

CONNECTIONS

ALUMNI MAGAZINE | FALL 2025

Vol. 53



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**MEET THE ALUMNI
AWARD RECIPIENTS**



**EMPIRE STATE
UNIVERSITY**

CONNECTIONS

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“Empire State University’s master’s program enabled me to dig deeply into workplace policy issues and fueled my interest in shifting from legal practice to legal academe. Now, I want to support future students who wish to pursue life-changing opportunities through SUNY Empire.”

— David Yamada '99, law professor at Suffolk University Law School in Boston

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A LETTER FROM PRESIDENT VOLLENDORF

Welcome to the fall! This is one of my favorite times of the year in New York. I hope it is equally beautiful wherever you find yourself reading this issue of Connections.

Empire State University continues to grow and serve more students across New York and around the world. Our enrollments this term are up 9% over last fall and up 13% over the last three years. We are meeting the need for affordable, flexible, and high-quality online learning from students of all ages and at all career stages. We are on track to achieve our goal of serving 20,000 students each year by 2028.

As a university community, we remain committed to growing with integrity. We have increased our workforce by 20% since July 2022, hiring nearly 250 new employees.

Part of this work involves ensuring we have the correct organizational structure to support our students and drive opportunity. This past summer, we restructured our eight academic schools into five colleges and hired five college deans, who you will read more about in this issue.

I am grateful to all our faculty and staff for their dedication to supporting our students throughout their academic journeys. Several of these students are featured in this edition of Connections, including a few who were recently awarded an associate degree en route to their bachelor's degree — a new program at SUNY Empire meant to help students achieve their career goals as early in their studies as possible.

Congratulations to Bryant O'Donnell '25, Kristina DiFalco Sciortino '25, and Patricia Rozzo Leadley '25, and the more than 430 students who have earned their degree through this program.

Also featured in the pages that follow are four



alumni who received Alumni Awards this year, including:

- **Timothy Johnson '24, '25**, a New York City correction officer and former president of SUNY Empire's Black Male Initiative
- **Elliott Murphy '88**, a renowned rock singer-songwriter, novelist, record producer, and journalist
- **Michele Johnson '19**, a U.S. Army veteran who has traveled across the country advocating for and mentoring fellow veterans
- **Jason Torreano '14**, who founded a nonprofit organization supporting youth in Makhanda, South Africa

You will also read about Jakub Smutny '09, who created an early warning weather system in Cambodia. I trust you will be as inspired as I am by all their incredible stories.

May this season of gratitude bring you time for reflection and renewed connection with friends, family, and loved ones. Thank you for supporting SUNY Empire!

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

Lisa Vollendorf
President



STUDENT WINS SUNY ART AWARD

Caleb Rubright '25, who earned a bachelor's degree in visual arts at Empire State University, was one of three students across the state university system to receive a 2025 SUNY Art Award. His oil-on-acrylic painting titled "Wild Horses" also won a SUNY Empire award in 2024.

EMPIRE NURSING STUDENTS LAND INAUGURAL SCHOLARSHIP

SUNY launched its Healthcare Educator Scholarship this year, and eight of the 12 recipients are Empire State University nursing students.

Scholarship recipients are baccalaureate-prepared nurses pursuing a master's degree in nursing. As part of the program, they will commit to a three-year faculty position at a SUNY associate-level nursing program.

The SUNY Healthcare Educator Scholarship will cover up to \$25,000 per academic year, including up to \$20,000 for tuition and fees toward a qualifying master's in nursing degree program at SUNY, plus a \$5,000 annual stipend for each year of eligible enrollment.

SUNY EMPIRE PARTNERING WITH HIGH SCHOOLS

SUNY Empire is working with two New York City metro area high schools to help introduce students to business and healthcare studies and careers.

Luis Camacho, SUNY Empire's academic coordinator of the Spanish BBA program, is teaching an introduction to business course at Brentwood High School on Long Island.

In Queens, NY, SUNY Empire is delivering online courses at the new Northwell School of Health Sciences and granting students college credits for those classes. The school offers four healthcare career tracks: pre-nursing, medical assisting, behavioral and mental health, and healthcare management. The high school builds on SUNY Empire's longstanding partnership with Northwell to address the healthcare workforce shortage in New York.

"These partnerships prepare students for entry-level careers after high school with the opportunity to continue at SUNY Empire and achieve upward mobility," says Daniel Fogarty, assistant vice president of enrollment and marketing.



**LOOKING TO GET INVOLVED WITH SUNY EMPIRE?
VISIT: [SUNYEMPIRE.EDU/INVOLVED](https://www.sunyempire.edu/involved) FOR IDEAS.**

NEW DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES

Empire State University launched several new academic programs this fall:

- Accounting (BBA)
- Advanced AI for Economic & Business Analysis (microcredential)
- Bilingual Education (post-bachelor's and post-master's advanced certificates)
- Business Administration in Spanish (BBA)
- Higher Education Leadership (advanced certificate)
- Human Services Management (B.S.)
- Information Technology (B.S.)
- Organizational Psychology (M.A.)
- Sociology (B.A. and B.S.)



Career Notes

BIG INTERVIEW NOW AVAILABLE

If you're looking for a job and nervous about the interview, you can now get help from the Big Interview platform. The service, available from SUNY Empire's Career & Experiential Learning Services team, works with job applicants to do mock interviews and reviews your resume to provide tailored recommendations.

To access Big Interview, scan the QR code below or visit: empirestatealumni.biginterview.com/ and use the one-time organization code 2470.

SCAN QR CODE TO ACCESS BIG INTERVIEW



YOUR CAREER, YOUR NEWSLETTER

Stay connected with SUNY Empire's Career & Experiential Learning Services!

Sign up for our weekly or monthly Career Newsletter, curated to match your interests and keep you informed. Scan the QR code (right) and find out how you can subscribe.



"I CHANGED INDUSTRIES!"

Liza Rochelson '21 of Syracuse, NY was an executive assistant in higher ed when she decided to switch into a new field. "I wanted to take what I had learned at SUNY Empire and use it to do good in our world," says Rochelson, who has a degree in interdisciplinary studies.



She reached out to Anita DeCianni-Brown '12, '15, director of Empire State University's Career & Experiential Learning Services. With DeCianni-Brown's encouragement, Rochelson began exploring jobs in philanthropy. They also polished Rochelson's resume and did mock interviews.

In 2022, Rochelson got a job as an implementation specialist for the Foundation Source in Syracuse. Today, she helps philanthropists launch and manage private foundations.

Rochelson credits Career Services and DeCianni-Brown for helping her make the transition. "Anita showed that she believed in me, which helped me believe in myself," she says. "It's not easy to change careers after a few decades in a specific field."

PHILANTHROPY CORNER

MAKING HIGHER ED MORE AFFORDABLE

Empire State University, in collaboration with Ithaca S+R and Buffalo State University has received a grant from the ECMC Foundation to advance course material affordability. The grant project will pilot innovative ways to reduce textbook costs for our students and investigate how to scale affordability efforts at a national level.

Shown here is the SUNY Empire team that secured the grant, from left to right: Beth Colello, executive director of corporate and foundation relations; Shannon Pritting, executive director for the Office of Graduate Studies and Scholarly Supports; President Lisa Vollendorf; Veronica Fitzgerald, vice president of the Office of Advancement; and Mark McBride, director



for Libraries, Scholarly Communications, and Museums at Ithaca S+R, a non-profit that works with universities to advance the public good.



DYSON GRANT TO ADDRESS NURSING SHORTAGE

Empire State University has been awarded a \$90,000 grant from the Dyson Foundation. The three-year award will support scholarships for students in nursing and allied health programs who live and work in the Mid-Hudson Valley. The award will help address the shortage of nurses and nurse educators in the region. Shown here is Andrea Reynolds, left, president and CEO of Dyson, and Lisa Vollendorf, president of SUNY Empire.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

SUNY Empire wishes to thank the following organizations for their scholarship support:

- Stewart's Shops/Dake Family
- Julia O. Wells Memorial Education Foundation
- Lake Placid Education Foundation
- Mohawk Valley Medical Associates
- A. Lindsay & Olive B. O'Connor Foundation

Michelle Thompson, Peekskill, NY, nursing student and recipient of a Julia O. Wells Memorial Education Foundation Scholarship.





Alumni Award recipients (from left), Jason Torreano '14, Michele Johnson '19, Elliott Murphy '88, and Timothy Johnson '24, '25, at an awards ceremony in Saratoga Springs in October.

SUNY Empire Celebrates the 2025 Alumni Award Winners

At Empire State University, we are so proud of our alumni, especially the lasting impact that so many make on society. To honor them, we created the Alumni Awards, which recognize some of our most outstanding graduates for their professional, philanthropic, and volunteer accomplishments.

This year, we received more than 80 nominations. Selecting the final recipients was not easy. In the end, we chose a captain in one of the country's most challenging correction departments;

a founder of a nonprofit that helps improve lives for children in South Africa; a veteran who supports other veterans, both locally and nationally; and a rock star (literally) based in Paris. Read on to learn more about our 2025 Alumni Award recipients.



Emerging Leader: Timothy Johnson '24, '25

As a longtime captain with the New York City Department of Correction, Timothy Johnson '24, '25 has maintained the safety of his workplace, along with his humanity toward the people in custody.

He is trained in de-escalation and hostage negotiation. But he tells those he supervises that being ready for worst-case scenarios still leaves room to respect individuals who are often incarcerated as their cases are decided.

“It’s about listening and seeing what the issue is,” he says. “De-escalation, a lot of the time, is listening to people and seeing how you can resolve their issue. Sometimes it’s a sick call, and it’s easy to resolve. Sometimes, people simply just want someone to listen to them.”

For his work as a public servant, mentor, and lifelong learner Johnson has received the 2025 Emerging Leader Award.

GUIDING TOWARD EXCELLENCE

Johnson, 50, a two-time graduate of Empire State University, started at Rikers Island as a correction officer in 2007. Today, as a captain, he trains and supervises 19 correction officers, manages a \$1.5 million budget, and keeps up with changing policies. Associate Professor David Fullard, who nominated Johnson, cited his insight and skill.

“(He) embodies the promise of an emerging leader: someone who leads by example, elevates those around him, and steers his institution — and his community — toward excellence,” wrote Fullard, himself a retired captain with the city correction department. “He represents the very best of what SUNY Empire seeks to cultivate in its alums.”

Johnson, a Brooklyn native, became a school safety agent with the NYPD after high school. Over time, he began to consider life after corrections work and enrolled at SUNY Empire, where he got an associate degree in general studies and a bachelor’s in criminal justice.

AN ACTIVE EXAMPLE

As a student, he became very involved, serving as president of the Black Male Initiative, the



“ It's about listening and seeing what the issue is. Sometimes, people simply just want someone to listen to them.”

mentoring program that Fullard heads. Johnson also participated in the Student Government Association and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council. As an alumnus, he maintains strong ties to SUNY Empire, often attending events and volunteering.

In addition, he is a member of the Kappa Psi Kappa Fraternity service organization and is working on a certificate in correction management at John Jay College.

Johnson likes to think he sets an example for his staff by learning and pursuing professional opportunities.

“I always encourage them,” he says. “If I can do it, they can, too.”

Professional Excellence: Elliott Murphy '88

When Elliott Murphy '88 graduated from SUNY Empire at 39, he was so full of gratitude that, guitar in hand, he performed his folk-rock composition "Empire State Made a Graduate Out of Me."

"It was perhaps the most meaningful performance I've ever done," he recalled via email from his home in Paris, "and one that I could hardly imagine would have ever come to pass."

A prolific singer-songwriter, Murphy has appeared at Madison Square Garden with pal and fellow Long Islander Billy Joel; written for Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair; published five novels, and run his own record label.

As the recipient of the 2025 Professional Excellence Award, Murphy says the key to professional success is striving toward personal fulfillment — in a way that suits you.

"It hasn't always been easy," says Murphy, who also credits his wife Françoise Viallon, an actress. "But I'm convinced I've finally arrived at a 'right-sized' career and lifestyle."

STILL ON TOUR

More than 50 years since the release of his first album, which brought comparisons to Bob Dylan, Murphy continues writing, recording, and performing to packed houses throughout Europe and Japan. When his friend Bruce Springsteen is in Paris, he often invites Murphy to accompany him on "Born to Run."

Born into a show business family, he dove into his first album, which he named "Aquashow" for the outdoor water spectacle his father owned and produced. Murphy attended Nassau Community College just briefly in 1970 because he was busy with his music.

But in the mid-1980s he hit burnout. He went to work at a law firm and considered a legal career,



"It hasn't always been easy, but I'm convinced I've finally arrived at a 'right-sized' career and lifestyle."

while pursuing his SUNY Empire degree.

"It soon became apparent that music and writing was my calling," he says.

FULLY INDEPENDENT

Murphy moved to Paris in 1989 and has stayed the course ever since.

In a Village Voice profile, Billy Joel said: "Elliott was what we call a career artist," and "dedicated to not being commercial for the sake of selling records." His son, Gaspard Murphy, cited his father's authenticity as both artist and businessperson when he nominated him for the SUNY Empire award.

"Out of both necessity and a yearning for total artistic control, his drive has brought him international success and admiration," wrote the younger Murphy, himself an award-winning producer. "By doing so, he has thrived as a fully independent artist, running his own label, publishing and overseeing every aspect of his career, gaining true expertise in all the workings of the challenging and ever-evolving music business."

Veteran Service: Michele Johnson '19

Michele Johnson '19's dedication to veterans is so strong that she received not one but two nominations for the Veteran Service Award.

"My mother rises each day with a heart set on helping others," wrote her daughter, Mekkah Bergeron. "Her journey has not been easy — there have been battles no one has seen and wounds that run deeper than most will ever know. But instead of allowing her trauma to silence her, she has chosen to use her voice, her pain, and her lived experience to uplift and empower other veterans who are walking similar paths."

"Through her voice and leadership, Michele has helped build cultural competency across our campus," wrote Bethany Hicks, coordinator of Military Academic and Student Services at SUNY Empire. "She has enabled our community to better understand the experiences of veterans and the lasting impact of military service, and strengthened our commitment to those who have served."



"I went so long without treatment that I had isolated myself. Now I welcome questions. And I have degrees on my wall to remind me what I've accomplished in this life."

SERVICE AT A PRICE

Johnson has used her degree in community and human services to support fellow veterans at retreats across the country, regional organizations, and SUNY Empire.

"You want them to live a better life that can include jobs and getting themselves better self-care, and to stop over-thinking and learn to move on," says Johnson, 65. "Sometimes, people just want to live in peace."

At 17, the Schenectady native enlisted in the Army in search of opportunities. Posted at bases in the U.S. and in Germany, she thrived, advancing to the role of drill instructor.

Military service brought her pride, recognition, and leadership skills — but at a cost. At a time when few women served, Johnson endured brutal sexism and sexual assault. After 16 years, she took medical retirement.

OPENING UP TO HELP

Back in Schenectady, she worked as a correction officer and decided to go to SUNY Empire to gain clinical knowledge and organizational skills, so she could have a bigger impact.

By then, however, Johnson's own trauma caught up to her. After 40 years of silence, she entered residential treatment for PTSD and learned how to speak up.

These days, Johnson is open about what she experienced in the military, both good and bad. She uses her stories to help others, whether she's speaking at retreats sponsored by the American Warrior Association or as a panelist at a SUNY Empire webinar.

"I went so long without treatment that I had isolated myself," she says. "Now I welcome questions. And I have degrees on my wall to remind me what I've accomplished in this life."

Community Impact: Jason Torreano '14

It didn't take long for Jason Torreano '14 to see that television journalism — “chasing ambulances and fires,” as he put it — wasn't for him.

What inspired him was the work he had done with children experiencing homelessness in Makhanda, South Africa. So, Torreano quit TV and enrolled in Empire State University's master's program in liberal studies, focusing on non-profit management.

“I knew I wanted to do something in South Africa, but I didn't know what it would look like,” says Torreano, 40. “SUNY Empire really helped me clarify. Working with faculty who cared and let me craft my own path was enormously beneficial.”

A PATH TO FREEDOM

He used the self-designed major to launch Inkululeko, an organization that creates opportunities for young people hampered by poverty and violence. Starting in eighth grade, motivated Makhanda students receive supports that guide them through high school.

Inkululeko — Xhosa for “freedom” — has grown from nine to 130 young people at any one time.

“Dozens of students not otherwise bound for university went to college as a result of our work and dozens more have jobs,” Torreano says. “Unemployment is a ticking time bomb in South Africa. With support, they have a real shot at meaningful work.”

In nominating him for the Community Impact Award, Inkululeko colleague Zuko Gqadavama said Torreano “embodies the qualities of a true community hero: an ascendant leader with a deep commitment to advancing positive change within his community and beyond. His ability to envision long-term goals while meticulously managing immediate priorities is remarkable.”

BUILDING A NONPROFIT

A native of Western New York, Torreano first visited Makhanda as an undergraduate at SUNY Brockport. Volunteering at a school for youth



“I knew I wanted to do something in South Africa, but I didn't know what it would look like. SUNY Empire really helped me clarify. Working with faculty who cared and let me craft my own path was enormously beneficial.”

experiencing homelessness, he fell in love with the community. He stuck with plans to be a broadcast journalist — but lasted just two years.

Torreano worked closely with SUNY Empire faculty to learn how to create a non-profit. He is particularly grateful to Professor Margaret Sithole, a member of the history faculty, and Professor Emerita Susan Hollis, who was his advisor.

“Without people like them who invested so deeply in students like me it would have taken a lot longer and might not have happened,” he says.

Last July, Torreano left the organization he started 14 years ago to return to the U.S. He transitioned Inkululeko to South African leadership and is now the director of social enterprise strategy and development for St. John's Community Services, an advocacy organization for people with disabilities in Washington, D.C.



In the News

SUNY Empire experts are turning up in growing numbers of news stories

By Winnie Yu

An old adage in journalism says, “A story is only as good as its sources.” These days, faculty and staff at Empire State University are helping reporters prove the truth of that saying by serving as reliable sources in their stories. Here are some examples of where they’ve been lending their expertise:

Brian Frederick, Ph.D. | Assistant Professor of Criminology



Media Outlet: CBS 6 News in Albany, NY

Topic: Impact of policy changes on resources in the LGBTQ+ community

Scan the QR Code below to read or listen to the story:



Njoki Mwarumba, Ph. D. | Assistant Professor of Emergency Management



Media Outlet: WNYT Channel 13, Albany NY

Topic: Importance of local planning in disaster preparedness

Scan the QR Code below to read or listen to the story:



Lisa Vollendorf, Ph.D. | President



Media Outlet: WROC Rochester, NY

Topic: Growing interest in online universities as an alternative to traditional colleges

Scan the QR Code below to read the story:



Xiomara Giordano | Assistant Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and Chief Diversity Officer



Media Outlet: EDUP Xcelerated Excellence, a podcast

Topic: “Leaving No Community Member Behind at Empire State University Through DEI”

Scan the QR Code below to hear the podcast:



Daniel Fogarty | Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Management and Marketing



Media Outlet: Business Wire

Topic: Preparing students for the cybersecurity workforce

Scan the QR Code below to read the story:



Sounding a Global Weather Alarm Ahead of Natural Disasters

When bad weather is pending, Jakub Smutny '09 wants people to know

By Winnie Yu

In the tropical climate of Cambodia, where monsoon winds create distinct dry and rainy seasons, extreme weather events are common and often disastrous. According to the 2021 World Risk Report, Cambodia was designated one of the top 15 most disaster-prone countries in the world, with severe floods affecting a quarter of the total population annually.

That year, Jakub Smutny '09 began working on an early warning system (EWS) in the southeast Asian country. As the program director, the Czech Republic native oversaw the implementation of the EWS, provided technical oversight, and developed the EWS across Cambodia and regionally, in Laos.

"The system, which is trademarked EWS1294, works by monitoring river levels across the country," Smutny says. "Together with other forecast modeling tools, it allows the government to send out mass voice calls so people can take precautions and, if needed, evacuate and seek higher ground."

The work in Cambodia helped lay the foundation for Smutny's current work on the Solomon Islands, a sprawling archipelago of more than 900 islands, located in the South Pacific Ocean, northeast of Australia and east of Papua New Guinea.



Smutny hiking foot trails in the lower Himalayas. He helped build the trails as part of 2015 earthquake relief works.

As the lead on the United Nations Development Programme's efforts to build the islands' national weather observation network, he is overseeing an \$8 million project created by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

"My role is mainly to give technical support to the local implementation team and ensure the planned network of land-based and upper-air observation stations is set up on time, at the required quality, and within the resources allocated," Smutny says. "It's quite a challenging project given the logistical

barriers and the fact that stations have to be strategically located to cover the entirety of the country's vast and stretched archipelago."

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Smutny went to the University of New York in Prague, Empire State University's partner school in the Czech capital, where he became increasingly interested in global affairs while taking international relations classes.

After graduating in 2009 with a degree in international economic relations from SUNY Empire, he went to the New

School in New York City. He spent a summer in Nepal studying the Maoist movement as part of the international field program.

“That’s when I realized that living abroad and working on development issues is what I want to do,” he says.

For the next 11 years, he did just that. After getting his master’s in international affairs, he joined People in Need, a Czech NGO based in South Sudan. He worked on food security in sub-Saharan Africa and then post-earthquake recovery in Nepal before getting involved with the EWS1294 in Cambodia.

In 2023, Smutny joined the UN World Food Programme in Cambodia. There, he worked on disaster management and helped the government design the national roadmap for Early Warnings for All, a global initiative by the UN that calls for the entire planet to be covered by multi-hazard early warning systems by 2029.

LIFE-SAVING WEATHER DATA

Smutny’s work on the Solomon Islands is likely to have significant regional implications for managing disasters.

“If all goes well, the data from Solomon Islands should help reduce local, regional, and even global forecast uncertainty by an estimated 20%,” he says. “The warm pool around the Solomon Islands has strategic importance for weather patterns beyond the islands, including as an area where many southwestern pacific cyclones originate.”



Smutny was part of a panel marking the 10th anniversary of the Early Warning System in Cambodia.

The network will collect key data about weather and atmosphere, such as temperature, rainfall, humidity, and wind direction and speed. The data is then sent to the WMO central database on an hourly basis and fed into supercomputers at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Hurricane Center in the U.S., and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather

Forecasts in England, Italy, and Germany.

“With this technology we’re able to better understand where and when the potentially dangerous extreme weather events will happen,” Smutny says. “Gaps still remain, especially with the increased unpredictability and intensity of natural disasters caused by climate change, but we are confident the technology will save lives.”

One Degree Higher: How an A.S. Made the Difference

By Winnie Yu

Last year, Empire State University began awarding associate degrees to students who had completed the requisite coursework while pursuing their bachelor's degrees. The ongoing initiative had a profound impact on many of the 434 students who were among the first to take advantage of the program.

Here's what three had to say:

I dropped out of college in 2010. As a recovering addict living with HIV and a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community — with ADHD and



neurodivergence — the traditional education system often felt impossible. I lacked the tools, support, and most importantly, the confidence to believe I could succeed.

"For months, I hesitated between a bachelor's or an associate degree, unsure of what path to take. Everything changed the moment I earned my A.S. It gave me a surge of confidence I'd never experienced before. It was a powerful affirmation that I can succeed and that my dreams are valid.

"Now, I'm working toward my bachelor's in early childhood education. Earning my associate also inspired me to become state-certified as an HIV peer navigator and harm reduction specialist. Today, I lead my own nonprofit, and advocate for LGBTQ+ youth. For the first time, I feel truly seen, empowered, and ready to create change.

— **Bryant O'Donnell '25, Binghamton, NY**

I've been going to school part-time while working toward my bachelor's for what feels like forever. When I was notified that I was eligible to receive my associate degree, I couldn't contain

my excitement. It gave me the extra push I needed to keep going.

"Being able to attend graduation, put on a cap and gown, and celebrate my accomplishments so far made me incredibly proud.

Walking across that stage and receiving my diploma was an

honor. I now have it framed on the wall next to my husband's degree. I can't wait to add my bachelor's and eventually a master's degree."



— **Kristina DiFalco Sciortino '25, Old Bethpage, NY**

When I first got the email stating SUNY Empire could confer an associate degree on me, I was both skeptical and surprised.

"Why the skepticism? It was rooted in being told repeatedly over 42 years that regardless of how much college work I had done, whether my academic pursuits were linked, or how much I was improving as a student, it counted for nothing.

"When the diploma finally arrived, a sense of closure and contentment came over me. All my past work in the sciences and writing finally counted, and my effort was approved and recognized by a university."



— **Patricia Rozzo Leadley '25, Rochester, NY**



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sunyempire.edu/springfund25



By Winnie Yu

5 New Deans, 5 New Colleges

New structure positions SUNY Empire for growth and success

Empire State University has restructured its academic programs into five colleges, led by five new deans. The strategic reorganization promises to expand opportunities and create a more collaborative environment for students and faculty alike.

The foundation for the restructuring was laid when SUNY Empire acquired university status in 2023. According to Rai Kathuria, provost and

executive vice president for academic affairs, the long-awaited reorganization, which was designed with stakeholder involvement over two years, enables SUNY Empire to “strengthen our academic infrastructure, integrate our approach to student success, and position the university for continuous improvement.”

Here, meet the new deans, and hear their plans for the colleges and their favorite ways to relax:

Carol DeNysschen, Ph.D.

COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



Before SUNY Empire: I was dean of the School of the Professions at University at Buffalo.

Why Empire: I was drawn to SUNY Empire’s mission-driven focus on access, flexibility, and innovation in higher education. The opportunity to lead a college that serves working adults, traditional and nontraditional

students, and communities often underserved by conventional models deeply aligns with both my personal and professional values.

My vision: To position the college as a leader in innovative, inclusive, and community-centered education. I envision a college that continues to be a leader in developing

flexible, high-quality academic programs designed to meet the evolving needs of students and the workforce, particularly in underserved and rural communities.

We will prepare professionals who are not only skilled and workforce-ready but also deeply committed to equity, public service, and improving the health and well-being of others.

If I wasn’t a dean: I love to teach, collaborate, and inspire, so teacher, professor, or inspirational coach would be top of my list. Or I’d be an oncology specialist (medical or nutrition), or veterinarian!

Recent read: “The Women,” by Kristin Hannah.

Last TV binge: Not much of a binger with television but I did get through a few seasons of “Grey’s Anatomy” during COVID.

On a free afternoon: Anything outdoors that entails moving. If I can do it with my dog, that’s even better!

Julie Gedro, Ed.D.
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS



Before SUNY Empire: I had a career in human resource management and development prior to becoming an academic. I joined the faculty at Empire State University in 2003 and eventually became interim dean of the School of Business.

Why Empire: I appreciate the university's focus on access.

My vision: To position the College of Business as a leader in delivering rigorous and accessible business education that equips learners to navigate complexity, lead with integrity, and achieve meaningful career growth. We are building an academic environment grounded in professional relevance. Our students will engage with curricula that are informed by real-world challenges, global trends, and evolving workforce needs.

If I wasn't a dean: I would return to some form of human resources practice and/or continue as a faculty member.

Recent read: "The Coming Wave," by Mustafa Suleyman.

Last TV binge: "Landman."

On a free afternoon: I enjoy a balance of movement, connection, and music: cycling along the beautiful Erie Canal path, spending time with my Yorkshire Terriers, or singing in the choir at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Rochester. These activities keep me grounded and joyful.

Ju Kim, Ph.D.
**COLLEGE OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES**



Before SUNY Empire: I served as the dean of the College of Science and Health at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

Why Empire: The university's mission to reimagine public education deeply resonated with me. The College of Arts and Sciences is more than a new administrative structure. It is an opportunity to shape the future of interdisciplinary, accessible, learner-centered higher education.

My vision: I plan to make a bold commitment to uniting the liberal arts with science

and technology. By integrating the creative, critical, and analytical strengths of the humanities, arts, and sciences, the new college will prepare its graduates to lead in any field they have chosen by providing them with the transferable skills needed to excel.

If I wasn't a dean: I would be teaching physics and doing research on superconductivity.

Recent read: "Immunity to Change," by Robert Keagan and Lisa Laskow Lahey.

Last TV binge: "Star Wars." I like the imagination of the Star Wars universe and futuristic technologies. Many of these futuristic technologies are no longer futuristic.

On a free afternoon: I'd be walking my dog or gardening.

Gina Torino, Ph.D.
**COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND
BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**



Before SUNY Empire: I was a post-doctoral fellow at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY.

Why Empire: I joined as a faculty member in 2010 and eventually became interim dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. I liked the emphasis on adult learners and flexible education, mentoring, and opportunities to make an impact on students who are frequently juggling multiple responsibilities and assist them in achieving their academic and professional goals.

My vision: To build a dynamic and inclusive academic community that directly addresses workforce development needs and prepares our students for immediate career success. We will accomplish this by offering relevant programs such as psychology, public policy and administration, labor studies, criminal justice, and others, all while creating an environment in which every voice is valued.

Our commitment is to provide high-quality online education and culturally responsive support, allowing our graduates to effect positive change and make significant contributions to their respective fields and communities.

If I wasn't a dean: I'd be a professor in our psychology and human development department.

Recent read: "Stillness Is the Key," by Ryan Holiday.

Last TV binge: "The Stand," based on the Stephen King novel.

On a free afternoon: I'd be at the beach, walking, swimming, and playing pickleball.

Kjersti VanSlyke-Briggs **COLLEGE OF EDUCATION**



Before SUNY Empire: I worked at SUNY Oneonta for the last 20 years. In my time there I served as a professor, chair of Secondary Education and Educational Technology, and was the inaugural director of the Faculty Center. I was also a

Provost Fellow in my last year there. Before that, I was a high school English teacher in the Binghamton area.

Why Empire: I wore many hats at Oneonta and was ready for a new challenge. At a time when we need to actively grow and prepare teachers in New York, I was ready to take on that challenge at an institution like Empire that's known for innovation.

My vision: To continue developing robust programs that provide a variety of access points for students to reach their professional goals in the field of education.

If I wasn't a dean: I'd still be teaching. I miss teaching high school and working with teens, but also love the work I've done at the university level.

Recent read: "The Anthropocene Reviewed," by John Green. I used to teach young adult literature and love his young adult fiction (although I think his brother Hank is the better author). I highly recommend it.

Last TV binge: "Mobland." I love Helen Mirren. She is such a talented actress.

On a free afternoon: I'd be reading or hiking with my family.



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ALUMNI NOTES

1980s

SALLY STEINWACHS '82 had four new paintings in the 65th annual Irondequoit Art Club exhibit in Rochester, NY last spring, including two oils, which are a new medium for her.

ROBERT WALDERMAN '83, a former pastor at Lynbrook Baptist Church on Long Island, published his first book, "All Things Through Christ" (Covenant Books).

KRISTINE BOUYOUCOS '84 exhibited her work in the Rochester Public Library's 14th annual Art of the Book exhibition. Her work has been in the show every year since it started.



SURAJ HOLZWARTH '89 released her new book "Heart Like a Mountain: A Young Woman's Climb of North America's Highest Peak," about being the youngest woman to climb Denali in 1979 at the age of 19.

JOYCE PALUMBO '89 was named "Community Volunteer of the Year" by the Rochester Red Wings, a triple-A minor league baseball team.

1990s

TIMOTHY COSGRIFF '93 had his artwork in two separate exhibits at the Rochester Public Library: the "Shapeshifter" and the "Art of the Book."



ROB EDER '95, whose murals are at the EPCOT Center in Disney World, led a talk at the Marco

Island Center for the Arts in Florida on the lives and legacies of Caravaggio, Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, and Jasper Johns.

MICHAEL GARBER '97 has published his second book, "Songs She Wrote: Forty Hits by Pioneering Women of Popular Music" (Rowman and Littlefield).

BERNIE HEVERON '97, a retired music teacher, released a CD of original music titled "Asunder."

MICHAEL MCNEFF '97 was named comptroller for the city of Troy, NY.

DENNIS SHIPMAN '97, '99 is pursuing a master's degree in mental health counseling at Bowie State University.

MICHAEL CRAVEN '99 was appointed president of East Coast Power, an electric utilities provider in the Northeast.

2000s

CARLENE LACEY '04 has been named chief executive officer of ON-RAMP (One Network for Regional Advanced Manufacturing Projects).



NITIN NATARAJAN '04 has joined Cambridge Global Advisors, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., focused on homeland security, intelligence, and defense.

TARA BURGESS '06, CEO of EPIC (Every Person Influences Children), was selected as a 2025 Woman of Influence by Buffalo Business First.

DENNIS LESTRANGE '07 has been named executive chairman of BlueCrest Communications after serving as president and CEO of the global technology provider.

ANN RUSHLO '07 is the new chief executive officer of the Dulles Area Association of Realtors in Leesburg, VA.

MICHELLE F. SOLOMON '07, editor-in-chief and arts and theater critic for Artburst Miami, received the 2025 Arts Marketer of the Year award from The Arts & Business Council of Miami.

LISA BRESCIA '08, a Broadway veteran, has been appointed interim dean of the Conservatory for the Performing Arts at Stephens College in Columbia, MO, where she has served as associate professor and chair of performance since 2022.

DAVID CZUBA '08 has written a memoir about his work life titled "The Mythic Quest: My Pursuit of the Fabled Career."



2010s

MIGUEL A. REYES-MARIANO '10, a social worker and military veteran, has written a book titled "The Enemies Theory: Who's the Obstacle to Your Personal Growth?"

BARBARA FILE MARANGON '11 published her first novel, "The Body in the Malibran Theater" (Ogham Books International), which won the bronze Royal Palm Literary Award.

ANITA DECIANNI-BROWN '12, '15, director of the Career & Experiential Learning Center for Empire State University, spoke at the National Association of Colleges and Employer conference on "Scaling Career Supports for Nontraditional Students in an Online Environment."

ALICE KLUGHERZ '12 performed a dance about smoking called "The Tingling," which she choreographed, wrote, and directed during a residency at the Green Space in Long Island City, NY.

KELLIE ROBERTS '12 has been named the executive director of the SPCA in Cattaraugus County in western NY.

ANGIE MCPHEE-SMITH '13, Ed.D., is the dean of nursing and health professions at New England College in Henniker, NH.

MELISSA TAYLOR '13 has been named to the newly created position of deputy county manager in Seneca County in Western New York.

LORI DISPENZA '14, a veteran of the U.S. Army, was appointed veteran services officer for the Dunkirk, NY office of the Chautauqua County Veterans Service Agency.

NICOLE MEYERS '15, '16 was elected president of the NAACP on Staten Island.

JAWANA RICHARDSON '16, '18, '24 spent three days lobbying with Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which included meetings with members of Congress to advocate for life-saving technology in new cars.



MIRANDA MOHR '17, an enrollment coordinator and billing specialist, published her first book, "Silhouettes of Self-Doubt and the Fires We Let Burn" (Bookleaf Publishing), a collection of poetry.

JARRI MACHELLE MELTON '18, '22, '25 was a contestant on "Wheel of Fortune" in October.

DAVID STROUF '18 has been named an associate director at Savills Investment Management in Prague.

JULIE TAYLOR-FRIETCHEN '18, '19 was appointed director of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers' training center.



KATELYN WALLEY-STOLL '18 was named the new agriculture team leader for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chautauqua County.

GREGORY VAN ACKER '17, a playwright, lyricist, and casting director in New York City, won the Idea Grant from Opera America for their first original opera libretto.



RETHA NICHOLE JONES '22 has published a mystery novel, "Secrets Keep You Sick."

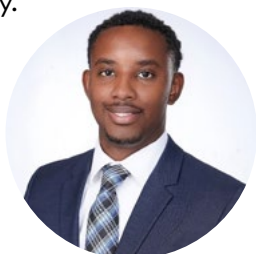
SETH MORGAN '23 is professional development coordinator at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, where he works with teachers on discussing the history of this event in their classrooms.

2020s

EMILY BURNS PERRYMAN '20 has joined Invest in Others Charitable Foundation as the head of marketing and communications.

ALEXIS GOODING '20, '21 was admitted to the second judicial department of New York after graduating from the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University in May.

ROHAN JOHNSON '21 is a construction project manager for Live Oak Bank in Wilmington, NC.



KEVIN RUSSELL '21 has been appointed commanding officer of the 123rd police precinct on Staten Island, NY.

HALEY HICKEY '25, JAEDEN EILERS '25, and OLIVIA WOODS '25 have joined the radiology department at Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital in Plattsburgh, NY after receiving their associate degrees from SUNY Empire.

CATHERINE MEYERS '25 is working at the Accounting Services office at Empire State University.

TIOMBÉ TATUM '25, chief of staff at Schenectady Community College, was chosen to become a member of the New York State Community College Leadership Academy.

IN MEMORIAM

Angela Baldera '87
Constance Barker '84
Anne R. Bertholf
Margaret Bye '85
Mary R. Carnicelli '75
James Cary '83
Rocco Diina '01
Angelo Fatta
Joan FitzSimons '77
Charles Frass '90
Eunice Golden '78
Angela Groulx '07

Joseph Michael Herbert '01
Barbara E. Hope '01
Robert F. Jennings '90
Janet Jones
Bernard Kerik
Olga Kinsman '82
Rose Ellen Larish
Philip J. Lyman '92
C.D. Meeusen '95
Jose Melendez '06
Lynn Murphy '88
Maria Oppenheimer '86

Mary E. Peterson '86
Robert Seurkamp '89
Starra Sherin
Gerald Sincebaugh '74
Rullie Suda '78
William Tessier '91
David Tomlin '80
Florence Walker
John J. Woods '81
Louis P. Zanghi '76



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