

Dear SUNY Empire Alumni and Friends,

It is hard to believe that two years have passed since I joined the SUNY Empire community. In that time, we have transitioned to university status, solidified our role as SUNY's leading online university, and expanded our reach across the state and around the world. This work is made possible thanks to the hard work of our amazing faculty and staff as well as the support you provide as we continue to elevate our impact.

Across the university, we have begun implementing our strategic plan. We are moving forward on efforts to drive student success, enhance academic and inclusive excellence, improve organizational effectiveness, and raise our public profile. We are developing a strategic enrollment management plan and expanding our opportunity programs. We are upgrading our information technology systems to better serve students, and we are refining our diversity, equity, and inclusion action efforts. We are also increasing our marketing budget, reimagining our website, and launching initiatives to increase alumni engagement. We are busy—and we are just getting started!

I am pleased to report that although higher education nationwide faces steep declines, SUNY Empire is in an incredibly strong position. To date, we have increased our enrollments by 12% year over year, and we project further growth in 2024-25, which is giving us the opportunity to hire more faculty and staff. In the last year alone, we added 50 positions, and we will continue to hire this year across the entire institution.

I have been busy meeting with legislators throughout the state to tell SUNY Empire's uniquely impactful story of driving educational attainment. This spring, we were thrilled that the state's 2024-2025 enacted budget added \$114 million in SUNY funding. SUNY Empire received a nearly \$5 million increase in state support over the last two years. I am thankful to Governor Hochul, legislators, and higher-education committee members who advocated for this funding.



This May, we celebrated commencement ceremonies in Albany, Rochester, and Manhattan with 689 graduates and their families. The spring Class of 2024 ranged in age from 18 to 77 and hailed from 57 New York state counties, 22 states, and 15 countries. 67 of this spring's graduates were military affiliated. This commencement season brought us ever closer to having 100,000 alumni!

I am so proud to lead this dynamic institution, especially at a time when a flexible, affordable, high-quality education is more relevant than ever.

Please follow us on Instagram and LinkedIn to keep up on our activity and help us spread the news about Empire State University!

Warmly,



Lisa Vollendorf, Ph.D.
President
@LisaVollendorf
@SUNYEmpire

EM WASSERMAN '24

When you meet people who have true passion for their work, it invariably surfaces. With Em Wasserman '24, that revelation is immediate – they want to transform the mental health system.

Wasserman was the student speaker at the commencement ceremony in Albany, NY this year, after completing an undergraduate degree in social science with a self-designed concentration in human rights advocacy.

“I am thrilled to have been able to put together a concentration that so closely resonates with my life,” Wasserman said. “I got to interrogate different systems – legal, education, mental health – and figure out how they impact people and see if we can do better.”

Wasserman is open about their experience within the mental health system, both as a past patient – they spent a few years in psychiatric institutions – and now as the manager of a program with the NYS Office of Mental Health that works in the community to help people struggling with mental illness. “I work holistically to support people who experience trauma, psychiatric labeling, or other life-interrupting challenges,” they said. “The people who are offering support are people who have been there. The program is meant to engage and support people to live a life that they deem worth living.”

Wasserman started their college degree at Northeastern University, studying architecture. Their first semester was also their last, until they found SUNY Empire. They immediately connected with the course work, thrived in the online environment, and bonded with mentor Nadine Wedderburn.

As an undergraduate, they discovered autoethnography, an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and uses the writing as a research practice. “It reminded me of my own work empowering people to share their narrative,” Wasserman said. “My mentor Nadine said, ‘Let’s do this for you.’”

With Wedderburn’s coaching, Wasserman prepared their own autoethnographic work, titled “Is There a Way Out?: Understanding Psychiatric Institutionalization Through Autoethnography”



and presented it at the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative, and again at the American Society of Criminology annual meeting. The experience left Wasserman feeling accepted, and excited to be “taking myself seriously, understanding I am just as capable as anyone in this room.”

In addition to their studies, Wasserman has been active in student clubs and organizations – including as president of the Student Government Association, and member of a LGBTQIA community task group. They currently serve as the student representative to the Alumni Student Federation Board and hope to continue as an alumni member after graduation.

“EMPIRE WAS THE LIFELINE THAT I DIDN’T KNOW I NEEDED.”

As a result of their academic work and university involvement, Wasserman was recognized this spring with a SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Student Excellence. Ultimately, Wasserman plans to pursue graduate studies in public health. Matching the SUNY Empire experience will be a high bar, but they are optimistic.

“Empire was the lifeline that I didn’t know I needed,” Wasserman said. “I didn’t believe in my ability to be taken seriously. But this place has offered me so many opportunities to reflect on that and apply everything that I’ve gained here in situations that do make a difference. I will use this gift, this privilege for years to come and continue learning.”



TEXTBOOKS FOR STUDENTS

Empire State University is committed to expanding opportunities and removing barriers for our students. That includes doing all we can to reduce the cost of textbooks. In a world where the cost of living continues to rise, the additional expense of textbooks can be devastating. Students say they often have to drop courses, opt out for a semester, or try to go without the textbooks they need to excel.

Our library provides free textbooks in more than half the courses we offer. These affordability efforts are among the most impactful in the nation. However, textbooks in other courses remain unaffordable for many students. Your gift to Textbooks for Students will help our students access the textbooks they need, focus on learning, and graduate faster. Together, we can remove another barrier to learning.

Give now.



SAVE THE DATE

Community Conversation: Ask the Experts About Literacy

Wednesday, August 21, 11 a.m. to noon

Join SUNY Empire faculty members Joanne Kramer, Tom Mackey, and Karis Jones for a panel discussion on literacy, moderated by Naomi Leconte-Lucio '23, an ELA teacher in the Master of Arts in Teaching, English program.

The program will begin with introductions from our expert panel and will be shaped by participant questions around literacy today and in the future.

Join the conversation.



ALUMNI AWARDS

Empire State University's Alumni Awards program was established in 2016 by the Alumni Student Federation Board of Governors. The awards recognize our exemplary alumni who have made a lasting impact on society and SUNY Empire through outstanding professional, philanthropic, or volunteer accomplishments.

The categories are:

- ▶ Emerging Leader
- ▶ Distinguished Leader
- ▶ Community Impact Award
- ▶ Veteran Service

We will be accepting nominations soon using a new easier nomination application. Specific details will be announced shortly. All members of the SUNY Empire community are encouraged to nominate deserving alumni for these awards.

Help us spotlight the achievements of the leaders SUNY Empire has produced. **Information about the awards**, including past recipients, can be found on our website.

For questions or more information contact alumni@sunyempire.edu.

Gifts to The Fund support student scholarships, as well as other programs and initiatives around the university. This year, we had the opportunity to support some special projects, including travel expenses for teachers, librarians, and students to attend the symposium at the Strong Museum.

When you make your gift to The Fund for SUNY Empire, you are partnering with the university to foster social change and community enrichment.

In addition, every gift helps support efforts to continuously improve programming, retain exceptional faculty, and offer scholarships that enable students to experience a life-changing education.

Please join us in changing lives by making your gift today!



SPECIAL PROJECTS GRANT AWARDED TO SYMPOSIUM ON STORYTELLING

When the Strong Museum in Rochester, NY, announced plans to host an exhibit on the fantasy role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons, Karis Jones, Ph.D., saw an opportunity for a partnership with Empire State University.

Now, Jones is part of the opening keynote team for a symposium on September 21 that kicks off the exhibit this fall. She and Alex Corbitt, an assistant professor of literacy for SUNY Cortland, will be doing two presentations: one at 11:30 a.m. on "Get Ready to Roll: Accessible Structures to Support D&D in Libraries and Schools" and a second at 2 p.m. on "Leveling Up Critical Storytelling: Using RPGs to Reimagine the Real World."



Karis Jones, left, with Nance Wilson, president of the New York State Reading Association, and Alex Corbitt, of SUNY Cortland.

The two created a professional development program called "Leveling Up Critical Storytelling" that centers on RPGs — role playing games. The program received the New York State Reading Association Richard L. Allington Grant for Research.

Since the summer of 2023, Jones and Corbitt have been working with libraries and K-12 schools, showing teachers and librarians the learning that often comes with role playing. They've also done virtual seminar discussions and presented at the National Council for Teachers of English earlier this year.

"It's all about how to use role playing games to teach literacy skills," Jones says. "There's a lot of socioemotional learning and conflicts to work through. It's also very collaborative and builds empathy. Students become better readers, writers, political citizens, and classmates."

Jones also uses role playing instruction in her teacher education classes at SUNY Empire.

Jones received a special projects grant from the Empire State University Foundation that will enable them to fund travel expenses for librarians, teachers, and students who want to attend the symposium. Jones is inviting all SUNY Empire alumni to attend the event.

For more information, visit the **Strong Museum**.