

AT THE Vanguard

ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023



RUTGERS

School of Health Professions

ANNUAL REPORT 2022–2023

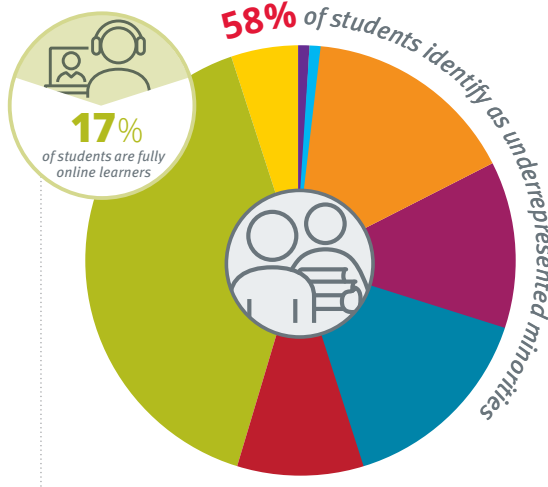
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by the numbers

1,359 students enrolled

- <1% American Indian
- 20% Asian
- 12% Black
- 18% Hispanic
- <1% Hawaiian
- 6% Two or More Races
- 39% White
- 5% Unknown



141 faculty

102 staff



23 graduate and undergraduate degree programs



11 graduate and undergraduate certificate programs

2 locations



and a global classroom



530

Graduates in 2023



13,600+ alumni

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



Alma S. Merians, PT, Ph.D.

Interim Dean
Rutgers School of
Health Professions



Our greatest pride is our students, who are diligent, energetic, conscientious. Driven by a strong moral compass, they work hard to improve the health and well-being of New Jersey residents.



As I reflect on this past year at the School of Health Professions (SHP), I see a vibrant community at the forefront of addressing critical needs in health care. Our commitment to meeting demands has led to the creation of new degree programs. Our students are making an impact in underserved communities during their clinical training. Our faculty continues to lead through education and research.

As my tenure as interim dean concludes, I extend my immense gratitude to the faculty, chairs, program directors, associate deans, and administrators for their support and true cooperation. At SHP, we are fortunate to have faculty, administrators, and staff all working together seamlessly for the benefit of the students. Our faculty members are the heart of this school. They nurture and mentor students and shape New Jersey's health care workforce.

Our greatest pride is our students, who are diligent, energetic, conscientious. Driven by a strong moral compass, they work hard to improve the health and well-being of New Jersey residents. Their commitment is evident in our clinics where the students, under the supervision of our faculty, provided exceptional pro-bono care in 2022–23 to more than 800 people without insurance or financial means.

This year, we unveiled a new student center, providing an inviting space for students to study and socialize, both individually and in groups.

We also launched our GAP program—"Growing Accomplished Professionals." This mentorship program pairs first-generation, underrepresented students with practicing professionals. We're excited to say that this pilot program will soon be expanded across all SHP programs.

Our research continues to flourish. In the 2022–23 academic year, we reached \$9 million in grant funding, an increase of over \$2 million from the previous year. It is important to note that the research at SHP is directed toward developing innovative interventions for people with chronic health care problems ranging from Parkinson's Disease to mental health issues. We are pleased to welcome four new tenure track faculty members and researchers, three of whom have joint appointments between SHP and the Rutgers Brain Health Institute.

We are delighted to welcome Jeffrey DiGiovanni, Ph.D. as our new dean. Chosen after a nationwide search, he joined us in early October, bringing a wealth of higher education experience and an extensive background in engineering and audiology. I plan to continue as associate dean of interprofessional education and look forward to returning to my passions—teaching and research.

Once again, my heartfelt thanks to all who have contributed to SHP's success. Success is the sum of numerous small efforts, and I believe that everyone's efforts have contributed to our many remarkable achievements.



Brian L. Strom, M.D., M.P.H.
Chancellor
Rutgers Biomedical and
Health Sciences

As the preeminent health professions school in the state, consistently acclaimed among the finest in the country, the School of Health Professions (SHP) assumes a pivotal role in Rutgers Health’s steadfast pursuit of its mission—delivering exceptional health care, education, training, research, and groundbreaking discoveries, both for the people of New Jersey and well beyond. Within the pages of this report, entitled “At the Vanguard,” you will discover the ways in which SHP leads the charge in education, research, and service.

In the wake of the post-COVID era, the demand for mental health practitioners has surged nationwide, and SHP is playing a crucial role in addressing this pressing need within our community. Over the past years, SHP has made significant strides by doubling its enrollment in the master’s program for mental health counseling. To further bolster mental health services, the school has partnered with the New Jersey Department of Education, dedicating its efforts to fortify mental health support services in New Jersey schools through the governor’s Enhancing School Mental Health Services Project.

SHP remains unwavering in its commitment to meeting the diverse needs of our community across all its programs. This year, SHP proudly graduated its inaugural class of speech-language pathologists, adeptly trained to serve a multicultural population. We’ve continued to provide health care to underserved regions of the state through free clinics, with the Health Outreach Practice Experience Clinic (H.O.P.E.) securing funding to expand its on-site testing capabilities and double its patient care hours by opening for an additional day.

The bedrock of our school’s excellence lies in its dedicated faculty. This year, we celebrated several national honors bestowed upon our faculty members for their tireless efforts in educating society on critical health issues. The 2022–2023 honors include:

- **2022 Clinical or Health Sciences Investigator Award, RBHS Chancellor Awards**—Awarded to Weili Lu, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions.
- **Lifetime Achievement Award, The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics**—Presented to Julie O’Sullivan Maillet, Professor, Department of Clinical and Preventive Nutrition Sciences.
- **Master Faculty Award, Physician Assistant Education Association**—Conferred upon Matthew McQuillan, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Physician Assistant Studies and Practice.
- **2022–2023 Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Award, Rutgers University**—Acknowledging the dedication of Pamela M. Rothpletz-Puglia, Associate Professor and Program Director, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies.

In addition to our esteemed faculty, it is my pleasure to announce that SHP has welcomed a new dean in October, following an extensive nationwide search. Jeffrey DiGiovanni, a distinguished scholar in communications sciences and disorders with substantial experience in higher education, joins Rutgers, having served as the acting associate dean of research for the College of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Cincinnati.

The growth and development of the School of Health Professions over the past eight years fill us with immense pride. The school’s burgeoning national reputation, expanding clinical endeavors, enriched opportunities for faculty development and fulfillment, and an ever-growing body of research all point toward an even brighter future on the horizon.

Thank you for your unwavering support as we continue to make strides in healthcare, education, and research that positively impact not only our local community but the broader world as well.



“

Our main job is to find that cancer cell. But I never forget it is not just a glass slide but a patient behind that slide—a patient you might never know or interact with, but a person to whom you are giving a very important diagnosis.

”

FARHANA KABIR, STUDENT

AT THE VANGUARD

The Rutgers School of Health Professions is more than an institution of learning—it's at the vanguard of community health. Through a diverse range of programs and initiatives, our students are immersed in hands-on experiences that bring health care services to the underserved, bridging gaps, and ensuring access to quality care. From the moment students begin their educational journey, they are learning to make an impact.

COMPASSIONATE CARE

Throughout their tenure, students undergo intensive clinical training, with many participating in SHP-established community clinics in underserved areas like Newark and Plainfield.

Under supervision, our students administer vital services such as physical therapy, speech therapy, primary care, and mental health counseling to populations that often have complex medical histories and limited health care access. These experiences ensure our students gain the knowledge and sensitivity critical to optimal health care.

Unique learning opportunities also come in remote locations. Over several years, students in our Doctor of Physical Therapy program have traveled to a federal Indian Health Services clinic in Teec Nos Pos, Arizona to provide care to Navajo Indians. In this rural desert area, where services are scarce, these students treat patients whose experiences are vastly different than their own.

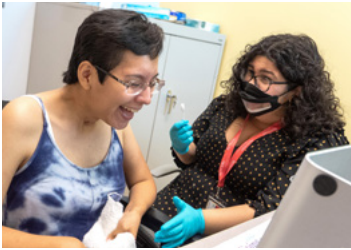
“They are no longer writing goals like ‘your patient’s going to walk 100 feet’ or ‘return to an office job.’ They’re writing goals for patients with shoulder injuries who must go back and chop wood to heat their homes. They can’t rest their shoulders,” said Nancy Mingelgreen, assistant professor and director of clinical education.

“They come out of these experiences with a much broader understanding of the human condition and diversity in the United States.”



*Mathew Bender,
physical therapy
student at
Teec Nos Pos*

SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS



SHP has been proactive in meeting contemporary health care demands.

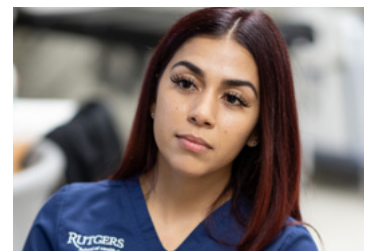
Spring 2023 marked the celebration of the inaugural graduates of our Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology program, specifically designed to serve diverse and multiethnic populations. The program's emphasis is a direct response to the nation's shifting demographics, highlighting a pressing demand for practitioners equipped with the knowledge and sensitivity to serve people from a wide array of cultural backgrounds.

Located in Newark, the program's pro-bono clinic gives students experience providing therapy for speech-language, communication, and swallowing disorders. Among those treated are adults recovering from strokes, children with autism, and transgender individuals struggling to align their voices with their gender.



Notably, we offer the state's sole Master of Science in Diagnostic Cytopathology program, which has been revamped and expanded to align with new industry demands. Using high-powered microscopes to examine cell samples, students train to identify cancer and other diseases. They learn how to work with pathologists and provide the data that specialists such as oncologists need to create precision treatments that can save lives.

A newly designed course on ethics and practice was instituted this year to help students more fully understand the impact of their work. It brought in a range of speakers that provided differing perspectives, including diagnostic cytologists, laboratory managers, and patients, including a woman with cervical cancer. "We want them to get a full sense of the people they serve and understand that what they do matters," said Lois Rockson, program director.



Many graduates of our Bachelor of Science in Medical Laboratory Science program were behind-the-scenes warriors in the COVID pandemic—the hidden heroes who worked furiously to process COVID tests at the peak of the outbreak.



“
Our interprofessional programs have increased the visibility of rehabilitation counselors and have proven our value as part of a care team that practices a holistic approach to mental health care.
”

TAMEIKA MINOR, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES

SHP has expanded its mental health counseling programs to help meet an urgent, post-COVID need for more counselors. “There was an all-time high suicide rate in 2018, and in 2022 it was even higher. The pandemic seems to have had the effect of creating a sense of vulnerability that many people didn’t feel before,” said Kenneth Gill, chair of the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions. “There’s growing need for mental health counselors and these positions can’t be filled fast enough.”

Our master’s in mental health counseling program doubled its enrollment over the past few years and we’ve added a new bachelor’s degree in psychiatric rehabilitation. As part of its expansion, the department sought out additional faculty and introduced new placement opportunities for students. SHP now boasts over 100 sites where psych rehab students can develop their skills through practicums and internships. They deliver mental health services in day schools to individuals with disabilities, provide counseling at a women’s shelter, and work in detox facilities.

Through a federal grant initiative aimed at those struggling with opioid addiction, students collaborate within interdisciplinary teams that deliver mental health, primary care, and substance use/opioid use disorder treatments. Working with other Rutgers students in nursing and social work, our students also are practicing team-based care for struggling youth transitioning to adulthood.

Last year, for the first time, we placed students within primary care centers, where mental health counselors are being integrated into practices as more patients confide their concerns to their primary care doctors.

“Our interprofessional programs have increased the visibility of rehabilitation counselors and have proven our value as part of a care team that practices a holistic approach to mental health care,” said Tameika Minor, assistant professor, and clinical coordinator.

At SHP, our students graduate with a solid foundation and a wealth of experience. They emerge as highly skilled compassionate health care providers, researchers, and advocates well-prepared to shape the future of health care.



RUTGERS PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM BREAKS INTO TOP TEN NATIONALLY

SHP's physician assistant program ranks as the best in New Jersey and shines nationally as a top-ranked program.

Consistently honored as a leading graduate program, the Master of Science in Physician Assistant program has been ranked seventh in the country by *U.S. News & World Report* Best Graduate Schools, continuing the program's long reputation as one of the nation's best.



Recognized alongside renowned universities such as Duke, Baylor, and Stanford, the Rutgers PA profile keeps expanding, grabbing a top-10 spot in the magazine's 2023–24 Best Graduate Schools rankings. Previously, in 2019, it was ranked at No. 21.

The upward trajectory represents the highest ranking in the program's notable history, marking SHP as one of the premier institutions in the country for students to pursue a physician assistant graduate degree.



DEPARTMENT CHAIR GETS NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Matthew McQuillan, chair of the physician assistant department, was honored with the prestigious 2022 Master Faculty award by the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) for his impact on students and the physician assistant profession.

With a 30-year tenure at the school, McQuillan's journey began as a student and came full circle when he returned as faculty. He became chair of the Department of Physician Assistant Studies and Practice in 2021.

Under his leadership, physician assistant graduates achieved a remarkable 100 percent pass rate on the board licensure exam over the past five years, consistently surpassing the national average passing rate.

One of McQuillan's notable contributions has been advocating for holistic admissions to enhance the diversity of the student body. This approach earned the program a national award from PAEA in 2018 for successfully attracting candidates from various racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic backgrounds. The department's commitment to diversity is exemplified by the incoming Class of 2025, of which 53 percent are persons of color, including 22 percent African Americans.

"Our students reflect the patient population, and are better practitioners because of that," he said.

Even as department chair, McQuillan has maintained a strong connection to the classroom by pioneering and teaching two courses.

In a demanding educational environment, McQuillan is recognized for fostering a nurturing culture that supports students. His commitment to their well-being stems from personal experience when he received support from faculty during a leave of absence as a student.

"That began my love for this program," he said. "This is a hard program—we have high standards to uphold. But if we are training students to care for people, these students must believe they are cared for here."

TRANSGENDER MAN HELPS TRANSGENDER WOMEN FIND THEIR VOICES THROUGH SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY

As a transgender man, AJ Quiray found that his voice deepened with testosterone treatment.

When the speech-language pathology student began helping transgender women align their voice with their gender, he understood how fortunate he was—and resolved to work with transgender people as a health care professional.

“I recognized then my privilege as a male whose voice changed naturally with testosterone,” he said. “It gave me a sense of responsibility to the LGBTQ+ community.”

In the Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology program’s pro-bono clinic in Newark, Quiray worked for months with the clinic’s first transgender client to retrain her voice through diaphragmatic breathing and daily vocal exercises. He was elated when she altered her pitch so that in phone conversations her voice matched her gender.

He and other students went on to provide gender-affirming voice and communication therapy in a group setting to other trans women and men who had found their way to the clinic. Tears, smiles, and virtual hugs often filled the sessions.

“Being able to bring my voice to the table with a trans group, I think made them more able to open up and made them more comfortable,” Quiray said.

The speech-language pathology program, which graduated its first class this spring, is focused on how gender, geography, socioeconomic status, and cultural background can impact speech and language development.

Between his internships and the clinic, Quiray worked with people with many different speech disorders, including a deaf client and those who had Parkinson’s Disease and ALS.



“I understood how much speaking and being heard matter,” he said.

As a graduate, Quiray hopes to work with transgender people, many of whom say they face discrimination and sometimes hostility from health care professionals. At the same time, some states are limiting insurance for gender-affirming care.

“As a health professional, I can play a small role in making sure the government understands that people need care. For trans women, having a female voice makes a world of difference in terms of their safety and quality of life,” he said.

A first-generation college graduate, born to Filipino parents, Quiray said he was drawn to the Rutgers program by its commitment to serving multi-ethnic and diverse populations.

Kelly Pena, a speech-language pathology assistant professor and academic adviser to Quiray, said he was one of her most thoughtful students who was humbled by his work with the trans community. She is certain Quiray will continue to push for diversity, equity, and inclusion in health care—the tenets that form the basis of SHP’s speech-language pathology program.



BEHIND EVERY GLASS SLIDE THERE IS A PATIENT

As a radiologist in her native Bangladesh, Farhana Kabir saw the devastating consequences of late-stage breast cancer on women who had postponed care because they were reluctant to see a male doctor.

“This is the moment I learned you have to diagnose the cancer as early as possible,” she said. “And now I am doing that.”

Kabir earned her master’s degree in cytopathology at SHP, graduating last December. As a skilled cytologist now working in a laboratory at University Hospital in Newark, she stands as the first line of defense against cancer, looking for evidence of the disease through microscopic examination of Pap smears and specimens from other body sites including fine-needle aspirations.

As a student in the 15-month program, Kabir spent countless hours honing her skills in the lab and building confidence in her diagnostic capabilities.

In her clinical training in hospital and diagnostics labs, she examined thousands of slides, assessing whether cells displayed normal, atypical, pre-cancerous, or cancerous traits.

“This is a very important role we play. Your outcome depends on the earliest possible diagnosis, and your diagnosis starts with me,” Kabir said.

The SHP cytopathology program, once a bachelor’s degree, evolved into a master’s program and then underwent restructuring in 2021 to meet new requirements and a demand for higher-level skilled practitioners, according to Lois Rockson, program director. It is New Jersey’s only cytology degree program.

As Kabir examines slides, she can’t help but think of the people whose lives are impacted by what she sees under the microscope.

“Our main job is to find that cancer cell. But I never forget it is not just a glass slide but a patient behind that slide—a patient you might never know or interact with, but a person to whom you are giving a very important diagnosis.”



“
*Our research family is growing.
Together, we will go far.*
”

ANTONINA MITROFANOVA, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR RESEARCH

FACULTY IN THE FOREFRONT

Our faculty is continually moving forward with transformational discoveries in health care. Their work relates to cancer treatments, aging, addiction, motor functions, mental health, and the profound impact of nutrition on overall health.

RECOGNIZED FOR EXCELLENCE

In 2022–2023, SHP achieved one of its most successful years in grant funding—securing over \$9 million from sources such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH); National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR); and other national and state agencies with a focus on public health, as well as private industry and foundations.

From investigating wearable technology to enhance the treatment of aging adults to uncovering biomarkers responsible for the recovery of damaged motor functions in children, our research in such diverse fields of study showcases the depth and breadth of expertise within our school.

In a testament to the caliber of our faculty's research, Weili Lu, associate professor in psychiatric rehabilitation and counseling, earned recognition for her research on mentally ill people who experience trauma. She studied how post-traumatic stress and prolonged grief disorder affect people with serious mental illness and highlighted a pressing need for improved trauma-informed clinical care. Last year, she was awarded a three-year, \$600,000 grant to study the effectiveness of internet-assisted, work-related training and intervention for people ages 16–24 with mental health conditions. For her research achievements, Lu received the 2022 Rutgers Biomedical and Health Science's Chancellor's Clinical or Health Sciences Investigator award and was selected for our school's 2023 Excellence in Research award.



264

*faculty
publications
in peer-reviewed
journals*

COLLABORATIONS

By partnering with other schools and organizations, we have expanded our capacity to bring evidence-based research and novel approaches to health care.

Researchers from SHP and the Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) have partnered to investigate the possible link between mental health issues and poor oral health. Vaishali Singhal, associate professor at SHP and RSDM, and a cross-disciplinary team, including Ni Gao, professor, and Yuane Jia, assistant professor, from SHP, and Jay Patel from Temple University's College of Public Health, are analyzing the medical histories of patients who visited Rutgers' dental clinics from 2014 to 2019.

“The population with mental illness usually has poorer health than the general population—and that includes oral health,” said Singhal, who says this results in the patients experiencing higher oral diseases and poorer treatment outcomes.

Singhal, a member of the American Dental Education Association's Social and Behavioral Health Committee, hopes the research will pave the way for new treatment guidelines and development of continuing education courses for dentists.

Ann Murphy, associate professor in rehabilitation and counseling professions, is spearheading a collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Education to bolster mental health support services in schools. With substantial funding of \$2.5 million, spanning three years, the project aims to strengthen mental health support services by introducing evidence-based strategies and practices to educators, counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and administrators in 50 selected schools.

“This project comes at a critical time, as students continue to experience increased mental health needs,” said Murphy.



ADDRESSING DISPARITIES

SHP researchers are committed to investigating health care disparities, leading to more equitable healthcare solutions for marginalized communities.

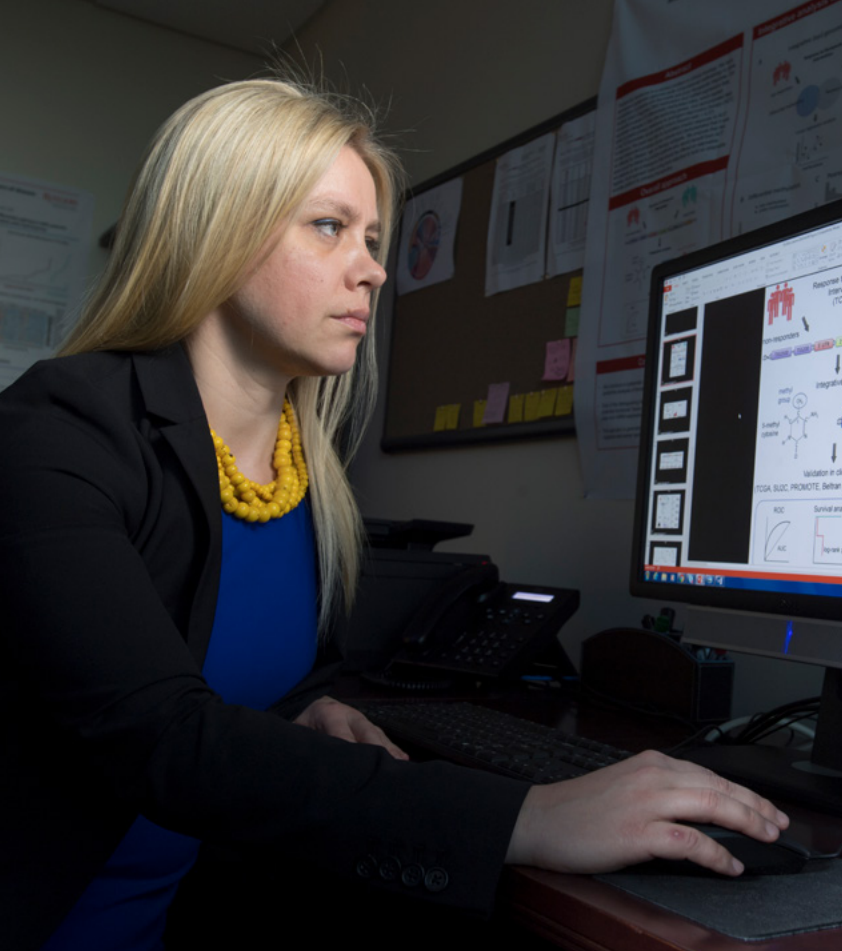
Underscoring our dedication to improving the health of all communities, our research spans the globe. In Nepal, Shristi Rawal, assistant professor of nutritional sciences, is studying the factors driving weight gain among pregnant women. Rawal, who is from Nepal, said the impact of diet quality is frequently studied in wealthy countries, but not in low-income ones. “Pregnancy complications are increasing in Nepal, and no one was doing work there,” she said. “This is a first step.”

Closer to home, Zhaomeng Niu, assistant professor in informatics at SHP and member of the Cancer Prevention and Control Research Program at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, is leading a study on ethnic disparities in skin-cancer related deaths, examining why Hispanics have higher mortality rates than non-Hispanic whites.



“
This project comes at a critical time, as students continue to experience increased mental health needs.”

ANN MURPHY,
ASSOCIATE
PROFESSOR



GROWING OUR RESEARCH CAPABILITIES

SHP's commitment to expanding its research has led to the addition of four tenure-track assistant and associate professors who bring with them a wealth of research knowledge in their respective fields. These individuals are recipients of prestigious NIH and National Science Foundation (NSF) grants.

"Our school is at the peak of its research growth, exemplified by this year's increase in overall and federal funding and high research impact. Our new hires and the success of our current faculty position SHP as an emerging leader in psychiatric and physical rehabilitation and digital health," said Antonina Mitrofanova, associate dean for research.

"Our research family is growing. Together, we will go far."

THE IMPACT OF SKIN CANCER ON THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

The rate of melanoma—the most dangerous form of skin cancer—has risen 20 percent among Hispanics in the past 20 years, and Hispanics who get skin cancer are more likely to be diagnosed at later stages when it is harder to treat.

Researcher Zhaomeng Niu, assistant professor of informatics and a member of the Cancer Prevention and Control Research Program at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, is leading a study to understand the disparities in skin cancer-related morbidity and mortality in Hispanics compared to non-Hispanic whites.

She is examining sunburns and sun protection behaviors among male Hispanic outdoor day laborers in the Northeast U.S. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the sectors with the highest concentration of Hispanic workers are farming, fishing, and forestry, all outdoor jobs that put the workers at increased risk for skin cancer.

Niu is currently working to explore sun protection behaviors among the Hispanic community in New Jersey. Funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, the study is assessing Hispanics' perceptions of skin cancer, sun protection, and skin self-examination behaviors and exploring whether Hispanic individuals would be interested in a mobile-based and user-centered skin cancer intervention.

The findings of this study will help investigators develop such interventions to achieve behavioral changes among the Hispanic population.





EXPLORING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY FOR MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES

In a pioneering initiative, the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling is introducing a novel wellness approach, known as positive psychology, in a residential setting tailored for individuals with mental disabilities.

“This is a new frontier,” said Michelle Zechner, researcher and assistant professor. “We are helping people with disabilities live a better, happier life.”

Positive psychology offers a scientific approach to wellness that shifts the focus from conquering weaknesses to developing strengths. By recognizing and building upon their strengths, individuals are empowered to flourish and lead more fulfilling lives.

Zechner said the approach emphasizes gaining an understanding of what makes individuals happier. “People in our pilot study often say that no one has asked them this question before. They appreciate the opportunity to explore their strengths and learn how to incorporate them into their daily lives. It’s about taking proactive steps toward having a good day.”

The pilot program is using a manual developed by the department in 2022 specifically for individuals with mental disabilities. It harnesses positive psychology strategies to enhance overall well-being. This approach has already demonstrated significant success among the general population. Zechner and her team are aiming to illustrate

“

This is a new frontier. We are helping people with disabilities live a better, happier life.

”

MICHELLE ZECHNER, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

its potential benefits for individuals grappling with mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia.

“It’s really exciting,” said Kaitlin Mitchell, a doctoral student working with Zechner on the study. “It’s such an innovative program that hasn’t been tried on this population and it’s so rewarding to be there and see firsthand how people benefit from what we’re teaching them.”

Zechner said the residents living in community housing already have proven their resilience. “And now we want them to take the next step,” she added.

Once the study is completed in November, the researchers plan to document and publish their findings and make them available to practitioners.

GREEN TEA EXTRACT MAY HARM LIVER IN CERTAIN PEOPLE

Long-term use of high-dose green tea extract may provide some protection against cancer, cardiovascular disease, obesity and type 2 diabetes, but it also may create liver damage in a small minority of the population.

Who is at risk? Research from SHP, published in *The Journal of Dietary Supplements*, provides the first solid clue: two genetic variants that predict some of the risk.

“Learning to predict who will suffer liver damage is potentially important because there’s growing evidence that high-dose green tea extract may have significant health benefits for those who can safely take it,” said Hamed Samavat, senior author of the study and an assistant professor of nutrition sciences.

Using data from the Minnesota Green Tea Trial, a large study of green tea’s effect on breast cancer, the research team investigated whether people with certain genetic variations were more likely than others to show signs of liver stress after a year of ingesting 843 milligrams per day of the predominant antioxidant in green tea.

Researchers led by Laura Acosta, then a doctoral student, now a graduate, selected two genetic variations. The year-long, placebo-controlled trial included more than 1,000 postmenopausal women.

An analysis showed that early signs of liver damage were somewhat more common than normal in women with one variation and strongly predicted by another variation.

“We’re still a long way from being able to predict who can safely take high-dose green tea extract,” said Samavat. “Still, we do think we have identified an important piece of the puzzle and taken a step toward predicting who can safely enjoy any health benefits that high-dose green tea extract provides.”



GRANT FUNDING 2022–2023

**\$9.09
Million**

TO PURSUE
EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

“
*This is why I went
into medicine:
to address these gaps
in care.*
”

GIANELLA BURGA, STUDENT



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

SHP’s commitment to service has left a lasting imprint on the lives of people in Newark and across the state. Our partnerships with community organizations and government agencies have widened opportunities to address health challenges faced disproportionately by underserved communities.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Through the efforts of faculty and students, we provide pro bono care to some of the state’s most vulnerable populations, leaving a mark not just on the communities we serve but on our students who gain a deeper comprehension of health care disparities and their role in effecting positive change.

IMPROVING CHILDHOOD NUTRITION

Our faculty has worked with the Head Start early childhood education program in Newark for over a decade. At that time, the Leaguers Inc., a Newark nonprofit that operates Head Start, asked SHP to conduct a needs assessment, examining children’s weight status, along with nutrition and physical activities at its Head Start center, according to Pamela M. Rothpletz-Puglia, professor. The study discovered high obesity levels, leading to further work, including collaborating on school menu changes to lower the obesity rates.



Understanding the social determinants of health helps to create community-centered interventions to enhance nutrition for children. Rothpletz-Puglia said SHP’s partnership with the community to improve early childhood nutrition has continued with work shedding light on how cultural food patterns, intergenerational influences, and social norms impact nutrition, as well as how life experiences influence breastfeeding practices among Black women.

“We care about supporting vulnerable populations,” Rothpletz-Puglia said. “Early childhood is a good place to focus on prevention, and I’ve learned from making home visits that the social, cultural, community, and family environment are integral to health—context is the mother of everything.”

SUPPORTING TREATMENT



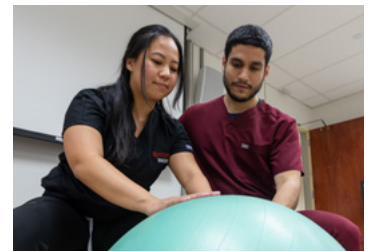
In Newark, Suchismita Ray, associate professor in health informatics, is working with Integrity House, the state's largest drug addiction treatment facility. With a National Institutes of Health grant, Ray researched brain, cognitive, and behavioral impairments in chronic cocaine and opioid users undergoing addiction treatment there.

Ray is committed to disseminating her discoveries in real time to the population affected by her research. Through regular lectures to the patients and staff members, she shares findings that help substance abuse users manage everyday stress, in-the-moment drug cravings, and mood fluctuations as well as improve their health.

"My work helps those with addictions manage drug use and relapse," said Ray.

PRO BONO CARE

At SHP's Newark clinics, our faculty and students provided pro-bono physical therapy and speech-language pathology services, while in Plainfield, our physician assistant department operates a primary care clinic. These clinics have collectively logged nearly 2,000 visits in the past year, extending quality health care to many who are uninsured, underinsured, or lack financial means for health care.



ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

Two years ago, Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS) opened a food pantry in Newark after a survey by Joachim Sackey, assistant professor of nutrition at SHP, found that nearly a quarter of RBHS students are food insecure. In deciding to open the pantry, RBHS chose SHP to manage and grow the pantry on its campus.

Shelves are stocked with staples like canned goods, tuna packets, and fresh produce as well as culturally relevant items like vegetarian beans, non-dairy milk, ramen, and Jamaican jerk sauce. It also stocks toiletries, including diapers and wipes, all of which can burden a household budget.

The pantry is staffed by student volunteers. Between April 2022 and August 2023, over 4,000 people came to the pantry for items for themselves and their households.

COMMITTED TO SERVE

In every corner of our work, SHP embodies a deep commitment to service. Our work touches the lives of countless individuals in underserved communities, building a healthier, more equitable future for everyone.

“

Peer support is a vital and important part of behavioral health services.

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AMY SPAGNOLO, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR



SHP TO WIDEN REACH OF PEER SUPPORT SERVICES THROUGH TRAINING GRANT

With a \$4.4 million grant from the state of New York Office of Mental Health, SHP and New York University (NYU) are partnering to increase access to peer support services by providing training to mental health provider organizations in New York.

Launched in January, the new Peer Support Services Technical Assistance Center (PeerTAC) will have the capacity to reach approximately 400 clinics interested in delivering peer support services to children, families, adults, and older adults.

Peer support specialists use their lived experiences to help others with mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and trauma.

“Peer support is a vital and important part of behavioral health services,” said Amy Spagnolo, associate professor in psychiatric rehabilitation and counseling and project director at SHP. “Peer support specialists share their own experiences of having a behavioral health condition and their recovery

journeys to engage people and support them in unique ways. They can share their own narrative to inspire hope and optimism in others.”

SHP brings significant organizational experience to PeerTAC. Since 2012, the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions has provided online training, testing, and tracking for the certification of peer support specialists in New York. Through this initiative, over 3,000 peer support providers have been trained for state certification.

The PeerTAC initiative expands that work by training and supporting provider organizations so they can implement peer support services or contract with peer support organizations.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO HEALTH CARE: A PUBLIC-PRIVATE SOLUTION

SHP is teaming up with Quest Diagnostics to provide no-cost laboratory tests over the next year to diagnose and manage acute and chronic diseases for uninsured and underinsured patients of the university's pro-bono Health Outreach Practice Experience Clinic (H.O.P.E.).

Quest is also providing grant funding to allow the clinic to double its capacity by opening two days a week rather than one.

The collaboration between SHP and Quest further improves access to critical primary care services for uninsured patients at the Plainfield Clinic.

It streamlines the testing process so patients can go directly from the clinic to a nearby Quest center immediately after their appointment, with results transmitted right back to the clinic for follow-up. Following through with lab tests can be challenging for patients at the H.O.P.E. clinic, which is owned and operated by SHP.

“

This collaboration with Rutgers is a great example of joining forces to make a difference in underserved communities.

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RUTH CLEMENTS, QUEST DIAGNOSTICS

“If lab tests are required, the patient has to find a lab, schedule an appointment, receive the lab results and bring them back to us for a consultation,” Frank Giannelli, director of the H.O.P.E. Clinic and an assistant professor in the physician



assistant program. “It’s a multi-step process where, at any point, something can go wrong, or they may find the cost is astronomical and leave.”

Gianella Burga, a physician assistant student who volunteers at the H.O.P.E. Clinic, knows first-hand how difficult it is for people without insurance to access even the most basic medical care.

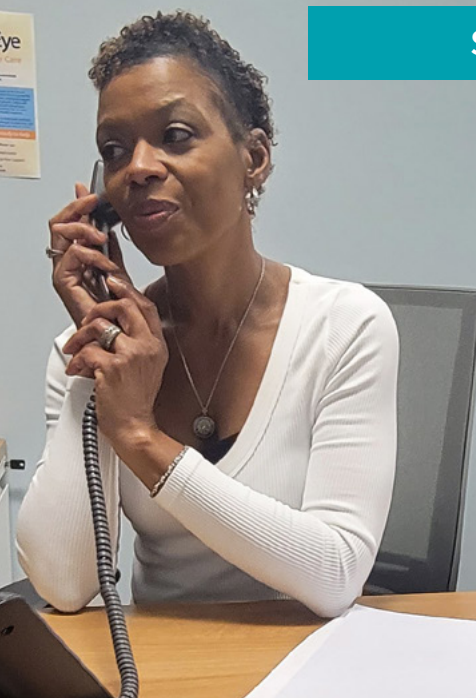
“Many of my family members are uninsured and struggle to get testing for conditions like diabetes or high cholesterol. It’s difficult for them to take a day off from work for a doctor’s visit and then another day for tests,” said Burga, one of about 75 students who volunteer at the clinic. “This is why I went into medicine: to address these gaps in care.”

Despite improving access to primary care services, the students and faculty at H.O.P.E. were regularly turning patients away because of high demand and a limited number of appointments available in a single day. With the grant from Quest, the clinic will now be able to expand primary care service to a city where about 30 percent of residents are uninsured and 39 percent report not having a primary care provider.

“This collaboration with Rutgers is a great example of joining forces to make a difference in underserved communities,” said Ruth Clements, vice president and general manager of infectious diseases and immunology at Quest Diagnostics and leader of Quest for Health Equity. “As our headquarters is based in New Jersey, we are honored to work to address health inequities in our home state with a strong teammate like Rutgers.”

“
As someone experiencing
the same loss, you know how
others feel.”

TRACEY SIMON, SUPPORT SPECIALIST



EYE2EYE OFFERS VITAL CONNECTION FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Tracey Simon, a peer support specialist, understands the devastating toll of vision loss. When she lost her sight, she experienced sadness, anger, isolation, and denial—yet, she had to learn to take care of herself and her children, how to grocery shop, how to navigate travel.

She recalls how even simple tasks became daunting. “Something I could easily do sighted, like plug a lamp into a wall outlet, now takes several minutes of fumbling. It can feel so defeating.”

Simon is now using her experience to help others with similar vision impairment. She is one of the first peer support specialists for Eye2Eye, a grant-funded, pro-bono program operated by SHP’s Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions. The program’s mission is to connect people who are blind or have impaired vision with those who have also experienced vision loss and are trained to help them overcome the challenges.

“In Eye2Eye, there is mutual trust. As someone experiencing the same loss, you know how others feel,” Simon said.

Eye2Eye was originally founded by a former Rutgers professor and psychologist, who discovered few resources available when he lost his sight. He recognized a real gap in emotional support services, particularly peer-to-peer support, for individuals with low or no vision. The program first began taking calls in 2019 and has since served 500

people, with 322 of them receiving support in the past year alone. The program’s reach extends to 39 states.

The COVID pandemic heightened demand for Eye2Eye’s services. To help address this need, the program added additional peer support specialists and introduced monthly group calls for clients, offering a lifeline to individuals who felt isolated and providing them with a sense of community and understanding.

This spring, Eye2Eye initiated an eight-week group workshop tailored to individuals newly grappling with vision loss. In this workshop, participants are offered a space to share emotions, discuss wellness and coping strategies, and learn about resources related to vision loss, assistive technology, mobility and orientation services, and self-advocacy. Additionally, Eye2Eye has launched specialized groups, including those for young adults aged 20 to 35 and for family members and caregivers of individuals with vision loss, according to Alicia Lukachko, Eye2Eye’s program director.

“We’ve seen how expansion to meet the specialized needs of our clients is critical to enhance the well-being and independence of individuals with vision loss,” Lukachko said.

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“

This scholarship has been paramount to helping me achieve my goals and making a positive impact on my community.

”

MAEKENZI DIXON, STUDENT



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THE IMPACT OF GIVING

THE LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT OF PHILANTHROPY

MaeKenzi Dixon was a Rutgers honors undergraduate who wanted to reduce health care disparities for underserved populations through a career in physical therapy.

Thanks to a faculty-sponsored scholarship, she is now at SHP—her top graduate school choice—where she is working with minority patients in a community-centered, pro-bono clinic in Newark.

“This scholarship has been paramount to helping me achieve my goals and making a positive impact on my community,” said Dixon, a recipient of the Alma and Richard Merians Scholarship established by Alma Merians, interim dean and professor and past chair of rehabilitation and movement sciences, and her late husband.

“It allows me to work to become the best clinician I can be so I can provide the highest level of care.”

For students, scholarships provide financial aid and encouragement toward reaching their career goals. For donors, they are also a way to honor a loved one or support an educational program that is meaningful to them.

The Rev. Jack Zamboni and his family established a scholarship for physician assistant students to memorialize his late wife, Judith Yannariello, who died of cancer just before completing her degree.

“She was fun and funny. She loved science for as long as she could remember and she so much wanted to use her love for science and medicine to help people,” said Zamboni. “We founded this scholarship to continue her legacy.”

Eileen Milicia is a recipient of the Kenneth T. and Catherine Gill Scholarship established by Kenneth Gill, professor in psychiatric rehabilitation and counseling, in memory of his parents. The first-generation college graduate and single mother, who is completing her master’s degree in clinical mental health and rehabilitation counseling, said the award means she can finish her degree without worrying about how to make ends meet.

“As I enter the practicum portion of my degree, it has become nearly impossible to balance work, school and being a parent. This scholarship allows me to remove the stress of finances from the many things I must balance,” Milicia said.

To learn how you can make an impact, please reach out to Katie Mayfield, director of development, at katie.mayfield@ruf.rutgers.edu.



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