



Drexel-Salus Merger Brings Prestigious Graduate Programs to the College of Medicine

With the recent Salus University merger, Drexel University College of Medicine has expanded its portfolio to include additional graduate programs in high-demand health sciences and rehabilitation professions.

Salus boasts a long and prestigious history dating back to 1919. Over the years, the school has grown and expanded its offerings, becoming a leader in the education of health professionals.

Several of Salus' renowned programs have joined the College of Medicine. The programs will benefit from the College's existing resources while continuing their tradition of excellence.

Salus also brings to Drexel some of the largest and most complex clinical facilities in its health portfolio – The Eye Institute, Pennsylvania Ear Institute and Speech-Language Institute. The expertise residing at these clinical facilities will benefit interprofessional training and research in collaboration with Drexel's clinics, colleges and schools.

Here is an overview of the programs and the directors who lead them:



Salus at Drexel University Physician Assistant Studies Program

The Salus at Drexel University Physician Assistant Studies program is patient-centered with a primary care philosophy and holistic approach, so students appreciate the need to not only care for the patient but also care about the patient.

Early and extensive clinical training combined with innovative teaching through small group and case-based learning are integral to the program. The second year is dedicated entirely to clinical rotations that provide direct patient care experiences in primary and specialty care disciplines.

Students in the program receive:

- A strong basic science and pathophysiology foundation.
- Anatomy instruction with an on-site full cadaver dissection lab, augmented with virtual anatomy facilities.
- Innovative, evidence-based instruction, which is integral to the development of critical thinking skills.

- Observational patient care, which is introduced in the first year.

Upon successful completion of the program, students receive a Master of Medical Science degree.

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Medical Spanish elective prepares MD students for a future of connection and care



Dean's Cup welcomes incoming class with friendly competition and camaraderie



Two White Coat Ceremonies welcome new students into the healing profession

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pulse

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drexel.edu/medicine



Dean’s Message

As autumn settles in with cooler weather and shorter days, I’m reflecting on the College’s recent milestones and feeling grateful to our community for driving our continued success.

In July, we welcomed students from a number of esteemed programs to the College of Medicine through our merger with Salus University.



Charles B. Cairns, MD

August brought 305 new MD students and 270 graduate students in biomedical sciences, health professions, and pre-med/pre-health programs to our campuses. The MD and PA students’ journeys officially began with inspiring White Coat Ceremonies.

Our College Forward and Strategic Plan 2030 wrapped its implementation planning phase in July, with over 220 faculty and staff shaping our next five-year roadmap. This work will ensure that we stay agile, innovative and future-ready. Thank you to everyone who

contributed — your insight is propelling us forward. Learn more about our Strategic Plan 2030 at bit.ly/DUCOM2030.

We’re pleased to welcome new leaders in research. Dr. Sandhya Kortagere has been appointed as vice dean of research and innovation, guiding research infrastructure and expanding funding opportunities. Dr. Ramesh Raghupathi is now associate dean for health equity research and innovation, mentoring faculty, professional staff and students in grant-writing and impactful studies. A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Kenny Simansky, emeritus professor and former senior vice dean of research, for his legacy in science, education and leadership.

Supporting our students remains central to our mission and operations. Dr. Bisan A. Salhi is now senior associate dean for medical student affairs, leading services, advising and programming that foster belonging and excellence. Dr. Mary Lynn Sealey joins as assistant dean, bringing decades of clinical and academic leadership and a deep commitment to student well-being.

I am looking forward to Discovery Day on November 6 at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. With 400 posters and platform presentations in biomedical and clinical research, and a keynote address from distinguished physician-scientist Avindra Nath, MD, it will be another wonderful event for our trainees to showcase their research endeavors.

I encourage you to take time to reflect on your growth, celebrate your achievements and set bold goals for the year ahead. Stay curious, stay engaged, and continue to shape the future with purpose and passion. Let’s finish this year strong — and begin the next chapter even stronger. The momentum we’ve built sets the stage for an inspiring new chapter, and I look forward to welcoming the opportunities, challenges and successes that lie ahead with you.

Charles B. Cairns, MD
Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Dean
Senior Vice President of Medical Affairs
Senior Vice President of Drexel Health Operations

Caring Together: Supporting Women in Their Substance Use Recovery

Jamerah McBride, case manager, and Yvette Thomas, peer support specialist, are two of the staff members at Caring Together. Both bring empathy, passion and personal commitment to their roles as part of the team that helps women and their children overcome substance use disorder and start a new life without drugs and alcohol.

What brought you to Caring Together, and what inspired you to take on your current role?

Jamerah McBride: What brought me to Caring Together was a deep personal connection to this work. Before he passed, my grandfather received treatment at New Journey to Recovery, and that rehabilitation center became the site of my very first job. Seeing the impact that support systems had on his life left a lasting impression on me. When I saw that Caring Together was hiring, I felt inspired to return to this field and reconnect with a population I've always been passionate about serving. Additionally, my mother has worked in drug and alcohol treatment for many years, so helping people in recovery has always been close to home for me. I'm honored to be part of this work.

Yvette Thomas: My background is in customer service. I found myself addicted to alcohol and sought help. After that I decided to pick another field that wouldn't be as stressful. I was introduced to peer support by my father, who has been a peer specialist for many years.

Talk a bit about your role at Caring Together, why it's important and what you find rewarding about it.

JM: As a case manager, I try to look beyond just medication and psychiatry. I focus on the full picture of what recovery looks like for each woman. My approach is holistic — I want to know: What else can we build around this woman to help her thrive?

One of the most important areas I help them navigate is housing. We offer many options — from recovery and transitional housing to inpatient placements. We also help women secure their own apartments or rooms and even guide them in the process of eventually purchasing a home. We also provide practical support like clothing and monthly food bags. These resources have a huge impact on

our clients' ability to regain independence and stability.

YT: For me, a typical day includes group facilitation, assisting with the collection of urine drug screening samples, and check-in calls with my participants. Collaboration is key. There are some clients who are more willing to share with a peer than with a therapist. I am able to talk with therapists and case managers about the situations the participants are in and work

together with them to help solve those problems.

It is rewarding for me when someone I work with makes progress, either in their recovery or mental health. "Progress and not perfection" is a mantra that I live by, and I love it when the clients in my program take positive steps toward a healthier life.

How does Caring Together's approach differ from other programs?

JM: What truly sets Caring Together apart is our whole-person approach. We incorporate family planning, group therapy, individual counseling, housing support and practical life resources. Every member of this team is deeply committed. We don't come here just to clock in; we show up for these women with our whole hearts. The level of care and dedication across the board is something rare and special.

YT: In other programs I've worked with, peer support specialists were not treated as they are here at Caring Together. We were used as errand-runners and drivers instead of being

available for the participants who may have needed peer support.

What are some of the biggest challenges your clients face, and how does the team work together to support them?

JM: One of the biggest challenges I see is the process of reuniting women with their children. For many of our clients, they haven't had full custody — or any contact — with their children for years. The journey of reconnecting is deeply emotional and complex. These women are not only working on their recovery but also adjusting to how much life has changed. Navigating motherhood after separation is a heavy burden, and we walk with them through it every step of the way.

• continued on page 4



Jamerah McBride



Yvette Thomas

Welcoming Salus

• continued from the cover

Rachel Ditoro, EdD, MSPAS, PA-C, is director of the Salus at Drexel PA Studies program. She says that among the program's core teachings are "communication, building empathy, and trying to help students become providers patients will go to and feel good about."

She stresses to incoming and current students the expectation that "not only will they be trained and competent enough to pass their board exams, but the medical education they're getting at the University will allow them to be successful, compassionate clinicians."

Global, Interprofessional and Specialized Programming

Global, Interprofessional and Specialized Programming (GISP) designs and implements master's, certificate, micro-credential, interprofessional and continuing education for health care professions in collaboration with Drexel University's colleges and external partners. GISP provides innovative degree programs and professional development offerings, including interprofessional education for collaborative practice (IPECP) to improve student, patient, client and community outcomes both nationally and internationally.

Melissa Vitek, OD, EdD, FAAO, PNAP, is director of GISP. A graduate of the Pennsylvania College of Optometry, she is also director of the MSc in Clinical Optometry and the Advanced Placement OD programs, and she is an instructor and coordinator in the Interprofessional Evidence Based Practice course.

Blindness and Low Vision Studies

Salus' Blindness and Low Vision Studies programs, which are part of GISP, include four subject areas, each of which offers a master's degree or certificate:

- Low Vision Rehabilitation (LVR)
- Orientation and Mobility (O&M)
- Teacher of Students With Visual Impairments (TVI)
- Vision Rehabilitation Therapy (VRT)

Fabiana Perla, MS '93, EdD, COMS, CLVR, is chair of the Blindness and Low Vision Studies (BLVS) programs. She has worked extensively to provide direct services to individuals who are visually impaired, while also teaching

and securing federal and local grants to support graduate students and enhance staffing in the field of blindness and low-vision impairment. Perla has gained an international reputation through her publications and presentations in the profession of orientation and mobility.

Low Vision Rehabilitation

The MS and certificate programs in low vision rehabilitation (LVR) prepare professionals to work in clinical rehabilitation and educational settings with people who have low vision. LVR specialists conduct functional visual assessments and provide instruction on skills to improve the individual's performance in activities of daily life using optical devices, non-optical devices and/or assistive technology. Graduates work in settings including optometric practices, low vision clinics, and veterans affairs medical centers.

Kerry Lueders, MS '99, COMS, TVI, CLVT, is director of the LVR program. She graduated in 1999 from the Orientation and Mobility (O&M) master's program at the Pennsylvania College of Optometry.

Additionally, she provides low vision therapy at The Eye Institute, offering services through the William Feinbloom Vision Rehabilitation Center, where she also mentors LVR interns and fourth-year Doctor of Optometry students.



Destination Excellence

• continued from page 3

YT: Clients in our program face several challenges. They have to prevent relapse as well as battle mental health challenges. I help them by providing a listening ear and lived experience.

How do you measure success at Caring Together? What does a "win" look like for you and your clients?

JM: I believe in getting 1% better each day. Progress doesn't have to be huge to be meaningful. I don't place a measurement on what success should look like because it's different for every woman. For some, success means simply waking up and showing up. That alone can be a major win. My job is to celebrate every step forward, no matter how small it may seem.

YT: Success here looks like a person who is working toward living a healthier, more fulfilling life. No one is perfect, and we don't expect perfection. When people find housing, are not using substances for a certain amount of time or find a job, they are celebrated.

"There is a shortage of personnel in our field, and our programs are kind of unique across the country," she says. "We need more students, we need to recruit, and we need to get the word out more that this is such an important need."

Teacher of Students With Visual Impairments

The Teacher of Students With Visual Impairments (TVI) Master of Education and certificate programs are competency-based teacher preparation programs offering coursework and practical experiences that develop the knowledge and skills required for the instruction of infants, children and youth who are blind or visually impaired, and those with multiple disabilities.

Katherine Alstrin, EdD, TVI, COMS, is the TVI program director. "I like to think we are modeling the breaking down of silo walls that is needed for true transdisciplinary collaboration," she says. "The certificates you earn in the BLVS department are applicable across a variety of professions and are needed, in great demand, everywhere."

Orientation and Mobility

Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists teach children and adults with blindness or vision impairments critical skills to remain oriented in their environment, as well as specific mobility skills to travel safely, efficiently and as independently as possible within the home, at school, at work and in the community.

The O&M master's and certificate program offer full-time and part-time options, and the majority of the curriculum is taught online, with a summer residency and one additional week in the fall on campus. The program culminates with an internship.

Jamie Maffit, MS '06, COMS, CLVT, is the director of the O&M program. She provides low vision rehabilitation therapy at the William Feinbloom Vision Rehabilitation Center housed at The Eye Institute of Drexel University. She works closely with low vision optometric interns who are studying how to evaluate patients' vision and the referral process for rehabilitation services.

Vision Rehabilitation Therapy

The Vision Rehabilitation Therapy (VRT) master's and certificate programs prepare professionals to provide services in adaptive activities of daily living and independent living skills to blind or visually impaired individuals across the lifespan.

Programs can be taken on a full-time or part-time basis and are mostly delivered online, with an eight- to 10-week summer on-campus residency and an internship.

Lachelle Smith, MS '03, CVRT, VRT, is director of the VRT program. The profession attracts a diverse group of individuals from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, including but not limited to special education, disability services, rehabilitation studies, social work, psychology, occupational therapy, financial services careers, health care professions (including doctors and nurses) and so much more.

"The clients we serve get to choose the level of independence they are most comfortable with, and I get to empower them with knowledge, skills and resources to help them achieve that goal," says Smith. "I'm not just helping them; I'm helping them help themselves. That's the



enlightenment, empowerment and encouragement I enjoy passing on to our students. And, then when you do that, you see them pass that information along to others — that's the best feeling."

Biomedicine

The Biomedicine Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Master of Science (MSc) graduate research degree programs allow students to specialize in any area of health science, including but not limited to:

- Optometry
- Audiology
- Occupational therapy
- Physician assistant studies
- Rehabilitation sciences
- Biological sciences
- Clinical medicine

Master's and doctoral graduate students in the Biomedicine programs will be trained and challenged to:

- Use effective means of reviewing literature.
- Find and master the most specific and sensitive research techniques.
- Produce and manage data with sensitivity to quality assurance.
- Understand ethical and confidentiality mandates.
- Publish findings using methods that maintain the integrity of the research and its interpretation.

Darryl Horn, PhD, is the director of Biomedicine programs and the Post-baccalaureate program in Health Sciences. He earned a PhD in biochemistry and molecular biology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine and did his postdoctoral research in the Department of Cancer Biology at Scripps Research Institute. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Optometry.

Charles B. Cairns, MD, the Walter H. and Leonore Annenberg Dean of the College of Medicine, and senior vice president of medical affairs and of Drexel Health operations, expresses excitement and enthusiasm for the merger. "Salus University's reputation as an exceptional educational institution for health professionals is a testament to the quality of these programs and the students they attract," says Cairns. "I look forward to collaborating with these leaders as we develop synergies across the outstanding programs that are part of our College of Medicine community."

— Mike Morsch



Ausborn

Jessica Ausborn, PhD, associate professor of neurobiology and anatomy, and **Catherine von Reyn, PhD**, associate professor in Drexel's School of Biomedical Engineering, Science and Health Systems and the Department of Neurobiology & Anatomy, have been awarded a National Science Foundation grant for the research project "BIO-AL: Dendritic Democracy in *Drosophila* Connectomes."



Moreno-Sanchez

Anthony Moreno-Sanchez, a Neuroscience PhD student, Ausborn and colleagues at University of Sheffield and Tel Aviv University co-authored "Ectopic Sodium Channel Expression Decreases Excitability of *Drosophila* Kenyon Cells," which appeared in the *Journal of Physiology* in August 2025.



Capriotti



Klase

Zachary Capriotti, Molecular and Cell Biology and Genetics PhD student, and **Zachary Klase, PhD**, associate professor of pharmacology and physiology, (see also

Gaskill, page 7) co-authored "Innate Immune Memory in Chronic HIV and HIV-Associated Neurocognitive Disorders (HAND): Potential Mechanisms and Clinical Implications," which was published December 28, 2024, in the *Journal of Neurovirology*.



Carey

Alison Carey, MD, associate professor of microbiology and immunology, and pediatrics, has received an R21 award from the National Institutes of Health for the project "Immunomodulatory Effects of Interferon Lambda on Infant Neutrophils."

Joshua Chang Mell, PhD, associate

professor of microbiology and immunology, (see also Marino, page 8) is a co-investigator on the project.

Abhishek Rao, PhD microbiology and immunology

'24, **Nneka Ugwu, MD**, former neonatal-perinatal medicine fellow at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children,

Abigail Onufer, Microbiology and Immunology PhD

candidate, **Ogan Kumova, PhD microbiology**

and immunology '20, and Carey published

"Cathelicidin-Related Antimicrobial Peptide (CRAMP) Is Toxic During Neonatal Murine Influenza Virus Infection" in the *Journal of Immunology* in March 2025. The work was highlighted as a "Top Read" by the journal. Onufer, Mell,

Laura Cort, MS, research instructor of microbiology and immunology, Rao, **Nontokozo Mdluli**, Microbiology and Immunology PhD student, and Carey published "Influenza Virus-Induced Type I Interferons Disrupt Alveolar Epithelial Repair and Tight Junction Integrity in the Developing Lung" in *Mucosal Immunology* in February 2025.



Brody Carpenter, MS, Neuroscience PhD student, gave a platform presentation and presented an associated poster, "Changes in the PACAP System With the Development of Ethanol Dependence," at the Research Society on Alcohol

Annual Scientific Conference, held in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 21-25, 2025. He was finalist for the society's Enoch Gordis Research Recognition Award, which honors graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who present as first authors at the conference.

Christina Curran-Alfaro, Neuroscience PhD candidate, received a travel award from the International Behavioral Neuroscience Society to present her thesis work in a symposium at the society's annual meeting in Tromsø, Norway. (See also Namba, page 9.)



Garth D. Ehrlich, PhD, professor of microbiology and immunology, and otolaryngology-head and neck surgery, was named as one of the founding class of International Lyme and Associated Disease Society (ILADS) fellows. He was also elected to a four-year term on the

Subcommittee on Elections of the American Academy of Microbiology.

Ehrlich and a colleague at the Ohio State University presented a lecture to NIH COMMEND program students on January 10, 2025, on "The Role of Biofilms in the Pathogenesis of Otitis Media: Targeted Rational Molecular Strategies for Their Elimination." He also appeared as guest expert on the podcast "Tick Boot Camp" on March 10, 2025. Ehrlich gave the departmental seminar in the Biological Sciences Department at Idaho State University, discussing "Bacterial Biofilms as Multicellular Pathogens" on April 24, 2025, and the keynote scientific talk as an American Society for Microbiology distinguished lecturer in Pocatello, Idaho, on April 26, 2025, on the topic "What Can Large-Scale Comparative Genomics Teach Us: The Use of Machine-Learning to Identify Bacterial Virulence and Tropism Genes."

Ehrlich also served as meeting organizer and program committee member for the ILADS and PA Lyme Resource Network Scientific Meeting, which was held June 7-8, 2025, on the College of Medicine's Center City Campus. He gave an invited talk at the event, "Biofilms and Persister Cells Provide for Metabolic Resistance to Antibiotics and Chronic Infections." He chaired the ILADS 2025 European Scientific Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, and he served as meeting organizer and program committee member for two events: the Shirliff Biofilm Symposium and the International Symposium on Recent Advances in Otitis Media. (See also Marino, page 8.)



Tell your colleagues what you're doing. Email CoM_Pulse@drexel.edu.



Fatatis



Taus

the Role of Its Tumor-Derived Form in the Progression and Treatment of Metastatic Prostate Cancer" in *Cancers (Basel)* on January 17, 2025.

Danielle Fortuna, MD, who serves as medical director of the Pathologists' Assistant program, was recently named to the American Society for Clinical Pathology's 2025 "40 Under Forty" list, in recognition of her achievements and leadership qualities that are making an impact on the field of pathology and laboratory medicine.



Gaskill



Van Duyn

were awarded an R21 grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse for their project "Transcriptional Silencing of HIV by LTR Targeting RNAi."



Channer



Agarwal



Dampier

Physiology program, **Taylor Kist**, lab manager, **Brian J. Murphy, PhD**, professor of pharmacology and physiology, **Will Dampier, PhD**, associate professor of microbiology and immunology, and Gaskill were among the authors of "Microenvironmental Conditions and Serum Availability Alter Primary Human Macrophage NF-B Inflammatory Response and Function," which was published in the *Journal of Leukocyte Biology* on May 22, 2025.

Alessandro Fatatis, MD, PhD, professor of pharmacology and physiology, **Waleed Iqbal, MS cancer biology '18, PhD biomedical science/informatics '24**, current bioinformatics scientist, and colleagues authored "Exploring STEAP1 Expression in Prostate Cancer Cells in Response to Androgen Deprivation and in Small Extracellular Vesicles," which was published in *Molecular Cancer Research* on April 27, 2025. **Yetunde Oyende**, Pharmacology and Physiology PhD student, **Luke Taus**, MD '27, and Fatatis published "IL-1 in Neoplastic Disease and

Alexis Brantly, PhD microbiology and immunology '25, **Kyle Yeackle, PhD molecular and cell biology and genetics '25**, **Michael J. Bouchard, PhD**, former faculty member, Gaskill, and **Michael R. Nonnemacher, PhD**, professor of microbiology and immunology, published

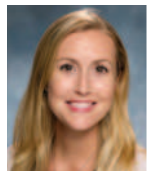


Nonnemacher



Matt

"Dopamine-Driven Increase in IL-1 in Myeloid Cells Is Mediated by Differential Dopamine Receptor Expression and Exacerbated by HIV," which was published in the *Journal of Neuroinflammation* on March 23, 2025.



Howe



Shumsky



O'Hara

in June 2025.



quality of their published orthopedic surgery research. He was invited to speak about wide awake hand surgery as a guest lecturer for the Chicago Society for Surgery of the Hand. He also received society's annual researcher award.



Ilyas

Zane Sejdiu, (see also Howe, above) Ilyas and a colleague presented "Bridging the Gap Between Dermatologic and Psychiatric Care in Acne Excoriee: Insights From a Multicenter Analysis" at the Brigham and Women's Hospital Dermatology Medical Student Virtual Research Symposium on May 28, 2025.

Caitlin A. Howe, PhD, associate professor of neurobiology and anatomy, and **Jed S. Shumsky, PhD**, professor of neurobiology and anatomy, with MD students and alumni

Stephanie A. Waldman, MD '25, **Zane Sejdiu**, and **Shannon M. O'Hara**, published "A Practical Examination and Feedback Survey Evaluating Learners Taught Using Physical Prosections vs. 3D Models of Prosections of the External Heart" in *Frontiers of Digital Education*

Asif Ilyas, MD, MBA, professor and academic vice chair, Department of Orthopedic Surgery, was named to Avante-Garde Health's 2025 list of "Orthopedic Surgery Research All-Stars," which honors the best surgeons and hospitals based on the quantity and

Erum Ilyas, MD, MBE, associate professor and interim academic chair of dermatology, spoke on the topic of "Sunscreen & Skepticism: Navigating the SPF Conversation" at the Pennsylvania Dermatology Trainee Advocacy Day, held virtually on May 20, 2025. MD student

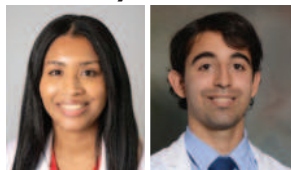
Ilyas was also a co-author of numerous recent publications. She was one of the authors of "Xylazine-Induced Skin Necrosis, Emerging Public Health Crisis and the Ethical Considerations in Surgical Reconstruction: A Case Report," which was published in *Surgicoll* on September 22, 2024. Ilyas, **Alexander Barna, MPH, MD '26**, **Alexis Arza, MD '25**, and **Carolyn Giordano,**



Giordano

PhD, associate dean of assessment and evaluation, and professor of family, community and preventive medicine, authored "Experiences of Social Media Users With Over the Counter Red Light Therapy Devices," which was published online in the July 2025 issue of the *Journal of Clinical and Aesthetic Dermatology*.

Grace Axelson, MD '27, **Jemima Constanza, MPH, MD '28**, **Ryan Rezaee, MD '27**, **Rina Weimann, MD,**



Constanza

Rezaee

assistant professor of dermatology, and Ilyas were among the authors of "Evaluation of UV-A and UV-B Transmission Through the Windows of Gas, Hybrid, and Electric Vehicles," which was published in the *Archives of Dermatological Research* on January 18, 2025.



Joshua Jackson, PhD, associate professor of pharmacology and physiology, and colleagues hosted Gliadelphia's Spring Salon event at the New College Building on May 22, 2025. The event brought together Philadelphia-area groups studying glial cell biology for a half-day event that spotlighted trainee research. Six local trainees shared their findings on how glial cells contribute to health and disease in the brain. (See also Meucci and Namba, page 9, and Romano, page 10.)



Pooja Jain, PhD, professor of microbiology and immunology, and a colleague at Jefferson University were selected to receive a \$100,000 Working Groups Pilot Grant from the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center for their project, "Characterizing HTLV-1 Infection and Associated Cancer Risk in Underrepresented Philadelphia Communities."



Jennifer Kelschenbach, PhD, spoke at the annual meeting of the Philadelphia chapter of the Society for Neuroscience on May 30, 2025, about how opioids contribute to neurocognitive impairment in the ecoHIV mouse model.



Margaret Larkins-Pettigrew, MD, Med, MPPM, professor and academic chair of obstetrics and gynecology, is a contributing author of the anthology *Medical Miracles: True Stories From the Frontlines in Women's Health Care*. She also received a Women's Health Provider Award from

Adagio Health, whose Leadership and Legacies program recognizes Pittsburgh's women's health heroes. The documentary film "The Ebony Canal," for which Larkins-Pettigrew served as a featured expert, has received numerous awards and nominations, including three Emmy nominations, and has been honored at multiple film festivals. In addition, an episode of the podcast "We Can Be," which featured her as a medical expert, earned the 2025 Robert L. Vann Award of Excellence from the Black Media Federation.



Loll

Patrick Loll, PhD, professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, was chosen to join the Board of Directors of the American Institute of Physics. Biochemistry of Health and Disease students and alumni **Lina Maciunas, PhD '20**, **Photis Rotsides, PhD '24**, and **Elizabeth D'Lauro, PhD** student, together with **Joris Beld, PhD**, associate professor of microbiology and immunology, and Loll, published "The VanS Sensor Histidine Kinase From Type-B Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococci Recognizes Vancomycin Directly" in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry* on May 22, 2025.



Sandhya Kortagere, PhD, professor of microbiology and immunology, and vice dean of research and innovation, and colleagues in Drexel's Department of Biology, authored "Tip60 HAT Activators as Therapeutic Modulators for Alzheimer's Disease," which appeared in the April 9, 2025, issue of *Nature Communications*. The paper was also covered in an August 26, 2025, Drexel News story. Visit bit.ly/3VF7j2l to read more.



Marino

Mary Marino, a PhD student in the Microbiology and Immunology program, presented two talks at the 23rd International Symposium on Recent Advances in Otitis Media held at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia June 15-18, 2025: "The Myth of the Silver Bullet: Multidrug Tolerance and the Stringent Response in *Haemophilus influenzae*" and "Cross-Talk Between the Stringent Response and Natural Competence in *Haemophilus influenzae*."

Kalya M. Socarras, PhD microbiology and immunology '22; Marino; **Joshua Earl, PhD**, former faculty member; Department of Microbiology & Immunology faculty and staff members **Rachel L. Ehrlich**, bioinformatics programmer, **Joshua Chang Mell, PhD**,



Mell



Sen

associate professor, **Bhaswati Sen**, instructor, **Azad Ahmed, MD**, assistant professor, and **Garth D. Ehrlich, PhD**, professor; and colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University

authored “Characterization of the Family-Level *Borreliaceae* Pan-genome and Development of an Episomal Typing Protocol,” which was published in *mBio* on June 11, 2025. Marino and Mell were also co-authors of “Epigenetic Control of the Ferric Uptake Regulator (Fur) and Fumarate Nitrate Reductase (FNR) Master Regulatory Proteins Contributes to *Haemophilus influenzae* Survival During Lung Infection,” which was published in *mBio* on July 23, 2025.

Kathryn Markey, MS, a Biology PhD student in the Department of Neurobiology & Anatomy, received a National Research Service Award to study astrocyte development in the cortex.



Jessica Merzy, a Molecular and Cell Biology and Genetics PhD student, was selected to participate in the 2025 Community Engaged Research Training for Emerging Scientists program at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center. Merzy will work closely with African American churches to offer educational and/or screening events focused on breast cancer.



Meucci

Olimpia Meucci, MD, PhD, professor and chair of pharmacology and physiology, and **Renato Brandimarti, PhD**, visiting research associate, received a grant from the University of Bologna, Italy, to implement new didactic programs exposing trainees to the pharmaceutical/biotech industry and other non-academic fields. The goal of their project is to promote institutional advancement strategies in support of translational research.

Chunta Ho, PhD, postdoctoral fellow; Pharmacology and Physiology program alumni **Jared Luchetta, PhD '23**, **Brad Nash, PhD '17**, and **Lindsay K. Festa, PhD '18**;



Ho



Nash

James A. Johnson, MS microbiology and immunology '24; **Ahmet Sacan, PhD**, teaching professor, Drexel School of Biomedical Engineering, Science & Health Systems;

Pharmacology and Physiology faculty members **Joshua Jackson, PhD**, associate professor, **Antonio**



Sanz-Clemente

Sanz-Clemente, PhD, associate professor, and Meucci; and Brandimarti authored “CXCL12 Engages Cortical Inhibitory Neurons to Enhance Dendritic Spine Plasticity and Structured Network Activity,” which was published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* on May 7, 2025.



Andréia Mortensen, PhD, assistant professor of pharmacology and physiology, and colleagues at Temple University and the Wistar Institute authored “Positive Allosteric Modulator of GLT-1 Reduces Methamphetamine Hyperlocomotion, Sensitization and Conditioned Place

Preference in Mice,” which was published in *Neuroscience Research* on January 31, 2025.

Calendar

November

- 6****Discovery Day**
8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Pennsylvania Convention Center, Terrace Ballrooms
North Broad Street between Race and Arch Streets
Contact: discoveryday@drexel.edu
- 10****Potential Benefits of Cannabinoids for Cardiovascular Disease**
4-5 p.m.
Presented by Maurice Hinson, MD '15
Virtual event
Register: bit.ly/48cxNQh
- 18****State of the College Town Hall**
12-1 p.m.
Health Sciences Building Room 1W03 or via Zoom
Contact: Danielle.Zimmerman,dnz29@drexel.edu

27-28 Thanksgiving Break

December

- 4****DUCOM Classical Winter Recital**
College of Medicine at Tower Health lobby
Information: ducomclassical@gmail.com
- 9-11****Immune Modulation & Engineering Symposium**
Symposium: The Study Hotel, 20 South 33rd Street
Poster session: Behrakis Grand Hall, 3210 Chestnut Street
Information: drexel.edu/biomed/research-and-design/overview/IMES2025
- 25****Christmas**

Ongoing

Population Health Speaker Series
Monthly on Wednesdays beginning November 5
Nesbitt Hall, Stein Auditorium or via Zoom
Information: Dan.Castranova,dc3482@drexel.edu

Save the Date

Tower Health Research Day
March 26, 2026
Reading Hospital
Information: alexandra.short@towerhealth.org

Full calendar: All College of Medicine events are available at drexel.edu/medicine/news-events/events.

Alumni: For information about alumni events, please call 215.895.ALUM (2586), email medical.alumni@drexel.edu or visit drexel.edu/alumni/stay-connected/events/.

Mark D. Namba, PhD, postdoctoral scholar, **Qiaowei Xie, PhD pharmacology and physiology '24**, **Joshua Jackson, PhD**, associate professor of pharmacology and physiology, **Jacqueline M. Barker, PhD**, associate



Barker



Giacometti

professor of pharmacology and physiology, and a colleague at the University of Pennsylvania published "EcoHIV Infection Modulates the Effects of Cocaine Exposure Pattern and

Abstinence on Cocaine Seeking and Neuroimmune Protein Expression in Male Mice" in the June 15, 2025, issue of *Addiction Neuroscience*. The same authors, plus **Samuel L. Goldberg, MA**, research assistant, **Laura Giacometti, PhD**, research assistant professor, and former Barker Lab members **Rohan Dasari, BS biology '24**, **Lauren A. Buck** and **Christine M. Side**, published "Chemogenetic Activation of Medial Prefrontal Cortex Projections to the Nucleus Accumbens Shell Suppresses Cocaine-Primed Reinstatement in EcoHIV Infected Mice" in the July 16, 2025, issue of *Psychopharmacology*.

Jessalyn Pla-Tenorio, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in the Barker Lab, received a National Institute on Drug Abuse loan repayment program award to support her work investigating GLT-1 and estrogen interactions in co-occurring substance use disorder and HIV.



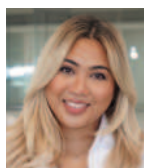
Mauricio Reginato, PhD, professor and chair of biochemistry and molecular biology, was recently selected to join the Editorial Board of the journal *Oncogene* as associate editor. Reginato was also recently awarded a \$100,000 Working Groups Pilot Grant from the Sidney Kimmel

Comprehensive Cancer Center for the collaborative project "Role of ACS2 as an Immune Modulator in Breast Cancer Brain Metastasis."



Romano

Gabriele Romano, PhD, assistant professor of pharmacology and physiology, and colleagues at Thomas Jefferson University and Lankenau Institute published "Plasticity and Functional Heterogeneity of Cancer-Associated Fibroblasts" in the July 29, 2025, issue of *Cancer Research*. **Camille J. Cunanan, PhD molecular and cell biology and genetics '24**, now a postdoctoral researcher, **Amirali Amirfallah**, a



Cunanan

Pharmacology and Physiology PhD student, **Alyssa Sanders**, Molecular and Cell Biology and Genetics PhD student, **Kayla Gallant**, lab manager, **Maria Cavallo, PhD pharmacology and physiology '24**, **Elizabeth Homer**, Pharmacology and Physiology PhD student, **Olivia El Nagggar**, Molecular and Cell Biology and Genetics PhD student, **Julia Farnan, PhD pharmacology and**



Amirfallah



Sanders



Gaylent



Homer



Hope

physiology '25, **Romano, Jennifer Hope, PhD**, assistant professor of microbiology and immunology, **Joshua Jackson, PhD**, associate professor of pharmacology and physiology, and **Edward Hartsough, PhD**, associate professor of pharmacology and physiology, authored "BAP1 Loss Affords Lipotoxicity Resistance in Uveal Melanoma," which was published in the May 2025 issue of *Pigment Cell and Melanoma Research*.



Robert Rosenberg, PhD, professor of pharmacology and physiology, was among the authors of "LLM-Generated Multiple Choice Practice Quizzes for Preclinical Medical Students," which was published in *Advances in Physiology Education* on September 1, 2025.

Yansy Salmerón, MD '26, and **Joe Christianson, MD '27**, received a 2025-2026 Helping Hands Grants



Christianson

Program award from the American Psychiatric Association Foundation. The program was established to encourage medical students to participate in community service activities, particularly those focused on underserved populations; raise awareness of mental illness and the importance of early recognition of illness; and build an interest in the field of psychiatry.



Robert T. Sataloff, MD, DMA, professor and academic chair of otolaryngology-head and neck surgery, has been listed as top expert in otolaryngology worldwide, according to Expertscape, which assesses 27,000 physicians and health care facilities worldwide, primarily considering publications, citations and scientific outcomes in their rankings.



Julie Schaub, MS, a Neuroscience PhD candidate, was awarded a two-year NIH F31 predoctoral fellowship for her project "Splice Variants of Microtubule-Associated Protein 4 Regulate the Efficiency of Organelle Transport in Dendrites."



Kirupaharan

Matthew D. Spangler, Nila Kirupaharan and Camellia Edalat, all fourth-year medical students, and **Meghan K. Berkenstock, MD '11**, president of the College of Medicine Alumni Association Board of Directors, published "Epidemiology of Globe Injury Repair Mechanisms in the TriNetX U.S. Collaborative Network Database: Retrospective Cohort Study," in the August 2025 issue of *BMC Ophthalmology*.



Todd Strohlic, PhD, VMD, associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, and assistant dean of curricular integration, completed the Program for Educators in Health Professions at the Harvard Macy Institute in Boston, Massachusetts. The title of his project

was "Reintegrating Biochemistry Into the Clinical Phase of the Curriculum at DUCOM." Strohlic received a 2024 Professional Enrichment and Growth grant to support his participation in the yearlong program. He was subsequently selected to serve as a faculty member for the 2025-2026 program.



Felicity Tso, a PhD student in the Microbiology and Immunology program, presented an invited talk, "Investigation of the Effects of Competitive Inhibitors on the Bacterial Stringent Response Responsible for Multi-Drug Tolerance Associated With Biofilms and Persisters,"

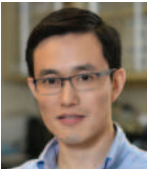
at the 23rd International Symposium on Recent Advances

in Otitis Media, held at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia June 15-18, 2025. Her talk received the Best Trainee Plenary Platform Presentation Award. She also presented an invited talk at the European International Lyme and Associated Diseases Annual Scientific Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, on May 3, 2025.



Kathryn Veazey, PhD, assistant professor of neurobiology and anatomy, and colleagues at Northern Illinois University and Randolph-Macon College co-authored "Medical Student Perceptions of Establishing Effective Clinical Communication: A Qualitative Study"

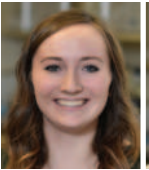
in the August 14, 2025, issue of the journal *Advances in Health Science Education: Theory and Practice*.



Dong V. Wang, PhD, assistant professor of neurobiology and anatomy, received a two-year R21 NIH grant for the project "Retrosplenial Down State Assembly Facilitates Memory Consolidation During Slow-Wave Sleep." Wang also gave several international invited talks,

including at Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan, in April 2025; National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, in March 2025; and East China Normal University in Shanghai, China, in March 2025.

Wenqiang Huang, Arron F. Hall and **Ashley N. Opalka**, Neuroscience PhD students; **Natalia Kawalec**,



former research assistant; **Jun Liu, PhD**, postdoctoral fellow; and Wang published "Anterior Cingulate Cortex in Complex Associative Learning: Monitoring Action State and Content" in *eLife*

on March 31, 2025. Hall and Wang also authored "A Cortical-Hippocampal Communication Undergoes



Rebalancing After New Learning," which was published in *eLife* on July 14, 2025. Opalka, **Kimberly J. Dougherty, PhD**, associate professor of neurobiology and anatomy, and Wang authored "A Distinct Down-to-Up Transition Assembly in Retrosplenial Cortex During Slow-Wave Sleep," which appeared in the *Journal of Neuroscience* on April 2, 2025.



Evangeline Williams, a PhD student in the Microbiology and Immunology program, presented two talks: "Condition-Specific Transcriptomic Shifts Associated With Outer Membrane Decoration Due to Loss of msf in *Haemophilus influenzae*" and "Towards Developing a Bacterial

Gene Expression Diagnostic of Persistent Ear Infections," at the 23rd International Symposium on Recent Advances in Otitis Media, held at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia June 15-18, 2025. She earned third place in the Best Trainee Platform Presentation category.

Orthopedic Research Day

Held on May 3, 2025, at Drexel University's Health Sciences Building in Philadelphia, the Drexel Orthopedic Research Day — organized by Drexel's Orthopedic Surgery Interest Group — brought together alumni, faculty and students to celebrate the community's achievements. The event began with a welcome from Doger Norceide, MD '27, and June Hoang, MD '27.

The morning featured alumni specialty lectures moderated by Asif Ilyas, MD, MCPHU '01, MBA, associate dean of clinical research and academic vice chair of orthopedic surgery, with presentations from alumni including David Galos, MD '10, Kimberly Zambito, MD, MCPHU '02, and Manish Patel, MD, MCPHU '00.

A poster session featured 22 abstracts presented by MD students, addressing clinical challenges and innovations in orthopedic care. Topics ranged from surgical techniques and prosthetic complications to mental health impacts and sustainability in pediatric orthopedics. During lunch MD students gave podium presentations, with Norceide serving as moderator.

After lunch, Patel delivered a keynote address, followed by an awards presentation. Overall, the event fostered collaboration, celebrated Drexel's orthopedic legacy, and highlighted emerging research shaping the future of musculoskeletal medicine.



The Language of Health Care

How Drexel Students Are Preparing for the Global Practice of Medicine

Last summer, second-year medical student Richa Sharma was working in the labor and delivery ward of a health care center in Spain when she witnessed a birth that was fast becoming a crisis situation. Labor was slowed down by shoulder dystocia — meaning the baby’s shoulder had lodged in the mother’s pelvis, and they had five minutes to determine whether the mother would need an emergency c-section.

“For a moment, I didn’t know what I was seeing, whether it was going to be a stillbirth,” Sharma says. “The baby came out blue and the team whisked the baby away to the NICU. It was a very scary moment, but what made it worse is that the mother didn’t speak Spanish, as she was from Germany, and her English was limited as well.”

Ironically, Sharma, who had completed Drexel’s Spanish for Medical Professionals elective the previous spring, was in Spain to practice her medical Spanish. While her second language wasn’t helpful to this mother, the experience only confirmed for Sharma how meaningful and useful the class had been. With more language skills, providers can be that much more effective in reaching patients.

“Thankfully, the baby and the mother were stable, but I could see how important it was to put the patient at ease, and the role communication plays in that process.”

More Than Words

Part of the Global Health Education program, Spanish for Medical Professionals is an elective for medical students who want to improve their language proficiency, understand the cultural nuances of interacting with

Spanish-speaking patients, and improve health care communication in general with diverse patient populations.

The yearlong elective, taught by Carlos Gonzalez-Ferrin, focuses on medical vocabulary, dialogue modeling and note-taking skills, with a goal of improving students’ listening comprehension and pronunciation. The class is designed for intermediate-low level Spanish speakers at any stage in their medical education, and it meets once a week.

“The requirement is that the students come in with conversational language skills, so the medical Spanish builds upon their knowledge base,” says Nielufar Varjavand, MD, professor of medicine and director of global health education at the College of Medicine. “Medical students have to learn how to practice medicine not just here but in the whole world. Spanish is the second most common language spoken in the United States, and it is valuable for our students to communicate well with patients, wherever they are.”

While many disease names — especially proper nouns — are the same across languages, the words for symptoms and treatments can vary widely. That’s where the vocabulary lists are particularly helpful.

“Descriptors like ‘wheezing’ or ‘swelling’ won’t come up in conversational Spanish classes. But when a patient comes to you and tells you the story of what they’re going through and what they’re having trouble with, it’s incredibly helpful to know those words to understand what a patient is saying,” Sharma says.

In the class, students also read medical articles, research medical interventions and watch Spanish language videos. They note differences in health conditions and health promotion efforts across different areas of the world, so they come away with a deeper understanding of health care systems, as well as differences in health care culture among Spanish-speaking regions.

As a first-year student, Nicholas Lehman, MD ’28, eagerly enrolled in the Medical Spanish class. Lehman majored in Spanish in college, but due to COVID lockdowns, he missed out on opportunities to travel and study abroad. Continuing his study at Drexel not only allowed him to deepen his existing knowledge but it gave him a new practical application for it.

“As an undergraduate, I studied history and literature,” Lehman says. “This class helped me expand my knowledge of everyday Spanish for the medical setting. Every week we would conduct role-playing scenarios where we take on the role of the doctor or the patient and run a mock evaluation. It’s things like knowing when to use the formal *usted*, subtle vocabulary differences and sentence structure, that can show a patient that you respect their culture and are here to help.”

Putting Learning Into Practice

Upon completion of the course, students are encouraged to get involved with Spanish-speaking community health programs at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children and Puentes de Salud, to enroll in global health experiences in the summer after their first year or as a fourth-year elective in Spanish-speaking countries, or to join the student group



Nicholas Lehman, MD '28, at El Centro Gerontológico La Recoleta in Cusco, Peru

Mesa de Español to continue practicing their newly acquired skills.

Like Sharma, Lehman opted for a summer immersion program. At the end of his first year, Lehman traveled to Cusco, Peru, for six weeks with the Máximo Nivel program, where he was placed in a clinic called El Centro Gerontológico La Recoleta, which focuses on geriatric care. He also continued his study of Spanish with additional classes there.

“I was responsible for physiotherapy and rehabilitation services, and assisting with patients’ activities of daily living. This experience was especially interesting because many of my patients only spoke Quechua, so I was able to learn a bit of that language as well,” he says.

Fluent in Compassion

Something else happens when students learn how to provide health care in more than one language — it breaks down silence and builds emotional connections.

“Students report that after they have taken this course, not only do they become better Spanish speakers but they come away with more empathy for individuals who lack proficiency in English,” Varjavand says.

Sharma saw firsthand how making an effort to directly communicate with a patient in their language went a long way toward building trust. It also allowed her to better understand the patient’s experience of feeling scared and alone.

“Even knowing that someone is just trying to communicate with you in your language makes a world of a difference,” she says. “In many situations there will be an interpreter or another person who’s fluent in a provider setting. But as the doctor, having a little bit of language competency to talk to your patients and look them in the eyes is a way of saying *I understand you and I care about what you are going through.*”

In the case of the mother in Spain, the provider spoke some English and they were able to convey that it had



Richa Sharma, MD '28, during her visit to Spain

been an emergency situation, the baby would need to go to the NICU, but they would both be stable, and the mother could see her child shortly. It was enough to put her at ease, Sharma said, but there’s no such thing as too effective communication.

“It was very much an eye-opening experience and definitely made me want to pursue speaking Spanish even more, so that I could always communicate with patients in tough situations and help them understand what’s going on.”

Bridging the Communication Gap

For Lehman, who hopes to go into emergency medicine and ideally practice in an urban setting, having the skills to communicate with patients quickly and correctly will be a major asset.

“We can and do use translators all the time in these settings, but being able to speak Spanish makes patients feel more comfortable. In an emergency setting it will save time and allow me to act more quickly.”

Sharma is considering a career in pediatrics, women’s health or community medicine, and she is especially interested in health equity. Originally from Texas, she anticipates that she may complete her training in the Northeast and return to her home state to eventually practice medicine and/or conduct research, and the medical Spanish will be especially useful amid the significant Spanish-speaking population there.

Regardless of where she and Lehman ultimately land, having the additional language skill on their resume will be a bonus, and having a stronger connection to their patients will only benefit their care.

“When we teach medicine, we are teaching communication,” Varjavand says. “It’s not just for the people on our block, in our city or even in our community. We are citizens of the world; we should help everyone.”

– Elisa Ludwig



Lehman during a hike to Machu Picchu

Together for Chester: The Importance of Community-Driven Health Care Resource Fairs

When Crozer Health in Chester, Pennsylvania, closed in the spring, thousands of area residents were abruptly left without access to reliable medical care. In response, local health and community leaders, including Annette Gadegbeku, MD, senior associate dean of the Office of Community Health and Inclusive Excellence, quickly mobilized to support area residents in maintaining continuity of care.

Their collective efforts culminated in the Together for Chester Healthcare Resource Fair, held on June 28, 2025, at Chester City Hall and the Chester Charter Schools Academy. More than 20 volunteers provided attendees with blood pressure screenings, health assessments, prescription refills, new provider referrals and assistance accessing medical records. Among the volunteers were

Drexel faculty members and several medical students.

"I was inspired by the opportunity to support a community that had experienced a sudden disruption in its access to health care," says student volunteer Jane Taylor, MD '28. "As a medical student, I felt a responsibility to contribute however I could."

Another student volunteer, Sarah Brock, MD '27, reflects on the broader impact of the event. "We've seen the impact of major hospital closures in Philadelphia. Each time it's the community that pays the price," she says. "But despite all of that, they're still showing up and trying to access care. I volunteered because I wanted to support the resilience that's already there in the residents and health care workers."

That spirit of resilience was palpable throughout the day. "One of the most memorable moments was seeing attendees spread the word after stopping by the event," Brock recalls. "They eagerly called relatives and friends once they realized what resources we had available."

For Solomon Wekunga, MD '28, another student volunteer, the experience was humbling. "It was amazing how people from the Chester community came together to help each other out."

Dean's Cup and Learning Societies: Friendly Competition and Camaraderie

During orientation week in August, MD program students participated in the annual Dean's Cup, a friendly competition between the seven learning societies students are placed in at the start of their medical training. The societies give students the opportunity to build relationships with their peers from day one. Each society is named after a famous historical Philadelphia or Reading, Pennsylvania, landmark, including:

- Athenaeum
- Liberty Bell
- Physick House
- Rocky Statue
- Reading Terminal
- Eakins House
- Pagoda

The Dean's Cup tradition fosters strong connections both within and

across the learning societies by bringing first-year medical students together for fun, camaraderie and community building. Students participate in field day activities including relay races, lawn games and tug of war.

"I like the learning societies because they bring students together throughout the year for things like the Dean's Cup, service events and social events. They help unite students that may otherwise have nothing in common," says Kaitlin Brannon, MD '28, who is president of the Rocky Statue Society. "There is always room for a little friendly competition. This year, Rocky took home the cup for the second year in a row!"

By fostering community and collaboration, learning societies



enrich the student life experience beyond the classroom. As the newest class embarks on their medical careers, these traditions help them to adapt, build relationships and give back.



New Leaders in Research, Health Equity and Educational Affairs

The College of Medicine has recently welcomed a number of esteemed faculty members to new leadership roles.



Sandhya Kortagere, PhD, has been appointed vice dean of research and innovation, effective July 1. In this role, she will lead efforts to enhance research productivity, secure external funding, and support faculty development across basic, clinical, translational and population health sciences. She will also oversee the research infrastructure, including grants administration, compliance and research facilities, while promoting commercialization and technology transfer. Kortagere will connect the College of Medicine's clinical expertise, world-class research, educational strengths, and extensive hospital and health system collaborations to foster innovation, support scientific discovery and enhance patient care.

Kortagere is a tenured professor of microbiology and immunology and an esteemed molecular and neuropharmacologist. She has been funded throughout her career with federal and non-federal funds exceeding \$6 million, and has published 80 papers in high-impact journals including *Nature Communications*, *Science* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. She is also a named inventor on 14 patents, many of which are awarded in multiple countries. Kortagere has served on several NIH study sections, gaining national and international recognition.



Ramesh Raghupathi, PhD, has been appointed associate dean, health equity research and innovation in the Office of Community Health and Inclusive Excellence at the College of Medicine. In this role, Raghupathi will conduct, promote and supervise health

equity research across the College's missions. He will develop, implement and oversee strategic planning for the Office of Health Equity Research & Innovation, propelling forward the centralization of health equity-related and community-based participatory research. He will also provide direction, oversight and mentoring for faculty, professional staff and students in grant-writing, research studies and publications related to health equity.

A tenured professor in the Department of Neurobiology & Anatomy, Raghupathi has been a faculty member since 2003. He has mentored countless students in the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Professional Studies and in the community. His research focuses on sex differences in infant and adolescent traumatic brain injuries. His commitment to making science accessible to everyone is evidenced by his impressive catalogue of published articles and interviews. In 2023, he received the Institutional Service

Award at the College of Medicine for his commitment to collaborating and leading internal committees, task forces and other institutional activities. He is currently a Drexel Faculty Senator, representing the College's interests at this important University governing body.



Bisan A. Salhi, MD, PhD, has been appointed senior associate dean for student affairs at Drexel University College of Medicine. Salhi has demonstrated extraordinary leadership, vision and dedication since joining Drexel in 2023 as assistant dean

for student affairs, community health and inclusive excellence at the West Reading Campus. In her new role, she will oversee all aspects of student services that support learners on their path to the MD degree. Her portfolio will also include leadership of the College's career advising and residency mentoring programs, as well as the development of programming that fosters a community of belonging and advances workforce excellence.

A nationally recognized educator, physician and scholar, Salhi is an associate professor of emergency medicine whose research has been featured in leading journals including the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, *Social Science & Medicine* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. She has received numerous accolades for her contributions to medical education and equity, including the Catalyst Award and Outstanding Research Publication Award from the Academy for Women in Academic Emergency Medicine. She was inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Society and received a Golden Apple Award in 2024 for her exceptional teaching.



Mary Lynn Sealey, MD, has been appointed assistant dean for student affairs, bringing more than two decades of clinical and academic leadership experience to student mentorship and support. Sealey has served as program director of the

Internal Medicine Residency programs at both Western Pennsylvania Hospital and Allegheny General Hospital, and as director of undergraduate medical education at Allegheny Health Network. At the College of Medicine, she is regional assistant dean for clinical education at Allegheny Health Network and is a professor of clinical medicine.

Throughout her career, Sealey has demonstrated a deep and consistent commitment to teaching, mentoring and creating a supportive learning environment. She is board certified in internal medicine and a fellow of the American College of Physicians. Her contributions have been recognized through multiple honors, including the Clinical Practice Award from the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American College of Physicians, and Drexel honors including a Golden Apple Award and the Dean's Special Award for Excellence in Clinical Teaching.

Guatemala Service Trip Transforms Physician Assistant Students

Marisa Hellmuth, physician assistant studies '26, understands that while medical knowledge can be taught in a classroom, true medical care is discovered and developed through hands-on patient experiences. She recently experienced this firsthand during a service trip to Guatemala with fellow students from the Salus at Drexel University Physician Assistant (PA) Studies program.

At one of the clinics, a Guatemalan mother arrived with her 3-year-old son, whose right foot was wrapped in layers of bandages and causing him significant pain. As Hellmuth and others began to gather the boy's medical history, it was revealed his foot had been accidentally burned in a hot-oil incident.

"It took a few minutes to convince the mother that we needed to look at the burn, and she finally agreed, but stated it was extremely painful to take the bandages off because they were sticking to the healing tissue," says Hellmuth. Eventually the care team was able to remove the bandages and examine the wound. A wound care nurse traveling with the health care team cleaned and rewrapped the foot and the mother was given supplies and instructions on how to properly care for the wound.

"The encounter had thrown me off kilter. Because I had seen so many stomach issues and ear infections, I did not even have the possibility of wound care practice in my mental toolbox at the time," says Hellmuth. "It allowed me to practice mentally and physically pivoting my medical train of thought. And, even though I wasn't the one specifically providing the medical care, this encounter reminded me that sometimes patients just need a warm presence to calm them down."

The Drexel group traveled to Zacapa, Guatemala, for a one-week service trip sponsored by the humanitarian organization Hearts in Motion, bringing together 16 students from the PA studies class of 2026 and three faculty members, as well as several other health care professionals and some non-medical volunteers.

Over the course of the week, the team provided care to 387 patients across five different communities, treating everything from acute illnesses to infections and wounds, while also providing vital patient education on managing chronic diseases in both infants and adults. Beyond medical care, they dispensed vitamins, water filters, children's books for a school in the community, and countless essentials including toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap and feminine hygiene products.

According to Morgan Leh, MSPAS, PA-C, assistant professor, who — along with Cara Orr, MMS, PA-C, associate professor, and Jeanne-Marie Pucillo, DHSc, MSPAS, PA-C, associate professor — served as a faculty advisor on the trip, the experience perfectly illustrates how physician assistants are trained in the Salus at Drexel University PA Studies program.

"PAs are trained to expand access to care, transform health and wellness, and serve patients in a team-based medical practice, and I think we represented that on this trip," says Leh. "Patient education is

really the foundation of our profession, and we had the opportunity to do that with every single patient encounter we had."

This service trip to Guatemala has been on the radar of Hailey Phillips, PA studies '26, for a while now. During her interview for the program, she had spoken to Pucillo at length about the Hearts in Motion trip to Guatemala. The discussion played a big role in Phillips' desire to be part of the program.

"In my undergraduate education, both my major and minor had a focus on public health and health disparities in America and global health," says Phillips. "So, when I was researching PA programs, I was interested in Salus'

trip to Guatemala because of its sustainability. Working with Hearts in Motion, you knew that your impact would expand beyond the week."

Phillips adds the experience "helped prove how vital it is to treat people as individuals, looking at what they have access to and what they can change in their lives."

Both Phillips and Hellmuth called the service trip "eye-opening" and "life-changing," and both would highly recommend the experience to their PA peers. "You are able to experience an entirely different type of medical care that is going to impact how you treat every patient going forward," says Hellmuth.





White Coat Ceremonies Welcome New Healers

The College of Medicine's MD program and the Salus at Drexel University Physician Assistant Studies program celebrated their incoming first-year classes at two White Coat Ceremonies. The events, welcoming the MD class of 2029 on August 8, 2025, and the PA Studies class of 2027 on August 15, 2025, ushered these future health care professionals into their careers as compassionate healers and lifelong learners.



Recent Thesis Defenses

We congratulate the following master's and PhD students from the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Professional Studies on the successful defense of their theses.



Tevo'n Campbell

Biochemistry of Health & Disease
MS Program

Title: Exploring the Effects of lncRNA FAM99B in Hepatocellular Carcinoma

Advisor: Srinivas Somarowthu, PhD

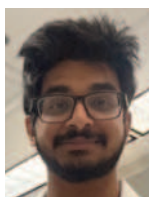


Mackenzie Collins

Microbiology & Immunology
PhD Program

Title: Near Full-Length HIV-1 Provirus Analysis for Characterizing Intactness and Variability in the Viral Reservoir

Advisor: Michael Nonnemacher, PhD



George Joseph

Biochemistry of Health & Disease
MS Program

Title: Uncovering Novel TMEJ Factors: A CRISPR-Based Approach

Advisor: Neil Johnson, PhD



Armoni Mayes

Microbiology & Immunology MS Program

Title: Inflammasome and Cellular Senescence Crosstalk in Glia Response to HIV-1 Infection (Literature Review)

Advisor: Sonia Navas-Martin, PhD



Neha Mohan

Pharmacology & Physiology PhD Program

Title: From Mechanism to Therapy: Dissecting Spastic Paraplegia 4 Using Isogenic Motor Cortical Organoids and Preclinical Mouse Models

Advisor: Liang Oscar Qiang, MD, PhD



Mihyun Oh

Molecular & Cell Biology & Genetics
PhD Program

Title: Structural and Functional Dissection of the Oncogenic lncRNA SCHLAP1

Advisor: Srinivas Somarowthu, PhD



Khushi Amish Patel

Molecular & Cell Biology & Genetics
MS Program

Title: Profiling DNA Damage Response in Lymphocytes from BRCA2 Heterozygote Carriers

Advisor: Sanjeevani Arora, PhD



Shelby Pernel

Biochemistry of Health & Disease
MS Program

Title: Utilization of In Vitro Porphyrin Biosynthesis

Advisor: Joris Beld, PhD



Emily Pochet

Molecular & Cell Biology & Genetics
MS Program

Title: Integrative Proteomic and Genomic Approaches Reveal Nuclear Role of SMN in Chromatin and RNA Regulation

Advisor: Lu Chen, PhD



Maria Ruiz

Molecular & Cell Biology & Genetics
MS Program

Title: The Effect of SMN Depletion on the Cell Cycle Progression

Advisor: Lu Chen, PhD



Erik Schubert

Molecular & Cell Biology & Genetics
MS Program

Title: Modeling the Cooperative Effects of GNAS^{R201C}, KRAS^{G12V} and TP53^{R175H} in Human Pancreatic Ductal Epithelial Cells

Advisor: Ridhdhi Desai, PhD



Lauren Elizabeth Walsh

Microbiology & Immunology MS Program

Title: Investigating Stringent Response-Mediated Tolerance to Non-thermal Plasma in Escherichia coli

Advisors: Donald C. Hall, PhD, and Vandana Miller, MD



Yibin Xu

Pharmacology & Physiology PhD Program

Title: Allosteric Modulator of Dopamine Transporter Inhibits Cocaine-Induced Behaviors in Rats

Advisor: Ole Mortensen, PhD

Get to Know...

What is your official title at Drexel?

Clinical Community Outreach Coordinator, The Eye Institute of Drexel University

Explain what you do in under 50 words.

The biggest part of my job is to ensure that underserved school children receive the vision care they need. I schedule and manage the School Vision Program team. I also interact with community leaders to make sure the public knows about the resources our clinical facilities have to offer.

Who do you interact with most on a daily basis?

I work closely with the School Vision Program team: Brandy Scombordi-Raghu, OD, director of optometric clinical outreach, and Steve Lee, Joanne Packer and Corina Elston, who serve as technicians and assistants in the program. This also includes many student interns and adjunct faculty. I communicate with a lot of school nurses! I also help the Elkins Park Campus marketing team with community events and clinical activities.

What is your typical day like?

I start my day early at home answering emails. When I get to The Eye Institute, I have a lot of conversations with school nurses to help the underserved kids in the greater Philadelphia area. I spend much of my time making all the activities — vision screenings, exams for the schools and community, and resource tables — fit into our schedule.

How do you see your work fitting into the big picture of the missions of the College?

All the work I do is to serve our patients and engage with the community. Proper vision care can change a young person's life. If you can't see the blackboard, you can't learn! Our goal is to be in the schools and community to help young people have a better experience.

What are your favorite and least favorite tasks?

My favorite part of my job is when I get to go to a school and see how excited the kids

are to get eyeglasses. I don't get to go out too often, but it is very heartwarming. My least favorite part is when I have to tell schools or event organizers "no." We want to help everyone, but unfortunately there are not enough hours in a day.

What is your educational and previous work background? How did those prepare you for what you do now?

Before working at The Eye Institute, I was a small business owner. I worked with fine chocolate as a chocolatier and owned a specialty candy store. Prior to that experience, I attended Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. I think working with the public for many years has helped me learn how to talk to strangers. Engaging with the public is definitely an acquired skill! I think everyone should be required to work a retail job at least once in their life.

When you are working on site, do you bring your own lunch or eat out?

I always bring my own lunch. I usually eat at my desk and do a crossword puzzle.

What's one piece of Philly culture that you return to over and over again, and why?

Just outside of Philadelphia is the Brandywine River Museum, which showcases many of the Wyeth family's artwork. I love that there is a place so close to a big city that honors the countryside and the artists who loved it.

Being from the Philadelphia area, I have to say that football season is my favorite time of year: GO BIRDS!



Alena Hackett
Clinical Community
Outreach Coordinator,
The Eye Institute
of Drexel University





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Strategic Plan 2030 Now Available

The College Forward initiative has led to the Strategic Plan 2030, which is now available at bit.ly/DUCOM2030. The plan is a living document that supports decision-making, outlines key priorities and ensures alignment across our institution.

*Thank you to all
who participated in our
strategic planning process!*



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

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Medicine



Strategic Plan
2025 – 2030
College Forward