

Healthy Huskie

College of Health and Human Sciences

2026 edition



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Northern Illinois
University

Undergraduate Programs

Communicative Disorders
Health Sciences
Human Development and Family Sciences
Medical Laboratory Sciences
Public Health
Nursing
Nutrition Sciences

Graduate Master's Programs

Applied Human Development and
Family Sciences
Athletic Training
Health Sciences
Nursing
Nutrition and Dietetics
Public Health
Rehabilitation Counseling

Graduate Doctoral Programs

Doctor of Audiology
Doctor of Nursing Practice
Doctor of Philosophy in Health Sciences
Doctor of Physical Therapy

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Academic Affairs
Tomoyuki Shibata, Ph.D., Interim Associate
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Mandy Thompson, Director of Finance and
Resource Planning
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and Communications

School of Preventive and Applied Health

Shondra Clay, Ph.D., Chair

School of Clinical and Developmental Sciences

Glenn Stone, Ph.D., Chair

School of Nursing

Jeanette Rossetti, Ph.D., Interim Chair

School of Rehabilitation and Performance Sciences

Peter J. Chomentowski III, Ph.D., Chair

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Message from the Dean



As the College of Health and Human Sciences continues to evolve, this year marks an important moment of transformation and alignment. Across our college, we have taken a thoughtful look at how our programs, people and resources come together to best serve our students and communities in a rapidly changing health and human sciences landscape.

In this issue of Healthy Huskie, we highlight two initiatives that reflect this forward momentum. The first is the reorganization of CHHS into new

schools. Shaped through extensive faculty and staff engagement, this new structure brings together complementary areas of expertise, strengthening opportunities for collaboration, interdisciplinary learning and innovation. It reflects a shared commitment to creating a more connected and responsive academic environment.

We also feature the relocation of the Master of Science in Athletic Training program into CHHS. This move aligns athletic training with other health-focused disciplines, expanding opportunities for students to learn and work across professions while enhancing the program's visibility and impact within the broader healthcare community.

Because this issue reflects the 2025–2026 academic year, you will notice that many of the stories remain organized around our previous school structure. In future editions, you will see Healthy Huskie fully reflect our new organization, highlighting the work and impact of each of our four schools.

Together, these efforts represent more than organizational change. They reflect a collective focus on positioning our college for the future; one that emphasizes collaboration, adaptability and excellence in preparing graduates for complex, team-based environments.

It is a privilege to serve as dean of CHHS. I am grateful to our faculty, staff, students, alumni and partners whose continued dedication and support make this progress possible. With a strong foundation and a clear sense of direction, CHHS is well positioned to lead and innovate in the years ahead.

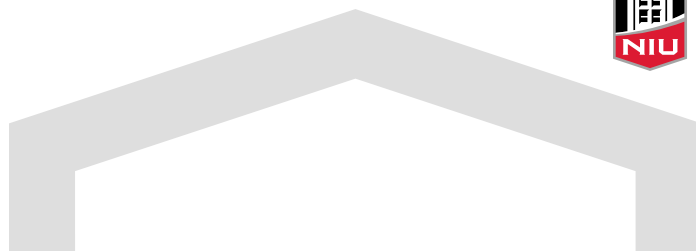
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kelly". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "K" and a cursive "elly".

Kelly A. Fiala, Ph.D.
Baustert Bahwell Endowed Dean of Health and Human Sciences



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**College of Health and
Human Sciences**



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Built for W



What's Next



The reorganization of the College of Health and Human Sciences was intentionally designed as a transparent, participatory effort rather than a top-down decision. The initial impetus emerged from faculty conversations in the context of ongoing budget constraints, coupled with challenges at the time in filling academic leadership roles. Together, these factors created a shared commitment to streamline administrative structures while preserving academic quality and impact. While leadership recruitment has since stabilized, the need to align resources with long-term sustainability remains.

From the outset, the process centered on engagement. Faculty and staff participated in open forums, small group discussions and structured feedback opportunities to help shape the college's future. Early activities invited participants to think differently about how programs connect and where new opportunities for collaboration might exist.

As ideas developed, they were continuously refined through cycles of feedback, first broadly across the college, then more directly with academic programs to ensure alignment with accreditation, disciplinary identity and student experience.

A collaborative naming process engaged stakeholders through multiple rounds of feedback, ensuring the outcomes are inclusive, clear and forward-looking. The final organizational structure and school names reflect this collective input and went into effect July 1, 2026.

Ultimately, the reorganization is not simply a structural shift. It reflects a shared commitment to aligning the college's strengths with its future aspirations.

The result is a college newly organized around four schools, each designed to bring together complementary programs, strengthen collaboration and expand opportunity for students and faculty alike.

School of Preventive and Applied Health

The School of Preventive and Applied Health advances a holistic approach to health grounded in prevention, population health and applied science. Programs in health sciences, medical laboratory science and public health share a focus on improving outcomes at the community and systems level. Under the leadership of Chair Shondra Clay, the school reflects a commitment to evidence-based practice and meaningful public impact.

School of Clinical and Developmental Sciences

The School of Clinical and Developmental Sciences brings together programs dedicated to human development, communication and well-being across the lifespan. Including audiology, speech-language pathology, human development and family sciences, these disciplines are united by a shared focus on supporting individuals and families at critical stages of life. Led by Glenn Stone, whose external appointment signals a forward-looking approach, the school is positioned to deepen interdisciplinary collaboration.

School of Nursing

The School of Nursing remains a cornerstone of the college, offering programs at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels. With a strong emphasis on professional preparation, leadership and advanced clinical care, the school continues to play a vital role in addressing workforce needs and improving patient outcomes. It is currently led by Interim Chair Jeanette Rossetti.

School of Rehabilitation and Performance Sciences

The School of Rehabilitation and Performance Sciences integrates programs focused on restoring, optimizing and enhancing human performance. Fields such as athletic training, nutrition, physical therapy and rehabilitation counseling share a holistic, person-centered approach that emphasizes function, mobility and quality of life. Under the leadership of Chair Peter Chomentowski, the school embodies the intersection of science, practice and innovation.

School of Preventive and Applied Health

Health Sciences, B.S.⁴

Health Sciences, M.S.⁴

Medical Laboratory Science, B.S.³

Public Health, B.S.³

Public Health, MPH³

School of Clinical and Developmental Sciences

Applied Human Development and Family Sciences, M.S.²

Audiology, Au.D.¹

Communicative Disorders, B.S.¹

Fashion Merchandising, B.S.²

Human Development and Family Sciences, B.S.²

Speech Language Pathology, M.S.¹

Academic Home Prior to Reorganization: ¹School of Allied Health and Communicative Disorders. ²School of Family and Consumer Sciences. ³School of Health Studies. ⁴School of Interdisciplinary Health Professions. ⁵School of Nursing. ⁶College of Education.

What's Next

Together, these schools create new opportunities for collaboration that extend beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Students benefit from expanded interprofessional learning experiences, including shared coursework, complementary minors and certificates and learning environments that reflect the realities of team-based care. Faculty are increasingly positioned to engage in interdisciplinary research and scholarship, addressing complex challenges that no single discipline can solve alone.

At its core, the reorganization strengthens the college's ability to prepare graduates who are not only highly skilled in their fields, but also adaptable,

collaborative and responsive to a rapidly evolving health and human sciences landscape.

Importantly, the Department of Military Sciences remains a strong and valued part of the college. Its continued presence reflects an enduring commitment to leadership, service and the development of students who contribute meaningfully both locally and nationally.

This next chapter for the College of Health and Human Sciences reflects more than a new organizational structure. It represents a shared vision for the future, one that embraces collaboration, innovation and impact in service of healthier communities and a stronger, more dynamic workforce. ■

School of Nursing

Nursing, B.S.⁵

Nursing, M.S.⁵

Nursing, DNP⁵

School of Rehabilitation and Performance Sciences

Athletic Training, MSAT⁶

Nutrition Sciences, B.S.³

Nutrition and Dietetics, M.S.³

Physical Therapy, DPT¹

Rehabilitation and Disability Services, B.S.⁴

Rehabilitation Counseling, M.S.⁴



Game-chan

Preparing students for meaningful careers in healthcare means continually evolving to meet the needs of both the profession and the communities it serves. A recent step forward reflects that commitment: the relocation of the Master of Science in Athletic Training (MSAT) program into the College of Health and Human Sciences, effective July 1, 2026.

Athletic trainers are highly skilled healthcare professionals who play a vital role in prevention, diagnosis, treatment and recovery. As an allied health profession recognized by the American Medical Association, athletic training sits alongside disciplines such as nursing, physical therapy and dietetics. Now situated within a college dedicated to health and human sciences, the MSAT program has a natural academic home that reflects how these professions collaborate in practice.

This transition is about more than meeting accreditation expectations. It reflects a commitment to creating richer opportunities for students and faculty. Within CHHS, MSAT students now learn alongside peers in nursing, physical therapy,

nutrition, speech-language pathology and related programs. These shared experiences foster interprofessional learning, helping students develop the teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills essential in today's healthcare environments.

"Positioning the AT program alongside other healthcare programs such as nursing, physical therapy and nutrition creates a powerful learning environment for our students," said Nick Grahovec, associate professor and program director for athletic training. "They're not just learning in isolation, they are engaging with peers who will be future collaborators, developing communication, clinical reasoning and practical skills through meaningful interprofessional education experiences."

The move also strengthens collaboration among faculty. By aligning athletic training with complementary disciplines, new opportunities have emerged for joint research, shared teaching and innovative approaches to complex health challenges. These interdisciplinary connections mirror the realities of modern healthcare, in which effective

ging Move

outcomes depend on coordinated, team-based care.

Just as importantly, the transition enhances the program's visibility and impact. As part of a college focused on advancing health and well-being, athletic training is more prominently positioned within both the university and the broader healthcare community. This alignment supports continued growth, attracts high-caliber students and strengthens the program's contribution to a dynamic and evolving workforce.

The timing of the move was intentional. As part of the college's broader reorganization, the MSAT program joined the newly formed School of Rehabilitation and Performance Sciences alongside programs in physical therapy, nutrition and rehabilitation counseling. Together, these fields share a focus on optimizing human performance, supporting recovery and improving quality of life — creating a strong, cohesive academic and professional environment.

For students, this means a more integrated and professionally relevant educational experience. For faculty, it provides access to enhanced infrastructure,

including dedicated support for clinical placements and partnerships, allowing greater focus on teaching, mentoring and discovery.

Ultimately, the relocation reflects a broader vision: One in which academic programs are intentionally aligned to better serve students, strengthen collaboration and advance community health. With its new home in CHHS, the MSAT program is well positioned not just to meet the demands of today — but to lead into the future. ■



Now Hear This

The NIU Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic earned the Daily Chronicle Reader's Choice Award for 2025 Best Audiology/Hearing Health Care in DeKalb County.

It's a testament to our amazing clinicians, faculty, staff and students who are passionate about hearing health and most deserving of this accolade.

"It meant a lot to us as audiologists to be recognized for the service we provide to our community," said Diane ScheckLong, clinical assistant professor. "We have a strong commitment to not only providing the best audiologic care to



our patients, but to serve as mentors and educators for the doctoral students in our program."

ScheckLong said that their team remains dedicated to helping patients achieve the best quality of life by connecting them to the important people in their lives.

"If we can play an integral role in easing communication barriers that arise with hearing loss in people of all ages, we have accomplished our mission," ScheckLong said.

Learn more about NIU

Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic at go.niu.edu/SLHclinic. ■



Honoring a Life

Some people are remembered for what they accomplished. Others are remembered for how they made people feel. Michael J. Naser will be remembered for both.

Whether he was treating a patient, leading a team or spending time with family and friends, Mike had a gift for connecting with people. He was known for his kindness, optimism and genuine interest in others.

That ability to connect with people shaped every part of Mike's life and career. It also inspired a gift that will help future Huskies follow in his footsteps.

In March 2026, Mike's parents, Al and Doreen Naser, established the Michael J. Naser Scholarship in Physical Therapy Graduate Studies to support students pursuing a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree at NIU.

The scholarship was created in memory of Mike, who earned his Master of Science in physical therapy from NIU in 2007 and built a successful career in healthcare leadership before his life was cut short in a tragic automobile accident in March 2025.

"We wanted to do something positive," Al said. "One of the things we believe strongly in is how do you find good in every situation? As difficult as this was, we wanted to do something to honor Mike."

The more they reflected on Mike's life, the clearer the answer became.

Mike chose NIU because of its highly regarded physical therapy program and the seamless path from undergraduate to graduate study. It was a decision that helped shape the course of his life. At NIU, he developed the foundation for a career he genuinely loved. He also met his future wife, creating a lifelong connection to the university that extended far beyond the classroom.

His parents believe that foundation was instrumental in both his personal and professional success.

"We kept coming back to his time at Northern," Al

said. "His success wouldn't have come without a good sound foundation."

A high school athlete, Mike first discovered physical therapy while recovering from an injury. What began

as a personal experience quickly became a calling. Throughout his career, he remained passionate about the profession, advancing from entry-level clinical positions to senior leadership roles across multiple states and healthcare organizations.

His final position was director of clinical services for Concentra in central Florida, where he oversaw multisite operations across multiple disciplines. Yet despite his leadership responsibilities, Mike never wanted to become disconnected from the work he loved most.

Mike's kindness was evident long before his professional career began. Doreen recalls that even as a high school football player, teammates and opponents alike referred to him as a "big teddy bear." He listened. He cared. He consistently put the needs of others ahead of his own.

Those qualities remained with him throughout his life.

At home, he was a devoted husband and father. Professionally, he was a trusted mentor who enjoyed helping young clinicians bridge the gap between the classroom and the workplace.

"Mike was a lifelong learner," Al said. "Continuing education was critical to him. It wasn't just something he had to do. It was something he looked forward to."

That love of learning sits at the heart of the scholarship that now bears his name.

The Michael J. Naser Scholarship is not only an investment in future physical therapists. It is an invitation to carry forward the values Mike demonstrated every day: compassion, curiosity, professionalism and kindness.

Learn how you can support the Mike Naser scholarship at go.niu.edu/naser-scholarship. ■





Language Without Limits

For many families in DeKalb, a simple conversation about child development can make all the difference. Through a growing partnership between NIU speech-language pathology graduate students and local organizations, those conversations are now happening in both English and Spanish, helping families feel informed, supported and connected.

Since February, bilingual speech-language pathologist and NIU Clinical Assistant Professor Bridgett Golz has led a team of graduate students in hosting monthly bilingual family workshops alongside Community Coordinated Child Care, known as 4C, and the Early Learning Development Center in the

DeKalb school district. These workshops focus on communication development, parent education and language enrichment strategies for young children.

“Opportunities like the bilingual parent workshop are important because of the community it builds between our SLP graduate student team, NIU and the DeKalb community,” Golz said. “Experiences like this can directly impact their confidence and preparedness in their future careers.”

That real-world learning experience has also become a meaningful extension of the classroom for students in NIU’s speech-language pathology graduate program. ■

Policy in Motion

Advocacy is not always the first thing that comes to mind when students think about physical therapy. But in April, students and clinicians gathered at NIU’s Wellness and Literacy Center to explore how policy decisions made far beyond the clinic can directly shape patient care, professional practice and the future of the profession.

Sponsored by the Illinois Physical Therapy Association (IPTA) and hosted by NIU’s Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program, “Dough & Dialogue: National Advocacy Dinner” welcomed 35 attendees for an evening focused on the growing importance of advocacy in physical therapy. Through conversation,

presentations and networking, students gained insight into how legislation, reimbursement and healthcare policy influence access to care and outcomes for patients.

“Advocacy dinners are important because they help students understand that advocacy is directly connected to patient care,” said DPT student Megan Sapita, who helped organize the event. “As students, we spend so much time learning clinical skills, but events like this show us how legislation, reimbursement and policy decisions can impact what we are actually able to do for our patients.” ■



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College of Health and Human Sciences



Sound Intelligence

Neurotone AI is proud to announce a new partnership with NIU to empower Doctor of Audiology students through hands-on access to Lace AI Pro, a next-generation auditory training platform. This collaboration enables students to experience firsthand how AI-driven tools can enhance listening and speech comprehension for individuals with hearing challenges.

By integrating Lace AI Pro into its clinical training, NIU is equipping future audiologists with direct experience using intelligent, patient-centered technology designed to improve outcomes in aural rehabilitation. This initiative underscores both organizations' shared mission to bridge innovation and education in hearing health.

"Our students will be working with technology

that reflects where the field of audiology is heading," said Danica Billingsly, clinical associate professor and audiology clinical coordinator at NIU. "This partnership gives them an early advantage in understanding how data-driven tools can personalize therapy and improve patient engagement."

Neurotone AI is equally enthusiastic about the collaboration.

"We're thrilled to support NIU's forward-thinking approach to audiology education," said Rick Carlson, CEO of Neurotone AI. "By bringing Lace AI Pro into the classroom, we're helping train the next generation of clinicians to use advanced, evidence-based tools that make a tangible difference in patients' lives." ■

Room to Grow

Representative Lauren Underwood (IL-14), a member of the House Appropriations Committee, secured \$850,000 in Community Project Funding to support updates to childcare spaces and career training at NIU. Rep. Underwood met with campus leaders on May 6 to discuss the Education for Parents Project and tour the Child Development and Family Center and classrooms in Gabel Hall.

"We are excited to be able to update our learning spaces and continue to provide a high-quality teaching and learning environment for our NIU students and our community families," said Kristin Schulz, executive director, NIU Child Development and Family Center. "We take pride in knowing we are supporting our community and training the next generations of early childhood educators."

Schulz said the funding will support updates to physical spaces and salary assistance for teachers and a family coordinator who will help with community engagement.

"Along with the College of Education, we are directly preparing professionals to work in children and family support fields," Schulz said. "These professions — early childhood classroom teachers, early intervention specialists working as developmental therapists and child life specialists supporting children and families in hospital settings — are critical to supporting our community."

Learn more about NIU's Child Development and Family Center at go.niu.edu/CDFC. ■



The Couple and Family Therapy Clinic at NIU

Counseling for couples, families, children and individuals

Going Global

While many spent their summer unwinding, DeAnna Harris-McKoy, associate professor in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences and director of the specialization in marriage and family therapy program, spent part of hers halfway across the world.

Last July, Harris-McKoy represented NIU at the inaugural Global Systemic Therapy Summit, held in Nairobi, Kenya. The event, hosted by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), brought together seasoned and emerging leaders from around the globe to explore innovations in systemic family therapy. Harris-McKoy was a part of a small group of professionals invited to submit a proposal for the inaugural conference.

"It was amazing to hear from marriage and family therapists, professors and students in Kenya about the systemic work they are doing," Harris-McKoy said. "Presenters discussed local and national problems and placed them in a global context."

Harris-McKoy said that Kenyan therapists and therapists in training discussed how they adapted the classical and evidence-based marriage and family therapy models to fit their cultural context.

"They are developing new theoretical models that better fit their cultural context," she said. "My workshop seemed to resonate with a lot of people. Participants in the workshop said the information was relevant and timely and is exactly what they needed."

At the summit, Harris-McKoy led a workshop titled "Having a Purpose-Driven Career" and presented a research poster discussion, "Not Gon' Cry: Trauma and Depression in Black Women." Both sessions drew interest from attendees eager to explore culturally responsive approaches to therapy and professional growth. For Harris-McKoy, the experience was more than just an opportunity to share her work — it was a chance to connect with a community of practitioners deeply committed to systemic healing. ■

Student Spotlight

Leilani Cancel-Lopez

Leilani Cancel-Lopez didn't set out to become a therapist, but her path led her to a nationally recognized fellowship aimed at expanding representation in mental healthcare. The second-year graduate student in the specialization in marriage and family therapy program was selected as a fellow in the 2025-2026 Foundation for the Advancement of Human Systems (FAHS) Minority Fellowship Program (MFP).

"The MFP gives me the opportunity to work with professionals from a similar background as myself in a field that has historically been dominated by white men," said Cancel-Lopez. "As a Latina woman, I have experienced firsthand what it's like to be left out of learning and healing spaces alike; this fellowship aims to open the door to minorities like me by preparing us to work with underserved populations."

The program is a national workforce development initiative that prepares marriage and family therapist researchers, teachers and practitioners to serve communities with limited access to mental health and substance abuse services. It's partially funded through a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and provides fellows with financial support, professional mentorship and advanced clinical training. ■





Tailored for the Future

Change in higher education often reflects refinement as much as reinvention. At NIU, recent updates to fashion programming are designed to better align with student interests and evolving career pathways, while maintaining a strong foundation for current students.

This includes the addition of a more robust fashion merchandising minor, creating a more broadly accessible pathway for students interested in fashion while continuing full academic support for those currently completing the major.

Current fashion merchandising majors continue to progress through their established degree plans with no changes to requirements. At the same time, the redesigned minor has been structured to expand access and flexibility for a wider range of students across campus.

"The program removes prior barriers such as external course requirements and reduces prerequisites to allow students to enter fashion coursework earlier in their academic journey," said Sarah Cosbey, associate professor of fashion merchandising.

Faculty describe the updated structure as a way to offer broader exposure to fashion disciplines while maintaining a focused, applied learning experience. That includes offering online and asynchronous

courses to best meet the needs of today's student.

Student engagement in fashion-related experiences continues through the Fashion Industries Organization, which remains active as a professional development and networking hub for students interested in the industry.

"The Fashion Industries Organization (FIO) remains committed to providing students with meaningful opportunities for professional development, networking and hands-on industry experiences," said MaryAnn Lorenz, clinical assistant professor. "I also see this as an opportunity for FIO to continue fostering experiential learning through visual window installations and other creative visual display opportunities that allow students to apply and showcase industry skills."

While new students are not being admitted into the fashion merchandising undergraduate major this fall, faculty note that the same instructors who have long taught in the program continue to guide students through both the major and minor pathways, ensuring continuity in instruction and academic support.

"The content, quality of instruction and dedicated faculty will remain the same, with every course focused on supporting their future career success," said Dean Kelly Fiala. ■

Golden Opportunity

Preparing tomorrow's leaders begins with meaningful partnerships. Through a new collaboration with The Alden Network, CHHS established the Alden Network Leadership in Aging Services and Senior Living Program, expanding opportunities for students while helping address one of society's most pressing workforce needs.

"This partnership creates valuable opportunities for students to connect with experienced professionals, gain real-world exposure to the senior living industry and better understand the various career paths available within aging services," said Robert J. Molitor, chief executive officer of The Alden Network. "It also enables organizations like The Alden Network to engage talented students who may become interns, managers, clinicians and leaders."

Supported by Alden's generous donation, the program prepares skilled professionals to lead and innovate in aging services and senior living. In turn, it strengthens the college's commitment to educating professionals who will serve older adults with compassion, expertise and vision.

This collaboration connects classroom learning with industry experience, helping students explore career opportunities while supporting a sustainable talent pipeline for senior living.

"The long-term care industry encounters ongoing workforce challenges, and partnerships between education and industry are essential in building a sustainable talent pipeline," Molitor said. "By investing in students today, we are helping develop the leaders who will guide our industry tomorrow."

Aging services offers far more career opportunities than many students realize. Professionals in the field work across healthcare, rehabilitation, operations, hospitality, finance, marketing, human resources, technology and executive leadership, creating pathways for students with a wide range of interests.

"One of the biggest misconceptions students have about long-term care or aging services is that it offers only a narrow range of career opportunities for individuals with clinical backgrounds," Molitor said.

As NIU and The Alden Network continue to strengthen their partnership, the program is helping prepare the next generation of leaders who will shape the future of aging services. ■





Destination Dinners

Mealtime at Patterson Hall and Neptune Hall got a flavorful upgrade thanks to a creative team of students from NIU's dietetic internship program. With Greek and Japanese-inspired dishes as well as Mexican and Italian favorites, diners enjoyed a trip around the globe during this much-loved campus dining tradition.

"Hosting a special dinner is both challenging and rewarding," said Jonathan Flores, a second-year graduate student in nutrition. "Bringing authentic Mexican flavors to life and seeing guests enjoy the food made all the effort worthwhile."

For Flores, the evening also held personal meaning.

"Some of our homemade recipes, like Torta de Milanesa, rice pudding and cactus salad, reflected my heritage," he said. "The cactus salad stood out since

many students had never tried it."

Flores is part of Nutrition 617: Food Systems Management, a master's-level course in which dietetic interns apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings. By choosing a theme, testing recipes and managing logistics, students showcase their talents and leadership skills to the Huskie community through these special dinners.

"The students spent nine weeks learning all aspects of residential food service and applied that knowledge to put on very successful dinners," said Brian Schneider, director of NIU Residential Dining. "For our customers, it's a chance to try new foods and experience cultural performances, while interns gain a true sense of how a food service operation runs." ■

Student Spotlight

Taylor Hennessee

Taylor Hennessee didn't set out to pursue a career in medical laboratory sciences.

"It was honestly by accident," Hennessee said. "I had a doctor's appointment in high school and my physician noticed I had never had any baseline labs done. After having that done, I was curious. Where did all the samples go? Who ran all of the testing?"

That curiosity led her to discover a field that operates largely behind the scenes but plays a critical role in patient care. Now a student in the medical laboratory sciences (MLS) program at NIU, Hennessee has immersed herself in the specialized

coursework that prepares students for careers in diagnostic testing and analysis.

Her academic path recently opened the door to a highly competitive summer experience. Hennessee was selected for the Mayo Clinic Summer Lab Science Program, a 10-week paid opportunity that places students at clinical sites across Minnesota and Wisconsin, where they gain hands-on experience and learn from professionals in the field.

"I'm so grateful for this opportunity and for everyone who has helped me get to this point," she said. ■

Fueling Big Ideas

For students in NIU's nutrition program, attending the Food and Nutrition Conference and Expo (FNCE) is more than just a professional event — it's a chance to step into the spotlight, share research and connect with leaders in the field. This year, over 20 students and faculty traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to join thousands of nutrition professionals exploring the latest research, trends and innovations.

"Attending FNCE is highly beneficial for both

nutrition students and faculty," said Professor Henna Muzaffar. "Students gain valuable presentation experience, networking opportunities, professional exposure and learning beyond the classroom. Faculty benefit through professional development, leadership engagement, student support and opportunities for collaboration. Going together also strengthens team bonding and sparks ideas for curriculum and program development."

For students like Hanna Jetel, the conference offered both personal and professional enrichment.

"It was incredible to have meaningful discussions with professionals about emerging nutrition research," said Jetel. "Attending sessions on a wide range of topics also helped me broaden my knowledge and think about how I'll apply what I learned in my future practice." ■



Race to JAM

A team of recent NIU medical laboratory sciences (MLS) graduates showed their skills during Race to JAM, a nationwide trivia-style game. Huskies competed in the finals held during the 2026 Joint Annual Meeting (JAM), a powerful collaboration uniting the American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science (ASCLS), Association of Genetic Technologists (AGT) and Society of American Federal Medical Laboratory Scientists (SAFMLS) in St. Louis, Missouri.

Under the guidance of Professor Jeanne Isabel, Mackenzie Reigler, Anna Lantz, Izzy Horbenko and Allison McDonald represented the Huskies, snagging first place in the MLS competition by beating

University of California-Davis team in the finals.

“Our team did an amazing job,” Isabel said. “I am so proud of the professionalism exhibited by these MLS graduates who took time away from their new jobs to participate in this.”

The team initially competed in the Jeopardy-style competition online in April where they excelled in each of the four rounds. Due to their outstanding scores, the recent graduates earned a spot — including travel and registration fees — in the finals.

“It was a great experience for everyone,” Isabel said. “They had fun, met many people and learned about the value of belonging to a professional society.” ■





Alumni Spotlight

Cathy Ngoma

With her role at the American Medical Association, Cathy Ngoma, '20, is advancing efforts to improve health equity in communities across the country.

Ngoma, who earned her bachelor's degree in public health from NIU, is a senior partnerships coordinator within the AMA's Center for Optimal Health Outcomes on the Partnerships and Strategy Team.

"My work has a nationwide scope through our Release the Pressure initiative, which focuses on empowering Black communities with the knowledge, resources and opportunities needed to achieve optimal health," Ngoma said. "In my role, I lead our grants and sponsorships portfolio for the center. Through this work, we are able to sponsor, fund and strengthen a variety of partnership initiatives that advance our mission and expand our impact."

Before joining the AMA, Ngoma worked for the Chicago Mayor's Office's Community Safety Coordination Center, where she helped address the root causes of violence in communities most affected.

"This experience strengthened my commitment to equity, collaboration and community-driven solutions," she said.

Ngoma's passion for service is rooted in her upbringing in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. When it came time to choose a college, Ngoma was eager to broaden her worldview by engaging with people from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds.

"I chose NIU because of its strong academic programs, supportive community and opportunities for international students," she said. "The university provided a welcoming environment where I could both pursue my professional goals and grow personally." ■

Student Spotlight

Cindy Carbajal

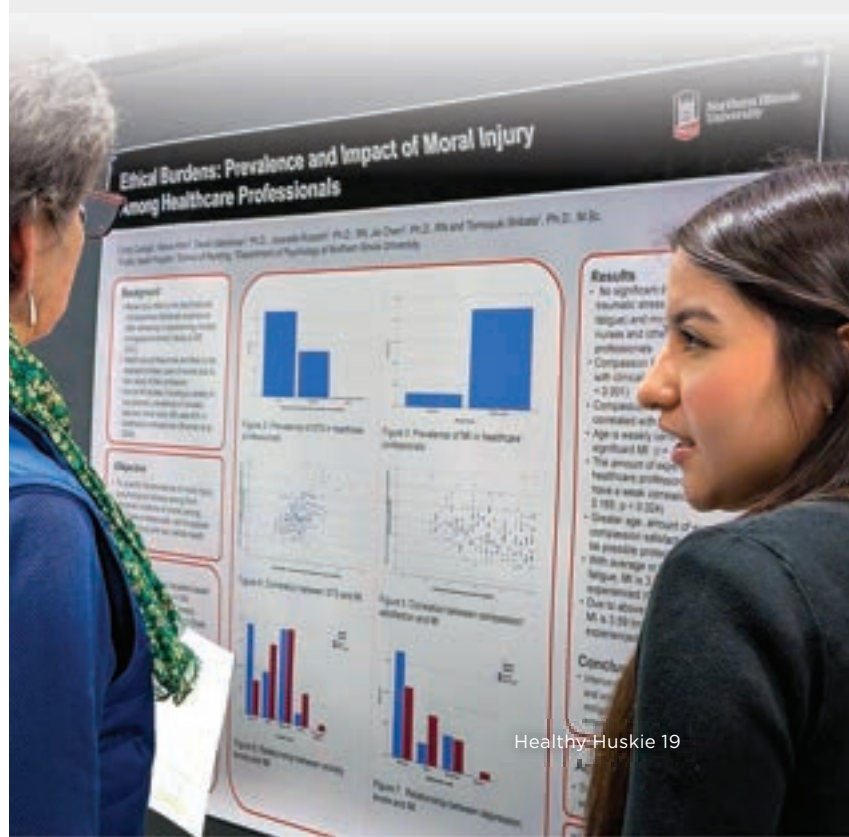
When Cindy Carbajal traveled to Washington, D.C., for the American Public Health Association's annual meeting, she joined more than 11,000 public health professionals, researchers and students from around the world. By the end of the conference, the public health student had earned recognition as one of the top student poster presenters in her section.

Carbajal presented her research poster, "Ethical Burdens: Prevalence and Impact of Moral Injury Among Healthcare Professionals," at the conference, the largest public health gathering in the world.

"Presenting at the APHA conference was truly an incredible experience that I feel so fortunate to have been able to take part in," Carbajal said. "It was amazing to be in such an informational and collaborative environment with like-minded individuals."

Her journey began through Research Rookies, NIU's undergraduate research program, which provides students with faculty mentorship, hands-on research experience and professional development opportunities. Carbajal credits her success to the support she received from Research Rookies, NIU's Office of Student Engagement, Experiential Learning and Entrepreneurship and her faculty mentor, Professor Shibata.

"I am so grateful to NIU for all the wonderful opportunities it has provided me with throughout my undergrad journey," Carbajal said. "I am proud to be a Huskie." ■



Curious Minds

#NCUR2026

I AM A
Researcher!



When Emma Hastings arrived in Richmond, Virginia, for the National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NCUR), she expected to present her findings alongside hundreds of undergraduate scholars from across the country. What she didn't expect was students from other universities showing up specifically to hear her speak.

"That kind of energy and support is something you don't forget," Hastings said.

The NIU health sciences student and Research Rookie was selected to present her study, "Overturning Roe v. Wade and Pre-Medical Students' Views and Medical School Choices," at NCUR in April. Originally published in Medical Education Online, the research examines how the landmark Supreme Court decision is shaping pre-medical students' views and influencing where — and whether — they choose to pursue medical training.

For Hastings, the opportunity to share her work on a national stage was both validating and motivating.

"This opportunity renewed my passion for researching women's health and connected me with so many passionate, smart and talented people who are making a difference," she said. "In divisive times, embracing community and finding ways to make all voices heard is essential, which is why opportunities like this matter."

The conference also gave Hastings a firsthand look at the scale and diversity of undergraduate research taking place nationwide.

"One of the most inspiring parts was seeing so many other undergraduate students from across the country presenting on all kinds of different, innovative topics," Hastings said. "It made me feel like I was part of something bigger."

Including scientific studies and artistic performances, Hastings said the event challenged traditional ideas about what research can look like. That message has become central to the advice she gives students who may feel intimidated by research opportunities.

"You can make valuable contributions to academia as an undergraduate student," Hastings said. "It's OK not to know everything, and it's OK to make mistakes. That's all part of the research process."

She said research allows students to deepen existing passions while building practical skills that extend far beyond academia.

"Research builds confidence and real-world skills like critical thinking, problem-solving and communication, even if you aren't planning to go into research as a career," Hastings said. ■



Student Spotlight

Aki Ito

When Aki Ito began thinking about her future career, she did not have a single dream job in mind. Instead, it was early experiences working with children that helped her discover a direction that now guides her studies at NIU.

"I wanted to be many things when I was little, but I did not have any dream jobs when I entered high school," Ito said. "It was the preschool program I became involved with there that sparked my interest in careers that worked with children."

While she realized she was not drawn to managing a full classroom, she knew she wanted to work more directly with children in a one-on-one setting. She's currently a health sciences major with an emphasis in pre-physical therapy and is pursuing minors in deafness and family and child studies.

Outside the classroom, Ito serves in NIU's Foreign Language Residence Program as a native speaker of Japanese, where she helps students learn language and culture in a shared living environment.

"Teaching the language and culture to others allows me to reflect back on my roots and understand them better," she said. "I also enjoy how I am able to learn about the cultures of other languages that are taught in the program through the eyes of native speakers." ■



R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Students in the Rehabilitation Counseling Student Association (RCSA) spent 18 hours at the Holmes Student Center during Respect Week, encouraging conversations about disability inclusion, advocacy and accessibility through interactive outreach and community engagement.

Respect Week is a statewide initiative that promotes kindness, inclusion and respect in schools and communities through activities and educational events.

Throughout the week, members of the Rehabilitation Counseling Student Association distributed 141 pieces of Respect Week gear while connecting with students, staff and visitors about the importance of accessibility and disability awareness.

"It was a joy to see all the engagement, networking and advocacy taking place," said Amanda McCarthy, associate professor and clinical coordinator for rehabilitation counseling. "I am very proud of our RCSA team."

The effort also provided students with hands-on experience in advocacy and community education, aligning with the association's broader mission of promoting accessibility and respect in professional and public settings.

"Participating in the Week of Respect is especially meaningful for rehabilitation counseling students because it aligns with our core values of advocacy, inclusion and respect for individuals with disabilities," said student Quarey Weikal. "Events like this give students the opportunity to move beyond theory and actively engage in promoting dignity and equity within the community."

Weikal said it also reinforces the importance of person-centered perspectives, challenges stigmas and helps students develop the interpersonal and cultural humility skills that are essential in their professional roles. ■

Adapting with Intention

The college is adapting to evolving student interests and workforce needs. As part of this effort, we are phasing out new enrollment in the undergraduate rehabilitation and disability services (RDS) major beginning in the 2026-27 academic year, while continuing to support current students through graduation and offering an enhanced minor open to all students that complements their bachelor's degree.

While the major will phase out as current students complete their degrees, the RDS curriculum will continue to play an important role in the college.

An enhanced minor is available which provides introductory knowledge and skills related to working with people with disabilities. That includes people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders,

individuals with chronic illnesses and other groups like the elderly, youth and incarcerated populations.

The nationally ranked and CACREP-accredited Master of Science in rehabilitation counseling remains as a strong graduate pathway in the discipline and the Rehabilitation Counseling Student Association (RCSA) will continue to provide opportunities for connection, leadership and professional development.

As the program evolves, its core strengths remain unchanged: committed faculty, a supportive learning environment and a focus on preparing students for impactful careers in rehabilitation and disability services. ■

A Legacy that

For School of Nursing alumni Daniel Pesut, returning to NIU for the Beta Omega Chapter's 50th Anniversary Induction Ceremony was a homecoming. Pesut, who is a professor emeritus from Indiana University and University of Minnesota, was studying to be a nurse in 1975 when he helped found the DeKalb chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International, the second-largest nursing organization in the world and a prestigious global nursing honor society.

"I have been a Sigma member for most of my professional life, but standing before a chapter that I helped create and which has been inducting nurses into the fellowship of knowledge for 50 years is something qualitatively different," Pesut said. "It is a homecoming — and like all genuine homecomings, it invites reflection before it invites celebration."

Pesut was among 100 people who attended the event at Barsema Alumni and Visitors Center on April 19. In addition to inductees, their families, friends and NIU faculty, Angela Villareal, a nursing management leader, was the keynote speaker.

"There are invitations you accept, and invitations

that accept you," Pesut said. "Being asked to serve as the invited expert speaker for ceremony felt unmistakably like the latter — a recognition that landed softly and meant more than words easily capture."

As Pesut reflected on the last 50 years, he noted that this chapter anniversary is both an institutional milestone and a living archive.

"Every nurse inducted over five decades carried something into the profession: a dissertation, a bedside practice, a classroom, a policy argument, a moment of compassionate presence no database will ever fully capture," he said. "When I stood at that podium, I was not speaking to an audience. I was speaking with a lineage."

Pesut spoke of leadership that makes milestones possible and touched upon the developmental nature of leadership, renewal as a professional discipline and the vocational dimension that gives sustained service its deepest meaning.

"The afternoon gave me a chance to look back and feel — not pride exactly, but gratitude about a career



Endures

legacy,” Pesut said. “The sense that the threads have held, the work has mattered and that the colleagues carrying this chapter forward are doing so with wisdom and heart. Fifty years is a long time to keep a promise. Beta Omega has kept it beautifully.”

Patrice Alsaden, NIU clinical assistant professor and vice president of the Beta Omega chapter, said Pesut’s words were inspiring.

“He discussed how nursing research changes lives, how nurses belong to the most trusted profession and how being inducted into Sigma as an undergrad is just the beginning of what it means to belong to an international research honor society,” Alsaden said. “How special it is that the undergraduate inductees must be invited to join based on their academic accomplishments. His address was impactful and was greeted with a standing ovation upon its conclusion.”

The ceremony concluded with the induction of 19 undergraduate and three graduate students into the Beta Omega chapter of the prestigious Sigma Theta Tau International Research Honor Society of Nursing. ■



Alumni Spotlight

Gareth Elkins

Gareth Elkins, '21, is currently a registered nurse working at the prestigious Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and this fall he will enter a doctoral program at the clinic's medical school. Elkins said his experience at NIU helped him prepare for his career and future goals.

"My two main reasons for coming to NIU were because of the nursing program's great reputation and its affordability," he said. "Having graduated and been gone for four years now, I've found that the program's reputation is richly deserved for the ability to get a quality education at an affordable price."

Last fall, Elkins begins the 39-month Doctor of Nurse Anesthesia Practice Program at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science.

"I will be training to become an advanced practice nurse that specializes in providing anesthesia care for patients," he said. "My goal is to one day work alongside surgeons and the surgical team in operating rooms during procedures." ■



Perks of Partnership

The School of Nursing welcomed approximately 30 guests including valued clinical partner organizations and members of the nursing faculty and staff for its Stakeholder Breakfast, a morning dedicated to collaboration, inspiration and shared commitment to advancing nursing education.

The event featured nursing alum Peggy Norton-Rosko, senior vice president and chief nursing officer of Trinity Health, as keynote speaker.

"I love to stay connected to the NIU School of Nursing because I credit my NIU degree with providing me the education and professional foundation that led to an amazing career," Norton-Rosko shared.

If you're inspired by NIU's commitment to excellence in education and would like to volunteer or share your time and talents, reach out to chhs@niu.edu to get involved. ■



Donor Spotlight

Marilyn Stromborg

For Marilyn Stromborg, NIU is more than an alma mater. It's part of her family's story.

"My mom graduated from there. My dad got his second doctorate there. My sister went there. I went there. My oldest son went there," Stromborg said. "It's just a real family history of an institution that's always been very, very supportive of my family."

Over the course of her distinguished career, Stromborg has changed lives as a nurse, educator, researcher, attorney and philanthropist. After earning her bachelor's degree in biological sciences from NIU in 1964 and her master's degree in nursing from New York Medical College, she served as a captain in the U.S. Air Force Nurse Corps during the Vietnam War. She later earned an adult nurse practitioner license from Rush University, a doctorate in educational psychology from NIU and a Juris Doctor from NIU.

Stromborg joined the NIU School of Nursing faculty in 1978 and was named Distinguished Research Professor in 1997, becoming only the second woman in university history to receive the honor. A prolific author and presenter, her research advanced cancer care and prevention, particularly among minority populations. Her work earned top honors from the Oncology Nursing Society and the American Nurses Association, while the American Cancer Society recognized her as an outstanding researcher. She also served on the Illinois Board of Nursing and the National Advisory Council for Nursing Research.

After retiring as chair of the School of Nursing in 2004, Stromborg launched a second career in law, serving as an assistant state's attorney and later coordinating the DeKalb County Drug/DUI Court for nine years. In recognition of her achievements, she received the NIU Alumni Achievement in the Sciences Award in 2018. In 2023, she became an inaugural member of the College of Health and Human Sciences Advisory Board.

Yet among her many accomplishments, helping students pursue careers in nursing remains one of her greatest passions.

"I think sometimes we forget how some students have to struggle to become nurses at Northern," Stromborg said. "They have family issues and certainly overwhelming financial issues."

That belief shaped her approach to philanthropy. Stromborg sees scholarship support as one of the most meaningful ways to make a difference because it directly impacts students working to achieve their educational goals.

"I just think it's an obligation — for those of us that can — to help those students, and the best way is through scholarships," she said. "When you donate a scholarship, it goes directly to help a student achieve their goals."

For aspiring nurses, that support can mean the difference between postponing a dream and achieving it.

By investing in future nurses, Stromborg's generosity creates a ripple effect that extends far beyond campus. Each scholarship recipient carries that support into hospitals, clinics, schools and communities, touching countless lives throughout their careers. ■





Lucky Number 700

On Sept. 5, 2025, NIU Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadet Caitlin Field achieved a remarkable milestone when she was commissioned as a second lieutenant and became the 700th officer to graduate from the NIU Army ROTC program.

Field, who completed all commissioning requirements over the summer, joined the Illinois National Guard as a military police officer while also beginning her career as an elementary school physical education teacher. Her dual roles reflect the NIU Army ROTC mission: developing leaders who serve with dedication both in uniform and in their communities.

The Reserve Officers' Training Corps is a college-based leadership development program that prepares students to become officers in the U.S. Army, Army Reserve or Army National Guard. For more than half a century, NIU Army ROTC has trained future leaders like Field who go

on to serve the nation and make an impact across diverse fields.

"Commissioning the 700th Second Lieutenant from Northern Illinois University Army ROTC program is a testament to the lengthy history and success of our program," said Lt. Col. Harold Larsen. "For 56

years, officers from our program have gone on to do amazing things for our nation, and I have no doubt that Caitlin will follow in their footsteps. This accomplishment would not be possible without the amazing support we receive from university leaders, faculty and staff."

Field's accomplishment represents more than just a personal achievement. It's a celebration of the strength, tradition and community behind NIU Army ROTC. Each graduate carries forward a legacy of service, leadership and excellence that continues to shape both the military and civilian world. ■



Adjusting Formation

For decades, Army ROTC programs at Wheaton College and NIU developed student leaders committed to service, character and excellence. Beginning in 2026, those two proud traditions will enter a new chapter as U.S. Army Cadet Command merges the NIU host program with Wheaton College's longstanding Rolling Thunder Battalion.

The reorganization is part of a broader nationwide initiative by U.S. Army Cadet Command to rebalance and optimize its Senior ROTC footprint. Across the country, dozens of programs are being restructured to better align resources with commissioning requirements and changing enrollment patterns.

Under the new arrangement, NIU will transition from a host battalion to an extension unit under Wheaton College. NIU cadets will continue to conduct physical training, leadership labs, and take military science classes on the NIU campus.

According to Cadet Command, the merger is intended to improve efficiency by consolidating administrative and logistical support, reducing organizational overhead and ensuring resources are focused where they can have the greatest impact. Army officials have emphasized that the changes are designed to maintain the quality of cadet development while adapting to evolving force requirements.

For cadets, the most important aspect of the transition is continuity. Cadet Command has stated that students will continue to receive leadership instruction, mentorship and training opportunities with minimal disruption to their ROTC experience. The merger also creates opportunities for greater collaboration between students from two distinct institutions united by a common commitment to serving the nation. ■



Reporting for Duty — Again

Cadet Knayjah Miller's path to NIU began with a simple but steady commitment to service. That commitment carried Miller from the U.S. Army to a leadership role in ROTC, where years of experience, education and perseverance now come together in pursuit of commissioning as a Medical Service Corps officer.

"My active duty experience has played a significant role in shaping me for my next position," Miller said. "It helped me develop strong leadership skills, adaptability and the ability to perform under pressure."

Before NIU, Miller served on active duty as a chaplain assistant in the U.S. Army, stationed in Japan. There, Miller supported service members and their families through both everyday challenges and moments of crisis while building skills in leadership, cultural awareness and empathy.

After completing active duty, Miller transitioned into civilian life, started a family and relocated from Virginia to Illinois. Even as responsibilities shifted at home, the desire to continue serving remained steady and eventually led to enrollment at NIU and participation in the Army ROTC program.

Miller graduated in May 2026 with her bachelor's degree in public health and a minor in military sciences and was selected to serve on active duty as a Medical Service Corps officer, continuing a journey defined by purpose, growth and a consistent drive to serve. ■



2026 Dean's Awards for Excellence

The Lankford Award for Excellence in Teaching

**Melissa Clucas Walter, associate professor,
Human Development and Family Sciences.**



Reviewers found Clucas Walter's teaching record "impressive" and admired her "sustained excellence in teaching through consistently high instructional effectiveness, broad teaching contributions and strong mentorship." Her dedication to excellence in the classroom, to fostering student success and

to continuously evolving her teaching practices is commendable and highly valued by the college. ■

The Fisher Award for Excellence in Service

**Nancy Prange, clinical assistant professor,
Nutrition and Dietetics.**



Nancy Prange's impressive record of service reflects her deep and ongoing commitment to leadership, advocacy and engagement in ways that elevate both NIU and the nutrition field.

Reviewers felt her accomplishments aligned well with CHHS goals, mission, vision and values. Her extensive involvement in committees, professional organizations and community outreach initiatives — combined

with her dedication to advancing her field — has made a clear and lasting impact. ■

The Sullivan Award for Excellence in Research

**Shicheng Chen, assistant professor,
Medical Laboratory Sciences.**



Shicheng Chen's exemplary research portfolio, consistent record of publications and presentations, and ongoing commitment to advancing knowledge

in the field distinguished his application and impressed the review committee.

Reviewers noted his strong track record of publications and described his contributions as "exemplary and extremely relevant to society." In addition to the strength of his scholarly

record, reviewers appreciated Professor Chen's demonstrated ability to secure funding and build collaborative research teams — qualities that significantly enhance the research mission of the college and the university as a whole. ■

The Award for Exceptional Work in Interprofessional Education

**Catherine Cheung, assistant professor,
Physical Therapy.**



Catherine Cheung's work exemplifies the college's strategic goal of promoting interprofessional

education and aligns with national and international standards. Her initiative serves as a model for others within the college and the broader university community.

Her efforts were not only innovative but also thoughtful and impactful, and her team's ability to balance these educational efforts

with regular teaching and clinical responsibilities further exemplifies her commitment and excellence. The impact of Professor Cheung's work goes beyond the classroom. By building these collaborative opportunities for students, she has helped to shape a future generation of healthcare professionals who will work effectively across disciplines. ■

Paper of the Year

CHHS named the first winner of its Outstanding Scholarly Publication of the Year award, and the honored paper gives bilingual children a fuller way to be heard. The inaugural award was established to recognize high-caliber published research that advances its field and reflects the strengths of the college.

"Developing a Core Vocabulary List for Tagalog-English Bilingual Preschool-Age Children," published in the American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, takes on a quiet gap in assistive technology. Many communication devices for bilingual children simply translate from English word lists, which leaves a child's home language thinned out. Working from the speech of 100 Tagalog-English bilingual children in Metro Manila, the authors built core vocabulary lists in both languages and used them to design communication boards that match how these children actually talk.

The paper paired four CHHS faculty members, professors Milijana Buac, Anna Cannone, Sarah O'Connor and Allison Gladfelter, with first author Vianca Ocampo, who earned her master's degree in speech-language pathology last year. ■

Faculty recognition

2025 Nurse Educator Award Winners

Three NIU School of Nursing faculty members were named as 2026 Nurse Educator Fellows by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE).

Patrice Alsaden, Rhoda Jefferson and Cristan Sabio join other Illinois nurse educators in the 2026 class after being selected based on their accomplishments, contributions to the nursing program and efforts to advance equity and diversity in nursing education. ■

Illinois Fellowship

Anitha Saravanan, associate professor of nursing, has been selected as a 2026–2027 Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) Fellow.



The IIN Fellowship is a competitive, statewide program that brings together faculty leaders from across Illinois to develop innovative, community-engaged solutions to pressing societal challenges.

As part of the fellowship, Saravanan will lead the development of the “Broadband for Better Health (B4BH) Playbook,” an equity-focused framework designed to improve digital access, digital health literacy and telehealth readiness among underserved populations. ■



Nutrition Fellow

Henna Muzaffar, associate professor of nutrition, was selected as a 2026 Excellence in Nutrition Fellow of the American Society for Nutrition (FASN).

The FASN recognition program honors outstanding nutrition professionals who are 10 or more years past their terminal degree and have been an American Society for Nutrition scientist, clinician or professional member for five or more years.

The FASN designation is a mark of excellence in the field of nutrition, signifying Muzaffar’s contributions to advancing nutrition science and practice, as well as her commitment to the highest standards of the profession. ■

Researchers to Know

Shondra Clay, chair, School of Preventive and Applied Health, was named as a part of the 2026



Researchers to Know class by the Illinois Science & Technology Coalition (ISTC). The annual initiative shines a spotlight on faculty across Illinois whose work is shaping the future of innovation.

Researchers are chosen for “actively translating research into real-world solutions, forging cross-sector partnerships, mentoring future innovators and driving inclusive progress across the state.” ■

Outstanding Manuscript Award

Congratulations to athletic training Associate Professors Tyler Wood and Nicholas Grahovec, nutrition Clinical Assistant Professor Nancy Prange and athletic training alumni Randi Needham who were named winners of the 2025 Outstanding Manuscript Award by editors of the Journal of Athletic Training-Education and Practice. Wood accepted the award for their article on “Frequency and Attributing Factors to Food Insecurity Experienced by Professional Athletic Training Students” at the National Athletic Trainers Association annual meeting in June. ■





Brace for Impact

Huskie Trek Talks spotlight bold ideas, creative work and community-driven research emerging from NIU. Modeled after TED-style presentations, the annual program sponsored by NIU Foundation brings forward concise, high-impact talks from faculty, staff and students whose work reflects the ingenuity and Huskie spirit that define NIU.

The 2026 Trek Talks highlighted 10 projects, including one led by Jamie Mayer, professor of speech-language pathology. Mayer was selected to present “Two Generations, One Goal: Keeping Our Minds Healthy.”

“I loved being able to share what I do in more of a storytelling format versus the research-based presentations I’m used to giving,” Mayer said, “and to do so in front of an audience including administrators and foundation members was just such a unique and incredible opportunity.”

Mayer, the principal investigator for the Brain Resilience Through Active Communication and Engagement (BRACE) Lab, shared information on a program she oversees that pairs NIU students with older adults in senior living communities to build brain health through interactive activities that strengthen mental resilience and social connection.

Grant funds totaling \$90,000 were provided by the NIU Foundation Board of Directors and its grants committee, the Division of Research and Innovation Partnerships, and award sponsor Molex. Following her talk, Mayer received a \$5,000 grant award that will help her to continue to grow her Brain Health program, reaching more older adults both locally and more broadly.

Huskie Trek Talks showcase NIU’s commitments to expanding transformational experiences, inspiring discovery and innovation, and fortifying our future.

“It was also a wonderful way to learn about the huge variety of innovative projects happening at NIU,” Mayer said. “I’m so proud to be part of our university and what it represents.”

Learn more about Huskie Trek Talks at niu.edu/research-innovation/huskie-trek-talks.

Student Spotlight

Buki Fabusiwa

Buki Fabusiwa, a second-year Ph.D. in health sciences student at NIU, has been selected as a national awardee of the AIM-AHEAD All of Us Training Program. The highly competitive initiative is supported by the AIM-AHEAD Coordinating Center and is designed to expand national capacity in data science and precision health research through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) All of Us Research Program.

“Being selected for the AIM-AHEAD Training Program is an honor,” said Fabusiwa, who holds a Doctor of Pharmacy degree from Midwestern University — Chicago College of Pharmacy. “The program aligns deeply with my commitment to harnessing data, AI/ML and real-world evidence to improve outcomes for diverse patient populations.”

NIU’s health sciences Ph.D. program provided the flexibility and rigor Fabusiwa sought as a working professional returning to graduate study.

“That flexibility was important to me,” said



Fabusiwa, who also earned her bachelor’s degree from NIU decades ago. “It was a pleasant surprise to discover that my alma mater, right in my own backyard, offered exactly the type of program I had been seeking.” ■

Student Spotlight

Grace Wilson Biokoro

When Grace Wilson Biokoro began exploring doctoral programs, she was looking for a way to make measurable change in maternal and child health along with earning her advanced degree.

Today, as a Ph.D. student in the health sciences program, Biokoro is doing exactly that, blending research, policy and practice to improve outcomes for women and children across Illinois.

“I am interested in health education initiatives aimed at reducing maternal and child mortality and morbidity rates among women of reproductive age,” Biokoro said. “I propose to do so by examining how the attitudes of healthcare practitioners toward lactation impact exclusive breastfeeding.”

NIU’s Ph.D. in health sciences program is built for students like Biokoro, professionals who want to lead with evidence-based practice and interdisciplinary collaboration. The program’s hybrid design allows flexibility for full- and part-time students while fostering connection through strategic in-person sessions. Students work closely with faculty mentors to align their research with meaningful, community-based outcomes.

“The interdisciplinary nature of the program has been truly rewarding,” she said. “It’s given me the tools to translate research into real-world health solutions, like designing simulation-based trainings and developing maternal-infant health curricula.” ■



Advocating through Evidence

An NIU research team has earned the Journal of Public Health Policy's Best Paper of the Year for a systematic review that examines how U.S. policies support unpaid family caregivers. The award was presented during the American Journal of Public Health's Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. in November.

The winning paper, "Caregiver Policies in the United States: A Systematic Policy and Literature Review," was coauthored by the NIU team of Health

sciences doctoral student Makenna Green, NIU Master of Public Health (MPH) alum Sadia Afrin and public health professor M. Courtney Hughes. Health economist Erin Vernon from Seattle University also coauthored the winning paper.

"Our team set out to better understand how legislation can support the growing population of unpaid family caregivers in the United States," Hughes said. "This honor affirms that such work has the potential to inform policy and improve lives."

Hughes added that the interdisciplinary nature of the project strengthened the research.

"Working alongside students and a health economist to conduct a rigorous systematic review was both energizing and inspiring," Hughes said. "This award underscores the value of interdisciplinary teamwork in advancing public health policy research."

Green said the award brings needed visibility to the challenges caregivers face.

"We all know someone who has been an informal or family caregiver or may have been one ourselves. These people care for a loved one without payment or expectation often for years," she said. "Being named best paper feels like we are pushing advocacy efforts forward and making the needs of caregivers more visible." ■



Research Drives Screening

Alyssa Harris, Ph.D. in health sciences candidate, was the lead author of "Facility-Based Uptake of Colorectal Cancer Screening in 45- to 49-Year-Olds After U.S. Guideline Changes." The study, which included Professor M. Courtney Hughes as senior author, was recently published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Network Open, which offers enhanced access to the research, reviews and perspectives shaping medicine today and into the future at no charge.

"It was incredibly validating to know that JAMA Network Open was interested in the work," said Harris, associate principal at the Center for Advanced Analytics and Informatics for Vizient Inc. "As a researcher and Ph.D. student, it's exciting to

contribute to conversations around colorectal cancer prevention and screening at that level."

The study examined how U.S. hospitals responded after national colorectal cancer (CRC) screening guidelines lowered the recommended screening age from 50 to 45. Using data from more than 1,000 hospitals in the Vizient Clinical Data Base, the researchers found that facility-based CRC screening among adults ages 45-49 increased almost tenfold following the 2021 USPSTF guideline update and subsequent insurance coverage changes.

"At a high level, the findings show that when evidence, policy and healthcare systems align, adoption can happen very quickly across the country," said Harris, "Health systems rapidly integrated the new recommendations into practice through provider education, EMR workflows and expanded screening efforts."

Check out the full study at

doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.41330. ■





What's the Buzz

Shicheng Chen, professor of medical laboratory sciences, received a \$40,000 Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) Sustaining Illinois Seed grant to support research examining the relationship between mosquitoes and environmental microorganisms.

The IIN, a consortium of universities, research institutions and innovation hubs across Illinois, provides seed funding for collaborative research projects that address the state's economic, health, social and environmental challenges. The grants are designed to help researchers develop pilot projects that can secure larger external funding opportunities.

Since launching the project in summer 2025, Chen and his research team — that includes three undergraduate students and one graduate student — have collected mosquitoes from sites across Illinois to investigate how environmental bacteria interact with mosquito populations and influence public health outcomes.

"My research explores how bacteria living in water, soil and insect habitats evolve and interact with their environment, including mosquitoes and humans," Chen said. "By studying their genomes and microbial communities, we can better understand how some of these organisms survive, spread and sometimes cause disease and even spread antimicrobial resistant (AMR) genes."

The team collected adult mosquitoes from six locations across the state: DeKalb, Sycamore, Kane County, Lee County, Rockford and Carbondale.

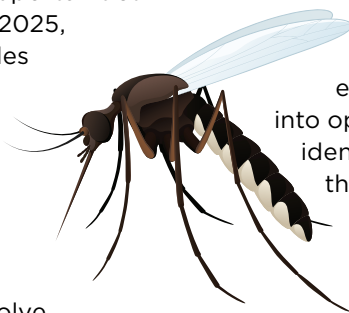
Traps were deployed in urban, rural and agricultural environments, and researchers recorded environmental data, including GPS coordinates, temperature and humidity, at each collection site. They used the next-generation sequencing technology to investigate mosquito microbiomes and AMR genes.

According to Chen, the project's findings could have significant implications for public health.

"My research focuses on understanding how mosquitoes interact with environmental microorganisms," he said. "This work has two main impacts: Improving our understanding of how some environmental bacteria transition into opportunistic human pathogens and identifying microbial and genetic factors that may influence disease transmission and AMR in the community and clinical settings."

Chen said the research will help scientists better understand how environmental microbes move between ecosystems and living hosts, potentially contributing to disease emergence.

"Many AMR bacteria may originate in the environment, not just in hospitals," Chen said. "This research supports the early detection of potential AMR pathogens, enhances our understanding of antimicrobial resistance and contributes to efforts aimed at reducing the risk of future outbreaks." ■



Publications

A selection of recent faculty publications

- Anderson, L., **Gladfelter, A., Buac, M., Cheung, W.C., Wang, Z., & Onal, S.** (2025). Relationships Between Cultural Factors and Motor Abilities in Autistic and Non-Autistic Children. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(12), 1742. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15121742>
- Beldon, M. A., **Clay, S. L., Hughes, M. C., & Mazurek, K.** (2026). Access to Maternity Care and Low Birth Weight among Women in Rural and Urban U.S. Counties with Higher Rates of Underweight Births. *Health & Social Work*, hlag024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlag024>
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