us through the challenges facing higher education with empathy and understanding. He has taught me invaluable life lessons about understanding others and checking my biases at the door. His desire to be kind to everyone will be his legacy, something that we can all hope to emulate.”

Walker recalled that a student-centered culture became especially important during the pandemic. As USU scrambled to move its courses online, ITLS faculty, students, and alumni volunteered their expertise to help instructors begin teaching remotely, even donating their time before emergency funding became available. Walker said those days were some of the most meaningful of his tenure. Students and alumni were motivated simply by the desire to serve the university community during a crisis.

After the pandemic, Walker supported ITLS faculty and student instincts to find ways to build a stronger sense of community within the department. They launched cultural celebrations that brought together students and faculty who come from around the world. Celebrating holidays and student cultures have now become annual traditions.

Walker consistently emphasizes that the department's successes are the result of the ITLS community. “My colleagues rise to the occasion every time,” he said about the major accomplishments he's seen in the past decade.

Looking ahead, Walker described a new pathway under development that will allow students to earn both a bachelor's and master's degree in five years. ITLS also

remains committed to adapting to technology, including the influence of artificial intelligence. In July, Walker will take a sabbatical and return to campus to resume his research faculty role in 2027.