

Academia's Most Wanted

Endowed chairs honor exceptional faculty.

By GAYNELLE DOLL and VIVIAN COOPER-CAPPS

Photography by DAVID JOHNSON

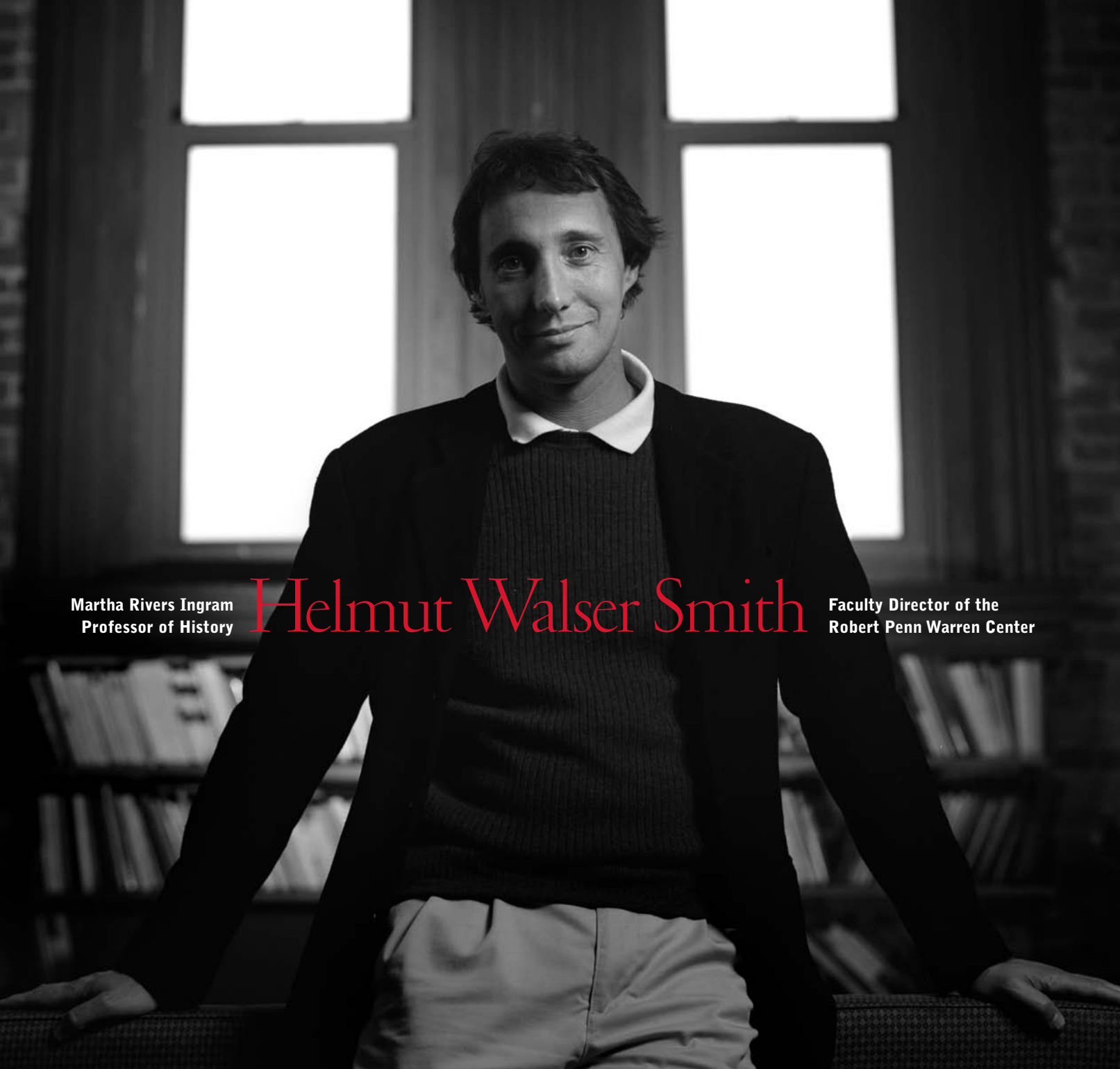
PLAIN-SPEAKING MIDWESTERNER ANDREW PORTER, THE PATRICIA AND RODES Hart Chair of Educational Leadership and Policy, cuts to the chase when asked the importance of an endowed faculty chair in his decision to come to Vanderbilt: “It was a deal-maker or deal-breaker. I had an endowed chair at Wisconsin, and other recruiting institutions were all offering endowed chairs. If the chair hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t be here.”

Endowed chairs are a time-honored means of luring top professors from other institutions, and of retaining and rewarding existing faculty. They are proof that the academic world can be as competitive as any *Fortune* 500 company.

For researchers like Sudhansu K. Dey, the Dorothy Overall Wells Professor of Pediatrics, an endowed chair offers a stability that grant money does not. “Grant money can be very uncertain from year to year. If you use your grant money on a risky project and it fails, the consequences can be disastrous. With an endowment, you can take a high risk and get a high pay-off.”

Endowed chairs carry prestige and honor for the chair holders and the persons for whom they are named. Though the cost of endowing a professorship requires deep pockets, the chair is forever. Just as Vanderbilt’s very first endowed chairs, the Holland McTyeire Professor of American History and the Landon C. Garland Distinguished Professor of Physics, continue to this day, chairs that are endowed this year will still be attracting top researchers and teachers in another hundred years.

On these pages we look at the holders of five recently endowed chairs.



Martha Rivers Ingram
Professor of History

Helmut Walser Smith

Faculty Director of the
Robert Penn Warren Center

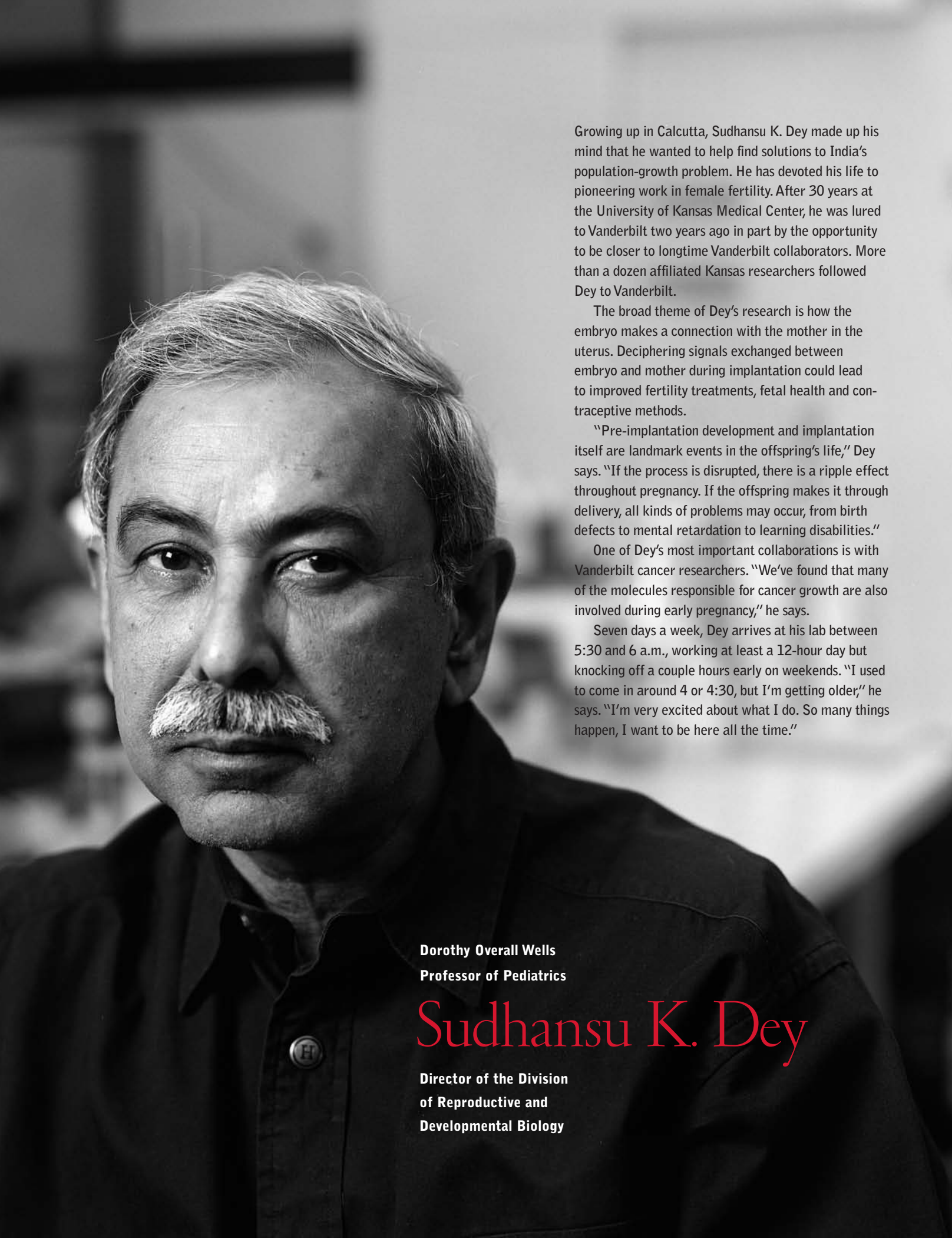
Helmut Smith's interest in history has always been traceable to his personal history. Born in Germany, he moved with his mother to the U.S. at age 4. "Part of my American upbringing was having close friends who were Jews," he says. "When I would go back to Germany and the place I had lived, the absence of Jews was very real and very strange. One knew that Jews weren't always absent there."

Smith joined the Vanderbilt faculty in 1991 and has taught a number of courses, including Western Civilization, a history workshop, and a large introductory class on the Holocaust. He received the Jeffrey Nordhaus Award of Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching.

One of that rare breed of academics who manages to bridge the divide between scholars and lay readers, Smith has written widely on

German history and the Holocaust. His 2002 book, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town*, received the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History, was named an *L.A. Times* Non-Fiction Book of the Year and a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, and was listed by *Damals*, a popular history magazine in Germany, as one of the three most innovative works of history in 2002.

"I loved Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. It takes the reader on an intellectual journey which is also a mystery," he says. "That was something I wanted to replicate in the genre of nonfiction. The fact that the book has been successful among my colleagues as well as the broader population has been gratifying and has opened doors to bigger rooms for me."



Growing up in Calcutta, Sudhansu K. Dey made up his mind that he wanted to help find solutions to India's population-growth problem. He has devoted his life to pioneering work in female fertility. After 30 years at the University of Kansas Medical Center, he was lured to Vanderbilt two years ago in part by the opportunity to be closer to longtime Vanderbilt collaborators. More than a dozen affiliated Kansas researchers followed Dey to Vanderbilt.

The broad theme of Dey's research is how the embryo makes a connection with the mother in the uterus. Deciphering signals exchanged between embryo and mother during implantation could lead to improved fertility treatments, fetal health and contraceptive methods.

"Pre-implantation development and implantation itself are landmark events in the offspring's life," Dey says. "If the process is disrupted, there is a ripple effect throughout pregnancy. If the offspring makes it through delivery, all kinds of problems may occur, from birth defects to mental retardation to learning disabilities."

One of Dey's most important collaborations is with Vanderbilt cancer researchers. "We've found that many of the molecules responsible for cancer growth are also involved during early pregnancy," he says.

Seven days a week, Dey arrives at his lab between 5:30 and 6 a.m., working at least a 12-hour day but knocking off a couple hours early on weekends. "I used to come in around 4 or 4:30, but I'm getting older," he says. "I'm very excited about what I do. So many things happen, I want to be here all the time."

Dorothy Overall Wells
Professor of Pediatrics

Sudhansu K. Dey

Director of the Division
of Reproductive and
Developmental Biology



Cal Turner Professor of
Law and Leadership

Suzanna Sherry

One of the country's best-known scholars in constitutional law, Suzanna Sherry joined Vanderbilt's law faculty four years ago after nearly 20 years at the University of Minnesota.

She and Berkeley colleague Dan Farber are now at work on the third in a trilogy of books about constitutional adjudication. "The first, *Beyond All Reason*, was an examination of the radical left and what we saw as its negative consequences as an approach to legal adjudication," she explains. "In the second, *Desperately Seeking Certainty*, we took on six high-profile mainstream constitutional scholars, three very conservative and three very liberal. You would think those two groups would have little in common, but we argue that both attempt to fit all of constitutional law into some grand theory. We think that's a mistake, not the way judges ought to reach decisions."

With their third book, Sherry and Farber "will share our vision of appropriate constitutional adjudication. It gives judges a fair amount of discretion and tells them to consider everything—text, history, policy, consequences, what other countries do, what their colleagues say—and trust that most of the time, but not all of the time, they'll reach a right decision or at least an acceptable decision."

In addition to her constitutional scholarship, Sherry teaches civil procedure to Vanderbilt law students. "It's not my business to mold students' political or personal views. But I try to give them tools to function in the ethically difficult world of being a lawyer, to help them become not only good, smart, analytical lawyers but responsible, ethical lawyers as well."



Peter Cummings

**John R. Hall Professor
of Chemical Engineering**

"Despite being made up of tantalizing simple molecules, water is perhaps one of the most complex substances," says Peter Cummings. Unlike nearly all other substances, water becomes less dense as it cools, which has biological repercussions that make life possible.

"If ice did not float, if ice did not form first on the top of lakes, rivers and ponds, aquatic life would not be able to survive the winter in cold climates," Cummings says. "This is just one of water's incredible properties. We never before have had a molecular model that adequately explains and accounts for all of water's unique properties."

Cummings is developing the most extensive, accurate model of water ever produced, one that incorporates water's behavior in extreme temperature and pressure conditions. This information could be useful to chemical engineers working on ways to solve environ-

mental and industrial purification problems by using more efficient solvents. He has veered away from experimental research toward theory and computation using complex computer tools.

Widely recognized as one of the world's leading experts in computer modeling and molecular simulation, Cummings, a native of Australia, joined the Vanderbilt faculty last year after serving as distinguished professor of chemical engineering, chemistry and computer science at the University of Tennessee and as distinguished scientist with the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) Chemical Sciences Division. Now he manages numerous research projects while teaching, editing a leading journal on chemical thermodynamics, and serving as director of the Nanomaterials Theory Institute within the Center for Nanophase Materials Science at the ORNL.


"Some people characterize America's K-12 education as being like the Missouri River: a mile wide and an inch deep. We add and we add, but nobody feels comfortable leaving anything out," says Andrew Porter. "It distinguishes our educational system from that of a number of countries around the world that teach fewer things but in greater depth."

For 25 years Porter's research has explored how teachers decide what to teach and how their decisions influence student achievement. An applied statistician and psychometrician, he uses mathematical models to measure human characteristics such as learning and achievement.

"A number of factors can influence teachers' decisions, such as accountability standards, principals, parents, achievement tests, and the composition of the class," Porter says. He has developed methods for assessing the alignment among classroom instruction, tests and content standards.

With the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Porter's expertise is more in demand than ever. He joined the Peabody College faculty last year after 15 years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was a professor of educational psychology and director of the Center for Education Research, one of the oldest and largest university-based education research and development centers.

"I see my job as giving teachers back information about what they are teaching in ways that help them to be analytical about it. It's all about trying to put tools into the hands of teachers that actually empower them to make good decisions."



**Patricia and Rodes Hart
Professor of Educational
Leadership and Policy**

Andrew Porter

**Director of the Learning
Sciences Institute**