

COMMENCEMENT EDITION

FALL 2023

# Invention

THE MAGAZINE OF THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY

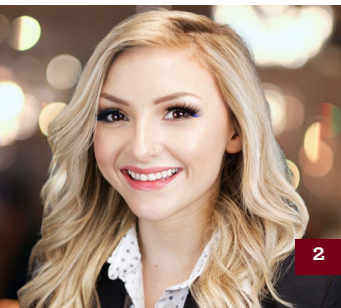


From Gridiron  
to Graduation

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JON RUNYAN, BA '23





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## *Dear Alumni, Students and Friends,*

I am delighted to present the fall 2023 issue of *Invention* magazine. In keeping with our pattern, we are devoting this edition to our Commencement ceremony and a sampling of our extraordinary graduates who share their personal stories on these pages.

Commencement is more than a testament to our graduates' intelligence and tenacity, it is an opportunity for their family members, colleagues, friends, significant others and our staff to share their triumph. Personally, it also provides an opportunity for me to witness the unalloyed pride on their faces as they walk across the stage. It is my immense honor to play a role in their moment.

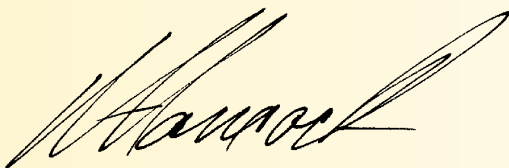
In this issue, we will learn how legendary NFL offensive tackle, Philadelphia Eagles Hall of Famer and former New Jersey congressman, Jon Runyan, BA '23, turned the pandemic shutdown into an opportunity to reignite his degree pursuit. He is now enrolled in our Bachelor's to Master's Program while serving as vice president of Policy and Rules Administration for NFL Football Operations.

We also meet Almira Halilovic, MSM '22, BSBA '21. As a displaced refugee during the Bosnian War, surviving air strikes and ground attacks, she could never have envisioned her future role as a senior vice president for PNC Bank's northeast U.S. market. Heeding her parents' advice to 'always remain humble and positive,' Halilovic marshaled the energy to adapt to her new country, balance expanding responsibilities in her career and oversee a growing family all while fulfilling her academic goals.

Marvella Cephas, DNP '22, is breaking the cycle of child abuse and neglect in her role as the director of Nursing for the Pediatric Emergency Department at the Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital. Her Doctor of Nursing Practice Capstone project converted her scholarly immersion into action resulting in an evidence-based tool to help fellow hospital staff quickly and objectively identify, screen and assess juvenile patients who may be at risk.

And there are so many more stories. Additional ones are told on these pages and others fill each and every seat at the arena. As we celebrate these remarkable graduates, I am reminded of the profound impact that education and determination can have on defining lives. These stories not only highlight personal achievement but also the boundless potential that the TESU community fosters. With each Commencement, we reaffirm our dedication to empowering individuals to reach new heights and create lasting change.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *Invention*,



Merodie A. Hancock, PhD  
*President*







# Pursuing Education to Make a Difference

## ❖ Amberlin Dupre, BA '23

### TESU Graduate Garners ACE/Sophia Learning Student of the Year

Amberlin Dupre's motivation to pursue her degree stemmed from a desire to make a difference for others and rise to a new level of adaptability herself.

While struggling with mental health challenges in high school, Dupre recognized that obtaining a college degree would open doors to a career where she could help individuals facing similar struggles.

Thomas Edison State University stood out during her search because of its willingness to recognize college-

level learning that occurs outside the traditional classroom. She immediately recognized the ability to earn American Council on Education (ACE) credits as an essential component to her success. Once enrolled, she thrived, earning a 4.0 grade-point average, all while juggling a full-time job and family responsibilities as well as health and personal challenges.

"The availability of online classes and alternative credits revolutionized my ability to learn in a way that my brain craved," said the 2023 Bachelor of Arts

(BA) degree graduate. "Earning ACE-approved credits saved me thousands of dollars and allowed me to graduate two years earlier than anticipated."

Dupre's academic accomplishment garnered her recognition as one of the 2022 ACE/Sophia Learning Students of the Year. This prestigious award is presented annually to two individuals who have benefited academically or professionally from the use of ACE credit recommendations for workforce or military training.



Early on, she also made it an objective to earn her degree while remaining debt free.

“By utilizing ACE credits for CLEP exams and *Study.com* courses, I was able to earn 75 credits at significantly lower cost. It helped me build momentum, and I was able to graduate two years earlier than anticipated. While completing my degree, I juggled a full-time job, family, studying and health issues. I realized that life doesn’t stop just because you’re in school, and I had to embrace a new level of adaptability.”

She commends the University’s ability to aggregate outside credits and its expeditious degree audit process, which provided a clear path to graduation. From possessing a GED to completing her BA degree in Psychology in less than two years, Dupre’s transformation is a testament to her perseverance.

“It’s important for all of us to recognize and appreciate that there are diverse pathways to learning. For people that are not able to thrive in a traditional learning environment, like me, there are alternatives – I hope to inspire others and increase awareness of all the resources and support that is out there, so anyone who desires an education has it as an option.”

As an exclusively online student, Dupre adapted to the challenges of independent learning and made it a priority to leverage every available resource at her disposal. She expressed her appreciation for the flexibility and support the University provides to adult learners. Dupre, who also highlighted TESU’s peer review inbox where she received excellent feedback that helped her improve as a writer and student, counseled, “If I had one piece of advice for other students, it is to take advantage of this invaluable resource!”

Another significant factor in Dupre’s

successful completion of her degree was the Charlotte W. Newcomb Foundation Scholarship she received from TESU. This timely support significantly alleviated her financial burden and further enabled her to achieve her goal to graduate debt free.

In her professional career, Dupre manages and oversees the finance department for Family Physicians Inquiries Network (FPIN), a nonprofit medical society. Her role entails coordinating accounts payable and receivable, government contracts, general operations, and expense tracking and travel. Dupre’s TESU degree has already propelled her career forward, as she was recently promoted from finance/operations coordinator to director of Finance. She expresses deep appreciation for her employer’s commitment to her professional development and support of her educational goals.

Outside of her academic and professional commitments, Dupre actively contributes to her community. She has supported individuals with dementia at a local senior living community and has raised funds for St. Jude’s Hospital by participating in a half marathon. Beyond her community service, she engages in mindfulness practices, starting her day with 15 minutes of meditation and a game or two of online chess. She also finds solace in painting, gardening and indulging in Korean skincare products.

Born and raised in San Diego, Calif., Dupre noted the Midwest truly is special and that she loves her life in Columbia, Mo.

“I am so blessed to have a family that has been so supportive of all my goals and pursuits. My mom, LuShawna, is my best friend, biggest fan and fearless mentor. My husband, Ben; two dogs, Janice



Amberlin Dupre finds solace in painting (top) and celebrates her graduation with her husband, Ben.

and Gerard, who I call my kids; and my sibling, Justin, are my favorite people on Earth. They are laughter, spice and the right amount of crazy. Without them, I’d probably be saner, but significantly less happy, entertained and grounded.”

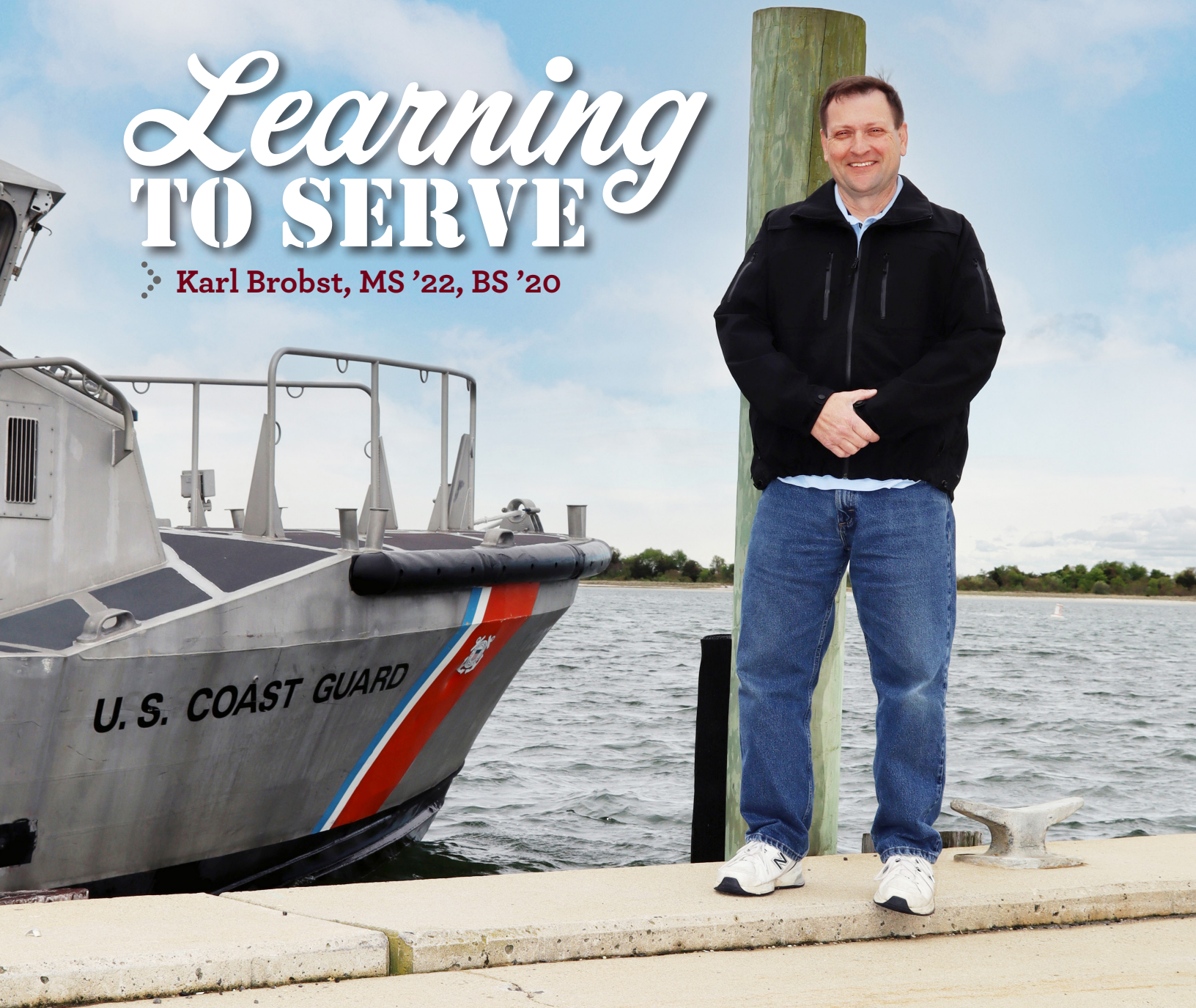
To learn more about the Heavin School of Arts, Science, and Technology, visit [tesu.edu/heavin](https://tesu.edu/heavin).





# Learning TO SERVE

❖ Karl Brobst, MS '22, BS '20



With plenty of hands-on experience, Karl Brobst added related theories, history and legal requirements to his resume with a TESU degree.

Across his 40-year career, Karl Brobst has restored safety in the most perilous situations. Through both the U.S. Coast Guard and the New Jersey State Police, Brobst has contributed to incident management and emergency response connected with military outloads, search and rescue cases, subsurface recovery operations, oil spills, aircraft crashes, floods, terrorist attacks – including those on the World Trade Center – and

hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Wilma, Sandy and Maria.

Now, as an adjunct instructor at Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX), Brobst teaches public safety leaders what he knows. It's a vast body of knowledge, yet he's always looking to accumulate more.

"Combining new knowledge and insight into terrorism with my experience would

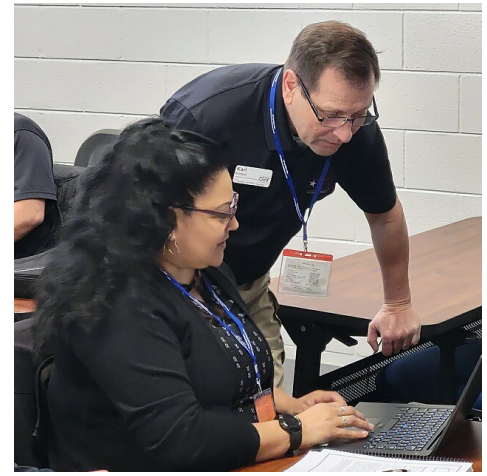
allow me to provide my students with a fuller, richer experience in the classroom and during exercises," he noted.

Those aspirations brought him to TESU's John S. Watson School of Public Service, where he earned a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in Homeland Security and Emergency Management in 2020 and his Master of Science (MS) degree in Homeland Security in December 2022. He also earned graduate certificates in





Brobst accompanies U.S. Coast Guard officers during a spring 2023 patrol off of Brigantine, N.J.



Brobst training first responders at FEMA's Center for Domestic Preparedness in Anniston, Ala.

counterterrorism and homeland security that he said will give him an advantage when he's ready to pursue his PhD.

TEEX, where Brobst has been teaching since March 2022, provides training in homeland security, emergency operations, incident command, cybersecurity and infrastructure security. The program aimed at saving lives worldwide is part of the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium and provides Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)-funded training through the National Emergency Response and Recovery Training Center.

On the job, Brobst works with universities and professional sports franchises, where he uses classroom discussion, group activities and practical exercises to acquaint first responders, government officials, members of the sporting and entertainment industries, and volunteer organizations with best practices for emergency response.

Before he joined TEEX, Brobst spent three years as security chief for the Battleship New Jersey. He has also volunteered his skills since 2018, serving pro bono as emergency management director for his New Jersey hometown, Eagleswood Township.

"I served the New Jersey State Police from 1987 to 2017, retiring as a sergeant first class. While there, I leveraged my affiliation with the U.S. Coast Guard, where I served on active and reserve duty between 1985 and 2015 and retired as a master chief boatswain's mate (BMCM)," he said.

In addition to becoming a sergeant in the state police squad responsible for

subsurface detection and recovery, he formed interagency task forces and training programs that benefitted both agencies, earning numerous awards and commendations along the way.

"I learned the hands-on, practical aspects of emergency management, but realized I lacked an understanding of the related theories, history and legal requirements," Brobst said. "Even though I completed 200 courses concerning emergency management offered by FEMA, TEEX, the Coast Guard, the Navy and the Marines, I believed the attainment of a degree would address any deficiencies in formal training and provide me with a more robust resume and ability to serve during an incident."

It was during a deployment in 2010 that Brobst learned of TESU and began taking courses co-sponsored by the University and Coast Guard Sector Delaware Bay. Held in Philadelphia, he said, the classes "allowed for in-person instruction to supplement the program's online component."

When Brobst pursued his undergraduate degree, he was thrilled that TESU gave him credit for the government and military courses he had already completed.

"Those classes satisfied all my elective requirements and three of my core courses," he noted.

Brobst chose TESU for its Bachelor's to Master's Program, which enables undergraduates to earn up to 12 graduate-level credits that they can apply to both their bachelor's and master's degree programs at the undergraduate tuition rate.

"Using the Bachelor's to Master's Program is extremely rewarding," he said, "as it allows students to save time and money while reducing the workload through the reduction in classes."

Brobst remains very impressed with TESU, saying its staff, from the dean to mentors and advisors, "function as a high-performing sports team. Each level interacted with me during my time at TESU, and each focused on making me better, allowing me to perform at levels higher than I imagined," he said.

He found that students he interacted with in both programs contributed to his experience.

"I encountered many people with differing points of view," he recalled. "While some conflicted with my stance on topics, engaging in civil dialogue allowed me to explore their beliefs. Sometimes I truly appreciated their point of view and amended mine; other times the encounter solidified my beliefs."

Brobst was inducted into the School's Order of the Sword & Shield National Honor Society in 2019.

"Knowing where to get answers and find assistance is imperative for success," he said. "The Sword & Shield National Honor Society is an excellent means to network with other professionals."

Outside of TESU's student-centric support structure, Brobst credits his family for helping him earn his degrees. "They tolerated me spending hours on my assignments, sacrificing time they would've otherwise had with me," he said.

To learn more about the programs available in the John S. Watson School of Public Service, visit [tesu.edu/watson](https://tesu.edu/watson).



# UNLEASHING POTENTIAL

## ❖ Gerard Harville, MS '23, BA '20

When Gerard Harville was seeking college credits for his military training, his experience with TESU did not turn out as predicted.

While searching for a university that fit his professional objectives in 2018, one criterion kept floating to the top of Gerard Harville's list: receiving credit for his military training.

At the time, Harville was working as a general manager for Planet Fitness and spending one weekend a month performing intelligence and technology work for the New Jersey Air National Guard at McGuire Air Force Base.

"I got to the point where I had to choose between doing intel full time or being a general manager. After doing some research, I chose intel."

That choice led Harville to a full-time position as an intelligence analyst with the U.S. Air Force, and the opportunity to utilize his previously earned associate degrees — one in digital communication and media from Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey and another in intelligence studies and technology from the Community College of the Air Force. He had also accrued college credit equivalents for his military training.

Those sources provided valuable steppingstones, and he recognized TESU as the institution that would bring all the elements together.

"I wanted to focus on a discipline, but I didn't want to start from scratch," noted Harville. "I was looking for schools in New Jersey that provided tuition assistance and worked best with my professional schedule. I was already familiar with Thomas Edison as it was recognized for its military friendliness by the Air National Guard."



On TESU's website, he found program information, details about transferring credits and a career evaluation tool. By entering the courses he had already taken, Harville was able to determine a clear path forward. What surprised him, however, were the results. The search indicated that a liberal arts track to a bachelor's degree would make the best use of his existing credits.

"I had been considering cybersecurity, but still I wasn't 100 percent sure of the pathway to take," he said.

The University applied 80 of the credits Harville previously earned to the 120 needed for a bachelor's degree, and, in a "testing the waters move," he decided to fill one of his program requirements by taking a cybersecurity course.

"I felt that If I did well in that course, I would just keep going," said Harville.

He was successful and eventually earned his 15-credit Graduate Certificate in Cybersecurity at the same time he was completing his BA degree in Liberal Studies in 2020. Soon after, he enrolled in the Master of Science (MS) degree in Cybersecurity degree program, which he completed in March 2023.

He said that throughout, TESU's online-course format fit his objectives and work schedule.

"What I appreciated about TESU is the online format," he said. "I travel for work — whether it's for training courses or to temporary duty locations. With TESU's online course delivery, I was able to maneuver through everything."

However, he noted that online did not always equate to 'easy.'

"Everything was a very smooth transition, from the time I applied to TESU to earning my degrees, but my courses were no walk in the park," he reflected. "Learning online was somewhat new to me and every course mentor was different, so their requirements varied. It helped that I always made it a point to connect with them to obtain feedback on what they were specifically looking for in our assignments."

Today, Harville continues his work as an intelligence analyst with the U.S. Air Force. His daily tasks involve researching domestic and international current events and then preparing and presenting briefs to leadership. He credits his TESU coursework and instructors with giving him not only a solid framework in research techniques and cybersecurity disciplines but also a forward-looking mindset.

"With cybersecurity, what you learn today might not be relevant tomorrow," he observed. "Technology is always evolving. There's always a new trend or a new vulnerability that you have to be aware of and learn about immediately."

During his degree pursuit, he said that family members kept him focused. He shares a special bond with his father, Herrod Harville, and his girlfriend, Sydney Normil, who were a constant source of encouragement. His mentors in the Air National Guard also played an important role.

"When it comes to life, it's like building blocks, and I don't want to make a mistake and have to start over. I want to keep building on my education and career milestones. I'm still in the process, and I want to keep moving and continue to construct my life into something special."

To learn more about the programs in the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, visit [tesu.edu/heavin](https://tesu.edu/heavin). To learn more about the School's graduate certificate programs in cybersecurity, visit [tesu.edu/ast/programs/grad-certificates](https://tesu.edu/ast/programs/grad-certificates).



Harville at TESU's 2023 Commencement ceremony. (top)  
A recent duty assignment with the Air National Guard offered Harville the opportunity to visit Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul, South Korea. (bottom)





# Loss & Love

## ❖ Kayla Heine, BSN '22

**Kayla Heine's personal loss was transformed into a love for patient care.**

Once she witnessed the positive influence nurses wield beyond bedside care, Kayla Heine became determined to follow the same path.

"Several years ago, my grandfather passed away in a neuroscience intensive care unit from West Nile virus. The guidance, compassion, support and expertise provided by his nurses got us through each day," recalled Heine, a graduate of the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Profession's Accelerated BSN Program. "I realized how important nurses are in educating and communicating with families, and I began to imagine becoming one myself."

She had already earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Smith College in Northampton, Mass., with a minor in Chinese language and literature before she began looking for a pre-licensure nursing program that fit her expanding objectives. Now a cardiac telemetry nurse for Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Browns Mills, N.J., Heine had enrolled in TESU's 15-month program and earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree in December 2022 after passing the NCLEX-RN exam.

"I was attracted to the program because of its affordability and timeframe. The small class size and convenient location also drew me in," she noted.

She credits the program's nurse educators for providing her with a strong foundation in clinical practice, patient care and ethical decision-making and valued the hands-on experience she gathered.

"Although I sometimes shuddered when I looked at the clinicals and patient sim labs (simulation laboratories) on my schedule, those were the times I learned the most," Heine said.

She also discovered that study groups helped to solidify what she was learning at a rapid pace.

"I was a member of a study group for most of the program and





Heine and fellow Accelerated BSN Program cohort members during their August 2022 Pinning Ceremony at TESU.



that was a great way to review what we learned in class or what we had to learn independently,” said Heine. “We would assign each member a topic to teach at the next meeting, and I enjoyed finding new ways to present my topic, whether that was through online videos, case studies, quizzes or PowerPoint presentations. The program is rigorous, but you’re never alone and there is ample support. Plus, the small class size allows you to form closer bonds with fellow students and support each other throughout.”

The aspect of the program that resonated for her the most was her on-ground clinical interactions in the Trenton community.

“The variety and quality of the local clinical experiences resonated with me,” said Heine, who often used white boards and daily planners to keep track of her assignments. “I was grateful for the opportunity to participate in the EMS Ride-Along Program, shadow staff in a residential behavioral facility, observe school nurses and witness labor and deliveries. I recommend that prospective students find ways to scale back other commitments and dedicate the same, and sometimes more, amount of time to

this program that you would a full-time job.”

During her Accelerated BSN Program Pinning Ceremony in December, Heine received the School’s Christine M. Rosner Award for Clinical Excellence and was inducted into the Upsilon Rho Honor Society.

“I arrived at clinicals each day buzzing with excitement for what I was about to learn,” she said. “My favorite part of nursing is empowering my patients to be involved in their care by educating them and advocating for them. At the end of the day, I feel I’ve made a difference if I have done that.”

Heine passed the NCLEX-RN exam on her first try in October 2022.

“The program prepares pre-licensure nurses for the NCLEX, but beyond that it prepared me to be a safe nurse. I found the ATI-NCLEX prep live review sessions very helpful in preparing me for the test. I also learned how to ‘read’ the questions – it is actually more difficult than it sounds – and how to evaluate the answers.”

Deborah Heart and Lung Center is an 89-bed teaching hospital specializing

in the diagnosis and treatment of congenital and acquired heart, lung and vascular diseases in adults and it provides outpatient cardiology services for children.

“It is a tertiary care facility, so we see patients who are often in dire need of medical care. I care for post-open heart surgery patients, COVID patients and patients with chronic illnesses like COPD and severe heart failure,” she said. “I have seen the toll that illnesses take, and I plan to pursue palliative care to better support these patients and their families as they navigate complex diseases and difficult prognoses. My goal is to become a palliative care nurse practitioner.”

Away from the hospital floor, Heine said she loves reading, thrifting and spending time outside with her two pit bull mixes, Berkeley and Zelda. With her BSN degree behind her, she is looking forward to traveling and has several trips planned this year.

To learn more about the programs available in the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions, visit [tesu.edu/nursing](https://tesu.edu/nursing).





# Valuing *Education* for the *Greater Good*

❖ **Daniel Catlin, BSBA '22**

**Daniel Catlin knows the merits of a career-focused partnership.**

Daniel Catlin's passion for learning, combined with his dedication to his family, has fueled him through his academic and professional journey.

When Catlin began considering going back to school, he knew that he needed

a program that would accommodate his full-time job and his responsibilities as a husband and father. His wife suggested he investigate Thomas Edison State University, and he quickly found that it was the perfect fit.

"I was able to finish my undergraduate degree completely online, which was especially important to me since I work full time and have a family," explained Catlin, who earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA)



degree. “The convenience of online learning was great, and certainly made working toward a degree far more manageable than it would have been had I needed to attend class in person.”

Not only was the online format convenient for him, but he found that TESU’s broad array of course offerings allowed him to pursue subjects that interested him.

“There were numerous course options available to fulfill the degree requirements so I could take classes on

“I am anticipating that my BSBA degree – and, subsequently, my MBA in Data Analytics, once I complete the program – will open additional career opportunities for me, specifically in management or leadership roles,” said Catlin, who added that “it was a welcome surprise to find out that my employer is a Corporate Choice partner with TESU.”

Senior Director Kelli Parlante-Givas, Office of Strategic Partnerships at Thomas Edison State University, explained that through a special partnership between Bright Horizons/

will allow Catlin to complete his MBA in less time than traditional master’s programs, because he earned some of his graduate credits while pursuing his undergraduate degree.

“The Bachelor’s to Master’s Program allows me to effectively work on two degrees at once and will significantly reduce the time I’ll need to complete my MBA,” he explained.

But Catlin’s accomplishments aren’t limited to his current academic and professional successes. In a previous role, he was the primary project manager in the creation of a “first-of-its-kind” specialty pharmacy program between his organization and a major pharmaceutical client.

“It was the most complicated project I have worked on to date, and its launch was a great success,” he recalled.

Catlin lives in Sparta, N.J., with his wife, Kelly, and their child. “My family is the most important thing to me,” he affirmed. Additionally, Catlin enjoys watching soccer, sci-fi and fantasy movies and, occasionally, playing golf. He also takes the time to give back to his community, volunteering on the board of directors for a local youth soccer organization.

As for his aspirations for the future, Catlin is pragmatic but hopeful.

“I’d like to continue to grow in my career, but I also want to continue to be a good husband and father,” he said.

To learn more about the BSBA and MBA programs, please visit the School of Business and Management at [tesu.edu/business](https://tesu.edu/business). To learn more about the Bachelor’s to Master Program, visit [tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program](https://tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program).

**“I WAS ABLE TO FINISH MY UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE COMPLETELY ONLINE, WHICH WAS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT TO ME SINCE I WORK FULL TIME AND HAVE A FAMILY.”**

Daniel Catlin

subjects that piqued my interest,” he noted. “All of my course mentors and professors were incredibly helpful and always made themselves available to us. The online portal was easy to use and pretty intuitive, even for someone who was new to online learning, as I was.”

His tenacity paid off when he received his BSBA degree in December. Currently employed at Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, Inc., as a Sample Operations senior specialist, he is primarily responsible for working with the biotechnology company’s marketing and sales leadership focusing on its drug sampling program. In this role, Catlin often leverages his written communication, customer service, data analysis and critical-thinking skills. According to its website, Regeneron Pharmaceuticals is a leading biotechnology company that invents, develops and commercializes medicines for people with serious diseases. Regeneron’s drug discovery success has led to numerous FDA-approved treatments and product candidates in development. Its medicines are designed to help patients with eye diseases, allergic and inflammatory diseases, cancer, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, pain, hematologic conditions, infectious diseases and rare diseases.

EdAssist and TESU, the University is providing a quality and, for most students, a debt-free pathway to degree and certificate programs at TESU. The partnership structure offers an advantage to both employers and employees. Participating employers benefit from an engaged and skilled workforce, improved retention rates and a positive employer brand, while their employees have access to educational opportunities that can advance their careers and increase their earning potential.

“The partnership program provides a career-focused curriculum offered completely online at Thomas Edison State University,” she added. “We are thrilled to have a long-standing seven-year partnership with Bright Horizons/EdAssist. Daniel was able to take full advantage of the program and its structure. TESU continues to work to enhance and meet the needs of its students through programs such as this.”

Looking to do just that, Catlin is continuing his academic journey by taking advantage of TESU’s Bachelor’s to Master’s Program, which enables undergraduate students to receive up to 12 graduate-level credits that can be applied to both the bachelor’s and master’s degree programs at the undergraduate tuition rate. The program





Breaking  
the  
Cycle





## Marvella Cephas, DNP '22

### Advocating for the most vulnerable patients is at the heart of Dr. Marvella Cephas' mission.

Marvella Cephas, DNP, RN, CEN, NEA-BC, is ensuring that children admitted to her hospital's emergency department presenting with symptoms of abuse or neglect receive the screening they deserve.

"Caring for abused children has impacted my life and career in numerous ways, and I will continue to influence the process of identifying children who are at risk," noted Cephas, the director of Nursing for the Pediatric Emergency Department at Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J.

Her culminating Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) project connected with this effort, and, in turn, she has converted that scholarly immersion into action. Cephas is now advocating for the implementation of her evidence-based tool that will help hospital personnel objectively identify, screen and assess children at risk sooner. Utilized during the patient intake process, the new resource will potentially be integrated with patients' electronic medical records across 13 hospitals in the healthcare system.

"Often children present for care with an injury related to abuse that emergency healthcare providers sometimes miss. This leaves them at risk for further injury and even death. I have witnessed the consequences of this in my career, from an acute event to the lifelong pathological conditions that result."

In her daily role, Cephas serves as the operational leader responsible for the overall quality and safety of the Pediatric Emergency Department.

"I set the tone in nursing practice and the standards of care for our patients," noted the December 2022 graduate. "I manage quality improvements that focus on patient throughput, patient experience and quality care metrics. I also serve as a professional mentor to the nurse manager team, helping them to add to their leadership tool kits."

Cephas has been focused on the care of children since the start of her career as a pediatric nurse. Preceding her current role, she was the assistant nursing director of the Pediatric Emergency Department at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. Before that, she held a succession of nurse leadership roles in the Emergency Department, Same Day Surgery Unit, Post-Anesthesia Care Unit and the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, Philadelphia, Pa.

Along the way, she earned Certified Emergency Nurse (CEN) and Nurse Executive Advanced Board Certification (NEA-BC) through the American Nurses Credentialing Center. Cephas earned her Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) in

A school nurse originally served as an inspiration for Cephas to consider the profession for herself.

"As a high school student, I worked in the nursing office and had the privilege of witnessing a school nurse respond to a medical emergency," she recalled. "She was swift, kind and calm while being fully in charge of the situation. That inspired me to consider nursing as a career."

When she was considering DNP programs in which to enroll, the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions program stood out.

"The program was affordable and local," said the Columbus, N.J., resident. "The interview process was vigorous, and I

**"FRONTLINE LEADERS IN HEALTHCARE TEND TO FOCUS ON THEIR SPECIFIC UNITS – I NOW SEE THINGS FROM A SYSTEMS-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE WITH ATTENTION TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT, THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE AND FISCAL ADMINISTRATION."**

Dr. Marvella Cephas

nurse leadership from Drexel University, Pa., and her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) from The College of New Jersey. She is also the president-elect for the New Jersey Emergency Nurses Association (NJENA) and will be serving in that capacity beginning in 2024. A member of the association for more than 30 years, she said that she is proud to be the first nurse of color to serve as its president.

Cephas' doctoral degree has already intersected with her career in rewarding ways.

"Frontline leaders in healthcare tend to focus on their specific units – I now see things from a systems-level perspective with attention to quality improvement, the patient experience and fiscal administration," she said. "My DNP degree has broadened my interest in research, and I now view clinical inquiries as opportunities to engage in projects that have the potential to lead to publishable works. It has also allowed me to mentor DNP students in their scholarly journey, imparting my experience to help them reach their full potential."

loved that Dr. (Ana Maria) Catanzaro was extremely detailed in the expectation and the rigor required to accomplish the journey."

Two TESU alums – one of them a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree student and the other a family matriarch – made sure she never lost sight of her goals.

"My friend Julie McGuire, RN, MSN, CEN, has been a huge supporter in my nursing career. She is a TESU Bachelor of Science in Nursing and an MSN program alum. She has been exceptionally supportive, and, whenever I considered giving up, she urged me on. My mother, Lavana Cephas (AA '19), has always been a strong influence in my life, keeping me focused on success in whatever endeavors I chose. As a woman of color, she taught me to be strong and stand on my own."

To learn more about the programs in the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions, visit [tesu.edu/nursing](https://tesu.edu/nursing). To read Lavana Cephas' story, see the spring 2020 issue of *Invention* magazine [tesu.edu/current-students/invention](https://tesu.edu/current-students/invention).





# PROFESSIONAL BOUT

John Magda, BS '23, AAS '21

**A constant cycle of goal setting, persevering and rallying prepared John Magda for anything.**

John Magda began his career as a maintenance technician at a New Jersey shopping mall. Through an affinity for

learning, he now oversees his company's engineering initiatives across three states. But before that career came to fruition, he had to hang up his gloves.

As a professional middle-weight boxer, Magda had a record of 11 wins and 1 loss in his weight class. During his career as an amateur boxer, the Rutherford, N.J., native was ranked 2nd in the country, won numerous New Jersey titles and

competed as a member of the United States National Boxing Team.

"When my boxing career ended, I took what I learned from the sport, combined it with my work ethic and applied it to my professional career. I was successful in my boxing career because I trained 7 days a week, ran further, worked harder and out-hustled my competition. I was never the most skilled fighter, I just



worked harder at it. The key is to always make the effort and find meaning in what you do,” Magda said.

That continuous cycle of training, goal setting, persevering, rallying and refining his boxing acumen from the time he was 14 years old, prepared him for the workforce.

Magda began attending TESU in 2019 to earn his Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in Electrical-Mechanical Systems and Maintenance. At the time, he was working as an operating engineer in a data center for a large financial institution.

“Our team maintained the power and cooling systems in the center. My work schedule was 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday,” he noted. “Electrical and mechanical systems and maintenance were my responsibilities, and I believed that earning a related associate degree would be immediately beneficial. The flexibility of the TESU program allowed me to study in the morning and go to work at night.”

The education Magda received supplemented his on-the-job experience and enabled him to gain an in-depth understanding of the many technical systems that are used in data centers and commercial buildings around the world.

“In an era where the industry trend is decarbonization through electrification, the solid electrical principles that I learned as a TESU student laid the foundation for a useful skillset in a field very much in need of talent,” he noted.

Decarbonization through electrification refers to the process of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by transitioning from fossil fuel-based energy sources to cleaner, low-carbon electricity. The approach minimizes the reliance on fossil fuels while promoting renewable energy sources and has become broadly embraced in transportation, industry and building design.

Today, as an engineering manager with UG2, Magda oversees the operations of the company’s various accounts in the tri-state area. UG2’s more than 1,200 employees provide customized facilities solutions for the commercial, corporate, education, retail, public venue, healthcare, life science and industrial markets. Facilities services encompass janitorial service, operations and maintenance.

“My role is to ensure that we operate and maintain the client’s facility to the UG2 standard. This means overseeing the safety programs, maintenance schedules, commissioning of new equipment, testing

of critical infrastructure, providing technical support as needed and more,” he noted.

Magda said he was attracted to TESU’s in-state tuition rate and the flexibility of online courses. Once he fell into a rhythm with his courses, degree completion quickly appeared on the horizon.

“I would recommend TESU to anyone. Being able to work in a field while pursuing a relevant degree program provided me with a valuable education,” he said. “I was able to work full time while being enrolled in 15 credits during multiple terms per year. The key to success is to find a routine that works for you.”

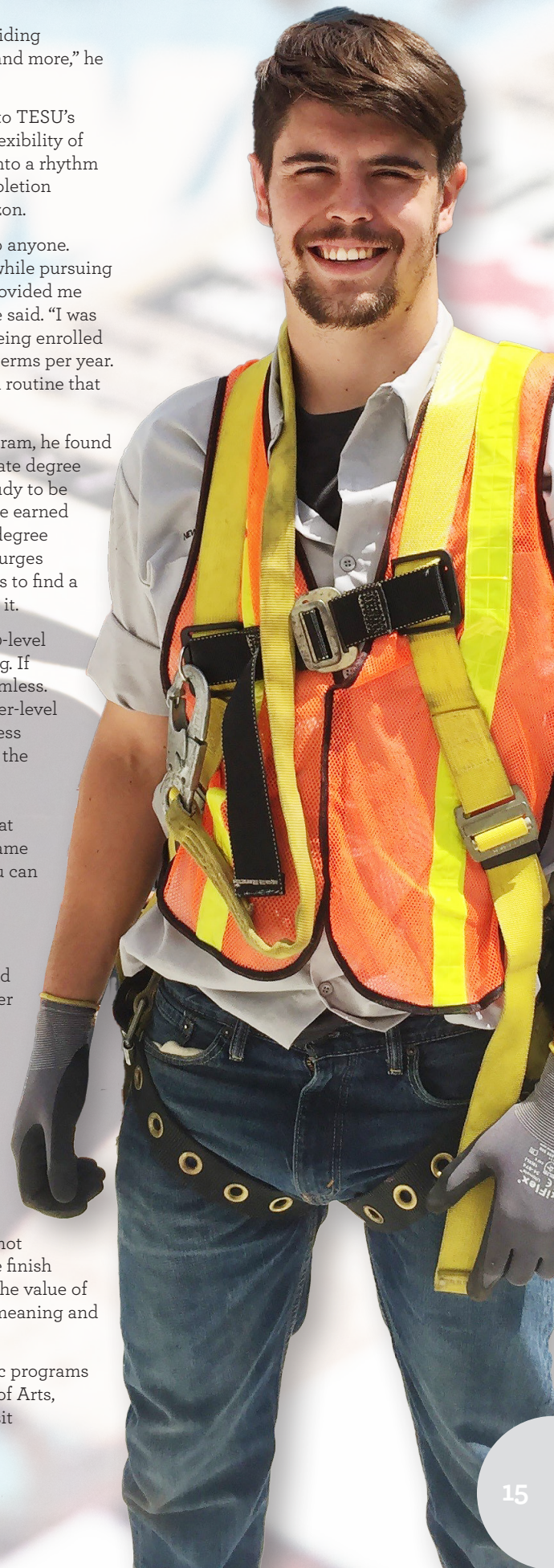
Despite the rigors of the program, he found the transition from his associate degree courses to bachelor’s-level study to be an easy one. In March 2023, he earned his Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in Electrical Technology and urges others with similar aspirations to find a comfortable pace and stick to it.

“I didn’t find the 300- and 400-level classes to be more challenging. If anything, it became more seamless. By the time I was taking higher-level classes I had refined my process and was well acquainted with the coursework,” he noted. “I had become so accustomed to the structure and expectations that completing assignments became easier. If you commit to it, you can do it.”

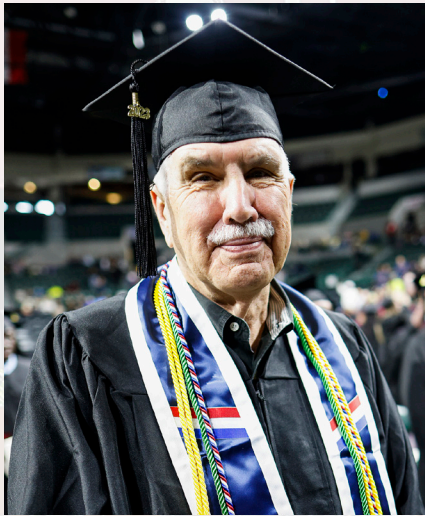
Magda found a way to focus on his academic goals while shouldering a full-time job and his responsibilities to daughter Payton. He is convinced that others can do the same.

“Earning a degree in a field in which you are actively working can be extremely rewarding,” he said. “It provides meaning to concepts you encounter every day. I also recommend that newly enrolled students not become overly focused on the finish line. Instead, concentrate on the value of the course material and find meaning and real-world application for it.”

To learn more about academic programs offered in the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, visit [tesu.edu/ast](https://tesu.edu/ast).

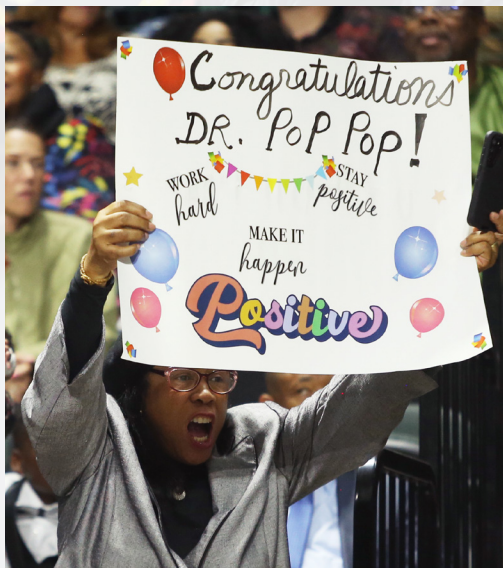






# 1,849 Pathways to Success

President Merodie A. Hancock celebrated this year's graduates for taking the path less travelled, while honored speakers concurred that TESU grads' journeys are rarely linear. But these unique pathways have succeeded in lifting communities, boosting professions, enriching the workforce and reducing disparities. Congratulations to this year's 1,849 graduates for their tenacity, scholarship and unwavering focus on their destinations.











# Fulfilling a Dream

✦ **Almira Halilovic, MSM '22, BSBA '21**

As a Bosnian refugee, Almira Halilovic could have never imagined her fate in the U.S.





As a 10-year-old, Almira Halilovic aspired to become the first in her family to finish college. But due to tragedy — and then to good fortune — those plans had to wait.

By the time Halilovic, then Almira Mehic, turned 11, her native Bosnia was at war, and she and her family became refugees along with more than 2 million others who had to flee their homes. She and her twin brother and mother sheltered with friends in Croatia and worried continuously about her older sister and father who were unable to escape with them.

“We lived through air strikes and ground attacks,” Halilovic said. “We got very little sleep due to hiding, running or wondering if that day was going to be our last.”

The three eventually traveled to an American Red Cross center in Croatia’s capital, Zagreb. Seeking help from an uncle living in Germany, they hid in a local bus station for several days until he arrived to accompany them. Germany wasn’t accepting refugees, but a sympathetic bus driver pretended she and her brother were his children and hid their mother in the back of the vehicle or the luggage compartment during the journey.

Once in Germany, the trio worked in a hotel and lived in a windowless house without running water. The family was finally reunited after Halilovic’s father fled Bosnia in a body cast, pretending to be a wounded soldier, while her sister disguised herself as a traveling nurse. By then, Germany had opened its borders, so the family was officially housed in a succession of facilities that included a former prison boat. She and her siblings began school and learned to speak German.

“Overnight, I became a parent to my mom and dad,” Halilovic said. “I had to translate everything and be there for them as they navigated the heartache of losing everything they had built in their former lives.”

In 1995, the family was welcomed into the United States. They settled in Budd Lake, N.J., and Halilovic, just shy of 14, joined the local workforce.

“I wanted to do as much as possible to provide for myself so my parents wouldn’t have to work multiple jobs,” said Halilovic, who worked as a house cleaner, a snow shoveler and in a car wash, a supermarket and a factory.

“My parents did an exceptional job of making sure we stayed humble and positive and counted our blessings because there were a lot of people who had it worse than us,” she said.

While working odd jobs, Halilovic learned to speak English, graduated from Mount Olive High School and began pursuing an associate degree in business at the County College of Morris, N.J. After a chance meeting with a Commerce Bank recruiter, she was hired immediately as a customer service representative and made a quick career ascent in the industry. She put her college education on hold when she was named an assistant branch manager — the company’s youngest at age 20. Three years later, Halilovic became a branch manager at PNC Bank and, later, a sales and service support manager and a senior vice president overseeing more than 20 branches. Today, as a senior vice president in the Northeast Market, she oversees the sales and customer/employee experience across PNC Bank’s 130 branches.

“I was willing to learn everything on the job, for a simple reason: To earn my right to come back tomorrow,” Halilovic noted. “I put my education off because everything else was a priority. But as I moved up the corporate ladder, I realized that education was a huge void in my life.”

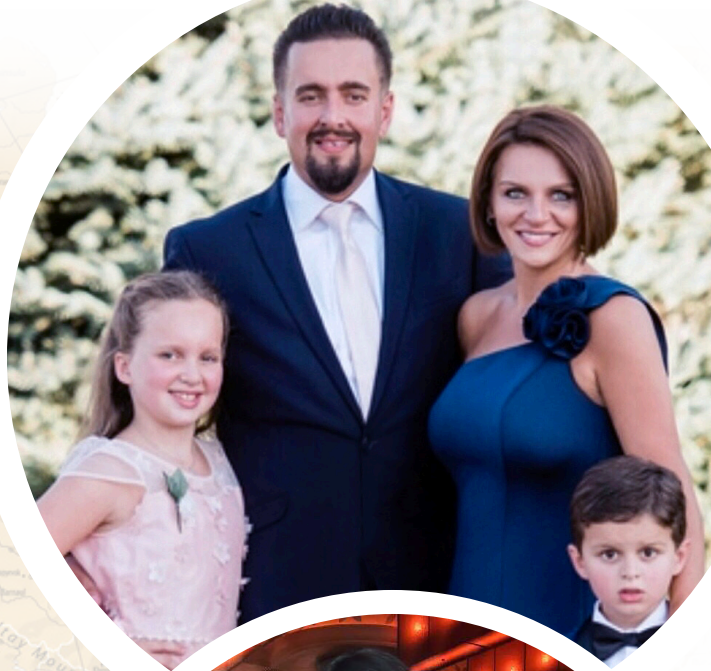
It was a childhood friend, Zlata Stankovic-Ramirez, who suggested that Halilovic consider returning to college, reminding her that it was never too late. Further incentive came from her employer, who stepped up to fund her education. In 2021, Halilovic — now a married mother of two — earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) from TESU. In December 2022, she earned her Master of Science (MS) degree in Management from the University.

“Work fulfills me, but nothing else would satisfy the 10-year-old girl inside who dreamed of paving the way for

others. I wanted to show everyone what is possible, set an example for my children and make my parents proud,” she noted. “TESU was the perfect fit. Whenever I needed help or support, everyone was more than welcoming and accommodating to my needs.”

Halilovic now looks forward to embarking on her Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree at TESU in January 2024. She credits her husband, Eddie Halilovic, and his parents for their daily support and added that her children, Malia, 13, and Dino, 10, inspire her every day to be the best version of herself.

For more information on the programs available in the School of Business and Management, visit [tesu.edu/business](https://tesu.edu/business).





# Triumph *over* Tragedy

❖ **Gwen Karro, BSHS '22**

Gwen Karro converted grief over losing her daughter into personal resolve.





Born and raised in Trenton, N.J., Gwen Karro was no stranger to Thomas Edison State University. Having passed by the institution countless times, she always felt a sense of familiarity with the campus. Little did she know the institution would someday change her life.

"I had always hoped to continue my education, it wasn't until I turned 42 while working for the state of New Jersey, that I decided to pursue my long-held dream of earning a college degree," said the 2022 Bachelor of Science in Human Services (BSHS) graduate.

Recognizing the importance of higher education for career advancement, Karro embarked on her academic journey in 2009, choosing TESU's online format for its convenience and flexibility.

The pursuit of her degree was not without its challenges. Juggling the responsibilities of a full-time job, a busy household and an 11-year-old child, Karro found herself working on assignments during evenings and weekends. While time management often proved elusive, Karro's commitment to obtaining a bachelor's degree fueled her determination to push on.

"Despite the difficulties, I found solace in the knowledge that my educational pursuits would pave the way for a brighter future," she noted.

Karro's journey took an unexpected turn when tragedy struck in 2011. The loss of her beloved daughter turned her world upside down, leaving her emotionally shattered. She attempted to continue her studies, but the weight of grief became too overwhelming, leading her to pause her educational pursuits in 2013.

"My 21-year-old daughter, Brielle Childs, was a young mother who I lost tragically and suddenly due to gun violence in 2011," Karro lamented. "Brielle was the main reason I came back to college. Her death was the reason I stopped and the motivation behind eventually finishing. This degree is in honor of her as she still shines in my heart every day."

It took several years for Karro to find the strength to return, and in 2020, amidst

the global pandemic, she rekindled her academic ambitions.

Her perseverance paid off as she emerged from her decade-long trek with a well-deserved degree in December 2022. Her staunch determination to



"Her death was the reason I stopped and the motivation behind eventually finishing," said Karro of her daughter Brielle Childs.

succeed and her ability to adapt in the face of adversity propelled her forward.

Reflecting on her experience at TESU, she said, "The unwavering support from the University staff was exceptional. The courses were meticulously structured and focused on achieving specific goals, while the professors showcased not only their expertise but also their approachability and empathy."

Karro is an honoree on the TESU President's List, a distinction bestowed on undergraduate program students who exhibit a commitment to academic excellence during their degree journey.

"One aspect I appreciated was the sense of accountability instilled in me throughout my studies," she reflected. "Embracing the challenges, I had the privilege of engaging with a diverse set of individuals in thought-provoking Discussion Board interactions, which left a lasting impression. Positive feedback from both my peers and professors

fueled my motivation and passion for learning. The professionalism and dedication I encountered at TESU, played a vital role in my success."

Karro takes immense pride in returning to college after eight years and is confident that her degree will open the door to

new career possibilities within the New Jersey Department of Human Services, where she has been employed for more than two decades.

"I started as a temporary employee in clerical support and have held clerical positions for a long time," Karro explained. "I reached my maximum salary for the title of Principal Clerk-Typist. To move up the ladder I needed a degree. My BSHS degree will allow me to apply for positions that were previously out of reach and utilize my experience working with grants."

While Karro's dedication to her studies has been impressive, there is more to her than just academics. She said that she is also a social media influencer who likes to spread joy and laughter through platforms like TikTok.

She has resided in Hamilton, N.J., for the last 15 years with her husband, Anti Karro; who she refers to as a wonderful stepdad to her son, Branden Childs, who is serving in the U.S. Army, and daughter, Kelli Childs, who just graduated from Johnson & Wales University.

A 10-year off-and-on tenure at TESU is a testament to Karro's determination, resilience and commitment to personal growth. Overcoming personal tragedy and the challenges of a busy life, she has emerged triumphant. Reflecting on her perseverance, Karro counseled, "After finishing college, I discovered new strengths and abilities inside myself, and I had clear directions and goals to pursue. You are never too old to complete college and there is always more to learn and grow within our minds. Just know the road will get bumpy and barriers will be put in front of you. You just have to have faith and jump higher."

To learn more about the John S. Watson School of Public Service, visit [tesu.edu/watson](https://tesu.edu/watson).





# BUILDING A FUTURE

## ❖ **Nicholas Phelan, AAS '23**

**Nicholas Phelan's time in the U.S. Marine Corps transformed him from an untested high school student to a leader.**

Nicholas "Nick" Phelan's service to his country and his responsibilities for the welfare of infantry platoons created a career pathway for the Afghanistan War veteran. New Jersey Department of Labor funding and TESU's Professional Learning Review (PLR) process helped amplify those triumphs in pursuit of a degree.

After his honorable discharge in 2013, Phelan joined Carpenters Local 254 in Edison, N.J., with help from Helmets to Hardhats, a nonprofit organization that places veterans in the union building trades. In spring 2023, with credits accepted for his carpenter's apprenticeship training and support from a New Jersey education grant, he earned his Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree in Construction and Facility Support from Thomas Edison State University. The program covered topics from reading blueprints and estimating the scope of projects to ensuring safety.

"There is always room to grow, learn and improve," Phelan observed. "There are many avenues a career in the carpenters' union and construction industry can take, and a degree can open up those opportunities. Though a college education is not essential in my field, a degree has the potential to set me apart."

As a carpenter's apprentice from 2018 through 2022, Phelan worked on jobs including the new terminal





at Newark Liberty International Airport. Now, as a journeyman carpenter often working on jobs commissioned through the U.S. Economic Development Administration, he might spend his day framing a structure, constructing concrete forms or installing trim, doors or insulation. But he most enjoys exterior finish work, taking pride in creating the facades that give buildings their character.

"I love the work I do," Phelan said, "and I find that being part of a union gives me a greater purpose, something I had been missing since I got out of the military."

Phelan was on active duty in the Marine Corps 0311 Infantry from 2008 to 2013 as a rifleman and a fire team leader with a Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team (FAST) platoon. He was initially stationed in Norfolk, Va., with his platoon and later, at the Marine Corps Base Hawaii with the 3rd Battalion 3rd Marines. He served as a patrol leader in the Afghanistan War from 2011 to 2012, and spent time in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; Bahrain; Jordan; Lebanon; Kuwait; and Djibouti.

"The Marine Corps transformed me into the person I am today," Phelan said. "It allowed me to lead from the time I was 18 years old. It not only shaped my sense of responsibility but forced me to consider how my decisions impact others."

After leaving the Marine Corps, Phelan attended Middlesex County Community College (MCCC) from 2013 through 2015, earning 56 credits in liberal arts with a focus on business. He was two classes shy of earning his associate degree.

"My initial plan was to attend a four-year university to earn a degree in accounting," he said. "Unfortunately, at the time – but fortunately in hindsight – I had gotten sidetracked because life got in the way. The transition helped me realize that I did not have a passion for a career in accounting, and I love what I do now."

Phelan said he was thrilled to complete his training through the Eastern Atlantic States Carpenters Technical College program in November 2022. He was equally excited to learn that TESU was willing to partner with the program to put a degree within his reach.

Through its PLR program, TESU awarded Phelan 18 credits for his training with the Eastern Atlantic States Regional

Council of Carpenters. As a result of the PLR and the prerequisites he already completed at MCCC, he only needed two courses to earn the remaining 6 credits at TESU: Critical Information Literacy and a Capstone course.

To make the experience even more accessible, all costs – including Phelan's application, tuition, books and graduation fees – were covered by the NJ PLACE Grant. The New Jersey Department of Labor grants help apprentices complete their associate degrees as part of an initiative to build the state's workforce.

"The support from TESU and the NJ PLACE grant were critical in my decision to complete my degree as soon as I did," Phelan said. "With the financial roadblock of attending school alleviated, I am sure it will encourage others to continue their education."

Phelan enjoyed his time at TESU due to supportive staff members, thought-provoking interactions with classmates in online forums and courses structured to allow him to complete assignments ahead of schedule. That was especially helpful when his last assignment for his final course was due – on May 28, 2023, his wedding day.

"I obviously worked to get the assignment done ahead of that day and submitted it early," he noted.

Phelan gives his wife, Kristen Phelan, credit for "being the most supportive person throughout this process," even though it meant missing time together on the weekends to watch movies, travel and see New York Rangers games.

"She understood that it was for a greater purpose," he said, "and ultimately for a greater future."

To learn more about programs available in the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, visit [tesu.edu/ast](https://tesu.edu/ast).



U.S. Marine Corps Cpl. Nicholas Phelan (top) and (bottom) during his May 2023 wedding.





# EMPOWERING TRANSFORMATION

❖ **Sugeily Rodriguez, DBA '23**

How TESU's DBA Degree Program is Shaping Scholars and Entrepreneurs

It was during the home stretch of her Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program that Sugeily "Sue" Rodriguez found herself at a 'pinch-me' moment.

"Once my DBA-930 course [Scholar-Practitioner Field Project III - Project Completion] was under way, my goal was becoming a reality, and I never imagined I would reach this level," said Rodriguez, who added that she is amazed by her personal and professional growth as a DBA program graduate. "I sometimes have doubts about my capacity since English is my second language, so I'm very proud that I've come this far."

Despite her apprehension, Rodriguez entered doctoral-level studies with an indelible vision of her future state.

"I came to the program with a purpose. I love teaching college students, so my goal is to become a full-time professor," noted Rodriguez, a Rahway, N.J., resident currently working as an adjunct professor at the County College of Morris. "However, completing the degree requirements has also prompted me to think entrepreneurially. I was at the stage in my DBA field project where I had completed the project framing and engagement phases and was pulling together the data and analysis and articulating my findings under the guidance of a DBA mentor when







Joining Sugelly “Sue” Rodriguez (second from left) during June’s DBA Orientation, Research Seminar and Networking Event, were Dina Silbernagel-Krohne, DBA ’23, BSBA ’15; DBA Mentor Dr. Paul Sam; and Mimi Nkweto, DBA ’23, MSHRM ’14.

I began to consider launching a real estate business alongside my pursuits in academia.”

It was also during that time that she and other members of the program’s eighth cohort joined the TESU leadership team, course mentors and alumni on June 24, during the School of Business and Managements’ DBA Orientation, Research Seminar and Networking Event.

Dr. Michael Williams, dean of the School of Business and Management, who launched and leads the University’s DBA program, moderated a panel discussion and audience exchanges during the event. The sessions focused on the culminating Scholar-Practitioner Field Project and the DBA program model. Drs. Robert Bigelow, Tami Moser and Paul Sam, mentors in the program, served as in-person panelists. Members of TESU’s leadership staff and program alumni joined in additional presentations centered on the program’s structure, expectations, scholar-practitioner project approaches and student strategies for success.

“It is gratifying to see Mrs. Rodriguez achieving critical personal and professional milestones,” noted Williams. “The program’s scholar-practitioner, interdisciplinary curriculum promotes and enables transformation for our students. Moreover, building and celebrating the program’s academic community through research seminars and social networking events allows our current students, graduates and mentors to fully engage and learn together. These interactions also reinforce the program’s expectations and comradery. Our academic model, standards of excellence and history of student success are testament to our power to transform lives, professions and society.”

Williams affirmed that the School’s commitment to student diversity, access, retention and support mechanisms have been in place since the DBA program’s launch. According to the program’s current demographics, of the 86 students currently enrolled, 49 percent are students of color or belong to traditionally diverse populations, 37 percent are U.S. military members or

veterans and 64 percent are alumni who advanced to the doctoral program from other areas of study at TESU.

Rodriguez, who completed her MBA and a bachelor’s degree in business administration at Berkeley College, took advantage of a customized learning platform, a devoted academic team and a plethora of unique resources available in her doctoral program.

“I’m excited about the potential of my new degree,” added Rodriguez, who also possesses a School Business Administrator Certificate through the New Jersey Board of Education as well as a certification in distance education. “It is a lot of work, but it can be done, and I’m very proud of this milestone.”

To learn more about the DBA program, schedule a telephone appointment with the dean or stay apprised of upcoming program events, visit [tesu.edu/business/dba](https://tesu.edu/business/dba).





# FROM GRIDIRON TO GRADUATION

## ❖ Jon Runyan, BA '23

**Jon Runyan's journey to degree completion was never destined to follow a customary path.**

Predating his roles as a vice president for the NFL and U.S. congressman; before his 14 seasons and 192 consecutive games as a legendary offensive tackle for three NFL teams – including an induction in the Philadelphia Eagles Hall of Fame; there was a college degree Jon Runyan started but never completed.

“It is a similar narrative for so many TESU students: life just gets in the way,” noted Runyan, who originally went to the University of Michigan on an athletic scholarship and was the first person in his family to attend college.

Distinguished early on for his athletic prowess and selected to the All Big Ten Conference when he was just 22 years old, Runyan's escalating athletic commitments began to erode his ability to fulfill his degree requirements.

He has plenty of company. The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education reported



this year that more than 750,000 New Jerseyans have some college credit but no degree.

"I promised my mom that I would get back to pursuing my degree – and it's taken me 25 years to fulfill that pledge," he said. "But it's vital, especially during a career transition, to list a four-year degree among your accomplishments. That component speaks for itself, and it can make the difference between being considered for an opportunity or being eliminated from the candidate pool."

As vice president of Policy and Rules Administration for NFL Football Operations, Runyan now oversees club- and game-related activities surrounding its players. According to the organization's website, he serves as Commissioner Roger Goodell's designee for on-field discipline and supervises the uniform and protective equipment inspection program with an overarching objective of decreasing on-field violations.

He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2011 to January 2015 representing New Jersey's 3rd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. He was a member of the House Committee on Armed Services and the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs where he focused on improving support for veterans and their families – particularly in the areas of healthcare and employment opportunities. During his distinguished NFL career, he played for the Oilers/Tennessee Titans, the Philadelphia Eagles and San Diego Chargers, and made the Pro Bowl in 2002.

His charitable work has encompassed the New Jersey Special Olympics, the American Red Cross, the Alzheimer's Association of Delaware Valley, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, the USO, the Armed Forces Freedom Ride and Habitat for Humanity. Runyan has extended his philanthropic endeavors to the University as a participant in the annual TESU Foundation Golf Classic

Runyan would attempt to reconnect with his goal of earning a degree repeatedly during the intervening years following his football career. Ironically, it was amid the COVID-19 pandemic when public health mandates forced his face-to-face interactions and traveling schedule to



**"I PROMISED MY MOM THAT I WOULD GET BACK TO PURSUING MY DEGREE – AND IT'S TAKEN ME 25 YEARS TO FULFILL THAT PLEDGE."**

Jon Runyan

a halt, that he found the opening he needed.

"Given my professional schedule and responsibilities to my growing family, in addition to my commutes into the NFL's offices in New York City, I was pretty much spinning my wheels in any attempt to return for my degree," he recalled. "When the pandemic hit, I suddenly had the space and flexibility in my schedule to go full bore and enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Studies program at TESU. When we returned to in-person meetings, I was already on pace and completed many of my reading assignments during my commute on the train."

Runyan enrolled in the program's Bachelor's to Master's track and is already completing graduate-level

credits toward his Master of Science degree in Management program.

"Continuing education sheds additional light on a career already in progress. What I enjoy most is that it puts a structure, philosophy and theory to a breadth of topics I'm already familiar with in my professional life," he said. "The curriculum has also been eye-opening and expanded my decision-making capabilities. As I'm completing my projects, I'm learning that there are multiple ways to approach business challenges. Also, the course material and student Discussion Board assignments steer you toward managing professional objectives in the most optimum way."

The advice he offers others new to TESU's course structure centers on throttling.

"The academic structure is such that you can double up on your courses during specific timeframes and go lighter during intervals when you need extra time surrounding family events, work schedules or vacation cycles.

Once you grasp the material, you can also complete assignments in advance to free up your time toward the end of a specific term. Additionally, the Bachelor's to Master's track helps

to speed up degree completion."

Runyan has three children: Jon Jr., also a University of Michigan alum and former Wolverine, who currently serves as a right guard for the Green Bay Packers; Alyssa, who is enrolled in the Master of Science in Athletic Training program at Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, Pa.; and Isabella "Bella" Runyan, who is enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at Villanova University and plays guard on the Villanova Wildcats Women's Basketball team.

To learn more about the Bachelor of Arts programs in the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, visit [tesu.edu/heavin/ba](https://tesu.edu/heavin/ba). To learn more about the Bachelor's to Master's Program, visit [tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program](https://tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program).



# Grads... by the numbers

DEGREES AND  
CERTIFICATES AWARDED

1,998

OLDEST GRAD

76

AVERAGE AGE OF GRADS

37

FEMALES

787

MALES

1,062



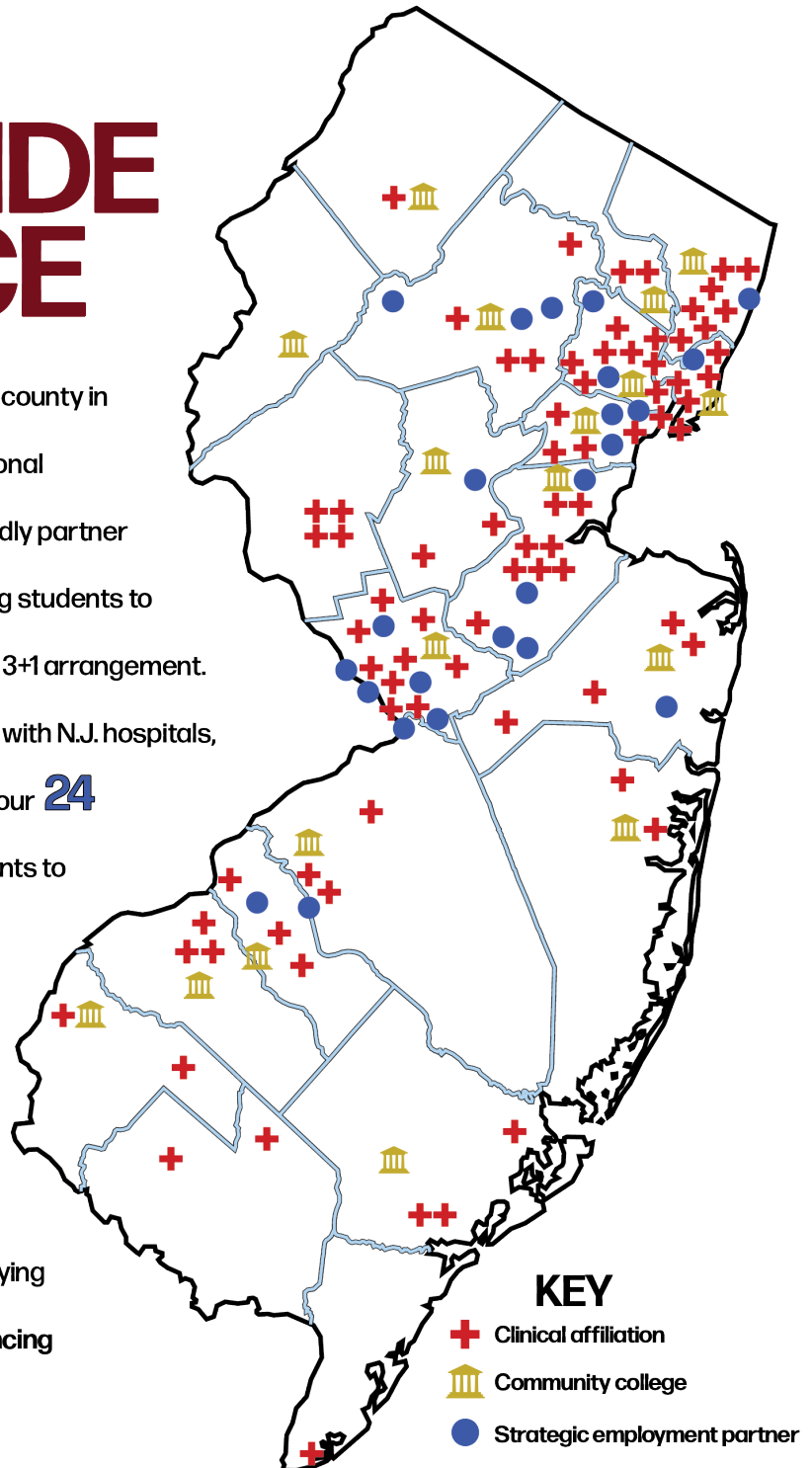
Graduates  
from every  
county in  
New Jersey





# OUR STATE-WIDE PRESENCE

Thomas Edison's students come from every county in the state of New Jersey, making our educational program truly diverse and inclusive. We proudly partner with all **18** N.J. community colleges, allowing students to pursue their studies seamlessly through our 3+1 arrangement. Additionally, we offer **81** clinical affiliations with N.J. hospitals, providing valuable practical experience and our **24** strategic partner locations enable our students to maintain their careers while pursuing their education, ensuring they have the flexibility they need to succeed. Our extensive network of more than **75,000** alumni and students are living and working throughout the state and the world, exemplifying our commitment to: **Building Careers. Advancing Professions. Empowering Lives.**





## University Awarded \$2.8m by U.S. Dept. of Labor

### NURSING EXPANSION GRANT PROGRAM WILL SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT OF PATHWAYS FOR PSYCHIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH NURSES

Thomas Edison State University was awarded \$2,761,271 as part of the Nursing Expansion Grant Program by the U.S. Department of Labor. The program is designed to support public-private partnerships that expand and diversify the nursing workforce, with a particular focus on developing professional pathways for frontline healthcare professionals to advance in their careers.

TESU plans to use the funds to create career pathways designed to fill a critical nursing shortage in psychiatric mental health nursing by providing scholarships to support students in programs from the RN/BSN to the MSN levels. New Jersey ranks 26th in the country for mental health providers per capita, according to the McKinsey and Co, Public Health Dashboard, and the need is high in Mercer County. The University will partner with two New Jersey state institutions: Trenton Psychiatric Hospital and Ancora Psychiatric Hospital as well as private Capital Health as employer partners to help ease shortages across a variety of mental health nursing positions. The Gloucester County Workforce Development Board and the New Jersey State Nurses Association round out the public-private partnership

supported by the grant as well as two community college pipelines, Mercer County Community College and Raritan Valley Community College. TESU is one of 25 organizations across 17 states to receive federal funding.

In response to the announcement, Dr. Merodie A. Hancock, president, said, "Receiving notification of this award during Mental Health Awareness month could not be more appropriate. Our communities are increasingly aware of the importance of skilled mental health and psychiatric care and this grant will enable us to expand our nursing program and support psychiatric mental health education. At TESU, we are committed to providing accessible and innovative education to a diverse student population. This grant furthers that mission by increasing the number of qualified nursing professionals in this critical sector of the workforce."

The Nursing Expansion Grant Program aims to address the significant staffing challenges facing the nursing profession, as projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By supporting innovative partnerships and strategies that expand and diversify America's pipeline of



qualified nursing professionals, the program will help to ensure the nation's well-being and strengthen our care economy using proven practices and strategies, according to U.S. Department of Labor projections.

The funding will also help grant recipients improve diversity in the healthcare workforce and address the health equity gap in America's underserved communities by embedding diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility strategies into their programs, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. By doing so, the programs will ensure students from historically marginalized and underrepresented communities have pathways to good jobs and careers in nursing.

## Three School of Business and Management Students Inducted in Business Honor Society

In May, three TESU students were inducted in the New Jersey Collegiate Business Administration Association (NJCBAA) Honor Society. The ceremony took place at Rutgers Business School in Piscataway, N.J..

Bachelor of Science in Business Administration students Lisa Barnickol of Maple Shade, N.J.; Anam Husain of Kendall Park, N.J.; and Camille Wilson of North Bergen, N.J., were honored during the event.

"This is a well-deserved recognition of our students' academic achievements and commitment to excellence," noted



BSBA students (L to R) Lisa Barnickol, Anam Husain and Camille Wilson were inducted into the New Jersey Collegiate Business Administration Association Honor Society on May 5.

Alicia Malone, assistant dean in the School of Business and Management. "It's particularly gratifying to see

TESU students who typically balance multiple responsibilities outside of their coursework achieve such high levels of academic success."

Established in 2003, the NJCBAA Honor Society recognizes students who are pursuing associate or bachelor's degrees in business administration. Students must be in the top 1 percent (by grade point average) of the total population of business students at their institution and must have completed at least 70 percent of their degree requirements as of Jan. 1 of the induction year to qualify.



## TESU's Annual Back-to-School Readiness Fair Provides Trenton Families with Supplies and Resources

Thomas Edison State University held its second annual Back-to-School Readiness Fair in August at George A. Pruitt Hall.

The afternoon event included distribution of 365 new backpacks and grade-appropriate school supplies that will help equip Trenton-area school children for the upcoming academic year.

"We value our role in providing Trenton area school children with some of the important tools they will need to embark on the school year," said Dr. Merodie A. Hancock, president. "As a long-time member and stakeholder in the community, we are inextricably linked to the continuum of preschool to graduate-level education and workforce development opportunities in the city. We not only view this role through



TESU Office of Admissions Counselor Mehreen Bhatti helps to distribute backpacks filled with grade-appropriate supplies to Trenton-area residents.

the lens of a postsecondary education provider, but also as a partner, custodian and collaborator in the success of local families."

In its second year, the event highlighted the University's partnership with the Trenton community, offering free resources and information, such as

COVID-19 vaccinations, guidance on maintaining a lead-free home environment, maternal and mental health, wellness services, free health insurance eligibility review and available after-school programs. Additionally, attendees received assistance with FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), tax preparation and other services.

Participating organizations included Isles, Inc.; Central Jersey Family Health Consortium; New Jersey Department of Health that provided the vaccines; NJ FamilyCare; Trenton Health Team; United Way of Greater Mercer County; Big Brothers Big Sisters of Mercer County; Boys and Girls Club of Mercer County; Hyacinth; HomeFront NJ; Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund; Mercer Street Friends that provided pre-filled lunch boxes; and the New Jersey State Library.

## Nuclear Regulatory Commission Awards Scholarship Grant

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has once again awarded nearly \$200,000 in scholarship funding to Thomas Edison State University for students enrolled in nuclear energy engineering technology and related technical programs.

"Since the scholarship program became available at the University in 2014, the NRC has supported hundreds of students who have advanced through our programs," noted Dr. John Aje, dean of the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology.

According to the NRC's website, the objective of the funding is to develop a workforce capable of supporting the design, construction, operation and regulation of nuclear facilities and safe

handling of nuclear materials.

"This ongoing and generous support is recognition of the quality of our curricula and will remove the barrier of cost for many who qualify," said Aje, of the \$199,999 grant support. "This enables us to attract and retain more students, expand the School's already affordable degree options and provide a pipeline of graduates to industries eager for their expertise."

Connected to its role of promoting educational advancement in the field, the University has partnered with the NRC to create degree templates aligned with the Nuclear Uniform Curriculum Program (NUCP) a unique partnership managed by the Nuclear Energy Institute. As part of this effort, Aje and his team



Dr. John Aje, dean of the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology.

developed articulation agreements with participating community colleges throughout the country to provide career-oriented degree pathways for students.



## The W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions Announces Two New Leadership Appointments

Lorraine M. Chewey, EdD, has been appointed associate dean of Undergraduate Programs and Madeline Gervase, PhD, DNP, has been appointed associate dean for Graduate Programs at the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions.

Chewey is working closely with Dr. Ruth Wittmann-Price, dean of the School, in the strategic planning, growth and delivery of curricula that will enhance its undergraduate nursing and health professions programs.

Before joining TESU, Chewey served as an associate professor and coordinator of the Graduate School Nurse Certification Program in the College of Professional Studies at New Jersey City University. She earned her doctorate in Nursing



Lorraine M. Chewey, EdD, associate dean for Undergraduate Programs at the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions (left) and Madeline Gervase, PhD, DNP, associate dean for Graduate Programs at the School of Nursing.

Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, N.Y.; a Master of Science in Health Sciences and a School Nurse Certification from New Jersey City University; and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Seton Hall University College of Nursing, N.J.



Gervase is collaborating with the dean on initiatives and strategic planning aimed at expanding the University's graduate-level curricula. In her new capacity, she oversees the Master of Science in Nursing and Doctor of Nursing Practice degree programs.

She brings with her more than two decades of experience as an academic and a family nurse practitioner and continues to support clinical research in the field of cardiology. Gervase earned her PhD in Education from Northcentral

University, Ariz., a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree from Frontier Nursing University, Ky.; her Master of Science in Nursing – Family Nurse Practitioner degree from Wagner College, N.Y.; and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the College of Staten Island, N.Y.

### foundation news

## Donor Cords Make the Difference

*Student and alumnus Adam T. Storkamp, AS '22, is helping fellow TESU students realize their full potential.*

Like so many TESU students, Adam Storkamp's educational journey began immediately after high school. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill but after one year realized that he was not ready for the traditional college experience. He later joined the United States Navy and found his passion in serving his country. As his family grew, Storkamp progressed through the ranks and, after accepting a commission, realized that career advancement would only be possible by earning his degree.

It was while he was stationed in Connecticut that Storkamp learned about TESU.

"The idea of starting school again was daunting, but I am determined to be disciplined in all things in life, and being an example for my four daughters was all the inspiration I needed," Storkamp said.

Storkamp earned his Associate of Science degree in Electronics Engineering Technology in 2022 and is currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Science degree in Technical Studies at the Heavin School of Arts, Sciences, and Technology.

"One of my favorite quotes is from entrepreneur Jim Rohn, 'Find a way to serve the masses, for service to many leads to greatness.' I learned this firsthand during my military experience on a naval submarine. After graduating and learning about the Philanthropy Cord program in an email from TESU, I wanted to pay it forward for another student," he recalled. "I'm a big fan of giving back, and I understand how challenging paying for tuition is because I now have college-age children myself. I was fortunate to have tuition assistance through the military, but not everyone has that support. If I can help with a small portion of someone's tuition, I am more than happy to do so."

We applaud U.S. Navy Submarine Communications Officer Lt. Storkamp, for



Adam Storkamp, AS '22 (This image does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement of the University or its programs).

his service to our Nation, for sharing his journey with us and for his willingness to pay it forward to future TESU alumni.

To learn more about TESU Philanthropy Cord, visit [tesu.edu/alumni/support/cord](https://tesu.edu/alumni/support/cord).



## MEET A TESU GENIUS

### **Bill Bortz, BA '08**

#### IGNITING DEDICATION AND SUCCESS THROUGH TESU'S GENIUS PROGRAM

Bill Bortz, BA '08, remembers his Commencement ceremony like it was yesterday.

"It was a beautiful fall day in Trenton at the majestic War Memorial a few steps away from the campus," Bortz said. "It was one of the best days of my life."

Because of that positive experience and his time as a Thomas Edison State University student, Bortz has remained a dedicated alumnus. As a Genius Program participant, he engages in alumni initiatives including serving on an orientation panel for new TESU Foundation Board members and refers friends and colleagues to the University.

Bortz found out about TESU (at the time, Thomas Edison State College) and enrolled in 2004 when he said that his career was "flatlining due to his lack of a degree." He had already spent two years at Susquehanna University and another two at Elizabethtown College where he accumulated many credits but had not earned a degree.

At the time, he was working for a market insights company and realized that if

he wanted to move up, he needed to earn his bachelor's degree. With one son nearly 3 years old and another child on the way, he found that the flexibility of his BA degree in Liberal Studies courses enabled him to be a good father and student while concentrating on his career.

"My career progressed rapidly, and within five years I moved up multiple levels, from a senior manager to the role of a vice president in what is now the largest and best market insights company in the world," Bortz noted. "What I learned at TESU, I use every day. I'm so very thankful to our alumni engagement team and fellow Alumni Ambassadors for their dedication to this wonderful University. Participating in the Genius Program is highly rewarding and fulfilling for alumni. It is a great way to contribute to and recognize this fantastic University and all it offers," Bortz concluded. "I hope that others benefit in a similar way."

To learn more about TESU's Genius Program, visit [tesu.edu/genius](https://tesu.edu/genius).



## Be a TESU Genius!

Alumni and friends of TESU are invited to join the Genius Program. Simply complete five steps to be eligible for the prize!

See complete details at [tesu.edu/genius](https://tesu.edu/genius).

## Keep Us Posted!

To connect with the Office of Alumni Engagement and fellow TESU alumni, join the conversation on social media:

**Alumni Facebook Group:** [tesu.edu/FacebookGroup](https://tesu.edu/FacebookGroup)

**Student and Alumni LinkedIn Group:** [tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup](https://tesu.edu/LinkedInGroup)



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## University Store

**TESUshop.com** is Thomas Edison State University's online store for TESU students, alumni, employees, mentors and TESU families. Declare your TESU pride with apparel and products bearing Thomas Edison State University's logo.



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