

# CONNECTIONS

ALUMNI MAGAZINE | SPRING 2025

Vol. 52



▶ PAGE 8

**CELEBRATING  
100K ALUMNI**



**EMPIRE STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

# CONNECTIONS

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*"An estate plan is not only about an orderly and good ending. It's also an opportunity to spell out the values that you cherished during your lifetime, which for me includes higher education and SUNY Empire."*

- Hugh Hammett, Ph.D., retired employee

**GIVE A GIFT. CREATE A LEGACY. CHANGE A LIFE.**



Consider supporting the future of Empire State University with a gift in your estate plan.

To learn more about planned giving and to explore your options, visit <https://sunyempire.edu/plangifts> or email [Toby.Tobrocke@sunyempire.edu](mailto:Toby.Tobrocke@sunyempire.edu)



# A LETTER FROM PRESIDENT VOLLENDORF

It is an exciting time at Empire State University. In November, we reached the impressive milestone of graduating 100,000 students since the university's founding in 1971. These are 100,000 lives changed by SUNY Empire's uniquely impactful mission of expanding access to higher education and driving educational attainment.

We are proud to count so many of you among this community.

This issue of Connections showcases several student success stories in recognition of SUNY Empire's rich history. You will read about the incredible journeys of alumni, including Jose Otero, a former automotive technician who now runs a successful consulting company.

Be sure to read the heartfelt memories of two of SUNY Empire's earliest graduates, Ted Marotta and Margaret Corbin, and a tribute to one of our institution's most loyal alumni, Susan H. Turben, who passed away in 2023.

You will also hear from one of the university's longest-serving faculty members, Robert Congemi, as well as from students and alumni who credit the institution's pillars of access, innovation, and flexibility with helping them achieve the dream of a college education.

As we celebrate the many moments and milestones that have allowed us to reach this point, I am reminded that the future for SUNY Empire is filled with opportunity—to reach more learners returning to college, fill critical gaps in the labor market, and be of service to those who have been left behind by traditional higher education.

That is why I was excited to learn more about the university's first cohort of doctoral students, who will use their Ed.D. degrees to transform



the lives of others through education. Similarly, you will read about SUNY Empire's new College of Education, which will help address New York's teacher shortage. In the coming year, we will be launching additional colleges to help raise our profile as a university committed to advancing economic opportunity for all.

And SUNY Empire's Career Hub continues to be a valuable resource for alumni. Anita DeCianni-Brown's feature article explains how to utilize this service throughout your career.

I am filled with pride and gratitude for our entire SUNY Empire community. Together we are building a legacy of academic and inclusive excellence for learners of all ages and backgrounds. With your continued support, that legacy will endure for generations to come.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa Vollendorf". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

**Lisa Vollendorf, Ph.D.**  
**President**



# THE BULLETIN



SUNY Empire staff from the **Center for International Education** went to Prague in February and spent time with students. From front to back on the right are Usman Aliyu, Nikolai Meissnest, Katerina Nikol Morris, and Rooza Bennet. All four are graduating this spring. On the left are Kim Marsella, associate director; Dan Nyaronga, Ph.D., a professor in SUNY Empire's Department of Psychology and Human Development; Francesca Cichello, senior executive director; and Todd Nesbitt, Ph.D., director of European Programs.

## ACCREDITATION PROCESS BEGINS

Empire State University is undergoing accreditation review from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE).

SUNY Empire has been accredited by the MSCHE since 1974. Accreditation affirms that SUNY Empire meets the highest standards in our academic programs and remains effective for our students. The process engages the entire university community in



self-study and continuous improvement.

SUNY Empire's accreditation was last reaffirmed in 2020. The review, which includes a site visit, is scheduled for the 2027-2028 academic year.



## SUNY EMPIRE LAUNCHES AI FELLOWSHIPS

The Office of Academic Affairs has selected the inaugural group of Empire State University AI Fellows.

The projects will explore ways to integrate AI into everything from mentoring and curriculum development to prior learning assessment and career planning.

The Empire State University AI Fellowship was established to promote AI innovation in teaching, research, or administrative practices and support the development of AI tools and programs that benefit students, faculty, or staff.

Fellowship recipients will also gain valuable experience and insights into AI's cutting-edge applications.

## A.S. DEGREES AWARDED ON WAY TO BACHELOR'S

Students getting a bachelor's degree who complete the courses needed for an associate of science degree in general studies will now be eligible to get an A.S. degree. The goal is to recognize students for their academic achievements on their journey toward earning a four-year degree.

Research indicates that obtaining an associate degree can provide an income boost and enhance the chances of completing a bachelor's degree. By awarding A.S. degrees, SUNY Empire reinforces its commitment to access and empowerment.

## DEBUT OF CHROMEBOOK PILOT PROGRAM

Eligible students were able to purchase a Chromebook at the discounted price of \$100 this spring, thanks to **SUNY Empire's Chromebook Pilot Program**. The program is open to new and matriculated students in the U.S. who are in their first term. More than 260 students purchased Chromebooks at the reduced price.

## EXPANDING CAREERS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

SUNY Empire is creating more inclusive career pathways for students with disabilities as part of a project with SUNY System Administration. The university was one of six SUNY schools chosen to participate in the system-wide Pathways to Inclusion project, which runs from January to August 2025.

The program is sponsored by the Office of Disability Resources at SUNY System Administration in collaboration with the SUNY Career Development Organization and John Robinson, president and CEO of Our Ability, a non-profit dedicated to promoting job opportunities for people with disabilities.

The project is led by three offices at SUNY Empire: the Office of Career and

Experiential Learning Services, the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services, and the Center for Autism Advocacy: Research, Education, and Supports (CAARES).

The goal is to build more regional partnerships, create an advisory board, and develop more career programming for students with disabilities.

## SUNY EMPIRE RECOGNIZED BY AMERICORPS

Empire State University has been named a School of National Service by AmeriCorps, the federal agency dedicated to volunteerism. These schools offer a variety of benefits to the one million-plus AmeriCorps alumni across the U.S.



## NEW DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES

Empire State University has new academic programs available. Here's what's been added:

- B.S. in biology
- B.A. or B.S. in digital media arts
- B.S. in early childhood education
- B.S. in information technology
- M.S. in healthcare analytics
- M.S. in marketing analytics
- Undergraduate certificate in labor studies
- Advanced certificate in nursing administration



**LOOKING TO GET INVOLVED WITH SUNY EMPIRE?**

Visit: <https://sunyempire.edu/involved> for ideas.





# Our Earliest Graduates

By Winnie Yu

**E**mpire State University opened its doors in 1971 when challenging convention was the norm. A year later, SUNY Empire graduated its first students. Here are three who got their degree that year.

## MARGARET CORBIN '72: NOTHING BUT WONDERFUL

Margaret Corbin was taking courses at Monroe Community College when an instructor showed her an article announcing a new college.

"I went there that first day, and a guy showed up with a key," recalls Margaret, who still lives in Rochester, NY. "I told him, 'I'm here to be your first student.' It was nothing but wonderful from the time I was there."

Margaret was a single mother with three kids and no money. She did volunteer work with juvenile offenders and led a book group at the YWCA. She also taught at local community colleges, SUNY Brockport, and Attica Correctional Facility, where she worked with inmates.

Her experiences translated into college credit at SUNY Empire and enabled her to get her degree in less than two



Margaret Corbin '72

years. "It was all about what I already did," she says.

Margaret spoke at the inauguration of SUNY Empire's first president Jim Hall in Congress Park in Saratoga Springs, NY. "If Empire State could capture these attitudes — flexibility, inquisitiveness, and supportiveness — I believe they will lead a great change in education," she said at the ceremony.

Margaret went on to get a master's degree from Goddard College and become a psychotherapist and health educator. She directed a New York State DMV Impaired Driver Program for more than 50 years, retiring in 2024.

## TED MAROTTA '72: THE RIGHT SCHOOL AT THE RIGHT TIME

It was 1971, when Ted Marotta spotted a small ad in the Albany Times Union for a new SUNY institution called Empire State College. "Nobody quite knew what was going on, but they were accepting people who had a lot of college credit," he says.

Ted had an associate degree in construction from Hudson Valley Community College (HVCC), where he taught. He had also attended SUNY Cortland for two years right out of high school.

To remain a professor at HVCC, he knew he needed a bachelor's degree. By then, he was married, working full time, and raising



**Ted Marotta '72**

two kids, with a third on the way. The prospect of going to college seemed daunting.

Seeing the ad for SUNY Empire was “a godsend, a miracle, or serendipity, whatever you want to call it,” he says. At an orientation, he learned it would take six to eight months to get his bachelor’s. Ted was sold.

Ted got his master’s degree from the University at Albany and spent 44 years teaching at HVCC, becoming a full professor and writing a textbook on construction materials that’s now in its eighth edition. He retired in 2012. “It worked out perfectly,” he says.

### **SUSAN H. TURBEN '72, H'05: THE FIRST DISTINGUISHED LEADER**

Susan H. Turben '72, H'05 was the second graduate of Empire State University and received a B.A. in developmental psychology/ infant development. She passed away in November 2023.

Susan attended SUNY Empire

while raising children and working. She especially enjoyed her relationship with the faculty. “I had terrific experiences with faculty and mentors,” she said at an event in 2021.

Later, she got an M.Ed. in early childhood education and a dual doctorate in early childhood and special education/developmental psychology, all from Kent State University. She founded Turben Developmental Services, which provided home-based

educational and developmental services to families.

Together with her husband, Jack, the couple became SUNY Empire’s first million-dollar donors in 2004. At the time, Susan said, “If you look at [SUNY Empire’s] educational model, which is such a modern, vital, up-to-date way of educating people, the question is why wouldn’t we make this gift?”

She served on the Foundation Board of Directors for two decades until 2021. The couple established two endowed faculty chairs, the Susan H. Turben Chair in Mentoring and the Susan H. Turben Directorship for Autism Advocacy. In addition, they created the Susan H. Turben Award for Excellence in Scholarship.

For her dedication, she received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from SUNY Empire in 2005 and the inaugural Distinguished Leader Alumni Award in 2017.

**Susan H. Turben '72, H'05 and husband, Jack.**







# Congratulations to Our 100K Alumni!

**E**mpire State University hit a major milestone last fall — we now have 100,000 alumni! 100,000 of us who juggled jobs and families while forging ahead with our studies.

100,000 of us who had the determination and drive to keep moving forward, regardless of what else was going on.

100,000 of us whose goals and dreams came into focus at varying points in time, be it after high school or later in life.

Since the university's debut in 1971, SUNY Empire has granted degrees to 100,000 people who know what it takes to get a college education the SUNY Empire way. It's a place where our work and life experiences counted as college credit, a place where we could earn a degree while attending to



the rest of our lives. These are the hallmarks of a SUNY Empire education.

I'm enormously proud to be counted among our alumni. We live in all 50 states and in 96 countries and work in industries of all kinds. Next time you





encounter another SUNY Empire graduate, I hope you'll take a moment to celebrate that bond. Take pride in what we've accomplished and let's applaud all 100,000 of us.

— **Marian Conway, Ph.D. '01, '04,**  
Chairwoman, Empire State University Foundation  
Board of Directors

## The New York Times

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### State Will Open College Without a Campus in Fall

By M. A. FARBER

The State University's new experimental college, whose students will earn degrees without being attached to a specific campus or having to enroll in traditional courses, will start operation in the fall in the Albany and Rochester areas and spread throughout the state by 1973, the university announced yesterday.

Inspired in part by England's Open University, the nonresidential college is meant to provide more educational options

for young and old people who have graduated from high school but who do not want to, or cannot, attend a regular college on a regular basis.

Students in Empire State College, the name of the new college, will pursue individual programs of study under the direction of small faculty contingents assigned to 20 new "learning centers" around the state. However, much of students' academic work will be done at home or in other non-campus situations.

Academic credit will be awarded for a wide variety of activities, including correspondence work, the use of instructional materials prepared specially for the college, educational courses on television, on-the-job and community-volunteer experiences, occasional

Continued on Page 47, Column 4

# Jose Otero '02: From Auto Technician to CEO

By Winnie Yu

**J**ose Otero was 14 when he realized he would need to be self-reliant. His family was facing hard times and fell into poverty. He recalls his mom saying, “I can put a roof over your head but if you want anything else besides one meal a day, you have to work for it.”

That’s when Otero walked down the street to a gas station in Brooklyn and got his first job pumping gas. “It was the 1980s, and we all worked back then,” he says. “By the time I finished high school, I was a full-time mechanic.”

For Otero, the experience was a lesson in hard work that paved the path for him to become his own boss. Today, the former mechanic is the head of three corporations, including Otero Consulting Group in Kissimmee, FL, where he serves as president and CEO.

The international consulting firm helps private K-20 — kindergarten through graduate school — institutions achieve compliance, secure accreditation, and meet licensing requirements in the counties, states, and countries where they want to operate.

Otero is passionate about what he does. “When I started this company, one of the things I realized is I never want to retire,” he says.



Jose Otero '02

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Otero grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. At age 11, he was identified as gifted and talented with an IQ of 140. He was offered a full scholarship to an elite school in Virginia, but his family was not comfortable letting him go without their supervision.

Instead, he graduated from A-Tech High School certified as an automotive technician. He later received certification to teach automotive technology.

Along the way, he tried working in other fields. He

spent a couple of years working for the New York City Police Department. “I felt bad for the minors who were convicted,” he says. “I felt they would not be in this situation if they were helped at a younger age. That bothered me, and it’s how I got into alternative ed.”

Otero started taking courses in special education. He developed a curriculum for teaching auto technology to students with disabilities at a time when no standards existed and special ed students received little attention. “I taught students with special needs



without a clue as to how to do it," he says.

He spent 18 years working for the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), as a teacher, a dean, and an administrator at various schools. He was appointed by the Chancellor to launch the first Cisco Networking Academy at Thomas Edison High School in Queens for students interested in IT careers. He also organized the Computer Technology Academy for the NYCDOE and helped expand the program to over 65 locations within two years.

### A PHENOMENAL EXPERIENCE

Otero credits his success to his experience at Empire State University, where professors encouraged his inquisitive nature and fueled his thirst for knowledge. His brother Juan Otero '01 and sister Maria Otero '06 are also SUNY Empire alumni.

Attending SUNY Empire at the Old Westbury location was "a phenomenal experience," he says. "For the first time, I was surrounded by intellectuals with eclectic knowledge of the human condition. These were really good and very smart people. If you asked a question, you engaged in a long discussion. No one watched the clock. It was invigorating, and it fed me."

Otero chose to study psychology to better understand human behavior. Among his most memorable experiences was an internship at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens, where he helped with patient assessments and other tasks.

After graduating from SUNY Empire, he went on to get a



## "One of the things I realized is I never want to retire."

master's in education and an Ed.S., both at CUNY Queens College. He earned his doctorate in business administration from the International University of Leadership in Orlando.

### BECOMING AN ENTREPRENEUR

Otero moved to Florida in 2004 and spent nine years working for various companies. In 2013, he launched Otero Consulting Group, a firm that helps private universities, colleges, nursing schools, and health-related institutions navigate the laws that lead to licensure and accreditation.

Today, the consulting company is a family business that includes Otero's wife A.J., who speaks five languages, and his three children, Joseph Jr., Paloma, and Bella. Clients come from all over the U.S. including California, Florida, and New York, and

the company has international clients in Peru, Columbia, and Chile, among other countries.

Together with his son, Otero also co-owns University Geek Squad, a technology company that helps universities and K-12 schools develop and manage online security and maintenance issues.

In 2025, Otero will be launching Otero Institute for Postsecondary Advancement. The institute will train entrepreneurs interested in starting private schools, colleges, or universities to manage operations, staffing, and finances.

After a lifetime of working in education at all levels, Otero is convinced that a global alliance in education is more important than ever.

"Education will one day pave the road to world peace," he says. "Education is the only way."

# Celebrating SUNY Empire's First Ed.D. Graduates

By Jane Gottlieb

**E**mpire State University graduated its first class of doctoral students this spring — 11 mid-career higher education professionals completing an Ed.D. in educational leadership and change. Another three students are expected to finish their degrees in December.

The new 54-credit program focuses on the intersection of research and practice. Over four years, students apply classes in such areas as organizational dynamics and research methodologies to their work as deans, administrators, and professors.

"They know what the challenges and opportunities are

and are committed to making a difference and celebrating the change they'll be able to make," says Lisa Unangst, Ph.D., the program coordinator and an assistant professor in higher education leadership.

Students take two courses for all three terms and one in the third year when they begin their dissertations. They attend online classes together and meet annually in Saratoga and in weekly online discussions.

Before graduating, the first doctoral candidates defended their dissertations. Among the topics: how laptop loaner programs support student success; how higher ed administrators understand

barriers to refugee education; and the effectiveness of clean-energy training programs.

Working professionals get the chance to pursue original research and help improve the systems they work in, Unangst says. "By the time they graduate they will be leading the scholarship in their fields," she adds.

Unangst says the first group built a strong community, which she hopes will continue in subsequent cohorts. By this fall, the program will have 80 students.

Here's what three graduates had to say about the program:



## Kathleen Lieblich '25

*Interim Vice President for Student Affairs and Assistant Vice President for Student Wellbeing at SUNY New Paltz*

"I have the same reason for doing this degree today as when I enrolled — to develop and educate myself further so I can provide the best experience to my students and be a leader who can support staff, innovate for my campus, and successfully navigate challenges and change.

"The cohort model has been one of the most important pieces to many of us finishing this degree. Four years is a long time and having these professional and academic colleagues by my side throughout this journey has been a sustaining force. The group supports, teaches and motivates one another."



## Brian Murphy '25

*Lecturer in engineering technology at Buffalo State*

“Working full time and pursuing a doctorate was challenging, and I was happy to find SUNY Empire’s Ed.D. program, which requires no more than two courses per semester and has the flexibility of online work. I was fortunate to have remaining benefits on my GI bill and SUNY Empire is a veteran-friendly school.

“We quickly became close through that feeling of ‘We’re all in this together.’ Whoever was on the call — sometimes all 14 of us and sometimes just a handful — discussed what they were challenged by and shared ideas on how to overcome those difficulties and do a great job. Sometimes, it was just a good motivational pep talk.

“I have grown in my understanding of higher education, both its history, its founding principles, and how important it is to society. I’m also more aware of the diverse ways to achieve student success through engagement and classroom learning style. Thanks to the Ed.D. program, I will be evaluated for associate professor in September.”



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**“By the time they graduate they will be leading the scholarship in their fields.”**

— Lisa Unangst, Ph.D., program coordinator

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## Navieta Ramasami '25

*Pre-award administrator at Yale University*

“I enrolled because I want to make a broader impact on higher education. I’ve developed a richer understanding of leadership and change management. I’ve learned to critically evaluate organizational structures, design meaningful interventions, and implement strategies that promote equity and sustainability.

“My dissertation, ‘Faculty BURNout at Research-Intensive (R1) Institutions (BURN-R1),’ explores the role of institutional culture and support in shaping faculty well-being. My ultimate goal is to help implement policies and practices that reduce burnout, support sustainable research environments, and improve institutional effectiveness.

“Through this shared journey, I’ve gained not only practical skills but also a network of colleagues who inspire and challenge me to push boundaries in the field of higher education. This support system has been a constant source of motivation and encouragement.”

# The Pillars of SUNY Empire

By Stephen Parato

**A**t Empire State University, we're known for our accessibility, flexibility, and innovation.

Call them the pillars of SUNY Empire, the values at the heart of our mission. But what do these mean in the lives of our students? We asked students and alumni to tell us in their own words how these guiding principles impacted their experience.



▶ Tell us how SUNY Empire's pillars helped you get a degree. Email us at: [ConnectionsMagazine@sunyempire.edu](mailto:ConnectionsMagazine@sunyempire.edu).

## 1. ACCESS



"While attending SUNY Empire, I have never had to worry about accommodations. From the start of the semester when the disabilities services office sends out the accommodation letters to talking to professors about utilizing them, SUNY Empire has made it a breeze for me to succeed."

— **Richard Collier, student in information technology**



"Learning online has been invaluable for me. As a farmer, where time and hours are unpredictable, in-person attendance was not feasible. Empire State University allowed me the opportunity to study anytime and anywhere (literally) at my own pace, fitting my education around my daily responsibilities."

— **Melissa Blake '22, '23, MBA student**



"I enrolled at SUNY Empire 26 years after I graduated from high school. As an adult learner, I had to learn how to learn again. The last paper I typed was on an electric typewriter, and the last time I had to do research in a library, I actually had to pull out wooden card catalogs from a cabinet. I had to learn how to use the citing methods. It was all so new to me. The SUNY Empire staff and administrators were always there for me. They didn't let this get in the way."

— **Lisa Bryk '16**



## 2. FLEXIBILITY



"At Empire State University, it's understood that one size doesn't fit all in the journey of education. The flexible online curriculum empowered me to balance my aspirations with the demands of everyday life, so I could pursue my goals without compromise. As a 13-year breast cancer survivor, I'm a mentor for newly diagnosed Black women, present all over the country about the importance of early detection, and produce a podcast. I take two classes every semester because I know how much time I can dedicate to my studies. SUNY Empire puts me in the driver's seat — choosing my pace, and charting my course, as I move towards success."

— **Serrina Goodman '25, MBA student**



"The supportive environment and flexibility to earn my degree online while serving in the Army made all the difference."

— **Juan Martinez Rojas '24**



"I would not be able to attend college without the flexibility that SUNY Empire offers. As a father of three, a full-time Veterans Peer to Peer program director, part-time correctional officer and EMT, being flexible is a huge part of my life and Empire State University has been great fitting into a busy schedule."

— **Tom Elwood, student in human resources management**

## 3. INNOVATION



"For many years, I tried to find a program that would allow me to complete my undergraduate degree while working an ever-changing schedule at CBS News and raising a family. My experience at SUNY Empire using its innovative learning techniques allowed me to finally earn that long awaited degree after 40 years of failing to find a way to do it."

—**Tom Sabella '08**

"My degree from SUNY Empire combined my two years of art school and sporadic community college credits I picked up over the years, with new classes at SUNY Empire. I also earned credit for what I learned in the workforce, from my stint as a door-to-door vacuum salesperson to the years I served as a peer counselor with AmeriCorps. I wouldn't have been able to swing full-time college as an adult. I'm grateful that I could earn a degree that enriched my education and wrapped it up neatly while leaving nothing wasted."

—**Kate Austin '08**



# 3 Reasons to Check Out the Career Hub

By Anita DeCianni-Brown '12, '15

**R**eady to take the next step in your job or career? SUNY Empire's Career Hub can help. The virtual career resource center, which debuted in December 2023, is packed with curated content that can help you enhance your job and career. Here are three reasons to take a look:

## 1 You're looking for a new job.

If you're seeking employment, the Career Hub has articles, resources, and tools that identify specific opportunities. Alumni have exclusive access to:

- **Handshake:** As SUNY Empire's job posting system for students and alumni, Handshake offers a place to find job openings across the country and around the world. Employers eager to connect with SUNY Empire talent can share their opportunities here.
- **CareerShift:** This comprehensive platform combines a job search engine with networking tools that

help you uncover hidden opportunities and expand your professional connections.

## 2 You want to change careers.

Ready to try a new industry? The Career Hub can guide you. Online assessments can help you identify your interests, while interviews in our Ask5 and Career In series provide a glimpse into potential areas of interest. Both feature interviews with alumni, industry experts, faculty, and staff to help you navigate next steps.

## 3 You're hiring.

Whether you're looking for a full-time employee or an intern, the Career Hub offers a place for employers to post job opportunities. Consider creating a Handshake employer account, which is free for employers. Handshake also helps broaden your search by reaching a bigger pool of candidates.



### HOW TO GET INVOLVED IN CAREER SERVICES

Want to help others succeed? SUNY Empire invites alumni to participate in our career programming.

By sharing your professional journey, participating in informational interviews with students, or offering industry insights in our Ask5 and Careers In series, you can inspire and inform the SUNY Empire community. Alumni can also provide valuable real-world perspectives.

Join us in shaping the future of SUNY Empire's talented students and alumni by contributing your knowledge and experiences.

Visit <https://careerhub.sunyempire.edu/> to learn more.

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*Anita DeCianni-Brown '12, '15 is the director of the Career & Experiential Learning Center for Empire State University. Her email is: [anita.brown@sunyempire.edu](mailto:anita.brown@sunyempire.edu).*





**EMPIRE STATE**  
UNIVERSITY



**100,000 alumni.  
100,000 dreams.**

You remember what it took to fulfill those ambitions. The late nights. The pots of coffee. And the generosity of those who gave to The Fund for Empire State University and enriched your education.

Now you can support other deserving students by making a gift.

Together, we can help the next 100,000 dreams come true.



Learn more at:  
[sunyempire.edu/springfund25](https://sunyempire.edu/springfund25)

# SUNY Empire Launches College of Education

By Daniel Fogarty

**C**ome fall, students will have the opportunity to take classes in Empire State University's new College of Education (COE). The creation of the college comes at a crucial time when the demand for well-prepared educators and education leaders is growing.

As New York's only fully online public institution, SUNY Empire is uniquely positioned to expand access to high-quality teacher preparation and leadership programs. The flexible, online model allows the university to serve working professionals, career changers, and educators in rural or underserved areas who may not have access to traditional teacher preparation pathways.

"The launch of the COE is a significant milestone for SUNY Empire, reinforcing our commitment to preparing educators and education leaders who are equipped for today's dynamic learning environments," says Rai Kathuria, Ph.D., the provost and executive vice president for Academic Affairs at SUNY Empire.

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES

In launching the COE, SUNY Empire will be able to centralize and strengthen its education programs and enhance professional pathways for educators at various stages of their careers.



"I'm particularly excited about the opportunities for collaboration, research, and expanded partnerships with school districts, workforce agencies, and communities across the state," Kathuria says. "These will present students and faculty with new professional development and research opportunities."

While SUNY Empire has long offered education degrees and certifications, the COE will bring a more cohesive, structured, and strategic approach to the university's education offerings.

By bringing all education-related programs under one umbrella, the new COE will establish a dedicated academic home for these programs and create a distinct identity for the college. The COE will be able to align its curriculum, faculty collaboration, and program development. Additionally, it will strengthen faculty governance and promote innovative teaching

practices for a more dynamic and responsive curriculum.

## SERVING MANY GROUPS

Interested students will be able to start enrolling on July 1, 2025. The programs will target educators who want to advance in their careers or acquire additional certifications; people entering the field of education; and traditional undergraduate or graduate students who want to pursue teaching careers or leadership roles in education.

School administrators seeking professional development and credentialing opportunities may also be interested in the COE. The college is developing microcredentials and workforce-aligned initiatives that meet evolving industry needs.

The COE will be led by Dean Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs, who will join the university in June 2025.

**Daniel Fogarty is the assistant vice president for enrollment management and marketing at SUNY Empire.**



# A Half Century at SUNY Empire: Q&A with Robert Congemi

**E**mpire State University was in its second year when Robert Congemi ran into Bill Frankonis, one of the university's first mentors, in a coffee shop in Albany. Frankonis told Congemi about a job opening for a literature mentor at a new, experimental state college.

"He went on and on about how it was so exciting and different, especially one-on-one mentoring," Congemi recalls. "Bill told me, 'Bob, nobody can do this job more than three to five years. So do what you can and then move on.'"

Fifty-two years later, Congemi is still at SUNY Empire, where he has served as a literature professor, a mentor, and a unit coordinator. "I love the job," he says.

Congemi lives and works in Albany and has three adult children and seven grandchildren.



Robert Congemi

He is also a writer who just completed his 13th book, "Dante and the Others" (TBM Books). We spoke to Congemi about his career and what SUNY Empire having 100,000 alumni means to him.

## What attracted you to SUNY Empire?

From what I read, the school was too good to be believed. The handbook described one-on-one learning, affective as well as cognitive education, interdisciplinary coursework, and college credit for work and life experience.

## How have students changed?

Early students were smart people who for one reason or another didn't have a degree. Many were older adults who wanted a degree for personal satisfaction. There were also counterculture people

from the 1970s who didn't want to sit at the feet of a professor for four years.

Nowadays, we have many younger students who like to learn but they're likely as well to need a degree to make their way in their field.

## Why have you stayed all these years?

This is my 63rd year of teaching. I was born to be a teacher. I still get excited by an upcoming semester, believe it or not. I just want to help folks get an education that often is so important to their lives.

## What comes to mind when you hear 100,000 alumni?

The idea of 100,000 people graduating from SUNY Empire is just stupefying. I was so proud when I heard that number. And gratified. It certainly justifies one's professional life.



Robert Congemi, circa 1970s.



# ALUMNI NOTES

## 1970s

### MICHAEL C. HUBBARD '75

retired from his job as a psychotherapist at Oregon State Hospital.



**ALBERT WEIR '77** has written "Professional Rookie," about his experiences as a New York City police officer and his role in 9/11.

## 1990s



**DAWOUD BEY '90** exhibited "Stony the Road" at Sean Kelly, a gallery in New York City, featuring his images of the Richmond Slave Trail in Virginia.

*(Photography Frank Ishman. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles)*

**JOHN PRIVIDERA '91** has been appointed chief experience officer for Sunmark Credit Union, based in Latham, NY.

**MARTIN ZUCKERMAN '92** retired from his job at Citibank as vice president of information technology.

**JASMINE TANG '96** received the Outstanding Commitment to Geneseo's Values-Belonging award from SUNY Geneseo, where she is an adjunct lecturer.



**MELBA TOLLIVER '98**, has written "Accidental Anchorwoman: A Memoir of Chance, Choice,

Change and Connection" (Rebel Bookseller) about her life and career in broadcasting.

## 2000s

**EDITH SMITH KNAPPENBERGER '01** has launched Jolts for Colts coffee blends, with a portion of sales donated to rescuing horses from kill pens.

**JOHN D. MARSHALL '01, '07** was appointed the CEO of Azra AI, a health technology firm that uses AI to automate cancer care.

**LISA WILLEY KNIERIM '02** is the mayor of Cranbury, NJ.

**EMAD RAHIM '02, '03** was among six graduates honored as distinguished Alumni Faces in 2025 by Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, NY.



**RICHARD G. WISHNIE '03** was appointed deputy county executive of Westchester County, NY.

**NITIN NATARAJAN '04** has launched NN Global LLC, an advisory services firm that will work with companies on cybersecurity, critical infrastructure resilience, and emergency management issues.

**WOODY CLERMONT '05** was elected Broward County court judge in Florida.



**JOSEPH LACIVITA '05** was named town administrator in Tisbury, MA, on Martha's Vineyard.



**ED FRIEDMAN '06** published a collection of humor essays, titled "I Will Not Be Ignored" (HumorOutcasts Press).

**JUDY MCLAUGHLIN '07, '14** was appointed chief nursing officer at Staten Island University Hospital.

## 2010s

**JOANNE A. BARRY '11, '12**, founder of Wholistic Fitness NY, was honored as Woman of the Month last November by the Professional Organization of Women of Excellence Recognized.



**DORIS COLSON '11, '24** (left) and **SARAH WILSON-SPARROW '17** spoke at the Continuing Education Association of New York Conference last fall.

**VIOLETA R. SHKRELI '11** is the founder of Talent Ponds, a talent recruitment firm that mitigates bias in the job search process.

**LAURIE SUE BROCKWAY '12, '24** has published "Sacred Stewards: Prayers, Ceremonies and Spiritual Practices to Guide Public Historians" (Goddess Communications).

**RANDY GORBMAN '12** retired from WXXI in Rochester, NY, where he was the news director.

**MIRANDA VON FRICKEN '14** is a contributor to "Unlocking Success," the latest book by Jack Canfield, co-creator of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series.

**COLLEEN BENTLEY-CICCONE '15** was promoted to assistant controller at Herkimer College (NY).

**KULLEN BAILEY '16** (left) is the president of the NYS Society of Radiological Sciences. He will be succeeded in fall 2026 by **Tabitha Sabater '23**.



**JOHN KANE '17**, president of Empire State University's Alumni Student Federation Board of Governors, is the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's advocate program coordinator.

**ROXANNE VON ANDRIAN, PH.D. '17**, published "Deception" (Book Locker), a thriller about post-Cold War espionage.

**MARK BORDEAU '18** was appointed by Gov. Kathy Hochul to the board of the SUNY Upstate Medical University Council.

**LISA ANN BORS '18, '22** was named vice president of public relations and development for Arc GLOW, which serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

## 2020s

**PHILLIP SALINARDI '20** was appointed the first-ever peer support coordinator for first responders in Orange County, NY.

**BEVERLY J. BURKE '21** received a master's degree in nonprofit leadership and management from Arizona State University.

**BRANDON A. LIFF '21** was promoted to financial advisor at Morgan Stanley Wealth Management.

**CHHUONG SO, SR. '21** published his first book, "Liberated from the Khmer Rouge" (Luminare Press).

**IAN THATCHER '22** is the artistic director and a dancer for the Peoria Ballet in Illinois.

**LOURDES LAIFER '23** is a life coach and mindfulness-based stress reduction teacher in Cold Spring, NY.

# IN MEMORIAM

Warren Abriel Jr. '83  
Rita Allen '05  
Agnes Annis '78  
Veronica Antenucci '94  
Paul Archibald '94  
Pamela Burkhart  
Norman Craig '82  
William Delaney  
Henry Eno '77

Catherine Furlani '86  
Daniel L. Grygas '85  
John Hendrickson  
Margaret Rocca Hill '75  
Robert E. Lazar  
Anthony J. Leone  
Christina C. Leung '97  
Irving Levine '77  
Dino Pacio Lindin

Sharon A Miner '03, '11  
Charles C. Morrison  
James R. Ostrander '76  
Alan Rachins '74  
Joseph R. Rogers '77  
Anthony S. Sgarlata '88  
Nancy A. Smith '01  
Rosalind Smith '92  
Reinhard Straub '93



## Launch The Next SUNY Empire Journey With Our Alumni Refer-A-Student Program!

When you refer a student (or even yourself), they receive a \$100 Better Together scholarship and a waiver of the \$50 orientation fee. Start referring today!

Visit [www.sunyempire.edu/refer-student](http://www.sunyempire.edu/refer-student).

Questions? Email: [alumni@sunyempire.edu](mailto:alumni@sunyempire.edu).





# And now, on to the next 100,000...

**O**n Friday, May 9, 2025, Empire State University opened our commencement season with our first ceremony in Albany, NY. It will be followed by two ceremonies in New York City and one in Rochester, NY.. This spring, we will graduate more than 1,500 students who will join the ranks of our alumni, now over 100,000 strong.





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EMPIRE STATE UNIVERSITY  
**ALUMNI**  
Awards

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## **Celebrate SUNY Empire's outstanding graduates with the Alumni Awards!**

The awards honor alumni who are making an impact. If you know someone, we want to hear about them. Nominations will be accepted from May 28 to July 28, 2025. For information, visit: <https://sunyempire.edu/alumni-awards>.

Questions? Email: [alumni@sunyempire.edu](mailto:alumni@sunyempire.edu).