



Letter From the Officer in Charge

Dear Friends,

Greetings! I hope this finds you healthy, happy, and enjoying the longer, warmer days of spring. Much has happened at SUNY Empire State College since our last issue just a few months ago, and since then, the groundwork has been laid for many exciting developments yet to come.

After a long two years, SUNY Empire, like many of you, has returned to in-person and hybrid work and events. It has been a welcome change, and such a pleasure to see one another's faces and to welcome back our alumni, students, and friends to our locations for meetings and special events.

Our 51st year is serving as a promising launch pad for our next half century, where we will continue to carry on our mission of accessible, flexible education that meets students where they are, at every stage of life and learning. At the same time, it's giving us fertile ground in which to plant seeds for innovation and evolution — of our programs, our processes, and the ways we serve our college community over the next 50 years.

We've continued to expand our undergraduate and graduate programs to reflect workforce and student demands, adding a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and a Master of Science in applied analytics. This fall, we'll launch our new bachelor's degree in criminal justice, and the New York State Education Department has just approved us for a dual-degree program in accounting and business management, leading to the B.S. and MBA degrees. We've also expanded our student supports. Earlier this spring, we secured Lifeworks My Student Support (Lifeworks My SSP), which provides all students with free, 24/7 mental-health counseling from trained, multi-lingual professionals. And to better serve our students, we've opened our new location on Staten



Nathan Gonyea

Island and will be opening new locations at Broome Community College and Orange Community College in the coming weeks and months.

This summer, we'll welcome SUNY Empire's new college president, Lisa Vollendorf, Ph.D. — an arrival that will usher in a fresh perspective on the direction and future of this very special institution. It has been my absolute pleasure to serve as SUNY Empire's officer in charge over the past year and a half and to get to know and work with so many of you. I'm proud of this college and its diverse community, and I'm excited for all we will achieve in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to lead and to help sustain and advance the mission of SUNY Empire.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you, as always, for your thoughtful and generous gifts to the college, which help us develop the programs and supports that ensure we uphold our commitment to our students. Your support makes a difference.

Sincerely,

Nathan Gonyea, Ph.D.
Officer in Charge

SUNY Empire State College Alumni Awards

Each year, SUNY Empire presents awards to our exceptional alumni in recognition of their lasting impact on society and the college through outstanding professional, military, philanthropic, and volunteer accomplishments.

Congratulations to the four 2021 Alumni Award recipients.

Keith Amparado '88, The Alumni Distinguished Leader Award

Brenda Muhammad '15, The Community Impact Award

William Serino '17, The Emerging Leader Award

Douglas Brian Sherman '17, The Veteran Service Award

The awards committee is currently accepting nominations for the 2022 Alumni Awards Program. The deadline for submission is July 1, 2022. To read more about these extraordinary alumni, or to submit a nomination form, please visit: www.esc.edu/AlumniAwards.

For more information contact alumni@esc.edu.

Thank You to Our Alumni Volunteers

We want to extend a very special thank you to all our alumni who have volunteered to assist the college this past academic year. You have contributed to the student experience by offering testimonials, appearing on career panels, speaking at events, assisting with recruitment, engaging on social media, and even volunteering at commencement to welcome our graduates into the alumni community. Thank you so much for your participation!

Alumni Events

This spring, SUNY Empire alumni and friends gathered at the Genesee Country Village in Mumfordsville, NY, for a Maple Sugar Festival and tour. The outdoor outing started with a meet-and-greet with refreshments and included a tree tapping demonstration and a tour of the sugarhouse where sap is transformed into maple syrup.



Alumni gather near Rochester, NY

Conversations Over Coffee Continue



Grab your favorite beverage and join fellow SUNY Empire alumni and friends for a virtual midday coffee break. Each segment of "Conversations Over Coffee" features new speakers and a new topic. All speakers are part of the SUNY Empire Community — alumni, faculty, staff, and students. Topics range from alumni stories and current events to career advice, faculty research, hobbies, and more. For information, or to suggest topics for discussion, contact alumni@esc.edu.

We are currently planning alumni activities for summer and fall. If you have an idea for an alumni event in your area or are interested in learning more ways to get involved, please contact alumni@esc.edu.

To view the alumni events schedule, visit www.esc.edu/alumni.

VanRil Brown '00

Paying it Forward



VanRil Brown '00

Creating a Haven for Those in Need

If you walk into The Social Action Center, Inc. on Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, you'll find a bustling hive of meaningful activity — from cooking and games to arts and crafts. And if you happen to visit on a day when the center's founder, **VanRil Brown '00**, is there, you'll hear the excited chants of "Mr. Brown!" from the center's clients when he walks into the room.

What VanRil has created at and through The Social Action Center is a stimulating and nurturing haven for individuals age 7 to 50 who have developmental or physical disabilities — and help and support for the families who care for them. The center offers day, after-day, and community habilitation programs, as well as at-home and after-school respite programs.

VanRil, whose background was in industrial and labor relations in his native Jamaica, moved to New York City in his 30s. Armed with a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of the West Indies and an impressive collection of business courses taken at College of Arts, Science and Technology in Kingston, Jamaica, he set out in search of a job in the Big Apple.

He landed one as a direct care worker in Queens, providing assistance to people who were unable to perform daily activities on their own. The job not only provided VanRil with a paycheck and a sense of purpose and fulfillment, it also provided him with the inspiration for a career that would change his life and the lives of all who now call The Social Action Center "home" — if only for a few hours each week.

At the same time, VanRil, a lifelong learner, was busy satisfying his curiosity about labor and economic issues. After seeing a newspaper advertisement for SUNY Empire State College and its focus on adult learners, VanRil enrolled, taking graduate courses in labor and policy studies at the college's metro location.

Then, one day, inspiration struck.

"I was on my way home from work, and I asked myself, 'Why can't I start my own organization for people with disabilities?' I discussed it with my family, and they had a good laugh," VanRil says. "They asked me, 'Where are you going to get the money?' I told them I never thought of that, but I would figure it out."

He brought the idea — and the financial conundrum — to his mentor, Roger Keeran, who gave him advice and encouraged him to "go for it."

VanRil devised a plan. He would pack his lunch every day and save the money he would have spent on lunch to launch his business venture. With advice from his SUNY Empire mentor, VanRil worked to establish his business while working and taking graduate courses. He incorporated his organization in 1999. The next year, he earned his master's degree. The rest — from gaining state approval and being awarded cases to finding real estate and hiring and training staff — is history.

***"SUNY Empire was great for me.
It gave me an advantage."***

"I did all of the ground work while at SUNY Empire. I knew I could go to my professor whenever I had a problem or question," VanRil said. "From SUNY Empire, I learned more about negotiations and navigating state and federal guidelines. Most of the things I do now involve negotiating with families, suppliers, and the state. That knowledge came from SUNY Empire."

He said what he gained at SUNY Empire provides some of the impetus for giving to the Fund for SUNY Empire as an alumnus. In line with his career path, he believes in giving back and helping those who need a hand. In addition to SUNY Empire, VanRil also founded and contributes to a scholarship for students attending his former primary school in Jamaica. He said he is grateful for the opportunities he has had and wants to create more for others.

"My primary school principal in Jamaica was a super motivator. He encouraged all of us to study hard and told us that if we got a good education, the things we wished for would come true. We believed in it," VanRil says. "It is never too late to learn. If you have something in mind to do and it requires a college education, go for it. SUNY Empire was great for me. It gave me an advantage."



Your Gifts at Work

While you may know that gifts to the Fund for SUNY Empire State College support student scholarships, did you know that the Fund also makes possible a number of other programs and initiatives around the college? Beyond student scholarships, the Fund for SUNY Empire supports student activities, faculty and staff development, a variety of our academic programs, and provides the college with funding to address emerging needs via unrestricted gifts directed to our greatest needs. This year we are pleased to share that, thanks to our donors, the college was able to launch a standing Student Emergency Fund.

While the Fund has always been there to help students when disaster strikes, during Hurricane Sandy and the COVID-19 Pandemic — to name a few — the college has now created a permanent fund to help address emergencies that are more personal in nature. The Student Emergency Fund provides grants for SUNY Empire students to pay for urgent expenses triggered by unforeseen events that threaten their ability to continue their studies.

Your gift to the Fund has broad impact and provides us with the flexibility to be responsive during these changing times. Please consider a gift to the Fund for SUNY Empire today to support our Student Emergency Fund and the countless other programs that are made possible thanks to you. You can make your gift today by visiting www.esc.edu/SupportESC or by scanning the QR code below.

Thank you for being a part of our community and for your loyalty to SUNY Empire. Together we can make it happen for the next generation of SUNY Empire students!



Winter 2021 Commencement

**Scan the QR Code to make your gift
to the Fund for SUNY Empire today.**

