



# ADVANCING HEALTH AND CARE

COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT 2024-2025

**R** | **RUTGERS HEALTH**  
School of Health Professions



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## DEAN'S MESSAGE

At Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), I'm reminded every day that meaningful change happens through people—students learning with purpose, faculty driving discovery, and communities growing healthier together.

Everything we do—whether it's didactic programs, clinical programs, students pursuing health profession degrees, or research—is for the promotion of health. This year we intentionally reframed our Annual Report to reflect our commitment to improved health and health care for all.

I proudly invite you to explore our inaugural Community Impact Report, which highlights our vital role in shaping the future of health care in New Jersey and beyond.



Photo Credit:  
William Padilla

**JEFFREY J. DIGIOVANNI**

PhD, CCC-A, Dean

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# REIMAGINING EDUCATION

SHAPING  
THE FUTURE  
OF CARE





At Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), we are driven by one goal: preparing our students to deliver informed, compassionate, and current care that meets the needs of patients and communities.

That mission begins at the moment of admission. Our students—who range in age from 20 to 60—bring diverse backgrounds and lived experiences, many inspired by personal moments that sparked their desire to make a difference. We build on that passion by giving them the tools, knowledge, and support to become skilled, thoughtful health care professionals.

With more than 30 academic programs across the spectrum of health care, we provide rich interprofessional education. Our students learn side by side, both in class and online, with peers from other disciplines in team-based environments that reflect how care is delivered in the real world.

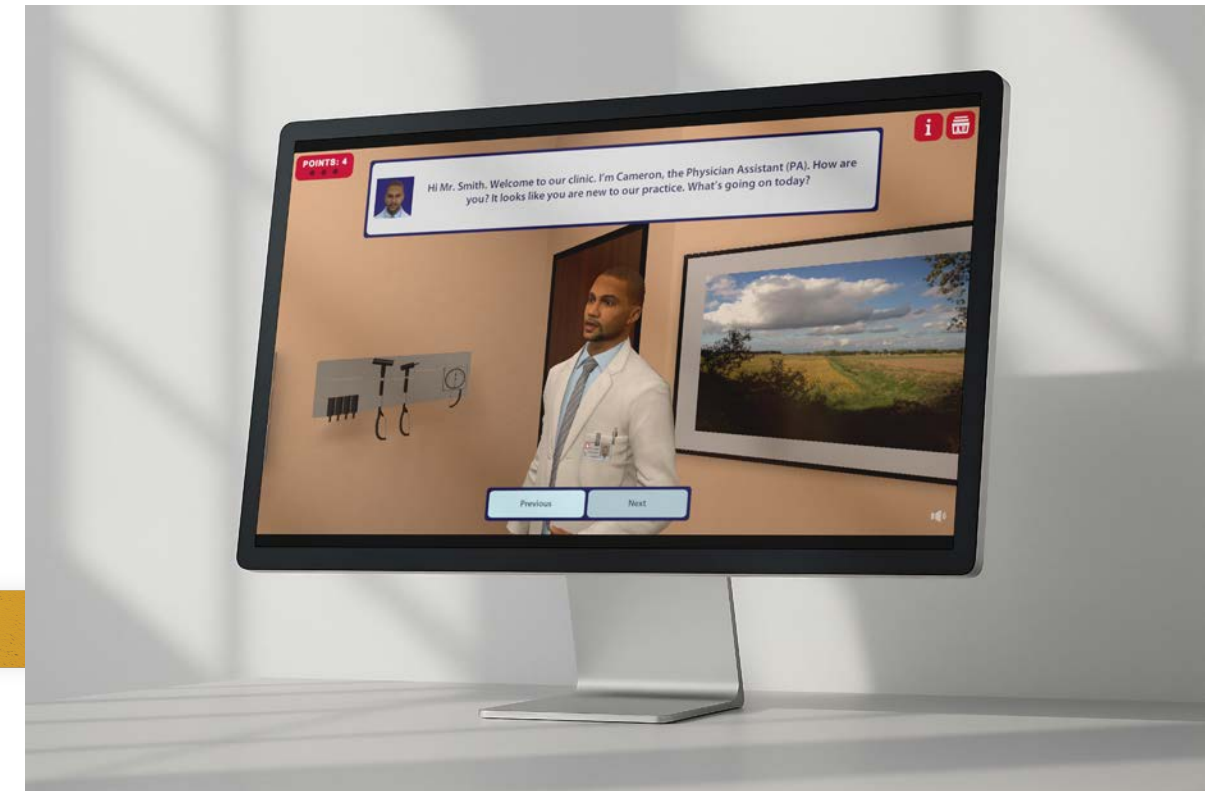
Through our growing network of community clinics, our students apply their learning in real time—delivering care across the continuum, from behavioral health to primary care to rehabilitation—while strengthening the collaboration and communication skills essential to patient-centered care.

We know that health care—and health care education—must evolve. That’s why we are reimagining how students learn, using cutting-edge technologies such as simulation, gaming, and artificial intelligence to enhance clinical reasoning, critical thinking, and decision-making.

At SHP, we are not only adapting to a rapidly changing world—we are teaching our students to shape it. Through forward-thinking education and immersive, hands-on experiences, we prepare them to become leaders who will advance health and care for the future.



# USING GAMING TO MASTER TEAM-BASED CARE



*SHP students collaborate across disciplines in an interactive simulation that mirrors real-world, team-based health care delivery. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers, School of Health Professions*

Interprofessional collaboration is at the heart of every Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) program—and now, it's being taught in a new way.

In a course that debuted last year, students from a variety of disciplines meet “Pete” and his family—patients with a mix of physical, emotional, and developmental concerns. Working together, the future health care professionals decide which practitioners are best suited to help, such as a speech therapist for Pete’s child and a mental health counselor for his wife.

The twist? Pete and the health professionals are animated avatars in a simulation game designed to mirror the complexities of modern health care.

“It’s a great introduction to interprofessional practice using gaming,” said physical therapy student Mesh Ramirez. “You look at the symptoms and your own scope of practice and recognize what is outside of your scope and who you could refer the patient to. So really, it is breaking down silos.”

The game-based course is now required for students in every SHP degree program.

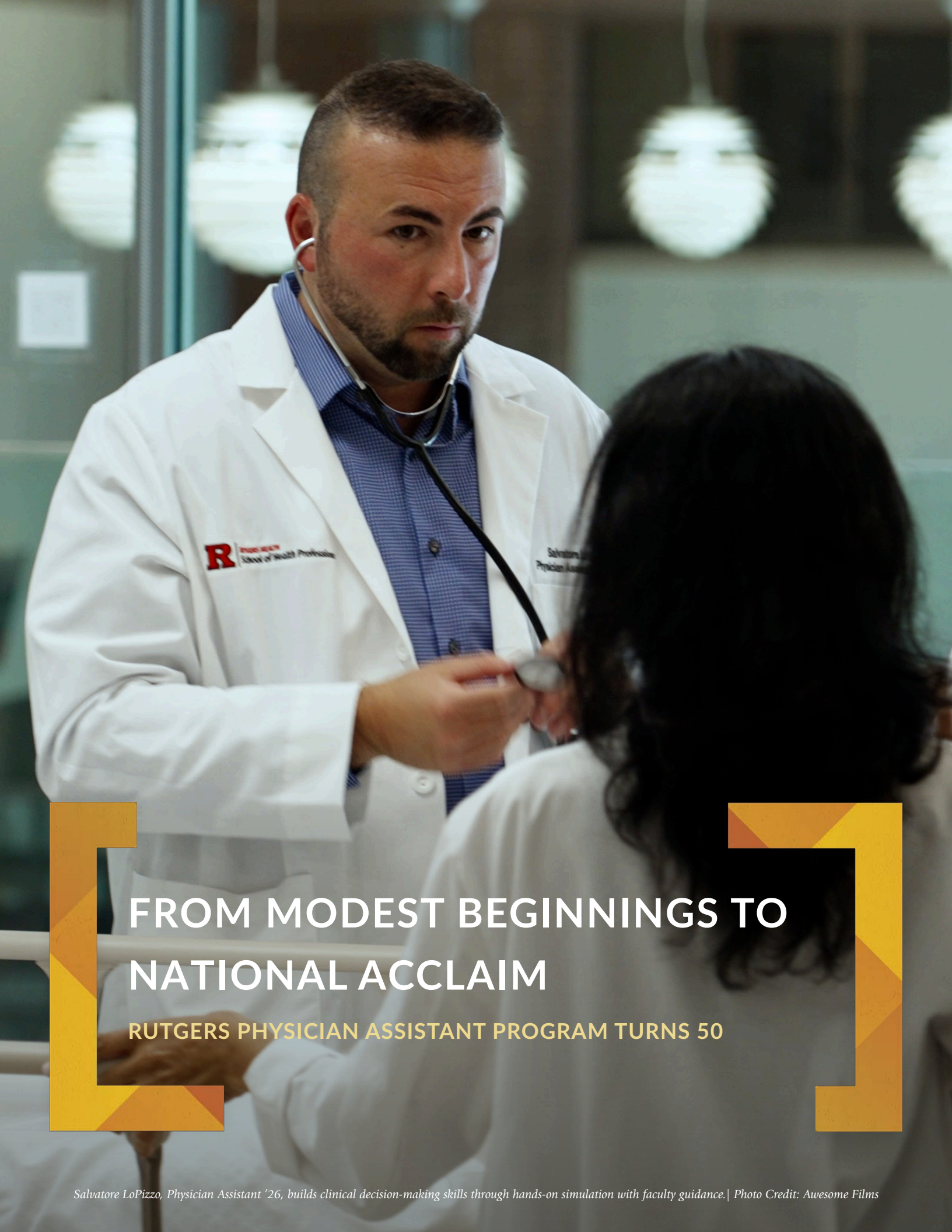
It teaches interprofessional education—the ability to understand and work across disciplines to deliver effective, patient-centered care.

“The complexities of health care today require team-based solutions,” said Alma Merians, professor of physical therapy and associate dean, who led the effort. “This method of delivery is an innovative way to train students to work in health care teams.”

The two-part course combines traditional online modules with interactive, case-based simulations. In small groups meeting on Zoom, students collaborate to solve problems, compare answers, and receive real-time feedback from avatars who guide or correct them. Each case reflects diverse backgrounds and real-world challenges while reinforcing national standards set by the Interprofessional Education Collaborative (IPEC).

“We wanted to make the learning engaging,” said Merians. “The gaming environment encourages interaction and reflection—helping students understand not only their own roles, but how every discipline contributes to better outcomes.”





# FROM MODEST BEGINNINGS TO NATIONAL ACCLAIM

RUTGERS PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM TURNS 50

Fifty years ago, Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) launched New Jersey’s first Physician Assistant (PA) program, starting with just a dozen students who couldn’t even practice in-state due to outdated laws. Today, our program is a nationally ranked powerhouse, producing top-tier PAs who shape health care in New Jersey and beyond.

Ranked among the nation’s Top Ten by U.S. News & World Report, our PA program admits just 3 percent of applicants. But the journey wasn’t easy. While other states licensed PAs as early as the 1970s to address physician shortages, New Jersey held out until 1992— after a march on the statehouse attended by faculty and graduates who fought to push legislation through.

Today, PAs are essential to primary care, and our graduates make their mark across public health and enjoy prestigious careers—one even cared for Hillary Clinton when she was secretary of state, according to Department Chair Matthew McQuillan. The program boasts a 99 percent first-time pass rate on the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE), the second highest among U.S. News’s top 20 programs.

But for McQuillan, the program’s culture and emphasis on humanistic care matter most. “Our students apply for many reasons—our history, exceptional pass rates, and dedicated faculty—but they also connect with our mission and the supportive community they hear about from alumni,” he said.

Over the past decade, the department shifted the admissions process to value life experiences alongside academic achievements. Since shifting to holistic admissions—and earning a national award for the effort in 2018—the program has attracted students from all walks of life. Among them: an Olympic Trials long jumper, a former stand-up comedian, and a musician who pivoted to health care.

“We believe strongly that a diverse workforce leads to better patient care,” said Lori Palfreyman, the former program director who led the change and who retired in the spring of 2025. “People are more than just a GPA, and we’ve seen the proof of that over and over again.”

Behind our program successes are faculty whose dedication and scholarship have helped propel it to national prominence.

As of 2024, every full-time faculty member holds a doctoral degree, bringing a wealth of expertise that ensures the program’s continued excellence. Faculty members have earned state and national recognition for their leadership, teaching, research, and innovation.





Physician Assistant students apply classroom learning during an interprofessional simulation led by Dipali Yeh, assistant professor. | Photo Credit: John O'Boyle

A cornerstone of our program's commitment to service is the Health Outreach Practice Experience (HOPE) clinic, which provides free care to uninsured and underinsured patients in Plainfield, N.J. For years, Rutgers PA students and faculty collaborated with other organizations to support the clinic, but after the pandemic, the program took full ownership.

Last year alone, faculty, staff, and supervised students logged a record-breaking 700 patient visits. Beyond honing their clinical skills, students gain firsthand insight into health care disparities—sparking a desire to bring about change.

"The work we do at HOPE clinic is about more than just providing care—it's about building trust, understanding systemic barriers, and training future providers who will make a real difference," Palfreyman said.

That spirit of service extends beyond the clinic. In a testament to the program's mission driven culture, three students from the Class of 2021 received full scholarships from the National Health Service Corps in exchange for a commitment to work in underserved areas for at least two years

after graduation. And the tradition continues—every year since, at least one student has received the prestigious award.

"It's an incredibly competitive scholarship, and having recipients year after year speaks volumes about the dedication and caliber of our students," said Palfreyman.

Our PA graduates are visible in all aspects of health care. Beyond providing patient care, some serve in public health leadership roles, while others innovate new ways to improve patient outcomes. Recognizing that strong aftercare reduces hospital readmissions, two alumni recently launched a virtual support service that provides round-the-clock check-ins to aid recovery.

"Our graduates aren't just excelling in their careers—they're reshaping the future of care," said McQuillan.

Fifty years in, Rutgers SHP's PA program isn't just surviving—it's thriving.





Sarai Sanguino Dugarte, Diagnostic Medical Sonography '25, smiles in front of a Rutgers sign on campus. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Sarai Sanguino Dugarte

## AGAINST THE ODDS

SONOGRAPHY STUDENT EARNS DEGREE AND  
CLINICAL HONORS

When they nominated her for a student excellence award, Sarai Sanguino Dugarte's professors in diagnostic medical sonography marveled at her ability to juggle working part-time as a medical assistant while excelling academically and earning accolades at her clinical sites.

But for Sanguino Dugarte, that level of hard work and perseverance has been a constant since she left Venezuela for the United States at age 19. Born and raised in Venezuela, it wasn't her plan to move abruptly to a new country alone, not even speaking the language. She was studying and preparing to start medical school. She hoped to visit New York with money saved from selling handmade jewelry.

"I thought I would spend summer break in the U.S. and start to learn some English," said Sanguino Dugarte. "I planned to finish my education in Venezuela, but staying there became impossible due to the political situation and circumstances beyond my control."

In New York, she stayed with a friend who had also left Venezuela due to political and socioeconomic unrest. Her fear of being in a new country and knowing very little of the language was washed away by the sense of freedom she felt far from the dangers of her home country.

Before long, Sanguino Dugarte began the process of changing her visa status to be able to work. She got a job as a cashier at a restaurant, which became a crash course in learning the English language.

"It was hard at first because people speak so fast. I would write down the names of the streets walking to and from work, and I spent hours on YouTube and Google just listening to phone numbers and looking at streets," she said.



As she became more confident in her English, Sanguino Dugarte set her sights on a new goal: continuing her education in the U.S. rather than returning to Venezuela. She earned a scholarship to a New York college and began her associate's degree in medical assisting.

"Since high school, I have always been interested in health care. My aunt Blanca is a pediatrician, and would help me study biology," said Sanguino Dugarte.

She recalled opening her first textbook and bursting into tears, thinking she would not be able to make it. Working full-time at the restaurant while also carrying a full course load to keep her scholarship, Sanguino Dugarte persevered, sometimes translating her textbooks word-by-word.

Upon finishing her associate's degree, she began work as a medical assistant. She enjoyed the patient interactions but wanted to do more to help patients directly. Sanguino Dugarte began to research bachelor's degrees and was impressed by the Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) diagnostic medical sonography program.

In Venezuela, sonography is a track in medical school, so she jumped at the opportunity to pursue it as a bachelor's program. Impressed by Rutgers' accreditation and the competitiveness of the program, Sanguino Dugarte applied but was placed on the waitlist.

"Even that made me happy, because I was not rejected," said Sanguino Dugarte, "I thought I would try again next year, but a spot opened up."

Sanguino Dugarte knew she would have to support herself completely while pursuing the degree. She quit her full-time job and coordinated with her weekend job to take 12-hour shifts both Saturday and Sunday.

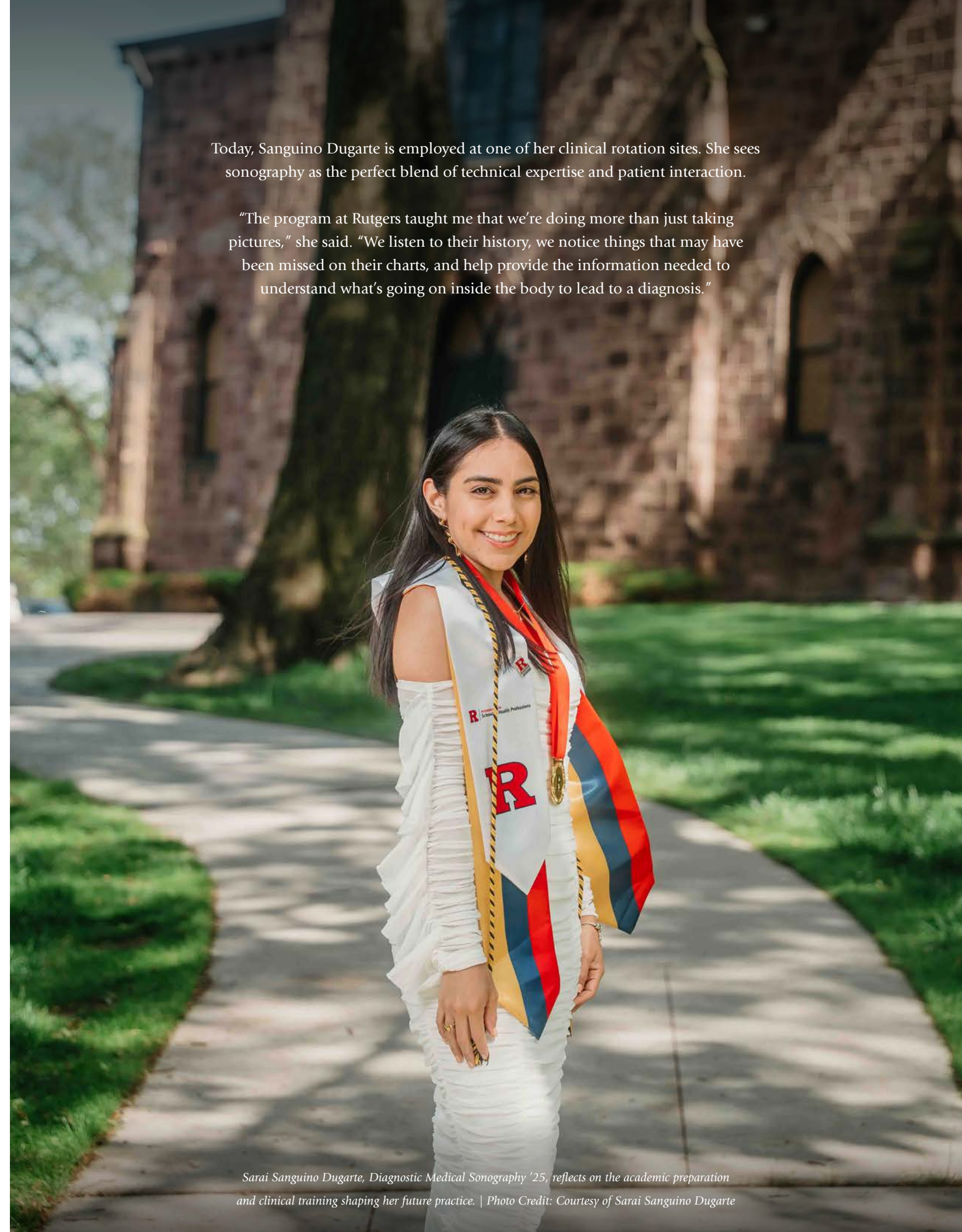
She began her day at 4 a.m. and often stayed at the library late into the night after clinicals, the only time available to her to study.

"For 18 months I didn't really have any days off," said Sanguino Dugarte. "I used to walk around the urgent care on the weekend studying out loud."

Her hard work was recognized when Sanguino Dugarte received SHP's 2025 Clinical Excellence Award for diagnostic medical sonography, an honor given to students who demonstrate exceptional professionalism and patient care during their clinical rotations.

Today, Sanguino Dugarte is employed at one of her clinical rotation sites. She sees sonography as the perfect blend of technical expertise and patient interaction.

"The program at Rutgers taught me that we're doing more than just taking pictures," she said. "We listen to their history, we notice things that may have been missed on their charts, and help provide the information needed to understand what's going on inside the body to lead to a diagnosis."



*Sarai Sanguino Dugarte, Diagnostic Medical Sonography '25, reflects on the academic preparation and clinical training shaping her future practice. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Sarai Sanguino Dugarte*





## AI-POWERED TEACHING AND SCHOLARSHIP

*Students study human anatomy using the Anatomage Table, integrating digital technology into foundational health sciences education. | Photo Credit: John O'Boyle*

When Antonina Mitrofanova, associate dean of research and associate professor of biomedical informatics, first began shaping initiatives in her role as co-director of Rutgers' Center for Biomedical Informatics and Health Artificial Intelligence, she kept returning to a question—What could Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) do with artificial intelligence (AI) that no one else could?

"AI is upon us," said Mitrofanova. "We can't escape it. Instead of fighting it, why not embrace it and use it in a smart way, to our advantage?"

SHP is uniquely positioned to use the new and growing field of AI to its advantage. With a strong research program, but with most faculty on the teaching track, Mitrofanova began to develop an innovative idea to combine the two: using AI in the classroom as a teaching tool and creating scholarship from it by measuring the results.

"By using AI in an intentional, specific way in the classroom, our faculty can run mini-clinical trials," Mitrofanova said. "If we give a group of students AI tools and compare the outcomes to those that don't have them, faculty can generate research and publish their results."

Mitrofanova introduced the initiative at SHP's annual Research and Scholarship Symposium in November 2024 and identified four faculty leads, each exploring a unique AI application:

- A hospital simulation for clinical training
- Simulated conversations to mimic difficult and emotional interactions between clinicians and patients
- A project to assist students in literature review, and
- A leadership training module

The leads will run their pilots during the 2025 fall semester and meet biweekly to share progress, learnings, and student feedback. Mitrofanova expects these trials to inform a larger rollout, potentially as soon as spring.

The long-term goal is to make AI-supported teaching an ongoing feature at SHP, with a growing library of tested, ethically designed tools. Once the groundwork is set, she envisions seeking support from philanthropic organizations for funding.

"AI is not here to replace us, it's here to enhance and augment what we do," said Mitrofanova. "But we have to build our program in an intentional way."

That philosophy includes identifying where AI tools excel, as well as areas where they may not perform as well. Mitrofanova plans to measure feedback to ensure that the teaching tools are benefiting both students and faculty, as well as which tools may work better for in-person or online courses or for specific specialties and degree tracks.

"The sky is the limit," Mitrofanova said. "We can do so many projects for so many specialties. But the key is to move forward thoughtfully, think about the ethical implications, generate scholarship for our faculty, and ensure we are building the skills our students need as clinicians."





# THE LONG JUMPER AND THE STAND-UP COMEDIAN

## TWO UNCONVENTIONAL PATHS TO PA SCHOOL

A national champion in the long jump, Madisen Richards twice competed in the U.S. Olympic Trials before feeling pulled in another direction. She is now a first-year student in the Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) Physician Assistant (PA) program.

Salvatore LoPizzo had commanded the stage as a stand-up comedian until the pandemic closed comedy clubs. As he watched friends in the medical field battling on the front lines during COVID-19, he found a new calling. He, too, is now a fellow student in the PA program.

Students studying to be physician assistants at Rutgers SHP come from a range of backgrounds and their unique experiences have helped them to succeed in one of the nation's most competitive and selective programs.

"I'm used to training hard for a goal that's years away," Richards said. "Now I'm training my brain instead of my body, making a plan for what I'm going to study each day, and then showing up to the exam to compete."

Richards graduated from the University of Southern California in 2018, where she earned NCAA All American honors and won a national championship as a member of the track and field team. Competing as a professional, she twice hit the qualifying mark to be invited to the U.S. Olympic Trials for the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and Paris in 2024.

After placing seventh at the 2024 trials (only the top three go to the Olympics), Richards knew she was ready to retire from her athletic career before the next four-year Olympic cycle. As a child, she had spent time after school in the doctor's office where her mother worked as a nurse, and had envisioned a future in health care.

"I met a PA through a volunteer opportunity and realized it shares a lot of qualities I really liked about sports," she said. "Track and field is a team sport, but you compete in your individual event."





Salvatore LoPizzo, Physician Assistant '26, and Madisen Richards, Physician Assistant '26—students whose diverse experiences strengthen collaborative learning in the PA program. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers, Physician Assistant Program

“”

*As a PA you have autonomy as a provider but also work closely as a care team with other aspects of health care.*

MADISEN RICHARDS

LoPizzo had performed comedy for ten years, beginning in San Francisco and then in New York City, before finding himself quarantined and wondering what was next.

“I have friends who are doctors and nurses, and I was really inspired by the work they were doing during COVID to help patients,” he said. “I started to look into what that might look like for me and what paths I could take to get into medicine.”

Despite coming from different fields, both point to skills from their previous pursuits that help them succeed in the PA program. “People think stand-up comedians get up on stage and just talk, but there’s a lot of preparation to learn a set,” said LoPizzo. “Now, for patient assessments, I’m memorizing a physical routine and performing the right steps every time.”

Former Program Director Lori Palfreyman said the program looks for more than high grade point averages and patient care hours when considering applicants.

“We seek multifaceted individuals with interesting, varied backgrounds who will translate their past experiences and skills to excellent patient care,” she said. “On the surface, a passion for sports, marching band, robotics, mountaineering, or entrepreneurial pursuits may appear different; however, at their core, they all require similar skills: planning, self-motivation, resilience, problem solving, flexibility, and teamwork.”

Although their paths to the program were different, Richards and LoPizzo are certain that the PA program, which ranks among the top five programs in the country, is the right place for them. Said Richards, “I’ve always been very service-oriented, and the PA program has the same mindset.” Through the program’s pro-bono primary care clinic in Plainfield, she said she “can see the direct impact of volunteering and taking care of the community you’re in.”

“Everyone is excited to be here. You feel like you’re part of something bigger than yourself and everyone is on your team,” added LoPizzo.



# STRENGTHENING THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WORKFORCE

Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) took a significant step toward addressing the critical shortage of community mental health workers in southern New Jersey this year by launching a new undergraduate certificate in psychiatric rehabilitation at the Rutgers-Camden campus.

Our 21-credit certificate program—tailored for psychology majors—gives students the practical skills and experience needed to work with individuals living with serious mental health conditions. It’s the latest offering from the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions, known for pioneering the nation’s only full bachelor’s degree in the field.

“We had planned to start small, hoping for maybe 10 students,” said Peter Basto, program director. “But we had 23 students enroll in the first course this spring, which was far beyond expectations.”

The program begins with an introductory course on the principles of psychiatric rehabilitation, followed by core classes in communication, group work, and clinical principles—all taught through a wellness and recovery lens. It culminates in a six-credit clinical practicum, where students are placed in local psychiatric rehabilitation agencies for 240 hours of hands-on experience.

“Our students will be shadowing staff at wellness centers, learning how to interact with people with serious mental health conditions, and getting experience running groups,” he said. “It’s a chance to apply what they’ve learned in class in a real-world setting—and to support people in the community.”

Although the initial class included juniors and seniors who won’t be able to complete the full certificate before graduating, at least five students from the first cohort are on track to continue in the program. Rutgers is currently developing a formal admissions process for future students, with new cohorts expected to begin in spring 2026.

Unlike our joint degree program in Newark—which allows students to graduate with dual degrees in psychology and psychiatric rehabilitation—the Camden program is a stand-alone certificate designed to integrate into a psychology major. Students graduate with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a certificate in psychiatric rehabilitation, which can substitute for electives or concentration courses within the psychology curriculum.

The launch responds to a growing need for skilled workers in behavioral health, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the field. Many professionals left direct service roles due to health risks, creating a shortage of trained personnel just as demand for mental health support surged.

“There’s a real crisis in the field, especially in the southern part of the state,” Basto said. “This new program is rebuilding the critical workforce pipeline.”

The certificate also appeals to students with lived experience. Many students in the inaugural class identified as having personal or family histories with mental health conditions, making them ideal candidates for peer specialist roles, which are in high demand—particularly those requiring a bachelor’s degree.

“We’ve found that agencies are eager to take our students for internships and hire them afterward,” Basto said. “In fact, 80 percent of our recent full B.S. graduates were offered jobs at their internship sites.” One promising placement site in Camden is the Community Wellness Center operated by Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, a peer-led agency where students can learn in a real-world environment. Rutgers is also leveraging long-standing relationships with other providers across the region to place students in supportive, high-impact internships.

Ultimately, the new program reflects SHP’s commitment to advancing care in communities across the state.

“With the Camden addition, we’re preparing students who are work-ready the day they graduate,” Basto said. “Agencies know they’re getting competent practitioners who will need minimal training in working with people with serious mental conditions. That’s the kind of impact that strengthens communities.”





## HOW ONE STUDENT'S JOURNEY LED HER TO PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION

Living on her own since age 18, Diamani Waugh juggled work, academics, and the weight of a childhood marked by instability, abuse, and periods of homelessness.

"I always felt like I knew something wasn't right," said Waugh, who suffered panic attacks, struggled academically, and continually felt unsafe. "I just didn't have the words for it."

It wasn't until she began therapy in college at Rutgers–Camden that she was diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety. That breakthrough changed her trajectory. Encouraged by a mentor, she enrolled in a new introductory class on psychiatric rehabilitation offered by Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP). The course not only reshaped her career goals but also helped her envision a new way of making a difference.

She is now among the first students enrolled in the new psychiatric rehabilitation certificate offered by SHP at Rutgers–Camden.

"I thought I wanted to go into psych nursing," she explained. "But once I learned about the healing process and how it really focuses on working with a whole team of doctors, counselors, and social workers, it changed my perspective. I wanted to have a deeper relationship with patients."

Now a junior majoring in health sciences and psychology, she plans to pursue medical school to become a psychiatrist—one who works in a community-based rehabilitation setting. She'll begin the certificate program this fall, gaining clinical experience and a deeper understanding of the recovery process.

"For a long time, I felt so lost and so alone. And when I finally found the thing that worked for me, it was literally life-changing," she said "I feel so much more accomplished and like I can handle so much more. And now I want to provide that kind of help to others."





*Lois Rockson, assistant professor and director of the Diagnostic Cytopathology program, leads New Jersey's only accredited cytopathology program. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers, School of Health Professions*

## LOIS ROCKSON: LEADER, INNOVATOR, AND INSPIRATION

In recognition of her work as an educator and in the field of health disparities, Lois Rockson, assistant professor of diagnostic cytopathology at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) was named a Hero of Pathology on Pathologist Magazine's Power List for 2024.

The Power List annually highlights professionals in pathology and laboratory medicine who inspire through leadership, innovation, principles, and drive. The Heroes of Pathology category specifically recognizes individuals who excel as problem-solvers and are on the front lines of expanding the field of pathology in their communities and delivering services to underserved populations—work that aligns with our mission.

Rockson sees this honor as an opportunity for the SHP Diagnostic Cytopathology program to enjoy some important public visibility in a field that sometimes faces challenges in recruitment. Cytologists analyze cells for signs of cancer.

"We're the only program in New Jersey that trains cytologists for practice," she said. "Pathologists, cytologists, and other laboratorians provide the data that informs the majority of health care decisions. But we're not the nurses and doctors people see on TV or interact with every day, so the profession is just not very well known."

Raising awareness of cytology sometimes means encouraging people she meets in daily life to pursue the program, if they seem like a good fit. Sitting and diligently looking through hundreds of thousands of cells takes a unique personality, but those people can be found everywhere, said Rockson, who also serves as vice president of the Society of Black Pathology.

"It's really crucial to draw from a diverse spectrum of students to bring in new ideas and ways of problem solving," Rockson said. "And this carries on as they move into practice. I have my students do implicit bias testing, because they're not just here to learn to identify cancer cells—but challenge their assumptions and expand their worldview."

Beyond the classroom, this diverse and global perspective drives her research goals as well. Focused on cancer screening among immigrant populations, Rockson brings that international awareness to approach her work at Rutgers.

"The pandemic showed us that what happens in one part of the world has an impact on all of us," she said. "We're seeing migration and refugee populations due to global unrest, and that impacts everything from our education down to lab work. By remaining outward facing, we can include what's happening globally in our decision-making."

This same forward-thinking view that makes her a Hero of Pathology has Rockson excited about the future of the field.

"Telepathology is already facilitating collaboration across thousands of miles and allowing us to do interpretation and diagnosis for people in rural areas or even other countries," she said. "As we continue to innovate, our ability to reduce the burden of disease and improve and extend lives, especially in underserved communities, will only grow."



# READYING FUTURE HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR THE AGE OF AI



*Jessica Gomes, associate Physician Assistant program director and assistant professor, advances innovation in teaching and learning as chair of SHP's Technology Inflection Group. | Photo Credit: John Emerson*

Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) Department of Health Informatics is staying on the cutting-edge of data science with a new, one-year certificate program on artificial intelligence in health care.

Our 18-credit AI in Healthcare Certificate program quickly builds competencies through hands-on application of artificial intelligence techniques and tools. Such skills are becoming increasingly necessary in both clinical decision-making as well as health care information management and data analytics.

Because AI is still in its infancy, we face the unique challenge of providing a curriculum that stays up-to-date with new developments and applications in the field.

"Aside from regular literature reviews, we get the most feedback from the recent graduates in our field," said Shankar Srinivasan, department chair in health informatics. "We find out from them what sorts of skills they're being asked about in interviews and what job requirements are being listed."

Srinivasan has already seen a shift in the industry from data management to more insight-driven data analytics. Machine learning and generative AI skills can be especially beneficial in this regard, extracting patterns and knowledge to assist in patient management, patient recruitment, and in solving problems related to health care delivery.

While our certificate program currently focuses on hands-on skill development that will allow graduates to hit the ground running in the workforce, opportunities such as an optional capstone project allow students

to explore new applications and ideas for AI. Srinivasan sees this playing a larger role in the program as access to software and tools improves.

In addition to serving as an introduction to the application of AI concepts, the certificate is an on-ramp for health professionals looking for a new career path. Many applicants come from a clinical or biotechnology background and are looking to gain proficiency and exposure to a new field.

"Nearly everyone who has entered the certificate program has ultimately moved on to the master's program," said Srinivasan. "It's a phenomenal way to get a grounding in the certificate, and when they see that they can still manage their work/life balance and studies, they switch to a Master's in Health Informatics."

This mirrors the long-term vision of the role AI competencies will play in the department. Srinivasan hopes to hire additional teaching faculty with an eye towards implementing a full AI in Healthcare track for the master's program.

"We're still a few years away from an industry standpoint," he said. "Not only with the availability of the software and tools, but for appropriate governance, standardization, and ethics rules to be put in place."

With the groundwork set from the certificate program, SHP is positioned to be ahead of the curve in preparing the next generation of health care professionals with the skills and capabilities needed to succeed.





# FINDING HER CALLING IN COUNSELING—AND SONG

Sabrina Lugo, Mental Health Counseling '25, performs the national anthem at SHP's 2025 Convocation. | Photo Credit: Island Photo

Sabrina Lugo thinks she has always been a bit of a therapist.

As an undergraduate, Lugo started her own business doing nails and noticed that clients she had never met before were opening up to her in very personal ways during their sessions.

At the time, she was a struggling biology major thinking of going to medical school. But after taking her first psychology course, she quickly changed her major. She decided to pursue a Master of Science in mental health counseling, and she graduated in spring 2025.

"I liked connecting with people in that way," Lugo said. "Giving them the space to feel safe and share has been something I value about myself, and that people seem to value about me."

As she earned her degree, Lugo worked at a wellness center with a mostly older population, which often involved shifting their perspective on what counseling is and how it could be beneficial to them.

"I love a challenge," she said. "They're often resistant at first, but once they open up they learn so much about themselves. It goes to show it's never too late to change."

Growing up, Lugo sang in choir and smaller performance settings but hadn't performed publicly in years. Yet, when she saw that Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) was seeking a student to sing the national anthem at her 2025 convocation, she applied—and was accepted.

"Music has always been a form of self-care and something I carry with me," Lugo said. "I wanted to show that there's more to us all than what we're studying in school."

She was also motivated for her five-year-old daughter to see her perform as a culmination to all the hard work of her degree, and to show her that she could do anything she put her mind to.

"I was so nervous, but she told me I did a good job," Lugo concluded with a laugh. "And she would have been brutally honest if I hadn't."





## DOCTORAL RECIPIENTS PAVING THE WAY FOR WOMEN OF COLOR IN HEALTH CARE

An emergency room physician assistant, faculty member, and mother of two, Dipali Yeh found the thought of pursuing a doctoral degree daunting. But when Rutgers University joined the Big Ten and the Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) dean urged faculty to get doctoral degrees to tap into new research funding, Yeh realized how badly she wanted it.

*Dipali Yeh, PhD; Jessica Gomes, DHSc; and Nkechi Mbadugha, DMSc—Physician Assistant faculty advancing equity, representation, and scholarship in PA education. | Photo Credit: John O’Boyle*

Seven years later, in May, Yeh stood in her graduation gown, her Ph.D. finally in hand. As a first-generation immigrant, she had achieved a milestone. She had also become one of a small group of women of color in the physician assistant department who in the past year all earned their doctoral degrees, joining colleagues Jessica Gomes and Nkechi Mbadugha, both children of immigrants.

“Women of color with doctoral degrees serve as vital role models,” Yeh said. “For me, personally, it was so important for my boys to see me achieve this. Every night, they’d see me head to my home office after putting them to bed. When they watched me walk across that stage, it all came together for them.”

In a field that often lacks diversity, the women see their degrees as powerful tools to challenge inequities in health care, advance research, and position themselves as mentors and role models to students of color pursuing careers where they are traditionally underrepresented. Research shows that students benefit from mentors who understand their experiences, said Yeh.

“As women of color with doctorates, our responsibility goes beyond personal achievement,” Yeh said. “We carry the power to bring fresh perspectives, to question norms, and to lead others toward professional advancement.”

“Having this degree lets my students see that there are no limits to what they can achieve,” added Gomes. “When students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, see their professors succeeding, it helps them shift their mindset from ‘Can I do this?’ to ‘How will I do this?’”

In the broader health care landscape, the contributions of women of color with advanced training ensures that diverse perspectives shape health care policies and practices.

“This kind of representation is essential for delivering equitable care,” Gomes said. “We understand the challenges faced by our communities, and we bring that understanding to patient care, education, and policy. By advancing our education, we are better equipped to lead, advocate, and inspire positive change in health care.”

Yeh, whose degree is in interprofessional health care studies, said she grew as a researcher, writer, and scholar. Her dissertation, inspired by her work in the emergency room during the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on how health care teams respond to crises. For her doctoral degree, Gomes explored the integration of functional medicine in health care education and is currently working on the use of artificial intelligence to enhance health care learning and practice, while Mbadugha concentrated on the use of film to teach psychiatric topics in medical education.

Mbadugha, who doesn’t recall being taught by any Black professors in the sciences, said it is empowering for other Black students to see someone they can identify with. “They talk to me about it all the time,” she said. “Recognizing that a Black woman who grew up in a lower socio-economic environment has made it to this point is important to them. It gives students from a similar background hope that they can also achieve great heights.”





James Moore, Physician Assistant '25, celebrates his success with family members. | Photo Credit: William Padilla

## SETBACKS AND THEN SUCCESS FOR STUDENT PURSUING PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT DEGREE

After dropping out of a physician assistant program in North Carolina following three grueling semesters, James Moore, then 28, found himself working third shift at a warehouse.

He had long dreamed of a career in medicine, but the coursework had proven more difficult than expected.

Moore thought the door to that future had closed.

"I remember the sadness on my mother's face," he said. "And then my father told me, 'It's OK to hit rock bottom. You just can't stay there.'"

So, he started again.

Moore enrolled in a master's degree program in physiology—a subject that had once been his greatest academic challenge. He didn't just get through it—Moore graduated with a 3.8 GPA.

When he applied to physician assistant schools again, he felt ready.

Nine years after leaving his first physician assistant program, Moore walked across the stage on May 20 as a member of Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP)'s class of 2025, receiving his Master of Science in Physician Assistant.

"This program is definitely hard, but I buckled down and focused," he said. "I didn't get a whole lot of sleep—just a whole lot of praying and a whole lot of studying. I kept persevering."

Moore, now 37, graduated in 2010 from a North Carolina university with a degree in biology, but his grades weren't strong enough for medical school. He returned to community college to retake science courses, then completed upper-level university classes before his first attempt at physician assistant school in 2016. To better prepare himself to try again, he sought his physiology degree and became a certified nursing assistant.

Still, he was surprised when Rutgers—now ranked No. 3 in physician assistant programs nationwide by U.S. News & World Report—offered him a spot in its program beginning in fall 2022. "I was speechless," Moore said. "I thought, 'How did someone like me get accepted?' I figured there were plenty of stronger applicants."

But the admissions team saw something more. "We read your story and got to know you," one member told him. "You're a testament to what can happen when people keep working, even when things don't go their way."

Matthew McQuillan, chair of the Department of Physician Assistant Studies and Practice, said Moore impressed everyone in the program with his grit and determination to succeed.



*His journey reflects the very purpose of our holistic admissions process:  
to identify individuals with the drive, compassion, and strength to  
make a lasting impact in the lives of their patients*

MATTHEW MCQUILLAN

"His story makes us especially proud to count him among our inspiring graduates."

His parents were at convocation—his mother in tears again, this time with pride. Moore's next goal: pass the certifying exam and find a job in primary care back home in North Carolina.

All through school, he repeated one message to himself: "Don't go back without that degree."

And he didn't.



# MAEKENZI DIXON ON FINDING HER VOICE



*MaeKenzi Dixon, Doctor of Physical Therapy '25, addresses peers as SHP's Class of 2025 student speaker. | Photo Credit: Island Photo*

When MaeKenzi Dixon stepped to the microphone to address the Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) Class of 2025 as student convocation speaker, she knew well the power and importance of using her voice.

Dixon fell in love with the field of physical therapy after taking an introductory course in high school, but she wasn't always convinced it was for her. She was overwhelmed by anxiety and fear, even before orientation, over whether she belonged. Her uncertainty was compounded by a noticeable shortage of women in the field who looked like her.

Now, having joined the roughly two percent of Doctor of Physical Therapy graduates who are African American women, she is proud to serve as an example for future students. "This is more than a personal milestone," Dixon said. "It's a reminder that representation matters, especially where we're overlooked."

In her speech to the Class of 2025, Dixon spoke to the responsibility she and her classmates hold as future health care providers. She shared her own experience of finding her voice as a provider during a clinical rotation on the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

While working with a therapy-resistant patient, Dixon visited the home and found that the patient was struggling in silence with challenges that the resources being provided couldn't address. By speaking up and advocating for modifications to make the home more accessible, Dixon improved the patient's ability to care for herself.

"Health care doesn't always start with a diagnosis," said Dixon. "Sometimes it starts with listening, showing up, seeing people, and advocating for them when they can't do it for themselves."



# BREAKING THROUGH

RESEARCH  
THAT  
FUELS  
CHANGE



*SHP students analyze laboratory slides as part of research-informed training that prepares them to contribute to discovery and translational science. | Photo Credit: John O'Boyle*

ADVANCING HEALTH AND CARE  
COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT 2024-2025



# NEW PROJECTS MAKING AN IMPACT

At Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), research moves beyond discovery—it drives better care. Our faculty pursue science with purpose, creating evidence-based solutions that improve health for individuals, communities, and entire populations. From addiction and mental health to advancing cancer treatment and veterans' care, SHP researchers are developing tools, therapies, and technologies that translate into real outcomes.

Among current research initiatives, faculty are harnessing mobile health technologies to expand access and promote health care equity. With support from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Zhaomeng Niu, assistant professor of health informatics, is developing a mobile intervention to help prevent skin cancer among Hispanic populations, who face a higher risk of late-stage melanoma diagnoses.

In rehabilitation science, a group of researchers supported by NIH and the National Science Foundation (NSF) is working to prevent falls in older adults and improve stroke recovery by mapping how brain connections influence movement—applying insights from neuroscience to restore function.

Our research responds to real, urgent needs. To ensure we can sustain and grow this work, we sharpened our research focus this year, targeting federal grants that support long-term programs and expand our reach in the community. That shift is already paying off.

In fiscal year 2024, SHP secured \$9 million in research funding—with a 15.9% increase in NIH support and a 42% jump in infrastructure funding. These gains mean we're better equipped than ever to conduct high-quality studies that matter. "These grants fund research that helps us build programs that deliver better care, reach underserved populations, and shape the future of health care," said Antonina Mitrofanova, associate dean for research. "Our commitment to community impact through science has never been stronger."

Our researchers are being recognized nationally. Mitrofanova was awarded the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE) from President Biden—the highest U.S. honor for early-career researchers—for her pioneering work in computational cancer biology and biomedical informatics. Her cancer-treatment prediction algorithms are already informing more personalized approaches to care.

## HELPING PEOPLE RECOVER FROM OPIOID USE DISORDER

Suchismita Ray, associate professor of health informatics, received a five-year NIH grant for a groundbreaking study combining mindfulness meditation and medication (guanfacine) to support long-term recovery from opioid use disorder.

## REACHING WOMEN AND MEN WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDER THROUGH TELEHEALTH

Ray is also a principal investigator on a five-year NIH study testing a telehealth approach to treating alcohol use disorder in women and men.

## EMPOWERING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Ni Gao, professor in psychiatric rehabilitation, received a three-year grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) to develop a digital toolkit that helps students with disabilities succeed in career and technical education programs.

## EXPANDING NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Ann Murphy, associate professor in psychiatric rehabilitation, is co-leading a national Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) project to strengthen how mental health programs are shared and sustained across the country.

## IMPROVING CARE FOR VETERANS EXPOSED TO ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

With funding from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Scott Parrott, professor in health sciences, is leading a study analyzing health conditions among veterans exposed to military-related environmental hazards such as burn pits.



# DATA THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

## THE RUTGERS RESEARCH THAT HELPED CHANGE VETERANS' HEALTH POLICY

Four years ago, a Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) professor received a federal grant to work with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to create a database of evidence linking toxic exposure from burn pits to diseases such as cancer and respiratory illnesses.

That work, led by Scott Parrott, director of SHP's Methodology and Statistics Support Team, helped push forward the 2022 PACT Act—a landmark law that significantly expanded health benefits for veterans exposed to airborne toxins during their service.

Named for a decorated combat veteran who died from a rare lung disease after deployment in Iraq, the PACT Act marked a turning point for veterans suffering from conditions linked to toxic exposure. Before the law, veterans had to prove their illness was directly caused by service in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations—a difficult, often impossible task.

"We didn't rewrite the law," Parrott said. "But we were honored to contribute to an important change that now allows veterans to be presumed eligible for benefits if they develop certain respiratory illnesses after serving in high-risk areas."

His VA grant was renewed this year and expanded. His team is now examining the relationship between toxic exposures and other conditions affecting Gulf War veterans, including interstitial lung disease, obstructive sleep apnea, and autoimmune disorders.

The effort began in 2021, when Parrott was asked by the VA to synthesize the scientific evidence linking military service to constrictive bronchiolitis, a rare but serious lung disease. Using a novel methodological approach, they challenged the framework previously used by the National Academies of Sciences, which had failed to establish a clear connection between exposure to burn pits and illness.

Their revised synthesis, submitted to the secretary of Veterans Affairs, was later presented to Congress—and helped influence change. Last December, the VA updated its clinical directives in



*Scott Parrott, PhD, professor, connects research to real life through family and community experiences that informed his studies on respiratory illness among veterans. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Scott Parrott*

accordance with the PACT Act, expanding health care for veterans who developed service-related health issues while deployed in the Persian Gulf region.

For Parrott, the work is deeply personal. His son-in-law, a veteran of multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and later a military contractor in Kuwait, now suffers from chronic respiratory disorders and cardio-pulmonary problems. He was one of the thousands of veterans participating in the VA's lung injury studies.

"When he came back from Kuwait, he had frequent infections, but never complained," Parrott said. "Then one day I watched him struggle to carry boxes up the stairs, stopping to catch his breath, and it all clicked. He's only in his mid-30s and can't swim or hike or play on the trampoline with his daughter like he used to. It's heartbreaking."

Parrott's work has also helped train the next generation of researchers. His project included 30 federal interns and eight from the Rutgers School of Pharmacy. Two of those interns have since joined the VA research staff.

His team is continuing to build systems that make it easier to keep scientific findings up to date, so new evidence can quickly reach researchers, policymakers, and military families. With the new funding, they've also been asked to expand the use of artificial intelligence to speed up and improve how they pull and combine military health data. This will help make the process faster and more accurate.

"This is really cutting-edge," Parrott said. "And as an Army dad, it's something I think is critically important."



# ANTONINA MITROFANOVA RECEIVES U.S. PRESIDENTIAL AWARD FOR CANCER TREATMENT RESEARCH

Faculty member and researcher Antonina Mitrofanova was awarded the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers—the U.S. government’s highest recognition for exceptional emerging scientists and engineers.

“This award is a tremendous honor,” said Mitrofanova, an associate professor and associate dean for research at Rutgers School of Health Professions who also serves as a research member at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey.

“I immigrated from Ukraine to the U.S. at 21 and decided to change my career from medicine to computer science. This award represents my ‘American Dream’ and is living proof that in the U.S., you can dream big and achieve it if you put your heart into it.”

Mitrofanova was one of 400 researchers who received the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE) award in January 2025 from President Joe Biden.

*Antonina Mitrofanova, associate professor and associate dean for research, received the nation’s highest honor given to early-career scientists for her pioneering work in cancer therapies. | Photo Credit: William Padilla*



The awardees were employed or funded by 14 governmental agencies. Mitrofanova’s recognition comes from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for her development of mathematical and computational algorithms that address biologically and clinically significant problems.

“This award is a testament to the incredible supportive environment that the School of Health Professions, Rutgers Health, and Rutgers created for scientists like me,” Mitrofanova said.

A pioneer in biomedical informatics, Mitrofanova specializes in identifying molecular biomarkers to predict treatment responses in cancer patients. Her work not only identifies patients at risk of developing resistance to treatments, but uncovers new therapeutic targets for those who fail traditional therapies.

Her lab uses advanced mathematical models to analyze complex molecular interactions rather than relying on single-gene markers.

“This approach provides deeper insights into disease progression and uncovers alternative treatment strategies for patients at risk of treatment failure,” Mitrofanova said.

A study by Mitrofanova published last year in Nature Communications introduced computational methods to predict which patients would benefit from a widely used prostate cancer drug. The study also proposed a strategy to extend the drug’s effectiveness.

Using sophisticated algorithms, Mitrofanova and her team identified why the prostate cancer drug enzalutamide (sold under the brand name Xtandi) fails for some patients and eventually stops working in others. By analyzing advanced prostate cancer patient data, they mapped interactions among molecular pathways and their upstream transcription factors—proteins that regulate multiple genes.

Mitrofanova’s lab is now expanding its research to address significant gaps in cancer biology, exploring the role of the non-coding genome in treatment response. If successful, said Mitrofanova, these approaches will help more patients receive the treatment they need and create pathways for developing non-traditional cancer therapies.

“We hope our work will guide the best therapeutic course for patients before they begin treatment, improving cancer management, outcomes, and quality of life,” she said.



## SUCHISMITA RAY

### EXPLORING NEW PATHS TO ADDICTION RECOVERY

When Suchismita Ray joined Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) in 2018, she arrived with a National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant that led to a groundbreaking study using brain imaging and advanced data analysis to distinguish individuals with opioid use disorder from those without it.



*Suchismita Ray, associate professor in health informatics, has garnered major grants that support her work in drug addiction recovery. | Photo Credit: Awesome Films*

This research is helping lay the groundwork for more precise, science-based approaches to diagnosing and treating addiction.

Since then, Ray, associate professor in health informatics, has continued to expand her research into both opioid and alcohol use disorders. In recognition of her contributions, she was awarded two major NIH grants in September 2024, further advancing her work on the neural mechanisms of addiction and relapse.

With a \$3.18 million grant, Ray is studying the effectiveness of extended-release guanfacine pharmacotherapy and mindfulness meditation—separately and together—in individuals receiving buprenorphine treatment for opioid use disorder. The goal is to improve stress regulation and reduce cravings, thereby lowering the risk of relapse.

She also received \$1.38 million to explore the use of extended-release guanfacine in women with alcohol use disorder, evaluating whether the medication can reduce cravings and improve impulse control. Together, these projects have the potential to inform more effective treatments and ultimately reduce addiction-related deaths nationwide.



*David Kietrys, associate professor and vice chair of the Department of Rehabilitation and Movement Sciences, received acclaim for his research into HIV-related neuropathy. | Photo Credit: William Padilla*

## DAVID KIETRYS

### HONORED FOR RESEARCH ADVANCING CARE FOR THOSE WITH HIV

Dave Kietrys, associate professor and vice chair of the Department of Rehabilitation and Movement Sciences at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), is receiving national recognition for his research on rehabilitation and disability issues for people living with HIV and HIV-related neuropathy.

Kietrys studies the impact of accessible, at-home treatments such as mindfulness meditation with the potential to improve patients' mobility and daily function. His research focuses on peripheral neuropathy, nerve damage that occurs outside of the brain and spinal cord, which often causes pain or numbness in extremities.

"By understanding how neuropathy impacts these patients' lives, we can help the evolution of effective and targeted treatments to control their pain and improve their quality of life and ability to function day-to-day," said Kietrys.

The American Physical Therapy Association's Academy of Oncology recognized Kietrys' work with two top honors this year. He was first presented the Research Award for his body of work in HIV therapy, acknowledging the enduring impact of his research in the field.

In addition to the recognition for the scope of his research, Kietrys also received the Research Platform Award for his presentation on a pilot study measuring the potential effects of mindfulness meditation and transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) on pain and quality of life compared to traditional medical care in patients with HIV experiencing neuropathy in their feet.


Physical therapy is changing to include behavioral interventions and wearables such as meditation and the TENS device. By investigating at-home treatments that may be easier for patients to use, Kietrys' work is paving the way for alternative therapies.



# EMPOWER COMMUNITIES

SERVICE THAT  
STRENGTHENS  
COMMUNITY  
HEALTH





Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP)'s commitment to community outreach continues to grow, bringing essential health care services to some of the state's most vulnerable populations who often have nowhere else to turn.

Our pro bono clinics and community programs address both physical and behavioral health needs—ranging from rehabilitation and primary care to mental health services. We have also created specialized programs to fill gaps in care—among them, a summer clinic on the Rutgers campus for individuals with paralysis, nutrition initiatives to improve children's health in Newark, and a center where young adults with autism can build life skills.

In these efforts, our faculty and students often work side by side with community partners to expand access to care. These experiences not only improve lives across New Jersey but also prepare our students to enter their professions with deeper understanding, empathy, and a determination to reduce health disparities.

*Jennifer Bridenbaugh, assistant professor in the Department of Preventive Clinical and Nutritional Sciences, supports food security and community health through service at Rutgers Health Food Pantry. | Photo Credit: William Padilla*

## DELIVERING COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY CARE

When the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation & Counseling Professions at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) opened a mental health clinic in January 2025, it expanded the reach of our pro bono clinics to include behavioral health, filling an important gap in providing a continuum of care to surrounding communities.

Through these community-based clinics, SHP provides primary care, rehabilitation, and now mental health services to populations who are often uninsured or underinsured and might otherwise go without.

The expanded network of community clinics reflects SHP's commitment to holistic care—treating not just individual conditions, but the wider needs of its surrounding communities.





A counselor provides individualized support, strengthening access to care for community members in need. | Photo Credit: peopleimages.com



Student Jennifer Burman, Speech-Language Pathology, '25, works on communication skills with a child at one of SHP's community clinics. | Photo Credit: John O'Boyle

## MENTAL HEALTH: A MISSING PUZZLE PIECE

When Aubrey Daniels, assistant professor in psychiatric rehabilitation and counseling, arrived at Rutgers in 2022, she brought experience as a clinic supervisor. Discussions about the possibilities of opening a mental health clinic for students and community members started during her interview, and Daniels immediately got to work.

"I had a lot of drive and passion for getting this up and running at Rutgers, so it's been an expedited process," said Daniels, who is also the clinic director. Daniels spent a year brainstorming and "dreaming," followed by another year of meeting with other Rutgers and community partners while setting up the background details.

She worked with Anthony Zazzarino, associate professor in psychiatric rehabilitation, relying on his 10-plus years of experience at Rutgers to identify barriers and needs for mental health care. They started by surveying (SHP) students and found a clear preference for more long-term services than were available through other campus resources.

Many of the available free services for students and community members were useful in crisis, but did not provide the continuity of regular visits or a familiar provider. Staffed by master's degree students in counseling and counselor education and supervision, with faculty supervising and seeing clients, the mental health clinic bridges this gap with both individual and group counseling services.

The clinic began seeing patients via telehealth visits in January 2025 and opened its doors for in-person services later that month. It also supports counseling groups for members with LGBTQIA+ identities, depression and anxiety, and teaches skills for emotional and social success.

"I want this to be a major learning space and a place to be creative as we learn the needs of the community," Daniels said.

## A HOLISTIC VIEW FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

As SHP expands its partnerships with the community, its holistic view informs every step. The broadened network of care allows the school to not only meet patients where they are in their health care journey, but to better understand their needs. It also helps students gain a deeper understanding of the communities they serve.

"We did community outings from the first semester," said Alexis Lashley, speech language pathology student who has worked in the program's Newark clinic. "At the clinic, we're working with people who might not have health insurance. Populations who might not otherwise be able to get services."

Through those experiences, she said, she's learned to better understand the challenges her patients face and the role the clinic plays in meeting those needs.

With the addition of the mental health clinic, Daniels meets monthly with a group of clinic directors from the network of therapy programs to share insights and updates.

This includes the Health Outreach Practice Experience (HOPE) clinic in Plainfield, where physician assistant students can gain clinical experience providing primary care, the speech-language pathology clinic, and the Community Participatory Physical Therapy Clinic and Newark Therapy Services for physical and occupational therapy students, all located in the underserved city of Newark.

The connection between clinics helps community members to reduce potential barriers to care they may experience in a disparate health system.

"The more we come together, the better clients can be served," Daniels said.



## PREPARING WELL-ROUNDED CLINICIANS WITH INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

In building a network of community-based clinics, SHP has positioned itself to provide an interprofessional education for its clinicians. Students from different disciplines not only learn from each other, but gain first-hand experience being part of a care team.

Students in the nutrition program, for example, have been able to visit HOPE clinic to integrate with the care there and support patients living with diabetes or improving their health through diet. Perhaps the strongest example of this collaborative, interdisciplinary work can be found at the Department of Rehabilitation and Movement Sciences' Summer Head Injury clinic.

After encountering a number of patients with head injuries assessed to have multiple needs, speech-language pathology Professor Kelly Pena began the Summer Head Injury clinic in 2021 to allow students from multiple therapy disciplines to collaborate on this specialty patient care.

"Physical therapy, speech-language pathology, and occupational therapy are three very different fields, but we all work together to help the patient reach common goals," said Laura Brady, occupational therapy student.

This collaborative work benefits patients as well, allowing them the level of coordinated care one might expect at a larger health care facility. And seeing how different disciplines work in the room provides a better understanding of how each discipline contributes to recovery.

"I'll be a better clinician having this experience," said Miguel Santana, a physical therapy student. "If I print out a home exercise program, I'll be more considerate about whether the patient has difficulty reading, making sure they understand, have pictures—just taking into account all these little things that can impact someone's health."



A Clinical Laboratory Sciences student practices precise laboratory techniques during a hands-on skills training session. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers, School of Health Professions





## A QUIET REVOLUTION IN MENTAL HEALTH:

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF PSYCHIATRIC  
REHABILITATION LED BY RUTGERS IN NEW  
JERSEY'S STATE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS

For 25 years, a quiet but powerful transformation has been taking place in New Jersey's state psychiatric hospitals.

A Rutgers-based team has been steadily changing the way inpatient psychiatric hospitals treat those with serious and persistent mental illness, replacing outdated custodial care through evidence-based psychiatric rehabilitation and modern, recovery-oriented approaches.

Launched as a partnership between Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) and the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the initiative's goal is not just to stabilize those with mental illnesses, but to help them rebuild their lives and reenter the community.



# A NEW MODEL OF CARE

The program began with the idea that people with even the most complex mental health challenges—many of whom had been confined to state hospitals for years—can recover, if given the right support.

For over two decades, the SHP team had offices inside the state’s psychiatric hospitals, including Greystone Park, Trenton, Ancora, Ann Klein Forensic Center, and the now-closed Hagedorn facilities.

Being embedded allowed them to observe clinical practice firsthand, train staff, design innovative person-centered care approaches involving patients in treatment decisions, assess how closely program models were followed through fidelity assessments, and conduct research to measure outcomes.

We weren’t just advising from the sidelines—we were fully integrated.

“We were flying under the radar for years,” said Program Director Thomas Bartholomew. “Because we were in the hospitals, not on campus, few people at Rutgers even knew we existed.”



*But our mission was clear: bring the goals, values, principles, and practices of psychiatric rehabilitation to settings that have traditionally delivered outdated, sometimes even harmful, care.*

THOMAS BARTHOLOMEW

Instead of the traditional medical model—where professionals diagnose, prescribe, and treat with little input from the patient—psychiatric rehabilitation emphasizes collaboration, asking patients what their goals are and what is meaningful to them. It gears treatment toward that vision.

“It’s a fundamentally different philosophy,” the director said. “And, as we’ve shown, a more effective one.”



Thomas Bartholomew, assistant professor in rehabilitation counseling, advances community-engaged teaching and service initiatives that extend SHP’s impact beyond campus. | Photo Credit: John Emerson



## INPATIENT TREATMENT MALLS

One of the most innovative models introduced by the team has been the inpatient treatment mall. In the traditional ward-based model, patients spend most of their day in a single unit, dependent on staff who are often overwhelmed and unable to meet the wide range of individual needs. The result is high levels of boredom, limited engagement, and missed opportunities for recovery, Bartholomew said.

Treatment malls change that.

“In a mall model, programming is centralized. Patients leave their units and attend a range of structured, specialized groups elsewhere in the hospital—like classes on symptom management, coping skills, diabetes care, or communication skills,” Bartholomew said. “It creates an economy of scale, allows for greater personalization, and addresses one of the most insidious problems in inpatient care: therapeutic inactivity.”

The team is now leading a national study on inpatient malls, making them among the foremost experts in the country on this increasingly adopted model.

## PROVEN IMPACT

The program’s early work focused on implementing a treatment called Illness Management and Recovery (IMR)—a group-based, evidence-supported model designed to help individuals understand and manage their symptoms, set goals, and prevent relapse.

Their research, published in a peer-reviewed medical journal, showed that for every hour a patient participated in IMR, the risk of psychiatric readmission decreased.

“But the key is doing it well,” Bartholomew said. “Hospitals are often so chaotic that we’d walk into an IMR group and find someone running it without training, without the manual, without fidelity. Quality is an ongoing challenge.”

To address this, the team developed training protocols, fidelity assessments, and long-term implementation strategies—all while navigating the enormous difficulty of changing entrenched systems.

“Good treatment can change the trajectory of a person’s illness,” the director said. “Recovery isn’t just possible—it’s likely, with the right support.”

## THE HUMAN SIDE

Behind the data are compelling stories that show what’s possible when treatment shifts from maintenance to recovery.

One woman had lived in a hospital for 21 years with complex issues including being unable to read. In addition to social skills training, a nurse taught her diabetes management using pictures. She left the hospital and now lives in the community, said Bartholomew.

Another woman who struggled with emotion regulation issues and was frequently restrained completed a type of behavioral therapy that teaches people to manage intense emotions. After her discharge, she became a peer advocate, helping others navigate their recovery.

“There are hundreds of stories I could tell,” said Bartholomew. “They’re the result of intentional, evidence-based, person-centered work. And they’re proof that good treatment changes lives.”

## COVID: A NEW ERA

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, inpatient hospital treatment programs were suspended and group activities much reduced.

In response, the Rutgers team pivoted, moving their training models online.

The team established the Institute for Inpatient Psychiatric Rehabilitation, a virtual hub located on the Rutgers Health website, for research, training, and collaboration with other hospitals nationwide.

They’ve conducted multiple national studies on topics ranging from competency restoration to reducing the use of restraints.

Their free trainings and webinars dedicated to improving inpatient psychiatric rehabilitation have been viewed more than 250,000 times since 2021.

Users have logged in from around the world—including India, Pakistan, Africa, and the Netherlands.

“Psych rehab was born in the U.S., and we’re one of the only programs in the country focused exclusively on inpatient psychiatric treatment for serious mental illness,” said the director. “Now we’re training people globally.”



## WHAT COMES NEXT

As the program celebrates its 25th anniversary, recent funding cutbacks have whittled the team down from five to just three people, running multiple centers, managing state and federal grants, and continuing to build a national evidence base for inpatient rehab.

SHP doctoral student Jake Mariani is working with Bartholomew on further research into recovery strategies that will reduce readmission rates to state hospitals. "There is a lot of room for this type of treatment to grow," said Mariani, who is working on his Ph.D. in Psychiatric Rehabilitation. "The long-term goal is to help people leave institutions if they are capable rather than letting them languish."

The mission remains urgent.

"We're fighting a tide of disempowering treatment," said Bartholomew. "But every day, we see how much more is possible."

After 25 years, the message is clear: treatment works. And with the help of this groundbreaking program, some of society's most marginalized individuals are reclaiming their lives.



*An educator supports a student through individualized learning that strengthens pathways to education and opportunity. | Photo Credit: SeventyFour*





# THROUGH THEIR EYES

## NEWARK MOTHERS EXPLORE FOOD INEQUITY USING PHOTOGRAPHY

When a Newark mother used a wheelchair to lower herself to her child’s eye level in the grocery store, what she saw startled her: row after row of ultra-processed snacks, sugary cereals, and brightly colored drinks—all within easy reach of a preschooler. “I couldn’t believe how everything was designed to target them,” she said.

That moment was sparked by a partnership between Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) and a Newark Head Start agency using Photovoice—a participatory research method that empowers community members to document issues in their daily lives through photography. The project’s goal was not just to study food insecurity, but to help families in underserved areas question the systems that shape how and what their children eat.

“As a culture, we bombard low-income communities with advertisements for fast food and ultra-processed food,” said Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia, professor in preventive nutrition science and qualitative methods researcher. “This was about engaging people as experts in their own lives and helping them critically examine their food environments.”

The project was funded by a Rutgers Equity Alliance for Community Health (REACH) grant to pilot-test approaches for building community-participatory food justice movements.

Over four weeks, thirty mostly Black mothers, including recent immigrants from African countries, were given cameras and asked to capture images of the food environments that influenced how they fed their children—at home, in stores, and in restaurants. In total, they took more than 800 photographs.



The images became a conversation starter in focus groups, where mothers explained why they took particular photos and what they represented. “At first, the conversations were about price and feeding kids on a tight budget,” said Rothpletz-Puglia. “But over time, they started questioning why things were the way they were—why healthy food is so hard to get, and why unhealthy food is everywhere.”

The project revealed deeper structural barriers. While the mothers appreciated WIC, they noticed that the assigned stores didn’t always carry fresh produce. They described the difficulty of getting to better-stocked stores on public transit. They shared that it was easier to shop in neighborhood stores such as Afro-Caribbean markets, where there are fewer ads targeting children, or local fish markets for fresher food. But those stores were often more expensive.

“These parents want to make healthy choices, but financial constraints and the surrounding food environment make it extremely difficult,” said Rothpletz-Puglia. “Sometimes buying a less expensive treat, like a candy bar a child wants in the grocery checkout, may be one of the few times a parent can say ‘yes.’”

The project also pushed back on a larger cultural assumption: that children should eat differently from adults. “We have this idea that kids need ‘kid food’—chicken nuggets, pizza and ultra-processed food filled with sugar, fat and sodium—but they don’t,” she said. “They can eat the same healthy food we eat.”

In December 2024, Rutgers and the Leaguer’s Inc. Head Start early education agency held a public exhibit of the mothers’ photos and voices. More than 70 people attended, including parents, local business owners, and community leaders. One mother, featured in a five-minute video, described how the experience prompted her to rethink how she feeds her family.

Still, Rothpletz-Puglia emphasized that behavior change wasn’t the project’s primary goal – rather than aiming to convince parents to say “no” to unhealthy foods, it was meant to create awareness about the food environment and develop critical consumers and change agents.

The exhibit is now traveling across the Leaguer’s Inc.’s 11 Head Start centers in Newark, Irvington, Roselle, and Elizabeth, continuing to raise awareness. With additional funding, Rothpletz-Puglia hopes to build on the momentum to support advocacy and community-driven change.

“We feed our kids based on what’s available, affordable, and advertised to them,” she said. “These mothers started asking why there is so much unhealthy food and advertising to children—and that’s where real change in communities begins.”



With a Rutgers equity alliance grant, Professor Pamela Rothpletz-Puglia explores food insecurity in the Newark community. | Photo Credit: John Emerson



# TRUE GRIT

## HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPINAL CORD INJURIES RECLAIM INDEPENDENCE

On a summer morning at Rutgers’ Livingston Campus, a group of teens and young adults in wheelchairs roll across the quad, heading to breakfast in the dorm dining hall. Later, some will take part in adaptive sports. Others will swap stories over coffee at the campus Starbucks.

All are part of True Grit—a first-of-its-kind residential summer camp that helps young people with spinal cord injuries rediscover confidence, community, and a sense of possibility.

Many of the participants, aged 16 to 21, were athletes before their injuries—football players, cheerleaders, competitors used to working in teams. Now, navigating life in a wheelchair, they’re coming together to build new teams, new routines, and hope for their future.

“After an injury, everything can feel like it’s been stripped away—your identity, your independence,” said Keara McNair, MS, clinical lecturer and capstone project manager in the Department of Rehabilitation and Movement Sciences in Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), who leads the program. “One of our campers told us, ‘I felt like I was back on the team again.’”

Run by SHP, in collaboration with RWJBarnabas Health Children’s Specialized Hospital, the True Grit Spinal Cord Injury Program fills a gap in care for young people transitioning to adulthood after spinal cord injury (SCI). While traditional rehab focuses on recovery, True Grit helps participants imagine what comes next—college, careers, relationships, and independent living.

Now in its second year, the program includes not only the immersive summer camp experience, but also single-day events, such as a beach day where participants can enjoy adaptive surfing, swimming, and accessible beach access, as well as year-round support for families.

“

*That’s what True Grit  
gives them—a reason to  
get up in the morning*

KEARA MCNAIR

*Jashar Banks, in wheelchair, returns to the program as a mentor  
for others after having experienced True Grit as a participant in  
2024. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers University*

Among the returning campers this summer was Isaac Lima, a former cheerleader from New Jersey who suffered a spinal injury at age 14 after a fall during a stunt. Paralyzed from the chest down, he first attended True Grit in 2024, which marked his first time away from home since the injury. He returned in 2025, joining two other returning participants from Tennessee and Massachusetts.

“Being here, it gave me like that push to say, ‘Oh, I can do it. I can go to a college. I can go to the classrooms,’” Isaac said in an NJ Spotlight News segment that aired on PBS in July.

True Grit also provides a learning experience for students. This year, 25 Rutgers students helped support the program including four counseling students from our Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling, three occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students, and more than 10 Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) students. Alumni from the inaugural year also returned to volunteer and mentor the next cohort.

Held in accessible campus housing, the week-long camp gives participants a chance to live away from family with the support of therapists, nurses, and peer mentors, some of whom have SCI themselves. “This is about more than just skills,” McNair said. “It’s about showing them that their lives aren’t over. They’re just beginning—differently.”

As the program grows, organizers are committed to keeping it low or no cost to families and ensuring it continues to serve as a one-of-a-kind clinical learning environment for Rutgers students.

*Brianna Heard, Occupational Therapy Doctorate ‘24, works  
with Isaac Lima, a former cheerleader from New Jersey who was  
paralyzed in a fall. | Photo Credit: Courtesy Rutgers University*



# DRIVING IMPACT

ALUMNI  
IN  
ACTION





With more than 14,000 graduates, Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) alumni are working and contributing to every aspect of health care. They are on the front lines of patient care, and behind the scenes in data and diagnostics, and in labs, clinics, classrooms, and communities. They are clinicians, researchers, educators, and leaders who use what they learned at SHP to make lives better.

Many return to our school as mentors, guest lecturers, and adjunct faculty, sharing their time and expertise to guide the next generation of health professionals. Through their service, innovation, and commitment, our alumni demonstrate the power of an SHP education—and inspire our students to make their own mark on the future of health care.





# RUTGERS ALUMNA BECOMES BRIGADIER GENERAL



Cindy Saladin-Muhammad, NCAS '91, SHP '91, applies her Rutgers training to advance military medicine and give back through alumni leadership. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Brig. Gen. Cindy Saladin-Muhammad

Cindy Saladin-Muhammad holds several singular distinctions. She serves as deputy commanding general of the 807th Medical Command and was recently promoted to brigadier general in the U.S. Army Reserve, one of only a handful of African American women to attain that rank in the medical field of the military.

Saladin-Muhammad NCAS'91, SHP'91, her husband, Sayyed Muhammad, who was in Army Special Operations, and her son, Air Force Tech Sergeant Reshard Saladin, have a combined 75 years of U.S. military service.

In addition, she is a Six Sigma master black belt and a resiliency coach and has held leadership positions in an international pharmaceutical corporation.

“Rutgers University had a significant impact on my career and my life,” she says.



*The university's diverse academic programs, emphasis on critical thinking, and commitment to community engagement gave me a strong foundation for pursuing my career goals in the private and military sectors.*

BRIG. GEN. CINDY M. SALADIN-MUHAMMAD

All these achievements began with her desire to be a toxicologist, a dream she realized after earning two Rutgers bachelor's degrees—one in clinical laboratory sciences from Rutgers University–Newark and one in toxicology from Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP).

After graduating from high school in Newark, New Jersey, she joined the Army in 1984, which gave her opportunities to travel and learn. She enlisted as a private, intending to complete her initial entry obligation of four years and perhaps be promoted once or twice.

“My goal was to obtain funding to further my studies after high school,” she says. “I never imagined a day I would be a brigadier general.”

Her four years in the Army positioned her with a “less than traditional start” to college life, but she was ready for the challenge. Rutgers offered her an affordable, close-to-home opportunity to earn a degree in toxicology while working and being near her family.

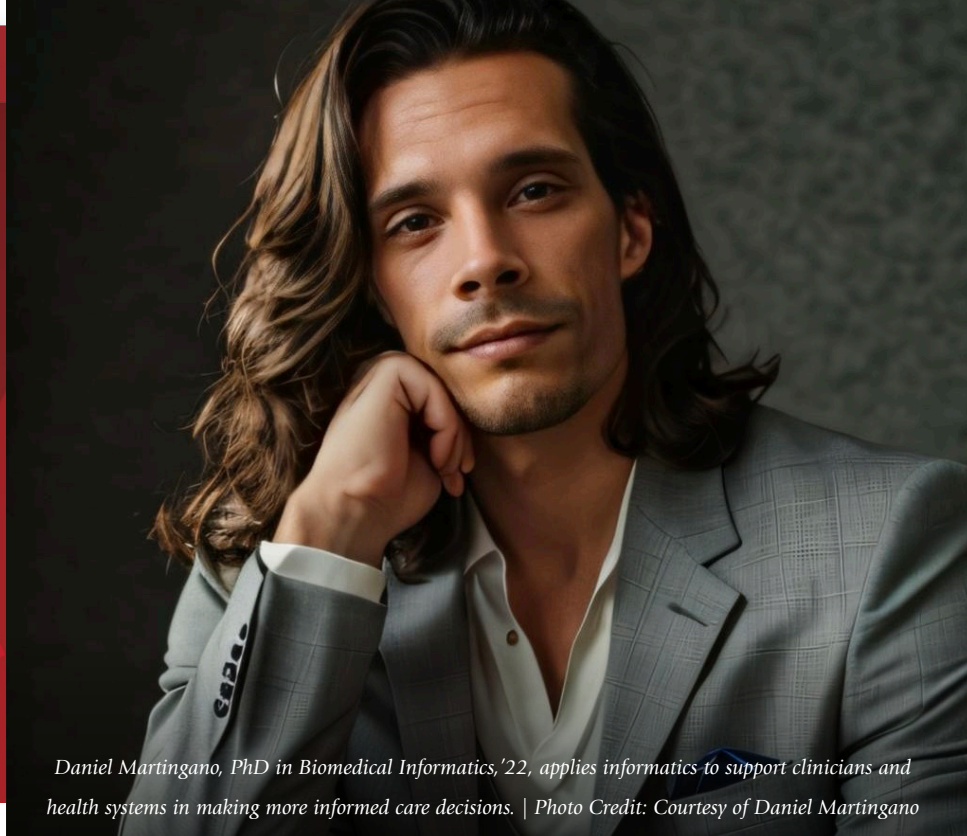
“I knew at quite a young age I wanted to be a toxicologist, and I knew Rutgers offered toxicology,” she says. “The added benefit was that this outstanding school was minutes from where I lived in New Jersey. I needed help from my family to complete school, so being close to home was critical.”

## GIVING BACK TO RUTGERS

After traveling the globe to lead military operations, she sits at Rutgers, not in a classroom, but in a boardroom with her fellow Rutgers University Alumni Association (RUAA) board members, poised to offer her knowledge and expertise.

“I have not always been able to give back to Rutgers—my heart always wanted to, but life always got in the way,” Saladin-Muhammad says. “Serving on the board has allowed me to pay it forward. Networking and mentoring have been instrumental to my career, and the networking, engagement, and mentorship opportunities available via my involvement with RUAA can be invaluable in shaping a successful career for others.”





Daniel Martingano, PhD in Biomedical Informatics '22, applies informatics to support clinicians and health systems in making more informed care decisions. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Daniel Martingano

# FROM MEDICINE TO THEOLOGY:

## A COMMITMENT TO COMPASSIONATE, MOM-CENTERED CARE

### Q & A WITH DR. DANIEL J. MARTINGANO

DO, MBA, PHD, DDIV, FACOG, FACPM, FMIGS | PH.D. IN BIOMEDICAL INFORMATICS '22 | OB-GYN SPECIALIST AT A WOMEN'S HEALTH CLINIC IN QUEENS, RUTGERS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, AND EDITOR

#### WHAT DROVE YOU TO BECOME A DOCTOR SPECIALIZING IN OB-GYN?

I wanted my work—both academic and clinical—to benefit others. OB-GYN and women's health broadly offers the opportunity to do tremendous good for mothers and their newborns and is one of the few fields in which the physician can fully resolve certain conditions through medical management with surgery. When care is driven by academic insight and delivered in a compassionate manner, you can significantly impact the lives of these women and children for the better.

#### AS A MEDICAL DOCTOR, WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO ALSO PURSUE DEGREES IN HEALTH INFORMATICS, THEOLOGY, AND BUSINESS? AND HOW DID YOU FIND TIME?

One of the key things I learned from Antonina Mitrofanova, my mentor at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP), was the value of understanding every facet of the work you do. As a physician, I constantly interact with the business side of health care and research methodologies, so I wanted to learn from the experts in those areas. That led me to pursue a Ph.D. in Biomedical Informatics and an executive MBA in healthcare management—fields that, while distinct, are essential to delivering care.

Theology was a more personal pursuit. For me, seeking truth in science and service inevitably led to seeking truth in the divine. I earned a Doctor of Divinity degree to deepen my understanding of compassion, which is the foundation of everything I strive to do as a physician and human being.

As for how I found the time—that's a great question. Online learning and computational research certainly helped. When in-person attendance was required, I made arrangements as best I could. It really came down to willpower, dedication, and the incredible support of people like Mitrofanova, who made accommodations for my hectic schedule. I'm incredibly grateful.

#### WHAT ARE SOME SIGNIFICANT PATIENT OUTCOMES IN YOUR WORK, EITHER IN PRACTICE OR RESEARCH, THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

One that stands out is my research on preterm prelabor rupture of membranes—a serious condition where a woman's water breaks too early, putting the baby at risk for infection. Our study was the first prospective one to show that using azithromycin compared to erythromycin significantly reduced the risk of maternal and neonatal infections while maintaining the same time to delivery.

Our findings were later validated by other studies and helped shift the standard of care nationwide. Our work has impacted thousands of patients across the country—and probably the world.

#### WHAT MIGHT PEOPLE BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU

I have a twin brother who is a fashion designer and regional visual manager for Adidas. He has to be adept with people (like a physician), skilled at working with tools and sewing (like a surgeon), and be able to make predictions in the field of fashion and marketing (like a scientist). We always laugh about the similarly dissimilar lives we live, and he is my greatest friend and blessing.

#### WHAT HAD THE MOST IMPACT ON YOU DURING YOUR TIME AT RUTGERS SHP?

Working with Mitrofanova was the single greatest educational experience of my entire career. Her mentorship shaped the kind of physician and academian I strive to be. It is no surprise that she has received all the accolades she has. (Most recently, Dr. Mitrofanova was honored by the Biden administration for her groundbreaking cancer research.)



# MAKING SECOND CHANCES POSSIBLE

LISA LACON, REHABILITATION COUNSELING M.S. '08 AND  
PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION PH.D. '20

Lisa LaCon's experience with depression led her to pursue rehabilitation counseling and psychiatric rehabilitation at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP). Today, she co-leads a Newark-based nonprofit with her husband, Sean, that helps marginalized populations find pathways to employment and stability.

"As a Black woman with a mohawk, I wasn't what people expected a scholar to look like. In many ways, I related to the stigma and shame my clients experienced," LaCon said. "When I left the workforce to care for my children, I battled severe depression. Returning to work was part of my recovery—it gave me purpose. Now, I want to offer that same opportunity to my clients."

In recognition of her impact, LaCon received SHP's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2022. She and her husband co-founded Blessed Ministries, Inc. (BMI), a \$1.4 million nonprofit that partners with businesses to hire individuals facing barriers to employment, including people with disabilities, those previously incarcerated, and individuals receiving public assistance.

The results speak for themselves: BMI clients have maintained a 70 percent or higher employment retention rate at 180 days. One man, formerly incarcerated for many years, logged 500 internship hours through BMI's Pathways to Recovery program, became a certified peer recovery specialist, and was still steadily employed 18 months later, supporting his family.

LaCon recalls being nervous about returning to school for her master's degree after a decade at home with her children. "I fell in love with the rehabilitation counseling program," she said. "The professors were so encouraging—they understood I wasn't a traditional student." That support inspired her to continue on for her doctorate, which deepened her expertise in working with people living with serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

"We serve very vulnerable populations who are too often stigmatized—people with disabilities, and those on parole or probation," she said.

“

*My experiences at Rutgers shaped how I approach this work: with respect, empathy, and a nonjudgmental lens.*

LISA LACON



Lisa LaCon, MS in Rehabilitation Counseling '08 and PH.D in Psychiatric Rehabilitation '20, works to widen workforce access for people with disabilities and those previously incarcerated. | Photo Credit: Island Photo



# LOVE, LOSS, AND A LONGBOARD

When a prospective student rolled up to his informational interview on a longboard—and popped it into his hand with a practiced kick—Jennifer Joseph, an assistant professor in the Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) physician assistant program, was horrified.

“I thought, ‘I have to meet with this punk for the next half hour and try to give him advice?’” said Joseph, laughing.

But that meeting turned into an hour. By the end, she was sold.

“We became fast friends,” she said. “He had a place in my heart from that time forward.”

That “punk” was Joey Leveille—known for skating down the aisle during the most recent season of Netflix’s reality dating show “Love Is Blind.” While things didn’t end with a wedding, Leveille, a 2015 graduate of SHP’s physician assistant program, won over viewers with his sincerity, his quirkiness, and his fun-loving personality.



*Joey Leveille, Physician Assistant, '15, exemplifies the diverse paths SHP alumni take—bringing authenticity, compassion, and clinical excellence to health care. | Photo Credit: Netflix*

## A REALITY ROMANCE (SORT OF)

Leveille, who lives in Minnesota, said he turned down producers twice before finally agreeing to appear on the show, which was filmed in 2023 and 2024, and premiered in February 2025.

“I was dating someone the first few times they called, but that didn’t work out—and then the third time was the charm,” said Leveille, who works as a physician assistant and administrative manager at a same-day clinic outside Duluth.

The premise of “Love Is Blind” is simple: Fall in love with someone—and get engaged—before you ever see them. In Season 8, Leveille was one of a group of hopefuls looking to meet their match through a wall. The then-35-year-old quickly connected with Monica, a 27-year-old digital marketer.

They bonded over a mutual dislike of country lyrics, a shared love of swing dancing, and that The “Sound of Music” is their favorite movie.

After proposing to Monica during “pod week,” Leveille met her face-to-face, bounding into the room in his signature energetic style.

“It was the wildest thing ever,” he said. “You know this person—but you don’t know this person. You’re connecting emotionally first, then meeting physically. It was like a mind explosion.” Compared with others on the show, their relationship was surprisingly drama-free—until Monica’s sister refused to give her blessing, and she began to have doubts.

On what was to be their wedding day, Leveille rolled up to the altar on his longboard dressed in a baby-blue suit, but Monica ultimately said no. Leveille took it with grace. In an interview, he said they actually had agreed the night before that neither was ready, and the refusal did not come as a surprise.





Joey Leveille on the set of "Love is Blind." | Photo Credit: Netflix

### BACK TO REAL LIFE (WITH A LITTLE FAME)

Off-screen, Leveille is back to work. His appearance on "Love Is Blind", followed by talk shows, have made him somewhat of a celebrity.

"That guy gave me a strep throat test!" one fan posted online. Leveille said he doesn't mind the attention.

"People ask me for pictures, and I'm glad to do it," he said. "I'm an extrovert—I don't mind at all."

Leveille, who was home-schooled through high school, was a student at a Minnesota college when he came to Rutgers through a summer program for low-income students to participate in research. That experience led to publishing a paper on Alzheimer's disease—and a meeting with Joseph to learn about becoming a physician assistant.

Two years later, he was accepted into our physician assistant program.

"He had so much depth and compassion," Joseph said. "At the time, he was working overnight shifts at a traumatic brain injury facility to pay for school—and still had a 3.9 GPA. He loved working with people and helping them."

She added, "So, the boy with the longboard turned out to be one of the best students I've ever met."

As for the longboard? Leveille calls it his "emotional support." Skating helps ease his anxiety. And yes, it really was his idea to ride it up to the altar (with Monica's consent). Leveille was planning to return to the PA program in the fall as part of a panel of alumni to speak with students.

He might even glide in on his board.





Corey Hawes, DCN '22, applies advanced clinical nutrition training to lead research that improves care for pediatric patients. | Photo Credit: Courtesy of Corey Hawes

## Q & A WITH COREY HAWES, DCN '22

CLINICIAN, ADJUNCT  
PROFESSOR, RESEARCHER—  
AND IRONMAN

### WHAT DREW YOU TO THE DOCTOR OF CLINICAL NUTRITION PROGRAM AT RUTGERS SCHOOL OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS (SHP)?

I knew that I wanted to be stronger clinically. I felt the DCN program at SHP would enhance my skill set and knowledge in a variety of ways including advanced clinical practice and clinical/translational research. There's something unique about those combinations that are difficult to find elsewhere.

### WHAT WERE PIVOTAL POINTS IN YOUR CAREER?

Joining the Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Team at Kentucky Children's Hospital. Pediatric Hem/Onc was always where I wanted to be, but jobs are limited in this area. Joining this team has allowed me to grow and practice to my fullest potential. The trust and relationship I have with my team to fully manage all our patients without hesitation or questioning has shown what our profession could be.

### WHAT ARE TWO HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR CAREER?

Finishing my DCN. This would not have happened if it wasn't for the support of my wife and family, but also of my program advisors, Jane Zeigler and Rebecca Brody.

They were always there in a moment's notice to turn to, to help guide or to navigate me through the program. They are still there today, helping me navigate the rest of my career.

The second highlight is the first grant that I got as a principal investigator. I received \$25,000 to run a clinical trial within the Pediatric Hem/Onc field to examine nutrition interventions and alternative measures of success using novel body composition measures. Without the knowledge and rigorous research processes that the DCN program instilled in me, I would not have gotten this opportunity. This has also opened other doors for collaboration and additional clinical studies that can, hopefully, improve our nutrition care to patients and optimize their survival.

### WHAT MIGHT PEOPLE BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

I am a ranked all-world triathlete who has completed multiple Ironman and Ironman 70.3 races. I have qualified for the Ironman 70.3 World Championship in Marbella, Spain, to be held on Nov. 9, 2025. I've competed in Nationals for the last three years, but this is my first year making the World's Championship.





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