

COMMENCEMENT EDITION

FALL 2021

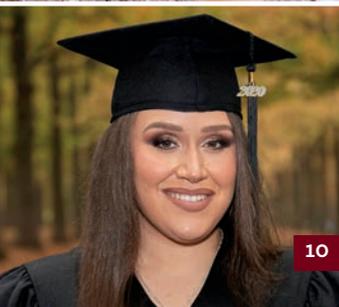
# Invention

THE MAGAZINE OF THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY



Ekene Udoka Ejimofor, DNP '21

*The 49th Annual Commencement*



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## *Dear Alumni, Students and Friends,*

Welcome to the fall issue of *Invention* magazine. As has become our custom, we are devoting this edition entirely to our Commencement ceremony with profiles of some of our magnificent graduates. While reading through the stories of these graduates, I was struck by their collective resolve and their capacity to overcome obstacles. For all of us, the last two years have been trying times, but each fall when hundreds of our graduating students join us here in Trenton, N.J., for a Commencement ceremony, the hardships fade away and the joy is palpable. This day is special to our graduates and to all of us who work here in so many ways. The excitement that fills the arena, the sense of accomplishment and the anticipation for a new and better future reminds me why we work so hard on behalf of our students and how life-changing education can be.

I think that you will agree with me that in the profiles contained in these pages we are able to capture the unique journeys and resulting triumphs that are the trademark of so many of our graduates. You will meet nursing students Jessica Poland, who went back to school to become a nurse and landed her dream job as a pediatric oncology nurse, and Tom Scheuren, who used his master's degree in nursing to find meaning and purpose in a new career as a clinical instructor after years in higher education.

And there's Mike Piscetelli, who says he lost many better opportunities over the years because he did not have a degree and now is with "the best company I have ever worked for," thanks to his bachelor's degree in Natural Sciences/Mathematics. Or Pamela Fink who abandoned her first attempt at earning an undergraduate degree because of a learning disability. But, years later, the birth of two children inspired her to try again. She sailed through her undergraduate degree in Business Administration and linked it to the University's Bachelor's to Master's Program for an additional degree in Project Management.

Or Rocio Dela Riva who earned a Doctor of Nursing Practice while leading a cutting-edge team of nurse informaticists in enhancing patient care and outcomes through the deployment of health information technology solutions.

These students are just a few of the dozen we profile in this issue. They represent a small slice of the thousands of students who earned a degree or certificate between December 2020 and September 2021. Each has followed a unique path to success and has a brighter future because of it. And I am proud that Thomas Edison State University's mission to help them has been at the core of this success.

I hope you enjoy this issue.



Merodie A. Hancock, PhD  
*President*



# Opening

*Amanda Figliola is using her new degree to advance her career in empowering adults with disabilities.*

# Doors & Strengthening Communities

## ❖ Amanda Figliola, BSHS '21

Amanda Figliola's future is full of possibilities. Now, she is making sure others hold the same promise.

As a program assistant for the New Jersey Institute for Disabilities (NJID), Figliola's field is expected to undergo a 17 percent employment growth rate (much faster than average) through 2029, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In her daily work, she provides life, social and self-advocacy skills training, one-on-one support and habilitation to adults with disabilities. She enjoys having a direct and positive impact on others and the variety of hats she wears while doing so.

"I'm assigned to an NJID group home where I assist in caring for individuals who have intellectual and developmental disabilities," noted Figliola, a 2021 Bachelor of Science in Human Services (BSHS) program graduate. "I often help them with daily-living skills such as cooking, cleaning, money management and personal care. My focus is on enabling them to lead more independent lives, advocate for themselves in multiple situations and make healthful choices in diet and lifestyle."

Providing a range of supportive programs including schools and day programs, enabling technologies, and residential and employment placement services, NJID's mission centers on providing life-enhancing programs that empower adults and children with disabilities and their family members.

"We also encourage and assist adults in our program in finding rewarding hobbies and roles as volunteers in their communities," said Figliola, who finds her career immensely rewarding, but also

recognizes the role of higher education in its progression.

The level of education that human services professionals complete often correlates directly with the level of responsibilities and opportunities they are offered by their employers. Those possessing bachelor's or master's degrees along with the appropriate work experience are often tracked for escalating positions in the field. Work settings often include schools, hospitals and nonprofit public or private agencies.

Transferring her Brookdale Community College associate degree credits into the TESU program, Figliola knew early on that a bachelor's degree was essential.

"I realized that I would not find the position I ultimately wanted in my field with an associate degree alone. Later, I was motivated in my studies by the desire to learn more about the populations I could serve in the future. I feel my degree will enhance my life on a personal level and offer more opportunities for me to help the populations most in need," said Figliola, who became interested in the field after serving as a volunteer for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Ocean County, N.J.

Of the institutions she considered attending, TESU's John S. Watson School of Public Service stood out for its affordability and online curriculum structure.

"I feel that my experience with TESU was excellent. I found my course materials

very instructive and immersive. The staff, classes, academic advisors and course mentors were amazing at conveying pertinent information and in helping me work through any issues along the way," noted Figliola, who was a 2018 recipient of a \$500 Inauguration Voucher from University President Merodie A. Hancock, PhD, that served to jump start her degree pursuit. "I enjoyed interacting with other students, sharing my own story and observations, and learning about their professional experiences."

Unique among academic programs in its category, the School's online BSHS degree program is designed for adults who already have exposure to the human services field. Once admitted to the program, students develop a professional track that matches their experience and aspirations and prepares them for advancement in their organizations or graduate-level study.

Figliola was also named to TESU's President's List in February 2021, a distinction that recognizes students' commitment to academic excellence during their degree journey. The Brick, N.J., resident lauds her grandmother, Grace Figliola, for inspiring her to always keep her eyes on the goal.

"My grandmother was very supportive through my whole long journey, from the early days of my associate degree pursuit, to the completion of my bachelor's degree," she noted.

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

# BREAKING THROUGH

KEITH WARE KNOWS FIRSTHAND THAT EDUCATION AND TEAMWORK CAN HAVE LIFESAVING POTENTIAL.

## Keith Ware, MS '21

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the value of clinical trials and the public's participation in them. For 2021 graduate Keith Ware and his colleagues, this development has special significance.

Ware, who is a manager of Investigator and Patient Solutions for the Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson, oversees the Investigator Portal Operations Support Team (IPOST) and its associated clinical research activities. According to Ware, through various polls and surveys, the pharmaceutical industry is witnessing an increasingly positive public sentiment toward the clinical trials process and its role in thwarting disease and developing new treatments.

This shift was especially crucial during the clinical trials phase of his company's development of its COVID-19 vaccine.

"The past year impacted clinical trial management in several ways. The most significant change was in the public's perception of the endeavor," said Ware, a Master of Science (MS) degree in Clinical Trials Management program graduate. "Clinical trial participation

a larger percentage of people now have a heightened interest in learning more about clinical trials," Ware noted. "I believe these factors combined to help diffuse the apprehension connected with clinical trial participation. This shift in thinking is promising for the future of research as we'll continue to need broad support to address the world's existing illnesses."

When he assumed his current role at Janssen Pharmaceuticals in 2020, Ware was already experienced in patient

**"MY TESU DEGREE PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE MY UNDERSTANDING OF ALL THE FUNCTIONS INVOLVED IN A CLINICAL TRIAL, NOT JUST MY SPECIALIZATION. THIS INCREASED AWARENESS HAS FACILITATED OUR PROJECTS AND HELPED ME WORK MORE THOUGHTFULLY, PRODUCTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY."**

Keith Ware

has been somewhat stigmatized in the past. That hesitancy has been one of the major barriers to clinical trial participation."

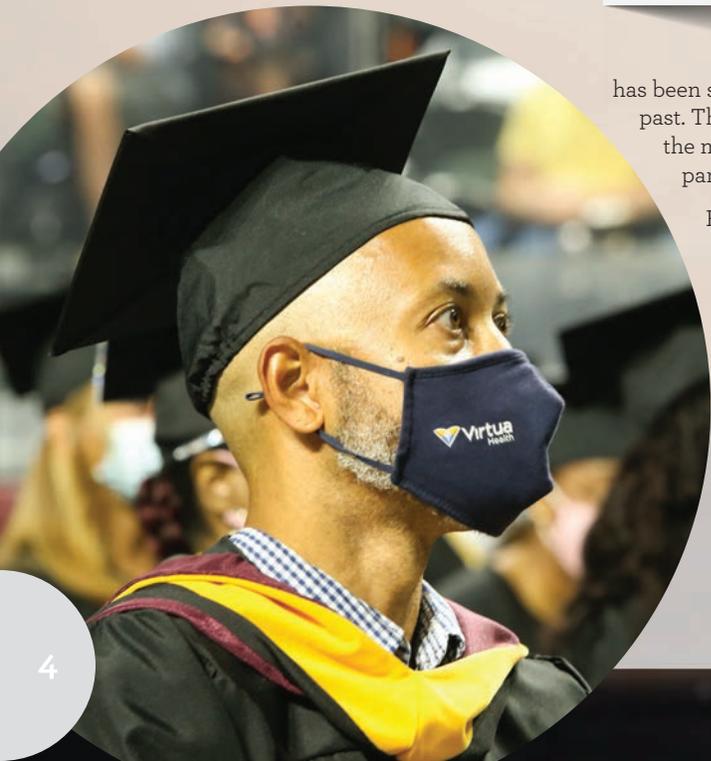
For an endeavor largely reliant on public sentiment and recruitment - government entities, academics, healthcare and community leaders, as well as the media, have played major roles in successfully turning the tide.

"There has been a more concentrated effort by the industry and media to educate the public. Similarly,

recruitment and retention management in a variety of clinical research settings. Before 2020, he served Janssen as a program manager in Investigator and Patient Management after working in strategic recruitment and operations recruitment management for PRA Health Sciences and InVentiv Health/Merck.

With a BA degree in sociology from Ursinus College, Collegeville, Pa., Ware is now channeling what he learned in his MS course work toward maintaining his team's cohesiveness.

"Throughout my experience of working in clinical trials, the most successful trials have included team members who took the time to understand each other's



functions, responsibilities and barriers,” he noted. “These teams also analyzed how a decision in a specific function might help or hinder other functions. My TESU degree provided an opportunity to increase my understanding of all the functions involved in a clinical trial, not just my specialization. This increased awareness has facilitated our projects and helped me work more thoughtfully, productively and efficiently.”

Ware originally heard about TESU’s programs through a colleague. Once he enrolled, he found the TESU instructional staff engaging, attentive and supportive.

“A colleague of mine went to TESU and spoke so highly of her experience that it immediately went to the top of my list. I also performed my due diligence by researching online reviews and blog articles about the institution, which ultimately sealed the deal,” he said. “The mentors were always accessible and provided great support. They also took the time to engage with us on an individual level. This contributed to my success in my courses and enhanced what I was learning.”

While balancing work and his course assignments, his mother was never far from his thoughts.

“I would think back to my mom and her studies to become an RN while raising me and my three sisters. If she could accomplish all that, then I have comparatively little to be stressed about,” he explained. “Also seeing my son excel at remote learning this past year despite the pandemic inspired me. He was very successful in his class. In short, I couldn’t let him outdo me in school, so I made sure to step up my efforts.”

In gauging Ware’s passion for his field, it becomes immediately clear that his motivations are driven as much by altruism as they are by his clinical endeavors.

“Compassion and the intrinsic desire to make the world a better place are core characteristics of people in our field. We work long hours, and the pressure can be high, so what gets you through is usually what attracted you to the field in the first place,” he noted. “I can’t tell you how many times a colleague has told me that they were motivated to work in clinical research because a loved one had or has an illness. Outside of the right motivation, if you are organized, if you can manage a project and can take the initiative whenever necessary, you’ll enjoy and be successful in this industry.”

Outside of work hours, Ware, a Burlington County, N.J., resident, enjoys catching up with shows on Netflix and following the Philadelphia 76ers, Eagles, Phillies and Flyers teams. And, as much as possible, appreciates “the pursuit of generally improving as a person each day – whether it’s through exercising, personal development or just practicing mindfulness techniques.”

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



# From

## Keisha Gifford, BA '21

Thanks to her unshakable resolve and work ethic, Keisha Gifford's best life is yet to come.

In her work for a large urban school district, Keisha Gifford was swimming against the current of other peoples' credentials. After two decades, she decided to turn the tide.

"I work in the largest urban K-12 district in New Jersey and always felt inadequate among so many people that were more accomplished academically," said Gifford, a management specialist for the Newark Board of Education (BOE) in New Jersey. "It is not that I lacked ability, I just didn't have the formal education to support my knowledge base. When I decided to enroll at TESU, everything changed. Something ignited in me the determination to push forward and not stop. It was a spark that caught fire."

In the 24 months following her enrollment, the former N.J. Army National Guard member completed the 23 TESU courses necessary to earn her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. Most of her assignments and exams were accomplished while working full time remotely, and ensuring that her son, Trent, age 14, was successful in his own daily virtual learning.

"Suddenly, my desire to earn a degree was at the forefront, and I couldn't imagine losing my momentum," noted Gifford, who went on to earn a Graduate Certificate in Organizational Leadership in 2021 and is now enrolled in the Master of Science in Management (MSM) degree program in Organizational

# a Spark to a Flame



Leadership through TESU's Bachelor's to Master's Program. "The online course structure is perfect for someone like me, and the discussion board assignments expose me to different professional perspectives. Many of the mentors have great motivational capabilities and keep us focused. I am just one year away from turning 50 years old, and I could not be prouder of what I've accomplished."

Gifford began working for the Newark BOE in 1996 as a per diem classroom aid before advancing through a sequence of clerical positions. Since 2019, she has served as a management specialist in the Office of Student Support Services. Her workday encompasses an array of

credentials in an industry that is focused on education. Most positions require a degree - earning my BA eliminated my concerns of not keeping my job or not qualifying for a new one. Completing my master's-level studies will improve my prospects even more. I now have 24 years of experience and a level of education to support my endeavors."

In 2020, Gifford was the recipient of a \$5,000 Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation Scholarship.

"The scholarship was beneficial to my journey. When I enrolled, my son, Tayvon, and daughter, Sanaa, were both attending college, so the timing

it was true in our case. Unfortunately, I am also a victim of sexual abuse, so I had to dig deeper to discover my motivations."

She credits her family for what she has accomplished and shares tips for the work-life balance she has achieved.

"I wouldn't have been able to complete my degree without the support of my husband, Damon, and the understanding of my children. Balancing work, life and school are challenging, and they gave me the space to get it done. There were plenty of days that I didn't prepare dinner, but they made sure I had a meal. I tried to stay as organized as possible, and, over time, it became less challenging," she explained.

"Honestly, you sleep less and you do more. What kept me going was the reward I knew was waiting. I would vacation with my schoolwork and take an hour every day to respond to messages and threads to prevent being overwhelmed. On the weekend, school is my job. I set my alarm and plan out my assignments for the week," added Gifford, who said that her hobbies took a back burner during the pandemic, but she still manages sewing, reading for leisure and taking long walks.

To learn more about TESU's Bachelor's to Master's Program, visit [tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program](https://tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program).

**"WHEN I DECIDED TO ENROLL AT TESU, EVERYTHING CHANGED...  
IT WAS A SPARK THAT CAUGHT FIRE."**

Keisha Gifford

administrative responsibilities including budgetary, payroll and grant funding oversight; scheduling, customer service and building permit administration; as well as charter school enrollment, student records, and district program monitoring and supervision.

"One of my more significant responsibilities is managing student records for 115 former district and charter schools. We must maintain these records for 100 years, confirm graduations and supply transcripts whenever necessary," noted the Newark, N.J., resident. "I am an expert at my job but lacked the academic

was good and the funding boosted my motivation," she noted. "I was honored to be recognized and awarded."

The customary incentives for pursuing a college education were something Gifford had to cultivate on her own.

"I didn't come from a broken home, but I also didn't have the parental motivation that I can provide to my kids," Gifford recalled. "My mother had six children by the time she turned 22 - I am the fifth. Popular wisdom is that the younger kids get a pass because the parents get too exhausted to mete out punishment, and



*A Doctoral Degree is Helping Rocio Dela Riva Impact Patient Outcomes in Ways She Never Thought Possible.*

## A Penchant for Patient Care and Problem Solving



## ❖ Rocio Dela Riva, DNP '21

Dr. Rocio “Cio” Dela Riva’s career path reflects the tenets of patient advocacy, quality assurance and access to quality healthcare for all. It follows that she selected a nursing school that imparts those same ideals to its students.

“This exposure is important to nursing students during all phases of their education and it helps us advocate for our patients, improve access to healthcare, and enable the growth and recognition of our profession,” noted Dela Riva, a 2021 graduate of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree program in the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions. “Patients rely heavily on nursing staff who are often the healthcare professionals they turn to the most.”

As a result, Dela Riva feels that nurses are uniquely positioned to be catalysts for positive change.

“It is important for us to understand the inner workings of our organizations and the political healthcare landscape, so that we remain engaged, knowledgeable and effective as true leaders,” she noted.

She is keenly familiar with the sometimes-immense responsibilities connected to such leadership.

As the director of Clinical Applications and Informatics at Englewood Health, an acute care teaching hospital in Englewood, N.J., she is responsible for the planning, execution and implementation of enterprise-wide clinical information systems at the institution. She currently leads a team of nurse informaticists in enhancing patient care and outcomes through the deployment of health information technology (HIT) solutions. During the past decade, HIT systems have emerged as the technological and quality improvement mainstays of patient care, supporting information management across multiple channels while securely sharing patients’ information between healthcare teams and other stakeholders.

“My DNP course work helped me recognize gaps in nursing practice and identify available HIT solutions for optimizing nursing skills and improving patient outcomes rooted in evidence-based practice,” she explained. “It also

helped me navigate organizational priorities and mobilize action toward the successful implementation of my project.”

That project, focused on a newly launched patient cognitive computing predictive model, known as the Deterioration Index (DI), emerged from her DNP Capstone work.

“My ‘Implementation of a Cognitive Computing Model for Early Intervention of Clinical Deterioration’ project addressed challenges in the early intervention for patients at risk of clinical deterioration,” she said. “This can result in unplanned transfers to the intensive care unit (ICU), extended length of stay, negative patient outcomes and additional burdens to the patient, their families and healthcare providers.”

Since traditional early warning tools often fall short in their ability to gauge subtle changes in a patient’s physical status, Dela Riva implemented the Deterioration Index (DI) model that resulted in more reliable analytics.

“The DI cognitive computing model utilizes multiple data points from the patient’s electronic record and, over time, becomes much more accurate in predicting a patient’s condition. In its pilot implementation, our nurses were able to identify patients at risk of clinical deterioration much sooner than they would have without the model,” she explained.

This penchant for problem solving and innovation keeps her career on a fast-forward mode.

“My mother claims that I became a nurse because I share Florence Nightingale’s birthday. But, kidding aside, I became a nurse because I don’t think that there was a time that I ever wanted to be anything else,” she recalled.

Dela Riva, who resides in Spring Valley, N.Y., originally heard about the School’s DNP program from a colleague and was immediately impressed.

“As a student, I don’t think that I would have been able to manage a full-time job and two courses every term if it hadn’t been for the convenience the program offered. And, despite it being 100 percent online, I never felt isolated or disconnected from my peers and mentors.”

Earning her bachelor of science in nursing from the Remedios T. Romualdez Memorial School of Nursing, Manila, Philippines, she later earned a Master of Arts (MA) in nursing administration from New York University and dual MAs in Health Care Administration and Health Care Informatics from the University of Phoenix, before enrolling in Thomas Edison State University’s DNP program in 2020. She holds a Nurse Executive-Advanced board certification through the American Nurses Credentialing Center and serves as an onsite practicum preceptor, course developer and facilitator, subject matter expert, academic coach, and instructor for several accredited university nursing programs.

As an accomplished leader and an academic with more than 30 years of combined clinical and administrative experience in nursing, healthcare informatics, project and change management, and quality assurance, a DNP degree might not be viewed as a necessity. But for Dela Riva, it has served as a crowning achievement in a productive journey.

“The intensity of the program not only challenged me academically, but also allowed me to connect the dots with everything I do,” she said. “I came to understand the dynamics behind complex health organizations and my role as a member of a constantly evolving organization in a shifting healthcare landscape. The DNP program opened my thinking to the many possibilities of how I, as a nurse leader, can impact patient outcomes and growth in the profession in ways I had not considered before.”

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



# ROAD WARRIOR

A BACHELOR'S DEGREE HELPS FUEL MELISSA ROMAN'S ABILITY TO KEEP NEW JERSEY'S BUSIEST ROADWAYS SAFE.

## ❖ Melissa Roman, BSBA '20

For Melissa Roman, safety is priority number one both in her career and her community, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Roman, an operations communicator for the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, is charged with the safety and security of motorists on two of the busiest thoroughfares in the state. With 321 miles of roadway and more than 640 million vehicles using the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway in 2020, Roman knows that it is important to ensure that they are the safest, quickest and most convenient routes for the commuters, truckers and recreational travelers that use them every day.

"My department is responsible for the management of traffic throughout the state of New Jersey via the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway,"

Roman explained. "We ensure that all signs are functioning, all disabled motorists are assisted, and all accidents and anything impeding traffic are cleared from the roadway in a timely manner."

Despite the challenges of working full time in a demanding career with the responsibility of ensuring the safety of millions of motorists yearly, Roman yearned to return to higher education.

"I have always enjoyed the hiring and interview process, and I wanted to educate myself in a way that made me an asset anywhere I go. I learned about TESU from a friend who attended the University and encouraged me to apply. What drew me to continue my education

after many years was the simplicity and quality of the education TESU provides," said Roman, who earned her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) degree in Human Resources Management /Organizational Management in December 2020.

"I loved the opportunities the University gave me; I was able to call myself a TESU student and still work and tend to everyday responsibilities," she continued. "I remained disciplined with time management and organization. It's easy to become distracted outside of a classroom setting with real life all around you, but I persevered. And I met some great professors and people along the way. I would eventually love to earn my master's degree with TESU."

In addition to earning her degree and working a challenging full-time position, Roman's dedication to public service goes a step further. For nearly 10 years,



**"I LOVED THE OPPORTUNITIES THE UNIVERSITY GAVE ME; I WAS ABLE TO CALL MYSELF A TESU STUDENT AND STILL WORK AND TEND TO EVERYDAY RESPONSIBILITIES..."**

Melissa Roman

she has also worked for the Perth Amboy Police Department as a part-time 911 operator.

"My experience with the police department has been great," Roman enthused. "I started in 2012 and was trained and certified that same year. We dispatch fire, police and medical assistance for the town. My overall experience has been positive, although at times it has been scary; however, I would not trade it for anything. Whether dispatching calls for someone not breathing, to house fires, to all minor accidents, it's been my job to make sure both the officers and the public are safe and get the care they need."

Roman's dedication and diligence was rewarded by the police department when she was honored with its Professionalism Award in 2018.

"It made me proud to hold such a title because we deal with the public every single day. It could be easy to become distracted, but that realization reaffirms the importance of making each and every person you are charged with protecting feel safe and valued."

Roman acknowledged that her experiences with the police department and Turnpike Authority have been both rewarding and enlightening.

"Being able to learn something new every day is a great feeling," she said. "Since we cover the entire state, I often find myself learning new roadway locations and different highways. I am grateful to continue my career with the Turnpike Authority for many years to come."

"I have worked under a massive amount of pressure throughout my career, which

has taught me how to deal with real-life problems," she added. "I am grateful for the skills I have learned over the years."

Off the clock, the Perth Amboy, N.J., resident loves being by the water and enjoying the beautiful weather. But, most importantly, she enjoys spending that time with family and friends, including

her soon-to-be husband, Danny Gomez, and her children, Danny Gomez Jr. and Aryia Rose Gomez. Roman said she is grateful to them and to her parents and stepparents who supported her the most throughout her educational journey.

The challenges of the pandemic have also had an impact on Roman, who noted, "I wish for happiness and health for my family and friends. This past year and a half have taught us the value and importance of our physical and mental health. Without the two, we cannot get up every day and work hard toward our dreams and aspirations. I think it's important to feel good on the inside to achieve greatness and overall happiness."

To learn more about the programs available at the School of Business and Management, visit [tesu.edu/business](https://tesu.edu/business).

# Navigating the Waters: Homeland Security & Healthcare



**A DYNAMIC MILITARY CAREER AND A MASTER'S DEGREE HELP ROBERT FIELD JR. OVERSEE THE SAFETY OF A MAJOR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY.**

## Robert W. Field Jr., MSM '20, BS '12

During his 20-year service in the United States Coast Guard, Robert Field Jr., never thought his civilian career would lead him to healthcare. He learned in both worlds, however, that no man is an island.

"When I left military service with the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), I never imagined it would be for a civilian career in a hospital environment," explained Field, who is assistant vice president, Support Services, Safety, and Security at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) Hamilton. "I had no medical training, practical experience or healthcare administrative knowledge."

Field, who began his USCG career as a boatswain's mate, retired in December 2005 at the rank of chief petty officer. "My job duties were various and exciting throughout my military career," said the Palmyra, N.J., resident. "My last assignment was as a criminal investigator with the Coast Guard Investigative Service, assigned as a supervisor to the New York/New Jersey Field Intelligence Support Team."

Along the way, Field served in protective service operations for high-profile dignitaries such as the president and vice president of the United States,

the secretary of Homeland Security and foreign emissaries. As the Coast Guard National Strike Force response supervisor, he assisted federal, state and local agencies with incident command system management that included the monitoring and cleanup of hazardous materials releases, oil spills and weapon of mass destruction incidents.

Additionally, he was directly involved with space shuttle Columbia recovery operations, and he coordinated and managed rescue boats and boat crew operations in New York harbor following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade

Center on 9/11. However, Field is most proud of the roles he has played in helping to save lives during the USCG's numerous maritime search and rescue missions - from the coast of Maine to the Caribbean islands.

"My military duties were diverse and varied, and I had to quickly learn the roles as I assumed new responsibilities," noted the 2020 Master of Science in Management (MSM) degree in Public Health/Public Policy program graduate. "This process allowed me to grow in my healthcare career. I take ownership, and I am willing to accept difficult challenges."

**"I FOUND THE EASE AND COMFORT OF PURSUING THESE DEGREES AT MY OWN PACE ALLOWED ME TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE LEARNING PROCESS, AND I BECAME MORE AND MORE INTERESTED IN LEARNING AS A DESIRE INSTEAD OF A TASK OR NECESSITY."**

Robert W. Field Jr.

I have also learned through my military service that no one can do it alone."

In his current role on RWJUH Hamilton's 67-acre campus, Field is responsible for the acute care hospital's nonclinical departments, which

include safety and security, emergency preparedness, facilities management, environmental services, patient transport, and laundry and linen services, with oversight of approximately 150 employees.

“As the hospital’s security director, I provide a safe and secure environment for more than 1,200 employees as well as our patients and visitors,” explained Field, who was named *Campus Safety* magazine’s 2018 Healthcare Director of the Year. “In my professional affiliations, I serve as the chairperson of the New

to his current position at RWJUH Hamilton.

“I learned about TESU while researching distance-learning programs throughout my military career,” he continued. “What drew me to the University were the various degree programs offered, the ease of the enrollment process and the convenience of online courses.”

Field earned his Associate in Applied Science degree in 2011 and a Bachelor of Science degree in Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness in 2012 from TESU before enrolling in the John

counselors and fellow students was a definite plus.”

Off the clock, Field spends quality time with his loving wife of 33 years, Marcy, taking long walks and bike riding to stay active. “I also enjoy playing my guitars. I have a collection of more than 27 and have created a home recording studio over the years with various amplifiers and audio equipment.”

Field credits his wife and sons, Steven and Michael, with encouraging him and providing the inspiration to stay the course.



Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) Northwest Healthcare Coalition, and I have coordinated the NJDOH emergency preparedness hospital grants. In my capacity as the hospital’s emergency management coordinator, I have also participated in state healthcare planning initiatives surrounding the H1N1 pandemic flu, Ebola and Enterovirus68 as well as the evolving COVID-19 pandemic response.”

Field was already enrolled in TESU’s master’s program when he was promoted

S. Watson School of Public Service’s MSM program in 2014.

“I found the ease and comfort of pursuing these degrees at my own pace allowed me to take control of the learning process, and I became more and more interested in learning as a desire instead of a task or necessity,” he explained. “I liked the ability to have independent control of learning opportunities and scheduling. The convenience of the proctored exams and the accessibility to mentors, professors,

“Marcy has supported me in every career choice throughout my Coast Guard service and beyond, and encouraged me to pursue an online degree program,” he explained. “I have to admit she kept me on track and even threatened to cancel vacation plans if I did not start writing in APA format. Also, I wanted my sons to recognize that it is never too late to pursue your educational goals.”

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

# For the Love of Learning



## Matthew ten-Hoeve, MAEdL '21

Matthew ten-Hoeve would have been perfectly content teaching grades 6 through 12 students forever. His co-workers, friends and family, however, had loftier visions.

“Colleagues and family members saw the work I was doing both inside and outside of the classroom and convinced me of my leadership abilities,” said the 2021 Master of Arts in Educational Leadership (MAEdL) degree program graduate. “I needed that push to pursue graduate-level study because I was, and still am, very comfortable teaching in a classroom. Teachers make a difference in the lives of students, but I came to

“All of them are amazing, and I love working with them. Over the years, I have also been a reading, creative writing, poetry and gaming club advisor; a basketball coach; and a mentor as well as an English Language Arts (ELA) and a Special Education department chair for my district,” said ten-Hoeve, who has successfully converted a multitude of resistant students to becoming lifelong enthusiasts of the written word.

with the skills to distinguish themselves in any environment. Playing a small part in that is very gratifying.”

His enduring connection to his school district comes as no surprise. As a youth, ten-Hoeve was a student in the Elmwood Park school system before earning his bachelor’s degree in secondary education from Bloomfield College in New Jersey. He returned to Elmwood Park to work as a student-teacher and, later, became a substitute teacher and teachers’ aid, before advancing to a full-time middle school teaching position and department chair.

In a demanding field where a graduate-level degree can make a perceptible

realize that a master’s degree would enable me to also help fellow educators and, possibly, my school district in increasingly significant ways.”

Memorial Middle School in Elmwood Park, N.J., has served as his career base for the past 11 years. Currently, ten-Hoeve, a nearby Hawthorne, N.J., resident, works with students across all levels of academic skill, from those who need minimal direction, to others who need more intensive support in developing their reading and writing aptitude.

His former students – many of whom are now nurses, professional firefighters and entrepreneurs – keep him apprised of the positive developments in their lives.

“They email me stories or essays they have written, either for a course or just for fun. Included in their messages are statements like, ‘Mr. ten-Hoeve, if it wasn’t for you, I would never have enjoyed writing.’ I don’t teach for the recognition, I do it because I want my students to be inspired to have a brighter future,” he said. “Students who came to me with a hatred of writing, often leave

difference in salary and job satisfaction, finding a program with the right structure is key. Once ten-Hoeve recognized that the difference he was making in the lives of his students could be extended outside of his classroom, he began searching for a master’s-level degree program that could accommodate his needs and busy schedule.

“I did a lot of research when it came to selecting a MAEdL program. The major draw at TESU was being able to preview each course syllabus before I applied. It gave me a sense of the course structure and pace during the decision-

SOMETIMES OTHERS RECOGNIZE THE POWER IN YOU THAT YOU WOULD NEVER SEE YOURSELF.

# MAEdL

making process,” he remarked. “Once I enrolled, I found that the courses were some of the best I have ever taken, and I can say without reservation that my academic experience at TESU was amazing. The professors were extremely knowledgeable and the staff could not be more accommodating. It was challenging to be sure, but nothing was fluff and all the course content was relevant. With every assignment, I truly felt that I was adding to my skill bank. With my new degree, I’ll be providing the academic coaching and support I always have, but with a bit more weight and a valuable credential behind my efforts.”

According to ten-Hoeve, co-workers and school administrators were very supportive along the way. But, perhaps, his biggest cheerleaders were his family members.

“One of my biggest supporters was my girlfriend, Samantha, who was amazing while she put up with me working on my papers into the night and assignments on weekends. My parents have always been very supportive and continuously checked on my progress. My mother passed away two months before I completed my MAEdL degree, and I wish she could have been here for this, but I know she’s happy that I finished.”

Off the clock, ten-Hoeve enjoys time with family and friends and two cats he refers to as his ‘babies.’ “I take an hour-long walk every day while listening to a podcast. With my course work behind me, I’ve also been enjoying cable TV, video streaming and watching sports as much as possible, including professional wrestling,” he said. “I

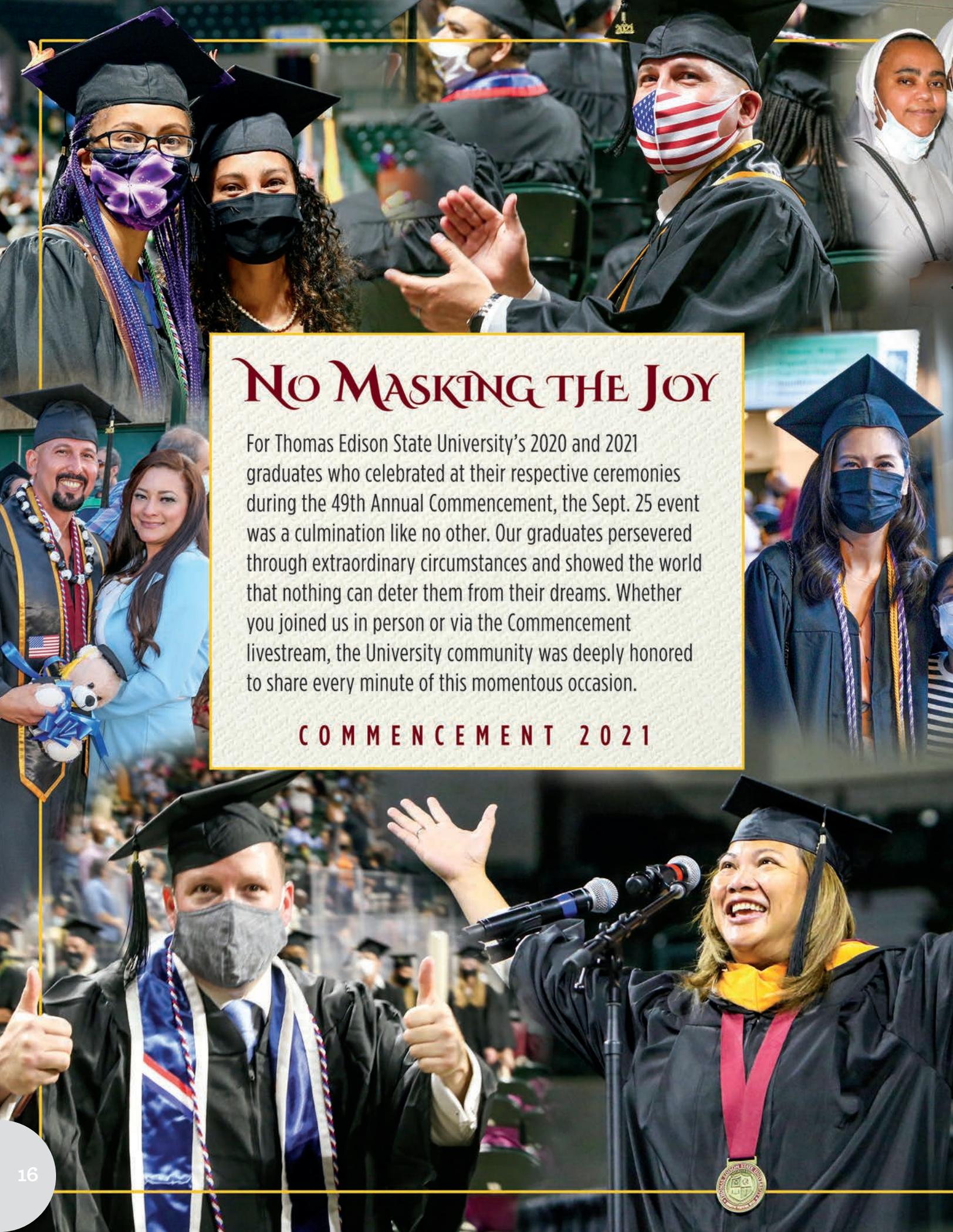
consider myself a big kid who never officially grew up – which actually helps in my teaching – and I also enjoy video games and collecting memorabilia whenever I have the opportunity.”

To learn more about the programs offered through the Heavin School of Arts and Sciences, visit [tesu.edu/heavin](http://tesu.edu/heavin).



*I don't teach for recognition, I do it because I want my students to be inspired to have a brighter future... Playing a small part in that is immensely gratifying.*

Matthew ten-Hoeve



# NO MASKING THE JOY

For Thomas Edison State University's 2020 and 2021 graduates who celebrated at their respective ceremonies during the 49th Annual Commencement, the Sept. 25 event was a culmination like no other. Our graduates persevered through extraordinary circumstances and showed the world that nothing can deter them from their dreams. Whether you joined us in person or via the Commencement livestream, the University community was deeply honored to share every minute of this momentous occasion.

COMMENCEMENT 2021





*Tom Scheuren already had a master's degree and years of experience in his field before deciding to start over.*

### 🔗 Tom Scheuren, MSN '21, BSN '16

Tom Scheuren graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and secondary education in 1999 before pursuing a Master of Arts degree in counseling psychology soon after. From there, he spent a decade in higher education fulfilling roles in student affairs. However, he noticed a troubling trend as he continued to work up the ladder.

"I absolutely loved my time in higher education, but I came to the realization that, as I would take on more administrative jobs, I

was increasingly losing direct contact with our students," he explained. "Over time, I started to lose sight of what sort of impact I was making on them, so I decided to make a change to a profession where I could have a solid sense of the influence and meaning of my work."

That began Scheuren's journey into the nursing profession. He obtained a nursing diploma from Holy Name Medical Center School of Nursing and began a position in the emergency department of a small hospital in

# FINDING PURPOSE

northern New Jersey. When it came time to progress further in his nursing education, Scheuren turned to TESU.

“Instructors in my nursing diploma program spoke highly of TESU’s RN-BSN program, both in terms of the content and rigor as well as the school’s ability to deliver a strong educational program through an online platform,” he said.

The RN-BSN program at TESU is an online program designed for experienced RNs who may have an associate degree or a nursing diploma to allow them to earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree in a self-paced environment.

“Nursing is a profession that requires a commitment to lifelong learning, so advanced degrees were always something I planned on pursuing,” he said. “Ever since I changed careers, my professional goal has been to enter academia as a nurse educator, so earning a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree was the next important step along the way.”

Scheuren returned to TESU to study for his MSN, working to complete his Practicum at the same time the COVID-19 pandemic was first taking hold of the northeastern United States.

“The pandemic impacted every aspect of my life,” Scheuren explained. “As an emergency department nurse, I experienced significant work-related anxiety throughout most of 2020. While my fear of personally contracting the virus was a constant thought, the prospect of potentially bringing it home to my wife and young son was the most terrifying.”

At the time, Scheuren and his family resided in lower Manhattan, one of the first areas in the United States to be completely overtaken by the pandemic. For safety’s sake, he lived apart from his wife and son for about two months during the initial surge, until the family was able to relocate to Flemington, N.J., before they purchased their first home in Pennington, N.J.



Tom Scheuren with his wife, Emily, and their son, Declan, who turned 4 in April.

Still, the pandemic became intertwined with every aspect of Scheuren’s life, including his education, as he continued pursuing his MSN. Luckily, he found a helping hand.

“I owe a true debt of gratitude to my graduate advisor, Carol Emmi,” he said. “The process of securing a Practicum for the MSN program is no easy task as it is. When you factor in the stress and anxiety of the early days of the pandemic, that process felt overwhelming. Carol was an immense asset, and I honestly do not think I would have been able to persevere through the process if not for her guidance and assistance.”

According to Emmi, both were focused on matching Scheuren with a Practicum that he was required to complete in a medical setting. The experience gives nursing students valuable hands-on experience while they work with and observe seasoned healthcare professionals in real-world scenarios.

“Tom was a flexible, diligent, steadfast student who did not compromise his high standards for schoolwork despite extreme challenges he faced

during preparation for his graduate Practicum,” Emmi said. “I was glad to assist him in completing his educational goal and placing him another step closer to becoming a nurse educator.”

With a new MSN to his credit, Scheuren is moving forward with that goal. This fall, he will take on two adjunct clinical instructor positions with Mercer County Community College’s associate-level and Caldwell University’s bachelor’s-level nursing degree programs.

“Without the MSN, I would not have been able to obtain these positions,” he said. “More importantly, the program’s courses helped me learn how to truly translate education theory into real world practice and teaching.”

Scheuren continues to work as a registered nurse in an emergency department in New Jersey with hopes of taking his education even further with a nursing PhD program in 2022.

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



## ❖ Pamela Fink, BSBA '20, current MS degree in Project Management Student

Pamela Fink has found success in education, career and family, but she would be the first to tell you that none of it came easy for her.

From a young age, Fink pushed herself to conquer the hardest tasks in front of her. She began helping her parents, owners of a small industrial HVAC company, with finance and business management before she even finished high school. There, in her parents' shop, her passion for small businesses bloomed. She wanted to study, learn and excel at

"I didn't go to most of my classes. I was ill-equipped, didn't want to be there and didn't have what it took to succeed in a conventional way, so I left," Fink explained. "While my friends were completing their college education, I was waitressing and bartending to pay my rent and utility bills. I gained valuable

struggling to move the dial on attaining a degree while working full time.

"I knew that if I wanted to reach my greatest potential I needed to act, so

# Turning Fear into

PAMELA FINK NAVIGATES LIFE'S ROADBLOCKS WITH UNMATCHED DRIVE AND MOTIVATION.

school and in her career. She worked hard to attain good grades, but it was not long before she realized the process seemed to be much more difficult for her than her peers.

"In high school, I was diagnosed with a learning disability and auditory disorder," Fink said. "Having an official diagnosis helped me to understand why I had to work so hard, but it didn't make the schoolwork any easier. No one knew the struggle or secret I kept. I did what I could to blend in and keep going. Instead of wearing the recommended headset in school, I chose a learning path that would involve a variety of strategies, countless notecards, visual tools and devoting significantly more time than my peers to complete my work."

Utilizing these strategies and the help of tutors, Fink completed her SATs, graduated high school and moved on to a university, but only for a year.

life experience, but I knew I did not want to be a waitress forever."

Another path presented itself to Fink, ironically, while she was waiting tables.

"One day, a customer at the restaurant, who couldn't believe how persuasive I was at promoting our menu items, invited me to apply for an entry-level job at Commerce Bank," Fink said. "I secured a position as a customer service representative. I knew that I would have to work hard to move up without a degree, but I was used to hard work. I recognized this was my chance."

Fink made the most of that chance. She continued with Commerce Bank as it transitioned to TD Bank and moved up the ladder to branch manager by 2013. Still, she felt something was missing: a degree. Over the next few years, she would take local community college courses here and there, but was

I enrolled in Thomas Edison State University. With the flexibility of online courses at TESU, I knew I could finish the bachelor's degree I had started 16 years earlier," Fink said. "The idea of taking courses online was terrifying at first, but then it showed me that I am far more intelligent than I ever knew. I did not have any anxiety that typically came with the classroom setting. Online learning allowed me to grasp concepts my way, on my own terms and is the best thing that ever happened to me."

In 2018, she had her second child, Molly. Molly and her brother, Hudson, born in 2016, became a driving force for Fink to push over the finish line. She had always been driven to display dedication and hard work to her co-workers throughout her career, but now she had her two children for whom to set an example.

By December 2020, Fink completed a Bachelor of Science in Business

Administration (BSBA) degree in General Management at TESU and was immediately driven to work on attaining a master's degree through its Bachelor's-to-Master's Program. Meanwhile, the effects of COVID-19 continued to drive unemployment to all-time highs across almost every industry.

"There was a great deal of uncertainty in finding a job, but I had faith," Fink said. "I turned fear into opportunity and was charged with the excitement of a fulfilling future."

In March 2021, everything came together. Fink accepted a position in Small Business Lending at Northfield Bank, where she says her talents and skills are appreciated. Now, as the vice president of Small Business Lending, she is growing the bank's business lending portfolio throughout New Jersey,

# Opportunity

while continuing to progress through the Master of Science in Management degree program at TESU.

"I hope to one day become a chief credit officer or chief risk officer, and it wouldn't be possible without TESU," said Fink, who calls Chester, N.J., home. "I know now that I am not limited because I am a woman in what was once a man's field, I am strengthened by it. I also know that I am no longer limited by my disability, I am more creative and adaptive because of it. Because of TESU, I am confident that I will continue to grow, because I shattered the only ceiling that could get in my way."

To learn more about the programs available at the School of Business and Management, visit [tesu.edu/business](https://tesu.edu/business). Interested in TESU's Bachelor's to Master's Program option? Visit [tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program](https://tesu.edu/academics/bachelors-to-masters-program) for additional information.



Northfield  
Bank

"BECAUSE OF TESU, I AM CONFIDENT THAT I WILL CONTINUE TO GROW, BECAUSE I SHATTERED THE ONLY CEILING THAT COULD GET IN MY WAY."

Pamela Fink

# Healthcare

TESU'S ACCELERATED BSN PROGRAM HELPED JESSICA POLAND LIVE HER DREAM AND OBTAIN A POSITION AT ONE OF THE TOP-RANKED HOSPITALS IN THE NATION.

## ❖ Jessica Poland, BSN '21

When going back to college to become a nurse was just a notion, Jessica Poland never expected to begin that journey at the start of a global pandemic.

After graduating from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania with a BS degree in psychology in 2014, Poland became a Certified Child Life Specialist in the Pediatric Emergency Department at Saint Peter's University Hospital in New Jersey. There, she was charged with helping infants, children, youth and families cope with the stress and uncertainty of acute and chronic illness, injury, trauma, disability, loss and bereavement.

"Although I loved every single minute of it, there was something missing," Poland explained. "I wanted to do more for patients and families. I worked alongside some astounding nurses who inspired me to pursue a nursing career. However, the thought of going back to school and starting all over really discouraged me."

However, while researching different nursing programs, Poland came across the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions at Thomas Edison State University, which offered an accelerated alternative to a traditional four-year program.

"The University has an excellent reputation for preparing and training adult learners, like me, to be exceptional nurses, some of whom I have had the opportunity to work with in the field. I instantly knew that this was where I wanted to make my dream a reality," said Poland, who earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree through the School's Accelerated BSN Program in June 2021.

Making that dream come true during a pandemic had its challenges. However, with the support and guidance of the School's leadership and educators, Poland noted, the program proceeded without delay.

"Changes were made to keep pace with evolving state and CDC guidelines while providing us with a high-quality distance learning experience," she explained. "Nurse leaders and educators in the program encouraged and supported us through this challenging time, while maintaining a stable educational framework. In the end, we were fortunate enough to continue our clinical rotations and meet all our graduation requirements exactly as planned."

Poland added that the University offered

ample learning opportunities for nursing students that went above and beyond conventional course work and clinicals.

"As TESU nursing students, we were given the opportunity to administer COVID-19 vaccines to local community members, something that I will remember for a lifetime," she explained. "That was one of many things that I loved about being a TESU student. It's hard to describe the amazing feeling of helping my community through this time while being a part of history. This was an opportunity of a lifetime for which I will be forever grateful."

The distractions of the pandemic aside, Poland admits that even in routine times, nursing school is known to be notoriously difficult.

"But that's not to say it's impossible," she affirmed. "If you have a passion for the profession and are dedicated to your education, it is possible and, most certainly, worth it!"

W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions Dean Dr. Phyllis Marshall (left) and Accelerated BSN Program students Gisselle Mealia and Jessica Poland, joined John Thurber, former Vice President for Public Affairs at Thomas Edison State University, in delivering dinner on May 8 to the staff of the ICU and CCU at St. Francis Medical Center in Trenton.



# Hero



Like many other students in the Accelerated BSN Program, Poland stepped away from her full-time job as a child life specialist to focus solely on her studies. Upon graduating from TESU, she accepted a full-time position in the Inpatient Pediatric Hematology/Oncology & Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC).

"I sincerely missed working at the bedside of pediatric patients," she said. "Becoming a pediatric oncology RN has been a dream of mine since crossing paths with several patients and families that have been affected by childhood cancer. Not only is it an honor to be given the opportunity to work at HUMC, but also, I'm beginning my nursing career at one of the top 50 children's hospitals in the nation for pediatric cancer, ranked so by *U.S. News & World Report*. I am excited to see where this journey takes me!"

The Cranford, N.J., resident explained that spare time has been hard to come by due to the demands of the program and now her new job, but she makes sure to find time for the things that she loves.

"I like to spend quality time with my family and friends. You can find me out on the water fishing with my family or at a country concert with my friends. I also love to volunteer. I have been a volunteer Wish Granter for Make-A-Wish Foundation since 2018," she said.

Poland is quick to admit that she wouldn't be where she is today without the love and encouragement of her parents.

"They helped me out more than they will ever know, both financially and emotionally," Poland acknowledged. "It was their encouragement and reassurance that kept me going whenever I began to doubt myself. Without their endless love and support, I wouldn't be where I am today, living my dream as a pediatric oncology nurse."

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

# Sealing His Future

## Michael Piscetelli, BA '19

There are two things that Michael Piscetelli is sure of: His Thomas Edison State University education directly led to being hired by his current employer, and his degree and new position would not have happened without the encouragement of his wife, Malenie.

“While I was interviewing for my job at Ergon Asphalt & Emulsion Inc., my future boss made me do a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation on why they should be doing business with me,” explained Piscetelli, who earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Natural Sciences/Mathematics in December 2019. “So, I had to talk about the company; I had to talk about my experience; I had to cover a number of topics, and I learned how to do all of that at Thomas Edison! I did for the interview what I had learned to do in one of my courses: I taped the presentation notes on my computer, I timed it, I had it down. I knew exactly how much time to devote to each slide. I had studied, I had prepared, and I made the presentation just as I had in my course.”

Piscetelli acknowledged that it was just ‘a little something,’ but that he probably would not have had the confidence to make that presentation had it not been for what he learned at TESU. He noted that although he always had good jobs, he had lost many better opportunities over the years because he didn’t have a 4-year degree and had begun to consider starting his own business.

“I got to a point where I was really down on myself and didn’t like what I was doing. As long as I was selling, I had security, but when you’re not selling, you lose that security. Then my wife, Malenie, said, ‘what do you want to do?’ I said, ‘I’ll buy a business.’



## A BACHELOR'S DEGREE WAS LIFE CHANGING FOR MICHAEL PISCETELLI AND HELPED HIM SECURE HIS DREAM JOB.

And she said, 'instead of doing that and putting all our savings at risk, why don't you go back to college, get a degree and get a better job?'"

Piscetelli, who earned an associate degree from Middlesex County College in 1992, was only halfway to a bachelor's degree and was sure that obtaining that degree was going to take years. He knew there had to be an alternative. Then he realized that TESU, through which he had started and stopped his educational journey over the last 37 years, might hold the answer.

"So, I reenrolled; I needed 63 credits to complete degree requirements at TESU, which I blazed through in 11 months," enthused Piscetelli, who credits TESU Program Advisor Amy Immordino for shepherding him through the process.

That educational trajectory was advanced with the help of his volunteer work with the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, where he currently serves as a flotilla commander.

"My training from the Coast Guard helped me complete my degree," he affirmed. "In fact, the Coast Guard trained me how to study. I took a lot of proctored tests for my Coast Guard positions, so when it came time to take TECEP® tests at Thomas Edison, I was prepared; I got the books, I studied, I tested out of public affairs, I tested out of environmental ethics, and I tested out of other subjects."

In addition to earning credit for testing, Piscetelli took a few online courses and was able to transfer a USCG leadership and management training course to TESU.

Now he has his dream job with "the best company I have ever worked for."

As a sales manager for Ergon, a privately owned oil company based out of Mississippi that sells asphalt, oil and

corrosion protection, Piscetelli oversees the Corrosion Protection Division for the northeast corridor. The division provides architectural and concrete coatings to protect surfaces from chemical wear, temperature or abrasion for businesses such as battery manufacturing and chemical plants, where corrosive chemicals are used to clean the product. With just a year under his belt at Ergon, Piscetelli was named Salesperson of the Year for 2021.

Piscetelli and his wife share a blended family that includes adult children: Elizabeth, Michael, Nicholas, Emma, Krystle, Nathalie and Jeremy, and Malenie's service dog, Lucy. In their spare time, the couple enjoys traveling, bicycling, kayaking and hiking. But, most importantly, they love spending time with their children, two of whom will get married in February 2022, and one who will make them grandparents for the first time in January.

When it comes to education, the Barnegat, N.J., resident said that he kept trying to return to complete his degree over the years and was inspired by his children earning their degrees. His next goal is to earn an MBA with TESU.

Piscetelli's advice for anyone who is adrift about finishing their education is "go and do this; focus and stick to it. You can get through this; just do it! Already this degree has completely changed my life."

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



Mike Piscetelli, his wife Malenie and her service dog Lucy with Michael's TESU diploma.

*"Go and do this; focus and stick to it. You can get through this; just do it! Already this degree has completely changed my life."*

Michael Piscetelli

# LEARNING FOR A CAUSE

FOR GERARD CARDENAS, A MASTER'S CAPSTONE IS NOT AN ACADEMIC FINALE , IT IS A PASSPORT TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

## Gerard Cardenas, MSM '21

Gerard “Gery” Cardenas’ Capstone project has proven to be more than the standard culminating master’s-level assignment. The process has honed his leadership skills, expanded his professional expertise and helped him devise a nonprofit business model focused on honoring fallen military.

“My course work helped me gain the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve my goal of launching a technology-based nonprofit that will help chronicle and commemorate the lives of fallen military service members,” said Cardenas, a 2021 graduate of the Master of Science in Management (MSM) degree in Information Technology for Public Service program at the John S. Watson School of Public Service. “Initially, the project will focus on conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Cardenas – a U.S. Navy veteran and independent consultant with more than 25 years of experience in shepherding clients and employers through business and technology development and implementation, program and product management, market research and client support initiatives – said his

academic program provided the perfect mix of technology and business course work and allowed him to tailor his independent study. It also incorporated nonprofit management courses, an area entirely new to him, but one that has become essential to his endeavors.

“This groundwork gave me the best of all worlds: Acknowledging my professional experience and updating my existing knowledge through the University’s prior learning assessment (PLA) process while providing the next level of theoretical knowledge and applied skills,” he said. “It was a valuable foundation that helped me meet new challenges, but it also enriched the journey.”

Along his career trajectory, Cardenas has discovered that the rate of change in technology, government and business is accelerating.

“Even before the pandemic, these three areas were becoming more intertwined,” he said. “My TESU course work helped me to update my skills in all of them.”

He also noted that his degree program offered an optimum combination of disciplines unique among other universities, but that was still only part of the draw.

“The Watson School’s team was world class,” he noted. “I’ve been involved with higher education leadership at all points in my career, but the dedication, compassion and commitment I experienced from the School’s team, TESU staff and my mentors was phenomenal.”

Cardenas didn’t instantly take to the online environment, but with support, the transition became easier and, ultimately, rewarding. Leading up to his culminating independent research project, Cardenas, who came to TESU with a bachelor’s degree from Rutgers University, completed PLAs in two key areas: leadership and human resources management for public service.

“Working on my PLAs helped me to articulate and document my knowledge



base and reconnect with specific areas of expertise while validating the effort I devoted to those areas over the years,” he explained. “The process also helped me to realize that I needed to update my skills in project management. Consequently, I took the Project Management for Technology and Practical Grant Writing courses. Both provided a valuable foundation for launching my own nonprofit and advancing to doctoral-level studies.”

His course work culminated in an applied research project centered on his nonprofit’s mission: The process by which our country honors fallen service members. Components included a self-assessment program on the technological aspects of such endeavors, and the feasibility for financing and expanding related projects. According to Cardenas, the pandemic severely limited access to his primary sources, making the research process so difficult that he

**“I’VE BEEN INVOLVED WITH HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP AT ALL POINTS IN MY CAREER, BUT THE DEDICATION, COMPASSION AND COMMITMENT I EXPERIENCED FROM THE SCHOOL’S TEAM, TESU STAFF AND MENTORS WAS PHENOMENAL.”**

Gerard Cardenas

He noted that the pandemic forced changes to his plans midway through his graduate course work, but described the experience as a “true eye-opener on the complexity, due diligence and overall effort needed to conduct academic research.”

almost changed his project’s focus before his Capstone mentor, Dr. Jane Ives, persuaded him to stay with it.

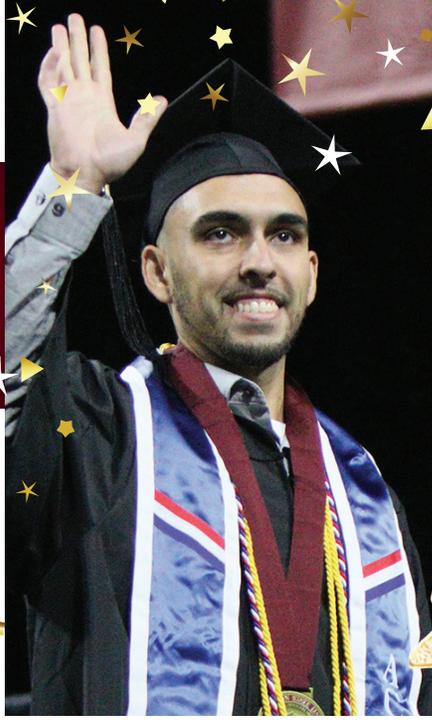
“I had to rely on digital archives and newspaper databases and found there was very little done prior to the American Civil War to document and

honor fallen service members. In the process, I discovered that those policies and sentiments changed, and, in my research, discovered the true origins and implications of contemporary Memorial Day observations,” he said.

He credits his family for the goals he has achieved.

“My academic journey has always been unconventional,” said the Cinnaminson, N.J., resident, “and, like a lot of people, I meant to do this many years ago. My family believed I could do this far more than I did, and I could not have succeeded without their encouragement and support. My wife did everything possible to allow me to focus on my classes, offering suggestions, reading drafts and patiently waiting for me to complete my assignments,” he continued. “It helped keep things in perspective and realize what an incredible opportunity I had to obtain a world-class education and to make the most of it.”

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



# Grad's

2021

DEGREE AND  
CERTIFICATES AWARDED

2,705

FEMALES



1,100

MALES

1,407



# ... by the numbers

OLDEST GRAD

**73**  
THERE ARE TWO!

AVERAGE AGE OF GRADS

**36.5**

Graduates from every  
county in New Jersey



#TESUgrad21

# comings & goings



**Dr. Malcolm K. Oliver** has been chosen as the next dean of the John S. Watson School of Public Service. Oliver will play a critical role in overseeing the School's

undergraduate and graduate programs that are focused on public service and designed for working adults interested in professional and personal growth. He assumed his new position on Sept. 13.

Previously, Oliver served as associate dean for the School of Graduate Studies at Excelsior College. He has also served as a graduate program director at California Lutheran University, National Louis University and The College of New Rochelle, in addition to hands on applied experience as a city planner and development coordinator.

Oliver's extensive public sector administrative experience gives him

insight into all facets of community development that will directly enhance TESU's academic programming. With a PhD in Public and Urban Administration from the University of Texas, Arlington, he embodies lifelong learner values and recently completed a Master of Science in Instructional Technology from the New York Institute of Technology. He also holds a Master of Public Administration from Cal Poly Pomona and bachelor's in political science with a minor in economics from University of California, Riverside.

"I look forward to leading the John S. Watson School of Public Service into a prosperous and impactful future," Oliver said. "As a school of innovation, information and policy formulation, our mission will be to strengthen the capacity of people and organizations working in pursuit of public interest."



**John P. Thurber**, who has served as vice president for Public Affairs and executive vice president for the Thomas Edison State University Foundation since January 1996, retired on Sept. 17.

Thurber originally joined the institution in 1991 as the founding executive director of The John S. Watson Institute for Public Policy and its predecessor, the Trenton Office of Policy Studies.

Under Thurber's 30-year stewardship, the University made significant strides in the areas of institutional advancement and public affairs. Since assuming his current role, he was pivotal in expanding philanthropic support for the University through the TESU Foundation, including collaboration on securing Wells Fargo's donation of a historic mural by N.C. Wyeth. During his tenure, the total assets of the TESU Foundation grew from \$600,000 to more than \$12 million to support the University's strategic priorities.

Through his leadership roles for the Princeton Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Mercer County Improvement Authority, the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation and the Trenton Downtown Association, he helped TESU significantly enhance its community profile and in the University's collaborations with area business leaders.

Thurber earned a BA in economics from Hampshire College and a JD with highest honors from Rutgers University School of Law - Newark. He was the recipient of the Justice Henry H. Ackerson Jr. Prize for distinction in legal skills and was selected as research editor of the *Rutgers Law Review*.

"John is an esteemed spokesperson whose genial nature and sense of diplomacy made him invaluable to our work with multiple stakeholders," said Dr. Merodie A. Hancock.

**Deb D'Arcangelo** has been appointed chief advancement officer and vice president of the Thomas Edison State University Foundation. D'Arcangelo will play a critical role in building and sustaining meaningful relationships with



individuals, corporations and foundations to enhance University support. She joined the University on Sept. 20.

Serving on the President's Cabinet, the chief advancement officer is the University's senior fund and friend raiser and the primary liaison to the TESU Foundation Board of Directors. She oversees annual giving, major gifts and alumni relations.

A resident of Trenton, previously D'Arcangelo served as chief executive officer for the Council for Relationships in Philadelphia and has significant fundraising and board governance

experience throughout her career. Her past employers include J.P. Morgan, The Lawrenceville School and Isles, Inc. She has served on the boards of Phillips Exeter Academy, I Am Trenton Community Foundation and Mercer County Community College Foundation, among others. D'Arcangelo currently is a board member of New Jersey Policy Perspective and an executive committee member of the NAACP-Trenton Chapter. She holds an undergraduate degree from Harvard College, Cambridge, Mass., and a Master of Public Policy from Princeton University.

"I have a deep appreciation of the Thomas Edison State University mission and look forward to supporting all of its wonderful programs, from the certificate programs to doctoral-level degrees. It will be an honor to work on behalf of the University's alumni and to engage the local and regional community in support of this important institution, which I have admired for decades," said D'Arcangelo at the time of her appointment.

## School of Nursing's Undergraduate Courses Transition to an 8-Week Format

NEW PROGRAM FORMAT BETTER ALIGNS WITH THE BUSY LIVES AND LEARNING NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

The W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions at Thomas Edison State University transitioned its undergraduate nursing degree programs from the former 12-week structure to a new 8-week format.

“The 8-week course structure is becoming increasingly popular and broadly adopted by fellow institutions for being more conducive to student success and degree attainment,” said Dr. Filomela “Phyllis” Marshall, dean of the School. “The courses offered during the 8-week terms have the same comprehensiveness and rigor our students have come to expect from our curriculum.”

The modification is expected to assist students in completing their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree requirements more efficiently and in less time – a crucial advantage in the field.

“Our research supports that students concentrating on one course during a shorter duration have a much more immersive, indelible and rewarding learning experience,” said Marshall, whose School also underwent a recent name change. The ‘Health Professions’ addition to its name reflects the School’s increasing expansion into other healthcare disciplines.

For students in the School’s online RN-BSN program, consisting largely



Dr. Filomela Marshall, Dean of the W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions

of working nurses, the new format is expected to be a better fit with their careers, personal lives and learning styles. The transition to the new course structure began in the July 2021 term. Students in the School’s master’s- and doctoral-level degrees will continue in their customary 12-week programs.

## Combating COVID in 10,000 Ways

TESU NURSING STUDENTS ARE ON THE FRONTLINE OF TRENTON’S ONGOING VACCINE EFFORT

During a routine year, pre-licensure nursing students at Thomas Edison State University can count on a sequence of clinical onground experiences at local hospitals and community organizations. But for students enrolled in its W. Cary Edwards School of Nursing and Health Professions’ Accelerated BSN Program, 2021 was anything but routine.

In a real-world scenario that would unnerve the most seasoned health professional, the School’s students and staff have administered more than 10,000 COVID-19 vaccinations to area residents since the City of Trenton Department of Health and Human Services’ program rollout began in February 2021. Many who continue to receive the vaccine are from high-risk populations.

“We are incredibly proud of our nursing students who continue to volunteer at vaccination clinics across our city, and our staff who work alongside them,” said Dr. Ana Maria Catanzaro, associate dean of Graduate Nursing Programs, who has shepherded the students through recent clinics.

“Throughout the effort, our students were assisted and mentored by our RN to BSN, Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program students, they expanded their public health competencies and learned volumes about issues that affect a diverse urban community.”

According to Dr. Lia van Rijswijk, associate dean of Undergraduate Nursing Programs, the students are emblematic of the next generation of nurse leaders. Several of them, already fluent in more than one language, immediately helped answer vaccine-related questions from non-English speaking members of the community.

“The students represent a new generation of healthcare professionals who are deeply focused on community health issues and rise to emerging challenges in extraordinary ways,” noted van Rijswijk. “They have also made the courageous decision to become nurses amid the most significant public health crisis of our time.”



## Donors Make the Difference

### MANY PATHWAYS. ONE DESTINATION.

Philanthropic support increasingly benefits our students who, in turn, impact their communities, our region and the world. Thanks to generous donations from alumni, friends of the University, organizations and staff, a multitude of students are able to maintain their trajectories and realize the sometimes-elusive dream of earning a university degree.

As we all continue to recalibrate through the shifting parameters of a global pandemic, the University's community of donors demonstrated their resilience. An increase of 46 percent in giving over the same period last year is helping our enrolled students stay the course during this challenging time.

Recent giving highlights include a \$849,000 grant award (NJ PLACE) from the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development that will support TESU's career-forward initiative and seeks to merge apprenticeship

training with higher education. Up to 100 apprenticeship students will have the opportunity to earn their associate degrees at no cost to them while learning their trade. Thomas Edison is the sole higher education institution in the state to be awarded such a grant.

The University was honored to receive its first-ever gift to support student-initiated research. With a generous \$100,000 contribution from The Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation (CWNF), the University established the Dr. Robert M. Adams Legacy Award for Student Research Fund. Adams, a noted academic, was a founding trustee of the CWNF and recently retired after 40 years of service. The CWNF has also provided an additional \$50,000 scholarship grant for mature students during this period.

The University also received two gifts totaling \$175,000 from the Booth Ferris Foundation in support of the Academic Community Impact Program at TESU.

The program provides the unique opportunity for students to work hands-on with a nonprofit organization throughout their course work, empowering them to lead and affect positive change while supporting the community.

Finally, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) awarded TESU \$199,396 in scholarships for students enrolled in undergraduate nuclear degree programs in the Heavin School of Arts and Sciences. This is the fifth such award of scholarship support from the NRC since 2013.

We are grateful for the generous donor support that makes it possible for our students to continue to learn, impact their communities and fuel our region's workforce.

## Employee Donor Spotlight: Susan Fischer, BSBS '20, AA '15, current MSM student

Meet Susan Fischer, administrative assistant in the School of Business and Management, who joined Thomas Edison in 2005. A dedicated employee and the epitome of a TESU student, Fischer is also a generous supporter of the University.

Fischer earned an Associate of Arts (AA) degree in Liberal Studies in 2015 and a Bachelor of Science in Professional Studies (BSBS) degree in 2020. A true lifelong learner, she is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Management (MSM) degree and an Organizational Leadership certificate with an expected completion date in early 2022. She is also one of the Foundation's most dedicated donors. For 16 consecutive years, Fischer has supported various University programs, including the Annual Fund, the TESU Scholarship Fund and the Student Relief Fund.

"I am grateful to have the opportunity

to earn several degrees while working full time. I've experienced times when other obligations can be overwhelming and understand how difficult it can be to juggle personal and professional life," she said. "Supporting other students is an important mission of mine. My goal is to help others have the same opportunity I received."

Fischer was also a recipient of the Caroline P. Tompkins Endowed Scholarship, a fund established to support academic-related expenses. The scholarship is made available to Thomas Edison State University employees pursuing an undergraduate degree.

"I was honored to receive this scholarship. It aided me and many of my colleagues, and I am grateful to Ms. Tompkins for supporting the TESU staff during our journey in earning our undergraduate degrees. This genuine spirit of giving left an everlasting



Susan Fischer, administrative assistant in the School of Business and Management at Thomas Edison State University

impression on me," noted Fischer, who most recently supported the newly established Philanthropy Cord Initiative. "I am so excited to walk with my fellow graduates at the Commencement ceremony, and I'll be proudly wearing my green philanthropy cord!"

The TESU Foundation team wishes to congratulate Fischer and all the University's 2020-2021 graduates! Thank you for your dedication to paying it forward for future TESU alumni.

## MEET ALUMNI AMBASSADOR

### ✦ Making a Difference: Rishi Dixit, BSOL '15

RISHI DIXIT IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR CHILDREN IN HIS COMMUNITY AND THE TESU FAMILY. **ALUMNI AMBASSADOR**

Rishi Dixit and his wife, Preeti, leveraged his organizational leadership experience and knowledge gained from his Bachelor of Science of Organizational Leadership (BSOL) course work at TESU to create the “Persona Model” based curriculum for their mutual enterprise, LeaderKid Academy, a 501c3 nonprofit.

In filling those gaps and bringing their brainchild to life, he leveraged what he learned in his organizational leadership courses.

**“BEING AN ALUMNI AMBASSADOR WHO CAN NURTURE MORE LEADERS IS WHAT BRINGS ME BACK TO STAY ENGAGED WITH TESU AGAIN AND AGAIN.”**

“I studied business decades ago and spent years working with senior leaders and successfully managing large and complex programs for Fortune 100 organizations,” said Dixit, a 2015 graduate and Alumni Ambassador for TESU. “As I engaged with leaders and individuals across the globe, I realized that when it comes to organizational competencies and soft

skill competencies, there is a huge gap. This sparked the idea of launching a leadership training organization.”

Dixit said he originally found TESU when he was searching for an institution that was flexible enough to accommodate his demanding work life and personal schedule.

“I conducted a lot of research before finding TESU. The BSOL curriculum aligned perfectly with what I wanted

to learn: theories of leadership, managerial communications, project management, organizational psychology and change management,” he noted.

He and his wife, who are deeply committed parents, were inspired by their children while launching LeaderKid Academy. Focusing on social-emotional and future skills training for youth, the enterprise brings educators together in empowering children and youth through mentoring and advocacy.

“Preeti and I take our role as parents very seriously. We wanted to embed the same



leadership skills and competencies in our own children,” he said. “We are excited that after many years of pondering and research, our passion for children is taking shape in the form of real actionable change.

“I love volunteering with TESU, and I enjoy sharing what I experienced in my learning to encourage others to pursue their passion,” he added. “I truly believe that TESU allowed me to use my knowledge and empowered me as a leader. Being an Alumni Ambassador who can nurture more leaders is what brings me back to stay engaged with TESU again and again.”

## Be an TESU Genius!

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

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

## Keep Us Posted!

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

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

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

**Alumnifire:** [tesu.edu/Alumnifire](https://tesu.edu/Alumnifire)



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## University Store

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



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[give.tesu.edu](https://give.tesu.edu)

TOTAL AMOUNT OF SCHOLARSHIPS DISTRIBUTED: **\$ 415,231**

**129** TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS RECEIVING SCHOLARSHIPS

GENERAL SCHOLARSHIPS DISTRIBUTED: **57/\$146,855**

**44/\$147,900** NURSING SCHOLARSHIPS DISTRIBUTED

MILITARY SCHOLARSHIPS DISTRIBUTED: **10/\$12,500**

**18/\$107,976** U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION (NRC)  
SCHOLARSHIPS DISTRIBUTED

AMOUNT THE UNIVERSITY HAS DISTRIBUTED TO STUDENTS  
WITH CARES ACT RELIEF FUNDS THROUGH FISCAL YEAR 2021:

**Over \$1.2 Million**