

# CONNECTIONS

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▶ PAGE 14

## A FRIENDSHIP BUILT ON LABOR

Together, Dora Cervantes '18, '19  
and Julie Fritchen '18, '19 have  
climbed the ladder at the IAM



**EMPIRE STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

# CONNECTIONS

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*There are no words to express my gratitude for your gift.* — SAMANTHA MARCOTTE

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# A LETTER FROM PRESIDENT VOLLENDORF



**S**pring is finally upon us in the northeast. With nearly two years of experience being a New Yorker, I now appreciate the changing seasons. And like many of you who have lived here far longer than I have, I especially appreciate the change from winter to spring!

Spring gives us a chance to refresh and re-energize. It's a perfect time to highlight the people helping Empire State University continually serve students better in a quickly evolving higher-ed landscape.

This year, we began implementing our strategic plan, Elevate '28. Across the university, faculty and staff are working in pursuit of our four strategic priorities: student success, academic and inclusive excellence, organizational effectiveness, and raising our public profile. In these pages, we explore some of that work and the people making it happen.

Our success is made possible by the vast network of people who believe in our mission, including the incredible alumni invested in SUNY Empire and our students' success. Brian Beck '16, '18, an assistant vice president at Northwell Health — New York's largest healthcare provider — knew SUNY Empire was the perfect educational partner to help his employees advance their careers and the organization to retain and upskill its workforce.

AI dominates the headlines, and it impacts our lives, jobs, and information consumption in ways big and small. As SUNY's leading online institution and New York state's only public online university, SUNY Empire's responsible deployment of this

game-changing tool is imperative. In this issue, Professor Andrew Hurd helps us understand how AI will impact the way educators engage our students.

You also will read about four of our newest additions to the SUNY Empire community — our chief diversity officer, deputy chief of staff, chief information officer, and executive director of corporate and foundation relations. All are professionals working tirelessly to improve our organization, climate, and programs to best serve our students and one another.

In a world where lives increasingly are lived online and in the public sphere, I am thankful for those who help us make sense of it all. Professor Gayle Stever's expertise on parasocial relationships is sought by major news outlets worldwide. Her insights are fascinating, and they raise SUNY Empire's public profile in unexpected and influential places.

Thank you for reading this issue of Connections and for your continuing dedication to Empire State University.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa Vollendorf". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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

# THE BULLETIN



## GO HIGHER FOR EMPIRE

Empire State University held a Day of Giving on March 21. The 24-hour event, named Go Higher for Empire, raised over \$121,000 from 285 donors. Thank you to all who contributed!



## \$1 MILLION GRANT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PARAPROFESSIONALS

Tracy Galuski, a mentor, professor, and chair of the Department of Educational Studies, has been awarded a \$1 million grant from SUNY's Education Workforce Investment Upskilling Paraprofessionals Program. The funds will support 24 part-time students for five years as they work toward bachelor's degrees in SUNY Empire's new early childhood education program, which debuts this fall.

Tracy Galuski



## ENROLLMENT IS UP — AND YOUNGER!

New student enrollment in the Spring 2024 term rose 25.3% at Empire State University. The growth came with a 13% increase in credits and a surge of more than 500 applications for the spring term compared to last year. Over the last five years, the number of full-time, matriculated undergraduates at SUNY Empire has increased nearly 7%. And our demographics continue to shift, with the average age of students skewing younger and a rise in first-time college students.



## SUNY EMPIRE LAUNCHES VIRTUAL FOOD PANTRY

Students with an emergency need for groceries can apply to the university's new virtual food pantry. Students provide information on household size and the type of emergency they have. Applicants are sent a link to create a grocery cart online, with a budget based on family size and USDA nutritional guidelines. Then the food is delivered to them.

The pantry is designed to fill a one-time need. It also connects students with resources in their community that can provide ongoing support, such as the federal supplemental nutrition programs SNAP and WIC, as well as other food pantries in their area.



## LOOKING FOR A NEW JOB?

Alumni and students have access to a treasure trove of information that can help you find a new job, explore career options, and network with other alumni in your industry. All you need to do is visit [CareerHub.SUNYEmpire.edu](https://CareerHub.SUNYEmpire.edu). There, you'll find labor market insights, job and career advice, and resources. You can also watch interviews about jobs and careers on the Ask5 online video series.



## ALUMNI ESTABLISH NEW SCHOLARSHIP

David Theobald '13, '17 and his wife, Susan '16, '18, have established the Dr. Bridget Nettleton Memorial Healthcare Scholarship. The scholarship will support undergraduate and graduate students in the School of Nursing and Allied Health. Nettleton, Ph.D., the first dean of the School of Nursing and Allied Health, passed away in January 2024. She launched the school's M.S. in nursing education and M.S. in nursing administration degrees.

Dr. Bridget Nettleton



## CAARES LAUNCHES PEER2PEER

The Center for Autism Advocacy: Research, Education, and Supports (CAARES) launched the Peer2Peer Student Connection program this spring. Peer2Peer seeks to foster connections for students of all backgrounds and identities, and at any stage of their educational experience.

"Promoting student belonging in higher education is a critical area for all students, and particularly for neurodivergent students or students with disabilities," says Lauren Allen, Ph.D., an assistant professor and assistant director of CAARES.



## FAST FACT

Did you know that 90% of all students at SUNY Empire have some prior college?



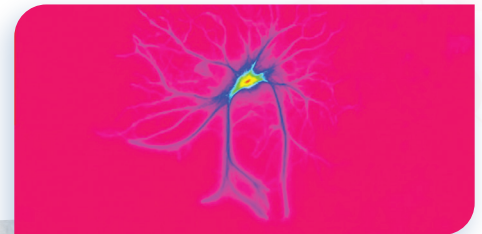
## TWO NEW DEGREES

Empire State University has launched a Master of Science in cybersecurity degree and a Bachelor of Science in digital communication this year.

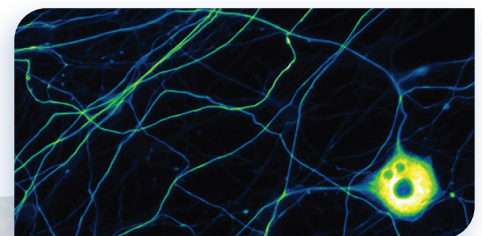


## ART ON THE BRAIN

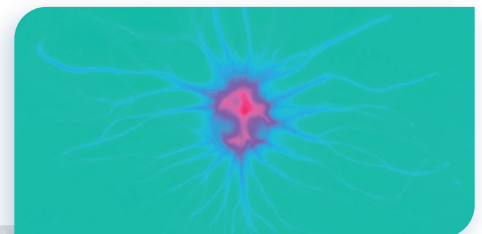
SUNY Empire celebrated Brain Awareness Week in March with an exhibit that included these fluorescent microscopic images of nerve cells at the university's Livingston Gallery in Brooklyn. The show, "Intrinsic Connections: Art and the Brain," featured works by students, the community, and scientists.



Alessandro Comincini, Ph.D., and Julie Parato, Ph.D.



Maria Elena Pero, MD



Alessandro Comincini, Ph.D., and Julie Parato, Ph.D.

# STAR GAZING

WITH GAYLE STEVER

QA  
&  
By Winnie Yu



**G**ayle Stever, Ph.D., was 9 years old the day her mother took her to Sibley's department store in Rochester to buy a Beatles album. It was 1963. Beatlemania was in full swing. Albums were on sale for a dollar, and a large crowd had gathered.

"They opened the door, and it was run or be trampled," Stever recalls. "When I got to the table where they had the records, it was bedlam. I couldn't get my head around it. What was wrong with these people?"

That moment, indelibly etched in her memory, became the basis of her master's thesis, doctoral dissertation, and ultimately, her life's work. Today, as a professor of human development at Empire State University, Stever has become an expert on fandom and

parasocial relationships, one-sided relationships with celebrities or fictional characters that are unreciprocated yet — Stever believes — beneficial.

We spoke to Stever about society's fascination with the famous.

### **How did fandom become your field of study?**

I didn't know what to do my thesis on, and my thesis advisor said, "What's the most interesting behavior you've ever seen? Study that." And my mind immediately went back to that day in Sibley's with the crush of people and craziness. I said, "Oh man, superstar mania. I'd love to study that."

### **What were you studying specifically?**

I was looking at personality congruence between fans and their

perceived personalities of their favorite celebrities. I'd ask fans to fill out the Myers-Briggs, the personality assessment tool, and when they were done, I'd ask them to fill it out the way they thought their favorite celebrity would.

One of my conclusions was that we have an affinity for people whose personality tendencies appear to be like our own.

### **How was your work received?**

Back then, popular culture wasn't considered serious research, and I took a lot of flack for my choices, especially from older male professors. I had the word "trivial" written on one of my proposals. But I knew what was happening in the media with fan-celebrity connections and that these connections were having a profound impact on people.

66

One of my conclusions was that we have an affinity for people whose personality tendencies appear to be like our own. — Gayle Stever



Hulton Archive via Getty Images



Gie Knaeps / Hulton Archive via Getty Images



I got my first publication in 1991 and published the Celebrity Appeal Questionnaire, an instrument I developed that measures why fans are so devoted. They tell you not to publish your own instrument because it's too complicated. But I had no choice. Nothing had been done up to that point to study fandom.

#### How did you do this work?

My methodology has always been to network into the fandom and connect. I don't do covert research. They always know who I am and what I'm about.

Between 1988 and 1992, I went to 14 Michael Jackson concerts and passed out hundreds of survey questionnaires. At one concert in Irvine Meadows in California, I was sitting outside with hundreds of people waiting for general admis-

sion on the lawn. Of course, this is a gold mine for me. People are sitting all afternoon with nothing to do, and I'm passing out questionnaires. They're all bored and happy to do it. That was 100% return for me.

I also monitored fan magazines and found key informants in each fan group for Prince, Madonna, George Michael, and Bruce Springsteen. I got people who shared their whole pen pal lists. I mailed out two Myers-Briggs to each person, and asked them to write a narrative on why being a fan is important to their life.

That became the basis for my doctoral dissertation, where we analyzed and coded the narratives for themes and came up with the motivations for why people form these close connections with celebrities.

Michael Jackson  
by Ricky Archambault





**From the top!**

Steвер with actor William Shatner, actor Alexander Siddig, and singer-songwriter Josh Groban.



**This was motivated by something reasonable. I just had to figure out what it was. — Gayle Stever**

“

**Were you yourself ever a fan?**

My own personal fan experiences have been minimal. I didn't put celebrity posters on my walls. I loved the Beatles. I had their albums. I thought they were great. And I saw all their movies in the theater. When Star Trek the original series came on in 1966, I was a big fan. My first crush might have been Mr. Spock. I was 33 when I decided to go out on the Michael Jackson tour. That was my first live concert.

**Why do people become fans of people they don't know?**

There are three big motivations. The first is the obvious one: talent. The second is what we call a crush. People develop a romantic attraction based on physical attractiveness. There's a part of our brain that's wired to pick out people who will enhance our evolutionary agenda.

The third piece is, what kind of human being are they? I call it the hero role model. Are they kind, generous and respectful? That's kind of the linchpin.

**Are some people more prone to having parasocial relationships than others?**

One of my theories is that fan people tend to be introverted intuitive, which means that they focus less on concrete reality and more on possibilities. People who are extroverted and sensory are less likely to process things internally. They focus more on the concrete world and real interactions. They don't gravitate to parasocial relationships. They're more likely to be sports fans.







# Nitin

## NATARAJAN '04:

Making Us a More  
(Cyber) Secure Country

Photo credit: CISA

</By Winnie Yu>

Like most of us, Nitin Natarajan '04 gets his share of suspicious messages. Texts from Amazon about undeliverable packages. Requests to click on links from the U.S. Postal Service. Mysterious invitations on LinkedIn.

As the deputy director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Natarajan knows better than to click on anything. "Sadly, this is my day-to-day life, so I know what the bad actors look like, but it's not as easy as it used to be," he says.

Today, as CISA's second-in-command, Natarajan is a spokesman for cybersecurity, encouraging people to never share passwords or keep them near their keyboards, know where their data goes, and always do software updates. He

worries that the next generation is tech savvy but not cyber savvy.

One millennial told him his peers didn't care about protecting their data. "They see it as, 'their information is already out there,'" Natarajan says. "So they tend to worry less about security than other generations."

### AN UNLIKELY PATH

Natarajan originally wanted to be a doctor in the U.S. Air Force. As a pre-med student at the University at Buffalo (UB), he worked as an EMS volunteer. "I enjoyed every minute of it, and I would rather do that than go to class," he says.

After three semesters, Natarajan was placed on academic probation. "I still have their letter saying please don't come back," he says.

He spent a year at a global IT company and hated the corporate culture. After 9/11, while working as

a flight paramedic, he took a job at Westchester Medical Center where he ran the regional emergency preparedness program. "I'd become a hospital administrator with a million-dollar budget and staff," he says. "But I needed a degree."

Natarajan had tried for 10 years to get that degree. He had credits from Hudson Valley Community College, where he got his paramedic certificate, and Erie Community College, where he got his EMT certificate. He also had random credits from UB and Dutchess Community College.

"None of it ever took off," he says. "I was married and felt like I was in a different place in life.

Somebody told Natarajan about SUNY Empire. "They were willing to let me transfer credits and leverage what I'd already done," Natarajan says. "It was a pathway to success."



**Above:** Natarajan on the field working as a flight paramedic.

## RISING STAR

Natarajan completed his bachelor's degree in cultural studies from SUNY Empire in 2004 (his twin brother Nikhil graduated two years later). He followed that up with an M.A. in national security studies from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in 2007.

In 2008, he joined the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, where he ran a federal medical response team and was deployed to disasters across the country. During the Obama administration, he was the director of critical infrastructure policy for the National Security Council. He later served as deputy assistant administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency before working in private industry.

Natarajan was appointed to CISA by the Biden administration in February 2021. His job is to help safeguard the nation's critical infrastructure from cyber and physical threats. That means protecting U.S. citizens, companies, and organizations from cyber

threats, natural disasters, and bomb threats, among other things.

"It's all the things that Americans depend on every day that they don't know they depend on," Natarajan says. "From the moment they wake up, there's their alarm clock, which is mostly on their phones now, so there's IT and communications technology. Then they turn on their light, which is tied into the electricity grid. And when they turn on their water, there's potable water. All these sectors, as well as others, are potential targets for physical and cyberattacks."

## GROWING CYBER THREATS

According to Natarajan, threats to the nation's infrastructure and IT systems have increased exponentially.

"It used to be that cyberattackers were mostly nation-state actors from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran," he says. "Now it's easier for anyone to become a cyberterrorist. They can recruit and train, or they can hire some-

one to do it for them. They just need to identify a target and figure out a means to collect."

The victim landscape has changed, too. "It's not just attacks on large contractors or federal agencies," he says. "Now, there are attacks on mom-and-pop shops in rural America, K-12 schools, water utilities, and healthcare."

The threats are compounded by the significant increase in natural disasters and their aftermath such as flooding and landslides, as well as bomb threats and demonstrations on college campuses, especially historically black colleges and universities.

## AN INTENSIFYING RESPONSE

Since he joined the agency, CISA has added 1,400 people to its staff and \$1 billion to its budget. As of the end of 2023, CISA had more than 3,200 employees and a \$3 billion budget. "We're still not where we need to be," Natarajan says. The agency relies on partners in state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, academia, and private industry to help.



*With Lisa Plaggemier, executive director of the National Cybersecurity Alliance, at NASDAQ last October for Cybersecurity Awareness Month.*



Photo credit: CISA

**Above:** Nitin Natarajan, deputy director, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

**<!-- "It used to be that cyberattackers were mostly nation-state actors from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. Now it's easier for anyone to become a cyberterrorist." -->**

CISA is also leading efforts to change how software and hardware are designed and deployed by making sure protective measures are built into the technology. For instance, software should allow only complex passwords, and multifactor authentication (MFA) should be automatic.

When they aren't, the consequences can be dire. In late 2023, Iran-backed hackers broke into a municipal water treatment plant in Aliquippa, PA, by hacking the plant's programmable logic controllers, tiny computers that help automate the plant.

A weak default password was never changed.

"A default password that's 1-1-1 should never be allowed to work. That's why we have a campaign called 'Secure by Default. Secure by Design,'" Natarajan says. "We need to raise the bar in what we expect from the software and hardware that we purchase."

Natarajan also recommends that the public regularly update software, create strong passwords, and choose services from companies that implement strong cybersecurity practices such as requiring MFA.

"People need to realize that they are all potential targets, personally and professionally," Natarajan says. "They lock their cars. They lock their doors, and they lock their offices when they go home. But we must make sure that devices are secure, too."



# “Where’s the Most Unusual Place You’ve Done Coursework?”

By Stephen Parato

**W**hen we interviewed Jessica Yannitty '23 for the “How U Do University” marketing campaign at SUNY Empire, the Poughkeepsie resident casually mentioned that she sometimes did coursework from her boyfriend’s 18-wheeler, while accompanying him across the U.S.

Oh really?

This led us to wonder where else our students do their coursework. So we went on social media — where else? — and asked: “Where’s the most unusual place you’ve done your coursework?”

It’s inspiring to see how resourceful people can be when they have to get work done. Plus, it’s good to know they can have some fun while they’re at it, right?

So when we say things like, “Learn on your terms,” or “How you do university,” we mean it. Here’s the evidence and what students and alumni had to say:



**“In Mike Tyson’s house in Bernardsville, NJ. This was when I worked for ABC News as a courier.”**  
Jim Lyons '89,  
Pelham, NY



**“Writing a term paper sitting on the floor in my closet so that the light wouldn’t keep other family members awake.”**  
Sarah Davies '18, Albany, NY

**“On a picket line during a labor strike in 2019.”**  
Cleveland Jones Jr. '22,  
Southfield, MI

**“While on the gondola at Belleayre Mountain Ski Center!”**  
Nelson Mason '20,  
Monticello, NY



**"Every night 30,000 feet in the air on an aircraft heading for Europe, Asia, or the Middle East as an air marshal right after 9/11, while finishing my bachelor's and master's programs."**

Terrence Manning '01, '06, '09, Conyers, GA

**"I was stuck on an elevator for over an hour and finished the work for chapter 6."**

Jamaal Davis '14,  
Wappinger Falls, NY



**"At a Mavis Discount Tire waiting for them to fix a flat before I had to go to work."**

Jay Culkin '22, North  
Babylon, NY

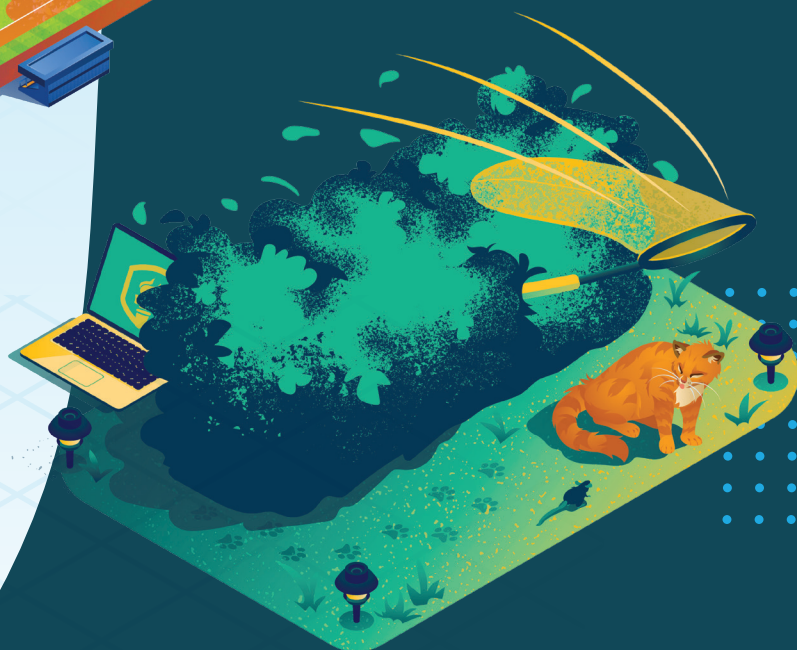


**"At a Mets game last year, I did some reading for Mental Health and Law between innings."**

Em Wasserman '24, Albany, NY

**"Hiding behind a bush while trapping a feral cat. She turned out to be not so feral, so I socialized her and she has now been adopted. I'm actually writing a PLA about my adventures in cat rescue."**

Nina K. Gordon, Great Neck, NY



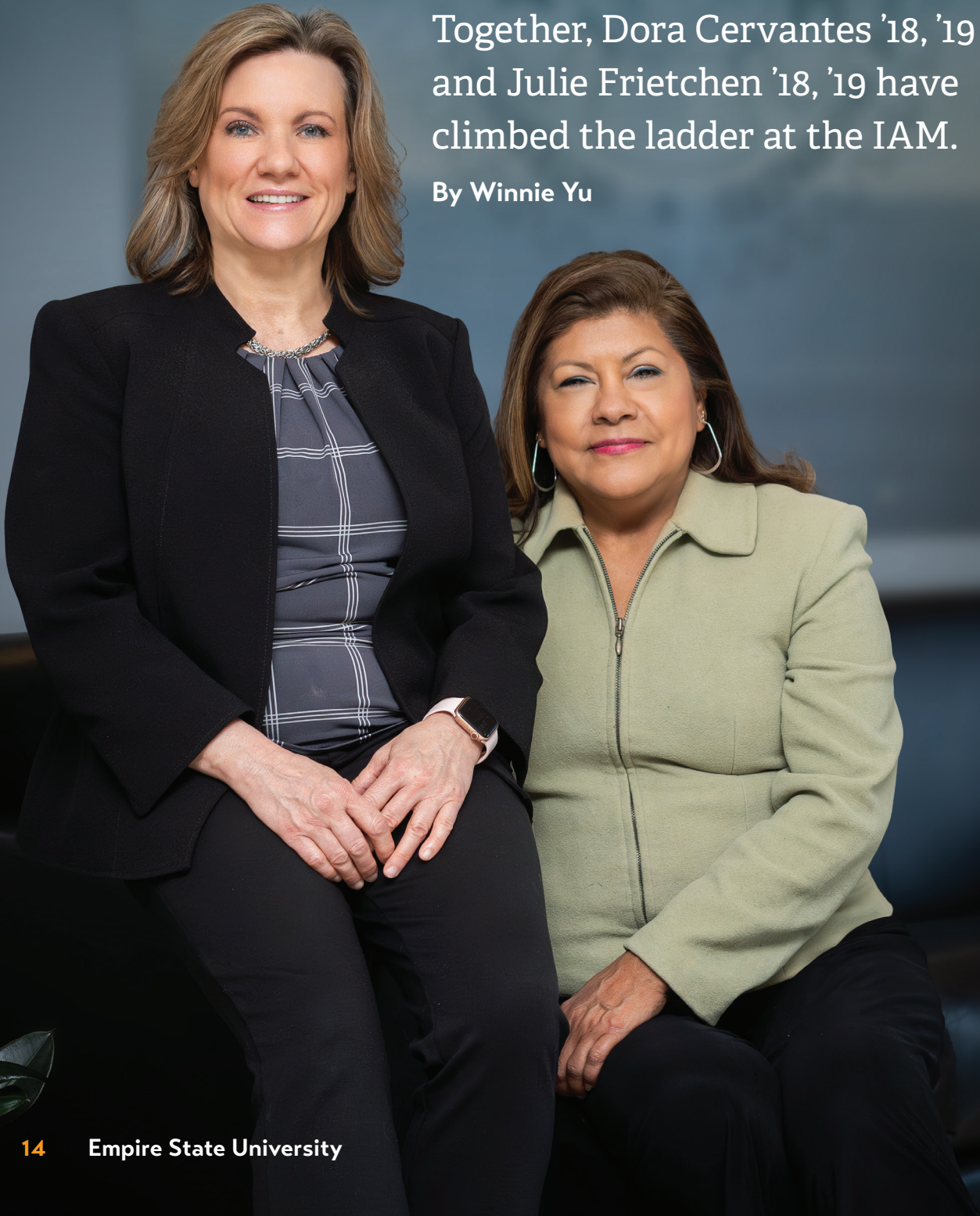
**"In line at CVS waiting for my COVID test."**

Lauramarie Tripp Ocasio '13, '22,  
Rochester, NY

# A FRIENDSHIP BUILT ON LABOR

Together, Dora Cervantes '18, '19  
and Julie Fritchett '18, '19 have  
climbed the ladder at the IAM.

By Winnie Yu



**J**ulie Frietchen '18, '19 was a new business agent for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) when she was handed her first arbitration case in 2000. A flight attendant had been fired and was claiming wrongful termination. Frietchen had to prove it.

"They just said 'Here, you have an arbitration in a few months,' and they left me with the files," says Frietchen. "And I was like, 'Now what am I supposed to do?'"

While attending the IAM's annual conference, she enlisted the help of her friend Dora Cervantes '18, '19, another new business agent who had started just two months after Frietchen. The two hunkered down in a Las Vegas hotel room and went to work, scouring contracts and preparing their arguments for the arbitration.

"It was the two of us brainstorming," says Cervantes, who is a Foundation Board member at Empire State University. "We had no experience. We just combined our best thoughts and experiences and put it together and she won."

Today, Frietchen is the director of the Women's and Human Rights Department for the IAM, and Cervantes is the organization's general secretary-treasurer, the first woman and Hispanic to serve in that role in IAM's 130-year history. IAM represents more than 600,000 members who work in industries as diverse as aerospace, automotive, and transportation.

## RIISING TOGETHER

For Frietchen and Cervantes, the arbitration case was just another chapter in the story of their 30-plus years of friendship, cemented by a passion for supporting women in labor, their careers at the IAM, and their college educations at SUNY Empire and the National Labor College.

The two first met in 1994 while organizing workers at their respective airlines. Cervantes worked as a reservation agent for Southwest, and Frietchen was a flight attendant for what was then Continental Airlines.

"I think we were in Newark, having an open house meeting to kick off the organizing campaign," Cervantes says. "Julie was the lodge president. We were probably two of the youngest people and two of the few women. I was pregnant, and Julie had a broken leg, and we were out there just hustling."

"It didn't stop us," Frietchen adds with a laugh.

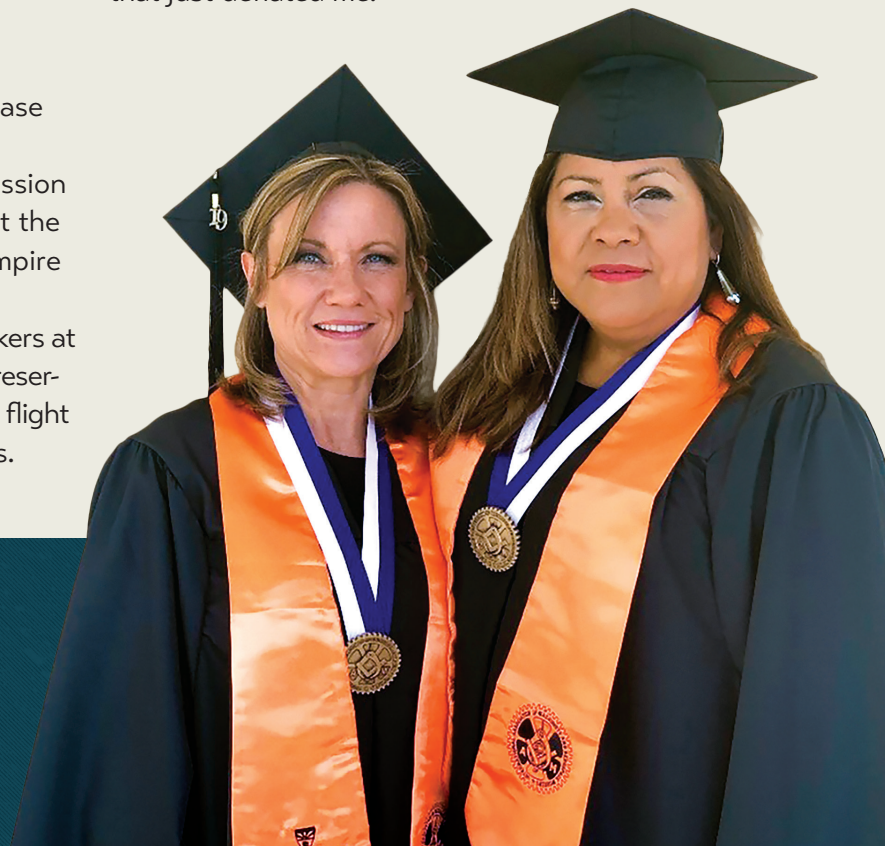
Nothing did. Through the years, the two women, who now both live in the Washington D.C. area, became co-mentors to each other and close friends, as they both rose to leadership positions in IAM. Cervantes, a mother of two, even became the godmother to Frietchen's daughter.

Breaking into the upper echelons however, wasn't easy. There weren't many women in the union, and even fewer in leadership positions.

**“ I was pregnant, and Julie had a broken leg, and we were out there just hustling.**

**Dora Cervantes '18, '19**

"I remember being at the convention where the women's department was established in 1996," says Frietchen, who got her current job in 2022. "I had a female mentor, and she said 'Don't get too involved in the women's department. It's a career killer.' And that just deflated me."



Frietchen and Cervantes graduated from SUNY Empire in 2019 with their master's degrees.

## THE COLLEGE YEARS

Getting a college degree, they agreed, was critical to helping them move ahead. "I always looked at the extra study as an advantage for me if I wanted to climb the ladder and advance myself, with help from my sister Julie here," says Cervantes, who became general-secretary treasurer in 2015.

The two women took advantage of IAM's partnership with the National Labor College, which is now closed, and got their Bachelor of Arts degrees in labor studies. When the IAM launched a partnership with SUNY Empire, Cervantes and Frietchen were among the first to sign up. They both got their master's in work and labor policy and advanced certificates in women and gender studies.

trying to get a master's degree under my belt," she says.

But as an education rep for the IAM at the time, Frietchen knew she had to practice what she preached: the importance of education. "If I wanted to get other people to go through these programs, I thought I should set an example," she says.

## TAKING THE LEADS

These days, women make up 28% of IAM's workforce, and more women are assuming leadership roles. But women still face harassment, sometimes even from each other. "Women are very hard on ourselves, too," Frietchen says. "We don't want to take on a job unless we know we're going to be perfect at it



Frietchen and Cervantes at the Grand Lodge Convention in San Francisco in 2000.

workplace challenges, share stories, and provide support. They also shadow people in leadership positions to learn what they do.

The goal is to inspire women to

*Boss*

“

I always looked at the extra study as an advantage for me if I wanted to climb the ladder...

Dora Cervantes '18, '19



Going to college while working and raising kids proved exhausting. "I was trying to put a convention together for over 2,000 people, running the office, trying to pay the bills and keep the lights on, and then going home and studying every night," Cervantes says. "What made it really good was I had Julie for a study partner, Julie who was on my butt every day, asking 'Have you completed the assignment?'"

Frietchen had her share of challenges too. "I was a single mom, working full time, and

while men will just do it."

In 2022, with the blessing of the IAM's Executive Council, Frietchen's department created a one-year mentoring program for women called the Leadership Excellence Assembly of Dedicated Sisters or LEADS.

Participants take monthly online courses on everything from how to be a shop steward to retirement security. They also participate in mentoring circles — Frietchen and Cervantes each lead one — where the women gather in small groups to discuss

take on leadership positions. The first cohort graduated 120 women, and some of the women have already moved into leadership roles. The program recently accepted 170 into its second cohort.

"We want to see more women in leadership positions because we do better when there's diversity in our contracts, our bargaining units, and our leadership positions," Frietchen says. "We all have different ways of looking at things and see the world differently. If we put our heads together, we can have better solutions."

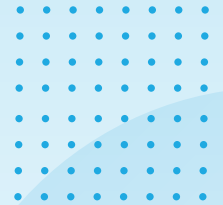




Brian Beck '16, '18

# TEAMING UP WITH NEW YORK'S LARGEST HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

By Jane Gottlieb



**W**hen Brian Beck '16 '18 got to know the supervisors and managers who ran the day-to-day medical practices for Northwell Health, he was reminded of himself.

"They are talented, hard-working people who are either self-taught or have some college," says Beck, an assistant vice president of operations for Northwell in Staten Island. "And they are caring for sick people who are scared and anxious, in

an everchanging industry."

Like him, they also knew they needed a college degree to advance. Working with Anna Sharts, a human resources manager at Northwell, Beck surveyed 47 managers and learned that just 18 had degrees. Many said they'd welcome the chance to get a college degree, even after decades on the job.

Beck suggested they attend Empire State University, the institution he turned to at age 37

to promote his own professional growth. Northwell already had a partnership with SUNY Empire, making it easy to get started.

Some were initially reluctant about the time commitment. "I would say 'Let's not think that far ahead. Take it one course at a time,'" says Beck, who has a bachelor's degree in business, management, and economics and an MBA. "We wanted to pull back any obstacles they may have had in the past."

SUNY Empire staff who helped welcome Northwell employees as students include, from left to right, Callie Montalvo-Patel, Tiffani Lomuto-Febbraro , Gina Torino, Brian Beck '16, '18, Anna Sharts (from Northwell), and Alejandro Galindo.





Anna Sharts, an HR manager at Northwell, and Brian Beck '16, '18.

Last fall, 11 Northwell managers enrolled in as many as four SUNY Empire courses each, most with plans to get degrees in management. Beck hopes to double the number of students this fall as the first group continues.

Though Northwell already offered tuition reimbursement of up to \$5,000 each year, the new initiative represents a more targeted approach. Leadership checks in regularly with employees taking classes and offers them opportunities at work that align with the courses they take, such as budgets, strategy, and marketing.

### BACK TO SCHOOL

Dana Signorelli, for one, had tried college, but left in frustration because she was unable to line up the classes she wanted. Instead, she studied to become a medical assistant, joining Northwell in that capacity a decade ago.

Signorelli now manages a pediatric office of 11 doctors and more than 20 staff. She is responsible for inventory, payroll, IT, and anything else needed to make an office run smoothly.

When Northwell offered her the chance to attend SUNY Empire, she jumped. Already, the classes have shed light on her field.

**“ After week one, I didn’t think I was going to continue. By week four, it was doable, and I felt good.**

**Sandra Comerford, student**

“I have heard terms that I probably would have never known until taking intro to business,” says Signorelli, who is taking math and business law in her second semester. “My classes apply to my everyday work.”

Another SUNY Empire newcomer, Sandra Comerford, started a rewarding Wall Street career right out of high school. After leaving to raise three children, she studied medical billing and coding, which enabled her to get hired at Northwell. Comerford recently moved into the newly created position of patient concierge and follows up on patients' care to help Northwell track its performance.

For all she had done, Comerford never attended college until diving into her SUNY Empire courses last fall in pursuit of a management degree.

“I was a nervous wreck,” Comerford says. “After week one, I didn’t think I was going to continue. By week four, it was doable, and I felt good. I had to reassure myself I could do it, and people are here to help.”

Northwell will benefit, too. Beck says having a SUNY Empire education will help these employees learn to reduce expenses, while focusing on quality care. He wants to expand the program to other regions the company serves such as Brooklyn and Manhattan. Also on tap: study hall space at work and a possible graduate degree component.

Many said they'd welcome the chance to get a college degree, even after decades on the job.



### A NONTRADITIONAL PATH

A Queens native, Beck started his healthcare career in 1995, working the front desk of a cardiology office, eventually landing at a large cardiology practice that joined Northwell seven years later. He spent evenings and weekends doing stand-up comedy, his initial dream. When he had a family and decided to make his day job his career, he knew he

needed a college degree.

SUNY Empire enabled him to take classes in person at three SUNY institutions. What really drew him were the prior learning assessments, which gave him college credit for his healthcare management experience and shortened the time and expense of completing a degree.

Beck says his SUNY Empire education helped him become

a better healthcare leader.

Promoting college to seasoned employees like himself reflects his faith in people who did not follow a traditional path.

"We recognize that there's no one blueprint for life," he says. "But when we decide to pivot, we need to invest in ourselves. Sometimes, that means getting a college degree."



## KNOW SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO START (OR FINISH) A DEGREE? MAYBE EVEN YOU?

As alumni, you can refer new students through our Alumni Refer-a-Student Program. When you do, they receive a \$100 Better Together scholarship toward one term of enrollment and a \$50 orientation fee waiver, upon application.

Refer a student today at:

<https://alumni.esc.edu/get-involved/refer-a-student>

For questions, contact [alumni@sunyempire.edu](mailto:alumni@sunyempire.edu).



# TACKLING THE NURSING SHORTAGE

**SUNY Empire** is growing the nursing workforce with innovation, expanded offerings, and scholarships.



By **Doug Gruse**

**E**mpire State University's School of Nursing and Allied Health, the State University of New York (SUNY)'s largest nursing program, is meeting the challenge of a nursing shortage with innovative opportunities for healthcare professionals to advance their educations and careers.

"We are at critical times where nurses have left the profession at an alarming rate," says David

Theobald RN '13, '17, a board member of the SUNY Empire Foundation and founder and president of Davin Healthcare, a managed service provider that provides temporary nurses to hospitals experiencing staffing shortages. "The data is showing that in some cases, we've lost almost a third of the workforce population."

According to the New York State Department of Health, the state anticipates a shortage of almost 40,000 nurses by 2030. Advancements in medicine and technology have expanded core educational standards for nursing, and job burnout has been on the rise.

In 2019, New York enacted the "RN to BSN in 10" law, which

requires registered nurses to either have or obtain a bachelor's degree or higher in nursing within 10 years of licensure. "The roles are evolving and more complex," says Justin Pascucci '19, an assistant professor of nursing at SUNY Empire who advanced his own career by completing an M.S. in nursing administration. "Having a BSN or higher is important. Nurses play one of the most pivotal roles on the healthcare team. A bachelor's degree helps expand a nurse's horizon and ability to help patients."

The increased educational demands were compounded by the trauma and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a catalyst for burnout in the profession. "I think there have been ebbs and flows over the years in nursing, but COVID was unique," Pascucci says. "It created a pit in nursing."



David Theobald, R.N. '13, '17



Kim Stote,  
Ph.D., dean  
of the  
School of  
Nursing  
and Allied  
Health

## EDUCATION INNOVATION

According to Kim Stote, Ph.D., dean of the School of Nursing and Allied Health, SUNY Empire currently has one of the largest number of nursing students in the SUNY system. Counting students at Nassau Community College (our largest community college partner in nursing program transfers) who are taking courses at SUNY Empire, the university had more than 700 students in the bachelor's nursing program last fall.

SUNY Empire also offers multiple tracks for advanced practice nursing with a focus on nursing education, including a fully online M.S. degree in nursing education for registered nurses; an RN to MSN program; and an advanced certificate in nursing education, which is ideal for nurses with an MSN degree in another specialty who wish to become nurse educators.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the advanced practice registered nurse workforce, which includes these growing professions, is expected to increase 40% between 2021 and 2031, much faster than average for all occupations.

As SUNY's leading online university, SUNY Empire is also forging new territory in nursing technology. In July 2023, SUNY awarded the university \$80,000 to help create simulated clinical experiences for nursing students. The funding coincides with a recent state law permitting nursing students to complete up to a third of their clinical training through simulation experiences, making degree completion more accessible.

## FUNDING THE GROWTH

Efforts to educate more nurses have generated financial support, too. In 2022, SUNY Empire received a \$245,000 grant from SUNY as part of the SUNY Nursing Emergency Training Fund created to grow enrollment in nursing programs.

In 2023, the Dyson Foundation awarded SUNY Empire a \$100,000 grant to increase scholarship funding for nurses and healthcare educators living in Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Orange, Putnam, and Ulster counties. "The scholarship is important for nurses who want to go back to school and is meant to help fill gaps in bedside nursing and nursing education," Pascucci says.

The recent grant expands on the Dyson Foundation's ongoing support. Since 2008, SUNY Empire has offered the Dyson Foundation in Nursing Scholarship, which has graduated 32 RN to BSN students. Of these, 82 percent continue to live and work in the Dyson Foundation service area after graduating.



According to the New York State Department of Health, the state is expected to face a shortage of almost **40,000 nurses by 2030.**

Theobald was so impressed by his education at SUNY Empire that he created the Davin Healthcare Nursing and Allied Health Scholarship in 2013 for both undergraduate and graduate students living or working in New York's Capital Region. During the pandemic and soon after, he donated additional scholarship funds to SUNY Empire and other colleges each time he ascended a high peak in the Adirondacks.

"Empire has been an amazing support system for me," he said. "Giving back to nursing and the nursing profession is very important."



Justin Pascucci  
'19, an assistant  
professor of  
nursing at SUNY  
Empire

# 4 NEW LEADERS GET STRATEGIC

By Winnie Yu

Everyone at Empire State University has a hand in ensuring we achieve the priorities in Elevate '28, our new strategic plan. We asked four new leaders to each talk about one priority and how it shapes their work. Then we asked them to share a secret about themselves.



## **XIOMARA GIORDANO**

Assistant Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer

**Priority: Academic and Inclusive Excellence**

Giordano comes to SUNY Empire from Bennington College in Vermont, where they were first associate director and then director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and deputy diversity officer.

### **Why is this priority important?**

Ensuring inclusivity is a top priority, both personally and for social justice. Growing up as a first-generation Latinx in an environment where representation was lacking in decision-making and leadership spaces, I'm driven to redefine what it means to be Latinx. It's crucial to break away from the idea that we're a monolithic group.

In my view, inclusive excellence goes beyond acknowledging different aspects of our identities; it involves thinking across all intersections and creating spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

### **How will you help SUNY Empire achieve it?**

By creating and maintaining environments that foster psychological safety. It's essential for students, staff, and faculty to feel comfortable showing up as their complete selves. My goal is to design systems and supports that not only allow that but actively encourage expressions of new ideas.

### **Tell us something about yourself.**

I'm a sculptor, working with fiber, clay, and metal. Engaging in hands-on creative endeavors allows me to feel grounded and find balance.



## **ANTHONY AMIANO**

Deputy Chief of Staff

**Priority: Raising Our Public Profile**

Amiano joins us from Wiley, a multinational publishing company where he served as global communications manager. He also held administration positions at Berkeley College and served on his local school board.

### **Why is this priority important?**

Legislators and policymakers should know why we've been so successful and how we're different from other institutions. Traditional universities are just starting to adopt practices that have led to SUNY Empire's success, including an intentional approach to online education, accessibility, and serving adult learners.

In raising our public profile, we're advocating for our students through appropriate policy solutions. We also have the experience and credibility to help the entire higher ed community at a time when the value of a college degree is regularly questioned.

### **How will you help SUNY Empire achieve it?**

I know the transformative power of higher education from my own experience as a first-generation college student. I bring this perspective to my role overseeing government relations. This means advocating for legislative policies that support our mission, positioning the institution as a trusted resource, and building relationships that further our goals. We have an extraordinary story to tell.

### **Tell us something about yourself.**

I'm mildly obsessed with Harry Truman. I've been interested in government and history since I was a kid, but his story from humble beginnings to the presidency always piqued my curiosity.



### **MARTIN GANG**

Chief Information Officer and  
Vice President for Integrated  
Technologies

**Priority: Student Success**

Before joining SUNY Empire, Gang was the chief technology officer at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, ID, where he also had roles in customer support, application development, and network design and management.

#### **Why is this priority important?**

Student success directly reflects our educational mission and has a significant positive impact on our community. It also helps SUNY Empire fulfill its social, legal, and ethical responsibilities.

Information technology (IT) enables the delivery of a wide range of educational content online, provides communication and collaboration tools, and enables interactive learning. Online learning platforms allow students and faculty to access course materials at their convenience, so they can balance education with other responsibilities.

#### **How will you help SUNY Empire achieve it?**

I intend to maximize the IT we have and add appropriate technology services and systems whenever possible. Data analytics tools will be used to track student engagement, performance, and progress, which can provide data-driven improvements in course design and teaching methods.

We will also use IT to streamline administrative processes like enrollment, scheduling, and student records management. We plan to implement the best adaptive AI learning technologies, so we can personalize instruction based on individual student needs.

#### **Tell us something about yourself.**

I love woodworking and stained glass, often integrating the two into a finished piece.



### **BETH COLELLO**

Executive Director of Corporate  
and Foundation Relations

**Priority: Organizational  
Effectiveness**

Prior to coming to SUNY Empire, Colello was director of donor relations for St. Lawrence University, where she served on the advancement management team and managed donor recognition programs and stewardship efforts. She also led corporate and foundation relations at Clarkson University.

#### **Why is this priority important?**

An organization must be financially sound, innovative, inclusive, and academically strong to effectively educate students and maintain a strong faculty and programs.

#### **How will you help SUNY Empire achieve it?**

I'm working with regional and national foundations to secure financial resources for programs that ensure student success and make scholarships available. Our work with foundations will help raise awareness of SUNY Empire and its programs and build a strong portfolio of philanthropic funding.

I'm also collaborating with departments across SUNY Empire who work with industry partners and external organizations — sponsored programs, veterans affairs, government relations, and the partnerships office. We have a committee that meets monthly to discuss opportunities and share updates about current or potential partnerships.

We hope to create mutually beneficial connections between SUNY Empire and regional companies and organizations. The goal for SUNY Empire is to secure philanthropic gifts, cultivate partnerships and increase enrollment.

#### **Tell us something about yourself.**

I'm a runner and have completed a dozen half marathons and numerous shorter races.



# ALUMNI NOTES

## 1970s

**KARL GROSSMAN '76**, a journalism professor at SUNY Old Westbury, was featured in an editorial cartoon by Peter Waldner, in several Long Island newspapers.



**CAROL LUMM '76** published "Compilation of Short Stories and Essays," a collection of teachable lessons and essays.

## 1980s



**KATHRYN WHITE '83** published her nonfiction story, "Adrift," in the Fall 2023 issue of Variant Literature.

**ROCCO DI PIETRO '86** published three books last year: "Yours in Beethoven: A Memoir of My Musical Journey with Julius Eastman" (BookBaby), "The Normal Exception: Life Stories, Reflections, and Dreams from Prison" (Rocco Di Pietro), and "The Comedy of the Real: The Dream of a K-Pop Youth" (Lulu Books).

**NAN HAYNES '88**, a former law professor at the University of Buffalo, published an open education resource book on legal writing.



**ELLIOTT MURPHY '88** was featured in a profile in The Village Voice.

**JUDITH FRIZLEN '89, '01** has released a new book, "Where Wisdom Meets Wonder: Forty Stories of Grandma Love" (Judith Frizlen).

**GEORGE J. MEYERS III '89** retired from his job as town supervisor of New Windsor, NY.

## 1990s

**ERIC GRUNDMAN '91, '92** was named the director of athletics, fitness, and recreation at Mercer County Community College in Princeton, NJ.

**VALERY PONOMAREV '93** leads The Jazz Messengers: The Legacy of Art Blakey, a jazz collective whose former members include jazz greats such as Branford and Wynton Marsalis, Chuck Mangione, and Terence Blanchard.

## 2000s

**SUZANNE BENDERSKI '04** was named chief of staff at CPS Recruitment, based in Liverpool, NY.

**ERIC PADEFORD '05** is the senior vice president and chief technology officer for the Pittsfield Cooperative Bank in Massachusetts.

**JENNIFER MEEHAN '06** was appointed the vice president, community engagement officer at MountainOne, a mutual holding company in North Adams, MA.

**SADY ALVARADO-FISCHER '07, '10**, vice president of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, received the second



annual Colors of Success Leadership Award from the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

**MARTHA SCHERMERHORN '08** was featured in the exhibit "Art of the Book & Paper" at the Rochester Public Library.

**KIMBERLY A. ROGERS '09** was appointed chief of staff for the mayor of Rome, NY, after serving on the City Council for 14 years.

## 2010s

**KEITH KEATING, ED.D., '10** was hired as the first chief learning and development officer for BDO Canada, a mid-level accounting and consulting firm in Toronto.



**BARBARA FILE MARANGON '11** is the author of "Passion and Elegance: How Flamenco and Classical Ballet Met at the Ballets Russes" (Routledge).

**RONAN KEARNEY '12** joined Southern Land Company as senior vice president, head of Property Management.



**RYAN SMITHSON '12**, a veteran of the Iraq War, was the keynote at the Veterans Business Council Breakfast at the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce last fall.

**NANCY MULDOON '13, '16** had a photography exhibit at the Saratoga Springs Visitor's Center in March.

**BARBARA FISCHKIN '14** writes a monthly column for 3 Quarks Daily, an online news aggregator, and is working on an autism-related historical novel.



**GERIANNE PUSKAS '14** was a finalist in the 2024 ATHENA International Awards, presented by Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

**RAFAEL A. RODGER '15, '21**, president of The Business Initiative Corporation of New York, was listed in City & State New York as a Gen Xer who's making a difference in the state.



**JOHN KANE '17** is the deputy coordinator of the Outreach and Education Programs at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

**SAMER LAKIS '18**, a diver in Byblos, Lebanon, co-authored an article in the Journal of Fisheries and Livestock Production about his discovery of three non-indigenous soft coral species of dendronephthya in the Mediterranean Sea.

**NORMA JEAN MCVEY '19** starred as Vera, the housekeeper, in "Killers of the Flower Moon," the Martin Scorsese film featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro, and Lily Gladstone.

## 2020s

**PAMELA LEVERING RN, MSN, '21** has been named chief nursing officer at Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center.

**ADAM GRINVALSKY '21** is an IT specialist with the New York State Department of Information Technology Services.

**JESSICA MILLS '21** was named the executive director of the Fulton Community Development Agency.

**GRIFFIN BATES '22** was appointed historian of the Steuben County Historical Society.



**NICOLE SHIELDS '22** was a distinguished speaker for Save the Michaels of the World, a non-profit that raises awareness of drug addiction.

# IN MEMORIAM

Kenneth T. Abrams  
Diane L. Azzollini '98, '00  
Maxine Cohen '95  
William J. Crapser '89  
Ruth Decker '74  
Alexis Deveaux '76  
Peter E. Dosso '89, '91, '94  
Mary L. Farrell '75  
Frances L. Francois '78  
Joan Gibbs '82  
Michael Hoosock '16, '17  
Linda F. Howard Weissman '82

Celedonia Jones '75  
Adrienne Kissee '02  
Gary Lacy  
Lisa Anne Lavarway '16  
Charles E. Lyttle '00  
Patricia Mangona  
Rosaline Theresa Manzari '78  
Ingrid O. McCauley  
Donald S. Milton '01  
Charles E. Morehouse '03  
Bridget Nettleton  
James T. Nichols

Arnold L. Nussbaum '87  
Jay Rae Offen '75  
Mary Paratore '08  
Robert F. Profige '85  
Merle Ratner '08  
Jack M. Risewick '93, '02  
Shishir Singh  
Elizabeth Slye  
Mary J. Snell-Davis '88  
David L. Snyder '85  
Sterling W. Treadwell '10  
Robert M. White '92

## REMEMBERING SUSAN H. TURBEN '72, H'05

**Susan Hanrahan Turben, Ph.D. '72, H'05**, passed away last November, after a long illness.

Susan devoted a lifetime of service to the field of education and to Empire State University. She was a member of the Foundation Board of Directors for two decades until stepping down in 2021.

Susan was SUNY Empire's second graduate, completing a B.A. in developmental psychology/infant development. She also had an M.Ed. in early childhood education and a dual doctorate in early childhood and special education/developmental psychology, all from Kent State University.

Susan and her husband Jack were SUNY Empire's first million-dollar donors, whose gifts to the university were transformational. The couple established two endowed faculty chairs – the Susan H. Turben Chair in Mentoring and the Susan H. Turben Directorship for Autism Advocacy – as well as the Susan H. Turben Award for Excellence in Scholarship. The couple provided leadership for The Fund for SUNY Empire and are members of the Boyer Legacy Society.

Susan received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from SUNY Empire in 2005 and was honored with the inaugural Distinguished Leader Alumni Award in 2017.





# AI DEMANDS WE LEARN AND TEACH THE FUNDAMENTALS

Andrew Hurd, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of MSIT and M.S. cybersecurity programs at Empire State University.

By Andrew Hurd

**G**enerative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT are changing the landscape of higher education. They will change the way educators prepare their classes and learners complete their coursework. Most of all, they will disrupt the foundational lessons of a solid education, the building blocks of learning, and our expectations of learners.

Technology always changes the world. Generative AI tools — Scribe, Copilot, Bard, Synthesia, to name a few others — are no different. Learners may decide to use these tools for their assignments, albeit in violation of academic integrity policies. As a result, many educators feel that being an educator has become more about policing assignments than grading assignments.

Educators like to believe our learners will do their work because they want an education. In truth, most learners want the credentials to get a better job.

And if people or machines can do our work for us, then we will let them do it and reap the benefit. If you don't agree with that, then why don't you write all your correspondence tomorrow by hand and deliver them yourself?

The current economy is built around technology. The bigger, faster, and more precise the technology is, the better and more efficient the outcome. Higher ed is no exception.

But what are we missing in the process? Think about how someone becomes elite in their field. It's from practice and hard work. It's from mastering the fundamentals. If we let technology do the fundamentals for us and put all our trust in generative AI, then how do we know if information provided is right or wrong? How do we know that a historical date is accurate, that the grammar is precise, or that the math is correctly calculated?

This is the quandary for learners in the face of AI. If someone

else is doing the work for you, then you are not building the skillset and absorbing the knowledge that underlies the work. You are simply supervising the work and learning how to use software packages.

We need a workforce that can not only use AI but create the next generation of tools. This requires us to embrace teaching and learning the technology that applies to each industry, while acquiring the fundamental skillset and knowledge needed to be productive in our respective fields.

Educational institutions need to adapt and overcome the challenges created by generative AI. Mastery of AI technology should be part of our educational skillset but must never displace the fundamentals. In the era of AI, it's even more imperative that educators on all levels engage our students. Then we stand a greater chance of providing them with an education and not just a college degree.

**“If we let technology do the fundamentals for us and put all our trust in generative AI, then how do we know if information provided is right or wrong?”**



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“SUNY Empire provides  
limitless opportunities that  
anyone can benefit from.”

— Jessica Naioti '12

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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 [sunyempire.edu/plangifts](http://sunyempire.edu/plangifts) or email [Toby.Tobrocke@sunyempire.edu](mailto:Toby.Tobrocke@sunyempire.edu).

