

Rush University College of Health Sciences

Impact

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and patient care



**Good chemistry:
MLS alumni find success
and love at Rush**

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The Connections Edition

Cultivating valued relationships to flourish academically and beyond



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On the cover, from left to right:
Anna Ackermann and Loyd Webb



50 years of making education personal

In the evidence-driven world of academic health care, we often focus on what we can measure: rankings, program completion and job placement rates, publications and funding. Yet what ultimately defines the educational experience for learners who come to the Rush University College of Health Sciences (CHS) is not these datapoints but rather a factor that is less concrete — the human connection.

In fact, many students and alumni report the reason they chose to advance their education at Rush — beyond our exceptional reputation in the health sciences — is feeling a connection with our faculty. This connectedness only grows stronger as they progress through their education, bolstered by instructors, staff, fellow students and alumni who see the best in them and believe in their potential. By prioritizing these connections, we send a clear message to students: You belong here.

Achieving a sense of belonging is extremely difficult in today's fractured world, yet creating a welcoming, supportive culture is what we have done at Rush since 1975. We strive to cultivate meaningful connections with the people we teach and the people we heal. I believe the connections we forge at Rush are so strong because they hinge on one of our core values — respect.

In clinical settings, our teacher-practitioners strive to embody that value — which is essential for delivering person-centered care — and set an example for the next generation of health care leaders. In our academic research, our investigators pursue innovative projects that reflect and respect the real-world needs of patients and families, who want to be treated with dignity. And, of course, our alumni understand how forging personal connections with the next generation of learners demonstrates their sincere desire to help others and their deep respect for their chosen professions.

In this issue of *Impact*, you will find faculty, staff, students and alumni who excel at using connections to deliver compassionate care, to create supportive learning environments and to pursue transformative research. Through their vision and tenacity, they demonstrate the personal side of academic health care, which CHS has championed for five decades. May these inspiring stories serve as a reminder that you are a vital part of our Rush family, and we value every opportunity to connect with you.

Jason S. Turner, PhD, MAE
Interim Dean, College of Health Sciences



Clockwise from top: Jason S. Turner, PhD, MAE, Interim Dean, College of Health Sciences, connecting with staff, chairs and program directors, the admissions team and future health care leaders.

New OTD faculty inspire students to lead in a changing world

What kind of learning environment creates the most proficient, engaged occupational therapists? Two new faculty in Rush's Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) program — ranked among the nation's top 20 programs by *U.S. News & World Report* — believe that cultivating connections brings out the best in students.

Creating confident, ethical leaders

As doctoral capstone coordinator, Kia “Ashley” Burks, OTD, OTR/L, helps support third-year Rush OTD students embarking on their individual clinical research projects near the end of their curriculum. Burks, who is originally from Reno, Nev., says her teaching philosophy is grounded in fostering self-directed, resilient and efficient learners who are equipped to meet the dynamic demands of occupational therapy practice.

“I believe that growth is rooted in consistent effort and reflection, not in the expectation of immediate mastery,” she says. “Learning is a process, and every attempt — no matter how small the progress — contributes to a student’s journey toward competence and confidence.”

In her role, Burks is committed to making positive connections through mentorship and creating a supportive environment where students feel empowered to experiment, reflect and refine their skills. “By emphasizing progress over perfection, I encourage them to view each attempt as a valuable step toward their growth,” she says. “My ultimate goal is to prepare students to excel in their capstone experiences and beyond, equipping them to

become ethical, flexible and informed practitioner-teacher-investigators who can meet the occupational needs of society with creativity and confidence.”

While an OTD student at Rush, Burks co-founded the department’s first Coalition of Occupational Therapy Advocates for Diversity (COTAD) chapter and the Rush OTs in Action (ROTA) committee to address diversity, equity, anti-racist and inclusive practices within the program. After earning her OTD from Rush in 2021, Burks worked at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Northwestern Medicine and the University of Chicago Medicine before joining the faculty at Rush.

To unwind from the demands of teaching, Burks reads voraciously and tests new recipes from *The New York Times* with her husband, Anthony.

Giving a voice to future advocates

Instructor Ryan Durkin, OTD, OTR/L, MBA, ECHM, aims to create a comfortable, inclusive learning environment while teaching the Leadership and Advocacy class for second-year OTD students.



From left to right: Kia “Ashley” Burks, OTD, OTR/L, doctoral capstone coordinator, and Ryan Durkin, OTD, OTR/L, MBA, ECHM, instructor, are the newest faculty to join Rush's Department of Occupational Therapy.

“Learning is a process, and every attempt — no matter how small the progress — contributes to a student’s journey toward competence and confidence.”

Kia “Ashley” Burks, OTD, OTR/L, doctoral capstone coordinator

“I try to make sure that my students are at ease when they’re learning and to give them a voice,” Durkin says. One way he does this is by incorporating “nature breaks” during his online lectures. He invites students to submit photos of nature that he posts during class, so students can briefly share some personal information with their classmates and explain why a photo is meaningful to them.

Durkin, who grew up in Elmhurst, Ill., received his OTD from Boston University. Before joining the Rush Department of Occupational Therapy, he practiced in outpatient, inpatient and community-based settings at Rush Oak Park Hospital. Beyond his faculty role, he is also program manager for the Rush Older Adult Home Modification Program, a federally funded initiative that aims to reduce health inequities in under-resourced neighborhoods by providing home modifications that allow older adults to age in place.

Durkin often invites capstone students to join him for home visits on Chicago’s West Side through the home modification program. “Today’s students want realistic, hands-on learning experiences, and the Rush OTD program is very good at getting our students into the community through practicums and capstones,” Durkin says. “Through these experiential learning opportunities, OTD students can learn practical ways to help address inequities and close gaps in care.”

Outside of work, Durkin enjoys gardening and a less sedate pursuit: he’s the longtime lead “screamer” for a Chicago punk band. “It’s a vehicle to express myself,” he says.

A full circle journey for one PA faculty member

Since childhood, Alyssa Knueven, MS, PA-C, CAQ-PED, has wanted to become an educator like her mother. The 2016 Rush graduate is now fulfilling her dream as an assistant professor in the Physician Assistant Studies program.

Her mother wasn't the only teacher who inspired her. "While enrolled in the PA program at Rush, my faculty made a profound impact on me — not only through their academic guidance but also through their mentorship and support in shaping my future as a health care provider," says Knueven, who grew up in Oak Forest, Ill. "I knew I wanted to be part of that experience for future generations of students."

A strong impression as a student

As a PA student, Knueven was a standout, says Regina Chen, PhD, MS, PA-C, chairperson of the Department of PA Studies. "Alyssa was not only an excellent student but also a class leader," Chen says. "She exemplified all the qualities and traits you would want from a great provider and future colleague."

Knueven served as class president and fundraising chair for the PA Student Society. She was also a member of Rush's AAPA National Medical Challenge Bowl team, which she now coaches as faculty. At graduation, she received the Dean's Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement and the Distinguished Leadership Award.

She credits the faculty's genuine interest in students and Rush's culture for helping her flourish in the program. "The strong emphasis on collaboration — between students, faculty and clinical providers — creates an

environment where everyone is invested in each other's success," she says. "This culture of mentorship ensures that our students graduate not only with the clinical skills they need but also with the confidence, leadership abilities and compassionate mindset essential to thrive in the health care field."

A creative, supportive educator

After gaining clinical experience in a private pediatric practice in the southern suburbs of Chicago, Knueven returned to Rush to join the faculty. Chen describes Knueven as "extraordinarily student-focused" and says she takes great care to ensure that each student feels supported.

Before each new cohort, Knueven takes the time to understand her students' backgrounds, learning preferences, goals and areas of interest, so she can tailor her teaching strategies to meet their individual needs. "This personalized approach helps me build strong, trust-based relationships with students, providing them with the guidance, feedback and mentorship necessary for both academic and professional growth," Knueven says.

She is also passionate about making learning engaging through interactive games and learning challenges, such as an innovative "escape room" activity she developed with other faculty. "By creating a personalized, supportive

learning environment and fostering innovation and collaboration — along with making learning fun and interactive — I aim to inspire students to achieve their full potential and make meaningful contributions to the health care field," Knueven says.

A role model on work-life balance

Chen also describes Knueven, a mother of two young children, as a role model for other PA students on balancing work and life responsibilities.

Knueven is open with her students about the real challenges of balancing motherhood and being a PA. "Ultimately, I want my students and my children to understand that success isn't about choosing between your career and your family — it's about finding the balance that allows you to excel in both without sacrificing what matters most: your health, relationships and personal well-being," she says. "That's the example I want to set, and it's what I strive for every day."

"By creating a personalized, supportive learning environment and fostering innovation and collaboration — along with making learning fun and interactive — I aim to inspire students to achieve their full potential and make meaningful contributions to the health care field."

Alyssa Knueven, MS, PA-C, CAQ-PED, assistant professor and director of clinical education, Department of Physician Assistant Studies



From left to right: First-year PA students Zoe Thompson and Madeleine Luu receive instruction from Alyssa Knueven, MS, PA-C, CAQ-PED, assistant professor and director of clinical education, Department of Physician Assistant Studies.



Knueven (pictured in the middle) coached Rush's AAPA National Medical Challenge Bowl team, which competed against other PA programs at the AAPA Conference in Houston in May 2024. Team members from left to right: 2024 graduates Angela Morrissey, Alinaa Alsaud and Alysée Giraud-Carrier; and second-year PA student, Lily Friedman.

From colleague to PhD candidate to faculty: One IT executive's journey

Although pursuing a PhD can be daunting, it's a rewarding journey for people like Steven Wightkin, PhD, MS-HSM, who value the opportunity to share their knowledge as fulltime faculty.

Four years after earning his master's in health systems management from Rush in 2006, the experienced IT executive began teaching health informatics at the College while working in information services at Rush. A few years later, he enrolled in Rush's flexible, fully online PhD in Health Sciences program to build his research acumen to further explore evidence-based strategies to improve clinicians' adoption of new technology.

"The program is perfect for someone who is mid-career and truly knows that teaching is where they want to go," Wightkin says.

Combining personal and professional growth

Helping PhD candidates like Wightkin reach their individual goals is an integral part of Rush's PhD program. "We have multiple opportunities for students to develop their professional skills according to their own interests," says Douglas Kuperman, PhD, RRT, chairperson of the Department of Health Sciences and director of the PhD in Health Sciences program. "This provides some personalization to the curriculum."

Wightkin's primary aim was to elevate his research skills. "The PhD program taught me how to do research at this

level, from working with the IRB [Institutional Review Board] to building a committee of collaborators to collecting data to getting a manuscript published," he says.

In addition to offering valuable insights on research, leadership and curriculum development, the program also enhanced Wightkin's personal growth by teaching him how to handle constructive criticism. "It can be difficult, especially if it's the first time in your academic career when you receive intense feedback," he says. "But you have to realize that people are trying to help you reach this new bar."

Pursuing a PhD through the pandemic and a career move outside of Rush also helped Wightkin build his resilience. "It was a big challenge to keep my eyes on the prize, and there were times when I asked myself if I really needed to do this," Wightkin says. "But I learned that I could get it done, even at my stage of career."

Finding and sharing support

While pursuing his doctorate, Wightkin leaned on his PhD committee for emotional and technical support, especially Michael Kremer, PhD, CRNA, CHSE, FNAP, FAAN, professor in the Department of Adult Health and Gerontological Nursing in the College of Nursing, and

José Velasco, MD, FACS, FCCM, professor in the Department of Surgery at Rush Medical College. "They were both great mentors and advocates for me," he says.

In 2024, Wightkin earned his doctorate, and today, he teaches informatics as an assistant professor in the Department of Health Systems Management. As faculty, Wightkin encourages students to thoughtfully ask for help when they get stuck. "Most people love to help, but you need to come prepared with questions. Don't just say you don't know what to do," he says.

Returning to Rush

Wightkin's decision to come back to Rush is not uncommon, as many faculty feel connected to the institution through the experiences and relationships they cultivate as staff and students.

"I am very gratified that Steven's experience while a student in the program contributed to his decision to return to Rush as a valued faculty member," Kuperman says.

"We have multiple opportunities for students to develop their professional skills according to their own interests. This provides some personalization to the curriculum."

Douglas Kuperman, PhD, RRT, chairperson of the Department of Health Sciences and director of the PhD in Health Sciences program



Steven Wightkin, PhD, MS-HSM, (pictured here standing) has taught informatics for HSM students at Rush for 16 years.



From left to right: Rush MRI technologist Sufiyan Patel mentors second-year imaging sciences student Jada Thorne during her clinicals at Rush South Loop on Michigan Avenue.

Undergrad students benefit from clinical opportunities

Completing a year of clinical rotations is essential for undergraduates in Rush’s Imaging Sciences and Vascular Ultrasound programs to gain valuable, real-world experience and make strong impressions that often lead to job offers. Meanwhile, students in the Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences program at Rush benefit from an entire semester of rotations with different types of practitioners throughout Chicago, which helps them find their calling and build their network.

“Our undergraduate programs stand out because of our commitment to providing high-quality clinical experiences,” says Mary Jo Guglielmo, MPH, assistant dean and director of undergraduate studies, College of Health Sciences.

Student learns art and science of imaging

“I’ve loved clinicals, and I realized when I started them last May that I had picked the right field for sure,” says Jada Thorne, a second-year imaging sciences student who grew up in the southern suburbs of Chicago. Before enrolling at Rush, she was a medical assistant and an insurance agent.

During her clinical rotations at Rush South Loop, Thorne has trained under senior MRI technologists like Sufiyan Patel. “In addition to learning how to do routine and special exams, I am also seeing behind the scenes when Sufiyan needs to adjust a protocol,” Thorne says. “I feel very fortunate to sit with him and see that.”

Beyond helping her gain experience with different scanner manufacturers, the clinical rotations have also enabled Thorne to strengthen her interpersonal skills, such as

“I’ve loved clinicals, and I realized when I started them last May that I had picked the right field for sure.”

Jada Thorne, a second-year imaging sciences student

compassion and sensitivity, as patients can oftentimes feel anxious or emotional before and during an MRI.

Grad found calling through clinicals

“There’s so many opportunities at Rush to explore different roles,” says Marcos Montes, BSHS, an academic and career development coach with the College of Health Sciences. He supports undergraduates at Rush by helping them develop the skills they need to juggle work, school and life.

Exploring different roles during his practicum rotations was ultimately what drove Montes to pivot from his original plans to apply to PA school after earning his bachelor’s in health sciences from Rush. During one rotation, he shadowed a nurse practitioner who supported the mental health needs of high school students on Chicago’s West Side. It became the “a-ha moment” that sparked his interest in earning his psychology degree and working with youth. “I realized that this was my calling,” says Montes, who grew up in Humboldt Park.

This year, Montes will complete his master’s in counseling psychology from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

“There’s so many opportunities at Rush to explore different roles.”

Marcos Montes, BSHS, CHS career development coach

(continued on page 12)



Jada Thorne is grateful for the hands-on experiences she has gained during her clinical rotations.



Marcos Montes earned his bachelor’s in health sciences (BSHS) from Rush and is now an academic and career development coach with the College of Health Sciences.

Clinicals built confidence for grad

Martyna Cudzich, BS, RVT, believes having a bachelor’s degree in vascular ultrasound from Rush, rather than an associate’s degree from another school, gives her an edge. “It gives me an advantage when it comes to progressing in my career and potentially getting into a managerial role,” says Cudzich, who emigrated from Poland with her family in 2002 and grew up in Orland Park, Ill.

Having a full year of clinicals, during which she scanned patients for 40 hours a week, was another plus. “You have an instructor that you work with on a day-to-day basis, and it’s just a very enriching experience,” she says. “That made me so much more confident when I started my first job.”

She completed her first two clinical rotations in Illinois, followed by six months in Knoxville, Tenn. It marked the first time Cudzich lived away from home, and her living expenses were defrayed with a stipend from Rush. “The experience gave me the kind of independence that I was craving, and I got to see a cool new place and meet new people,” she says.

Cudzich earned her bachelor’s in vascular ultrasound in 2024 and now works at Rush performing a variety of vascular ultrasounds. She is mastering the specialty of transcranial Dopplers, a type of brain scan that checks for critical post-stroke complications involving the vessels in the brain. “I’m really happy where I’m at now,” she says.

“The experience gave me the kind of independence that I was craving.”

Martyna Cudzich, BS, RVT,
2024 vascular ultrasound grad



During her clinical rotations in Tennessee, Martyna Cudzich, BS, RVT, explored the Great Smoky Mountains.

Mentoring program supports health sciences undergrads

The Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences program has launched a new mentoring initiative that pairs first-year students with second-year students, who are encouraged to meet at least monthly. Students also may be matched with alumni based on their backgrounds, interests and career goals.

“We hope it reinforces students’ commitment to their education and helps them keep an eye on their future goals and see that anything is possible,” says Kellye Walters-Warren, MS, program coordinator and instructor, Department of Undergraduate Studies, College of Health Sciences.

Second-year BSHS students Oreofeoluwa Ajayi and Bryan Espiritu are student mentors who are also helping organize the program. Other

student mentors include Jennefer Jackson, Andriana Howell, Larissa Cerda and Chloe Tai.

“This mentoring program will help students navigate their time at Rush and remind them that they aren’t alone,” says Espiritu, who was born in the Philippines and raised on Chicago’s West Side. He attended Culver Military Academy in Indiana and tutored low-income students before enrolling in the BSHS program. After graduation, he is considering pursuing a career in cardiothoracic surgery or physical therapy.

As a graduate of the BSHS program, Walters-Warren understands the value of having a support network. “The faculty don’t let you give up,” she says. “If you’re a student, we just want you to know that we’re here for you.”



BSHS mentors, mentees and faculty connect at a field trip at the International Museum of Surgical Science.

Research projects are personal for grant awardees

While researchers strive to be objective and present their findings based on evidence, the pursuit of the facts can still be personal, especially in the health sciences.

“Research can feel personal for several reasons, depending on the individual’s connection to the work,” says Lauren Little, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, associate dean of research for CHS and associate professor of occupational therapy. “Researchers often have a personal investment in, and emotional connection to, the topic in which they investigate, often fueled from personal life experiences or clinical encounters.”

Research is also personal because it can be connected to a desire for change, Little explains. “Whether we want to change the ways in which individuals access care or the types of care that they receive, research has a personal connection to how we want to influence the world,” she says.

Such connections are evident for two CHS faculty who are recipients of the 2024 Rush to Progress: Accelerating Research through Pilot Awards grants.

Advancing equity in dementia care

Chien-Ching Li, PhD, MPH, FGSA, health services researcher and associate professor in the Department of Health Systems Management, earned a \$100,000 pilot award for his research addressing the growing public health challenge of Alzheimer’s disease and Alzheimer’s disease-related dementias (ADRD) among Chinese American family caregivers.

“As the largest Asian subgroup in the United States,

Chinese Americans are aging rapidly and often face unique barriers to ADRD care planning due to cultural norms, language barriers and limited health literacy,” Li explains. “These challenges exacerbate the physical and emotional caregiving burden experienced by this underserved population. This grant will enable the development, refinement and evaluation of a culturally and linguistically tailored, web-based decision-aid (DA) tool aimed at supporting ADRD care planning among Chinese American family caregivers.”

The DA tool aims to facilitate shared decision-making about home health care versus facility-based long-term care to help reduce the caregiving burden for families, he says. “This grant not only strengthens my research capacity but also positions this project as one of the first to deliver evidence-based, culturally sensitive tools to address ADRD care disparities among Chinese Americans,” Li says. “The findings will guide the implementation of health care interventions and lay the groundwork for broader dissemination and adoption of decision aids, ultimately advancing equity in dementia care for underserved minority populations.”

Investigating the potential of telehealth

Steven Taylor, PhD, OTD, OTR/L, assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy, says he was deeply honored to receive a \$50,000 grant for his pilot testing a telehealth strategy to support older adults with cognitive decline.

“This recognition not only underscores the importance of advancing health care access for older adults but also supports my journey as an early-stage investigator committed to innovative research,” Taylor says. “With this award, I am excited to further explore the potential of telehealth-delivered strategy training through the Cognitive Orientation to Daily Occupational Performance (CO-OP) framework.”

Taylor’s study aims to address the unmet needs of older adults with subjective cognitive decline by promoting functional independence and equitable access to care. “By combining telehealth with real-time performance evaluations, this research has the potential to transform how we support aging populations in maintaining their daily lives,” Taylor says. “I am grateful to Rush for investing in me and other early-stage investigators, and for the opportunity to advance practice in this field.”

“Whether we want to change the ways in which individuals access care or the types of care that they receive, research has a personal connection to how we want to influence the world.”

Lauren Little, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, associate dean of research for CHS and associate professor of occupational therapy

Two CHS faculty recipients of the 2024 Rush to Progress: Accelerating Research through Pilot Awards

\$100,000

Pilot award for his research addressing the growing public health challenge of Alzheimer’s disease and Alzheimer’s disease-related dementias (ADRD)

\$50,000

Pilot testing a telehealth strategy to address the unmet needs of older adults with cognitive decline by promoting their functional independence



Chien-Ching Li, PhD, MPH, FGSA, health services researcher and associate professor in the Department of Health Systems Management, received a grant for his research supporting Chinese American family caregivers.



Steven Taylor, PhD, OTD, OTR/L, assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy, was awarded a grant to study telehealth for aging populations.



From left to right: First-year clinical nutrition student Victoria Gomez; Sandra Gomez, PhD, RD, LDN, associate professor in the Department of Clinical Nutrition; and Catherine Phillips, second-year clinical nutrition student, exemplify how individualized research advising at Rush helps advance the field.

Faculty mentors bring clinical nutrition research to life for students

A strong interest in combining research with clinical practice was what drew second-year clinical nutrition student Catherine Phillips to Rush. Since her first semester, Phillips has been working on a research project to understand the relationship between body composition and obesity-related cancers. Guiding Phillips along the way is her research mentor, Sandra Gomez, PhD, RD, LDN, associate professor in the Department of Clinical Nutrition.

“Supportive mentorship is crucial for making research both manageable and enjoyable, and what initially felt like a daunting project has become approachable under Dr. Gomez’s guidance,” says Phillips, who is from Milwaukee and earned her undergraduate degree in human nutrition

from Case Western Reserve University. “Her dedication to preparing students ensures we feel confident in representing our projects, and her immense expertise provides invaluable insights for those of us still relatively new to research.”

Making research ‘real’ for students

At Rush, students in both tracks of the Master of Science in Clinical Nutrition program complete a master’s research project under supervision from faculty like Gomez, who leads several federally funded research projects at Rush in collaboration with the Medical College of Wisconsin and Loyola University Chicago. During students’ first semester, they select a research question that they will develop into a research project, which requires them to review literature, formulate a hypothesis, select research methods, conduct the study, compile and analyze data, and create and defend their presentation to faculty, clinical dietitians and classmates.

Throughout this process, students meet weekly with their dedicated research advisor and learn how to apply the research theories they are learning in the classroom to their own project, which helps demystify the process. “Research can be really abstract until you do it,” Gomez says.

Besides getting support from Rush faculty like Gomez, students may also have an opportunity to work with researchers outside of Rush and build their network. “Students get a taste of the collaborative research environment, which they will hopefully continue to pursue later on,” Gomez says.

Reaping the rewards of research

As students progress in the program, faculty hand over control of the weekly advisory meetings so students set the agenda, says Mark McNerney, DHSc, RD, LDN, assistant professor and Clinical Nutrition – Dietetic Integrated Track program director. “Over time, students develop leadership skills, which is very rewarding to see,” he says.

Rush’s highly individualized research mentoring is not typical for most nutrition programs because it requires a significant time commitment from faculty, McNerney says. However, Rush faculty believe master’s level students benefit from individualized guidance, particularly if students have not had experience with research methods and are considering a doctorate.

First-year student and Chicago native Victoria Gomez (no relation to her research advisor Sandra Gomez) came to Rush with a master’s degree in companion animal nutrition and corporate experience at a pet food company. However, clinical research was new to her, and she says receiving mentoring has helped her feel more confident conducting her own research project, a scoping review investigating the use of medical cannabis as pain management in older adults.

“Although I just joined Dr. Gomez’s team, I already feel confident having someone there who can help me as I learn more about clinical research,” she says. “My background is mainly in bench work and wet lab work, so this is completely new to me. I’m grateful for this new experience.”

Giving students hands-on research opportunities is necessary to advance the field of clinical nutrition, McNerney says. “Our profession doesn’t move forward if students don’t understand the research and how to incorporate it into their professional practice,” he says. “And we want to make sure that those who are graduating with a Rush degree are the best.”

“Supportive mentorship is crucial for making research both manageable and enjoyable, and what initially felt like a daunting project has become approachable under Dr. Gomez’s guidance.”

Catherine Phillips, second-year clinical nutrition student

Good chemistry: MLS alumni find success and love at Rush

From left to right, middle ground: Engaged couple Anna Ackermann and Loyd Webb met while MLS students at Rush. From left to right, foreground: Second-year MLS student Mandy Kaiser and Nadine Lerret, PhD, MLS(ASCP)[®], associate professor, associate dean of academic and AI integration and MLS program director.

Students enter the laboratory at Rush expecting to gain the knowledge and skills they need to perform and oversee tests in a variety of settings. What they don't anticipate is finding their future partner — but that's just what happened to Anna Ackermann and Loyd Webb, who enrolled in the Master of Science in Medical Laboratory Science (MLS) program in the fall of 2018.

"I sat right in front of Anna during most of the lectures, and I was always turning around, making comments to spark some conversation," Webb says of their early interactions. "Something about meeting in class like that — it felt really genuine."

Eventually, he asked her to hang out after their afternoon labs, and they headed to the Art Institute. They would continue exploring the city together, often with other MLS students.

"Our class was really friendly and pretty close, so we spent a lot of time together outside of class as a group," Ackermann explains. By March 2019, the couple's friendship had evolved into something more.

After graduating from Rush in 2020, the couple stayed together as they excelled along different career paths. Last summer, Webb proposed to Ackermann at Chicago's Navy Pier, where he had asked her to become his girlfriend five years earlier.

"On their own, Loyd and Anna are wonderful, but together, they are even better," says Nadine Lerret, PhD, MLS(ASCP)^{cm}, associate professor, associate dean of academic and AI integration and MLS program director.

Different paths, shared love

Webb, who is originally from Michigan, completed his undergraduate work at Grand Valley State University. Ackermann, who grew up in Oak Park, Ill., and northwest Indiana, earned her health sciences degree from DePaul University.

"At Rush, both Anna and Loyd were top students," Lerret says. "Loyd was involved in difficult and complex research, and he often led discussions in the classroom. He was great for thinking outside the box."

Ackermann was also a leader in the cohort, exemplifying a quieter leadership style. "Other students trusted Anna and would often go to her with issues or problems," Lerret says.

While at Rush, Webb focused on the molecular sciences and investigated a laboratory technique called nucleotide sequencing, which determines the exact sequence of bases (often referred to by the first letters of their chemical names, A, T, C and G) in a DNA molecule. After graduation, he was hired at a molecular testing lab. He later moved on to become a clinical applications consultant at the biotechnology company Thermo Fisher Scientific, where he provides technical support for approximately 25 labs.

Ackermann took a more traditional path and was hired in the blood bank at the downtown campus of Northwestern Medicine, where she completed one of her clinical rotations. Since then, she has been promoted to lead medical lab scientist. At Northwestern, she is a preceptor for Rush MLS students who are rotating through the blood bank.

Staying connected postgraduation

Webb and Ackermann currently live in the Buena Park neighborhood in Uptown. When they are not working or planning their 2026 wedding, they enjoy seeing live music and exploring the outdoors.

At a mini class reunion in 2023, Lerret caught up with the couple and learned they were still together. MLS grads like Webb and Ackermann often stay in touch with faculty and fellow alumni postgraduation, even as they pursue careers in different fields and labs. Alumni from the same cohort also help each other make job connections and provide moral support when one of them has a personal or professional setback.

"We tell every student during the orientation on Day One that they will want to lean on one another, and they immediately form connections," Lerret says. That's not always the case for students in grad school, which can sometimes be an isolating experience, she adds.

While finding love in the lab is uncommon, the smaller class size and collaborative culture at Rush do help students form lasting connections. "It doesn't matter if 10 or 20 years have passed since you graduated," Lerret says. "As Rush alumni, you're family."

"On their own, Loyd and Anna are wonderful, but together, they are even better."

Nadine Lerret, PhD, MLS(ASCP)^{cm}, associate professor, associate dean of academic and AI integration and MLS program director



From left to right: Ackermann and Webb were study buddies before they became a couple.



From left to right: Webb proposed to Ackermann at Chicago's Navy Pier on June 14, 2024, where he had asked her to become his girlfriend five years earlier.

AuD, SLP alumni personify the power of postgrad connections

Many graduates of the Doctor of Audiology (AuD) and Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) programs, which are ranked among the top 30 programs in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report*, maintain strong connections to Rush, even years after graduation.

“We are a high touch program, so throughout students’ time at Rush, they develop personal relationships with faculty,” says Valeriy Shafiro, PhD, chairperson, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences. “These connections persist through graduation, and our alumni want to stay in touch as their careers take off and continue contributing to the programs.”

Two examples of exemplary grads maintaining strong connections to Rush are Emily Mott, AuD, and Abbey Carlson, MS, CCC-SLP.

AuD alum keeps connected through mission work, teaching

Mott, a 2022 AuD graduate who grew up in Forest Park, Ill., now teaches the Educational Audiology course in Rush’s AuD program. She was motivated, in part, to pursue audiology because of her own experience as a child wearing a hearing aid.

“I thought, this would be a really cool personal connection that I would have with patients,” says Mott, who completed her undergraduate work at Saint Louis University. Now as an educational audiologist with the Northwestern Illinois Association (NIA), she supports kids with hearing loss and assists school districts with hearing assistive technology in the classroom. As a clinical preceptor, she also helps train AuD students from Rush and other audiology schools. “It’s rewarding to be on the other side now and help students learn,” she says.

Mott is also deeply interested in global health and has completed three mission trips to the Dominican Republic through Rush’s partnership with Community Empowerment. Her most recent trip was in March 2025, when she provided hearing screenings and full diagnostic evaluations for children and adults, as well as hearing aid fittings.

Mott — along with two other 2022 Rush alumni, Kirsten Petrarca, AuD, and Paulina Kocon, AuD — coordinate the audiology teams for the mission trips. For their humanitarian work, the three were honored with the Rush Global Health and Community Empowerment Service and Innovation Award in 2024.

Mott recommends Rush to other students because they can benefit from the connections they will make. “Rush has a huge network, not just in Chicago but also around the U.S.,” she says. “I’m proud to be a Rush alum and part of the legacy.”

Because of Rush’s smaller cohort size, students form close connections, even before they come to campus, explains Amy Winston, AuD, CCC-A, assistant professor and AuD program director, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences. Each incoming student is assigned a second- or third-year student mentor, who can offer advice on housing and preparing for their first year in the program.

In their first and second years, AuD students not only see more complex patients, but they also experience a broader



From left to right: Emily Mott, AuD, a 2022 Rush graduate and AuD instructor, completed her third mission trip to the Dominican Republic in March. Pictured here with second-year AuD students Emma Crane Marks, BS, BA; Cait Kinsella, BS; and Nisha Dhanik, MSDE.

scope of practice compared with other programs, Winston says. High-quality clinical preceptorships, often led by Rush alumni like Mott, help set the stage for students’ success. Hearing aid fittings and other community service opportunities also allow students to learn to connect with a wide range of patients, including unhoused people and those who do not speak English. “Students get to have that personal connection and see the difference that they are making in someone’s life,” Winston says.

“It’s rewarding to be on the other side now and help students learn.”

Emily Mott, AuD, 2022 Rush graduate and AuD instructor

SLP alum sings the praises of Rush

Carlson, a 2021 SLP graduate, grew up in the southwestern suburbs of Chicago and completed her undergraduate degree in communication sciences and disorders from Central Michigan University. A classically trained singer, Carlson chose speech-language pathology — and Rush specifically — to pursue a career in voice rehabilitation. “I knew that if I wanted to specialize in voice, I would need a more medically focused program,” she says.

During her graduate program at Rush, Carlson completed a master’s thesis project using a novel technique of measuring thyrohyoid space with ultrasonography and

(continued on page 24)

presented her research at multiple national conferences, including winning a competitive research travel award.

After graduating from Rush, Carlson completed two clinical fellowships, including one at the University of Washington Medical Center specializing in voice disorders. She credits Rush for providing the foundation she needed to follow her career path. “It gave me the confidence to pursue a highly competitive clinical fellowship and to stand alongside esteemed colleagues in the field, knowing I bring unique experiences and valuable insights to the conversation,” she says.

Based on her work in Seattle, Carlson was recruited to co-develop Northwest Indiana’s first voice, airway and swallowing center, which is affiliated with Powers Health. She also stays connected to Rush by giving guest lectures for the Voice Disorders course and serving as a teaching assistant. “My growth as a clinician and now educator is something I take a lot of pride in, and it wouldn’t have been possible without my mentorship at Rush,” she says.



From left to right: Abbey Carlson, MS, CCC-SLP, a 2021 Rush graduate, reconnected with Shannon Theis, PhD, CCC-SLP, associate professor and SLP program director, at the 2024 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention in Seattle. Both were invited speakers at the meeting.

Unlike other speech-language pathology programs, Rush is solely focused on master’s education, which means that students cultivate close relationships with faculty, says Shannon Theis, PhD, CCC-SLP, associate professor and SLP program director, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences. Students also complete the same curriculum simultaneously, so they become very close. “It’s not a competitive environment but rather a collaborative one, and our students and faculty offer support to make sure that everyone in the cohort is successful,” Theis says.

Students from both the SLP and AuD programs also form connections at the Dr. Emily Q. Wang SCOPE Speech & Hearing Clinic, which Theis directs. During their practicum experiences at the pro bono clinic, students learn how to communicate with families in a way that establishes trust and builds clinical skills, Theis says.

Carlson advises current and future students to prioritize relationship building during their time at Rush. “Your classmates and clinical educators have the potential to become lifelong colleagues and cherished friends,” she says. “Lean on them, learn from them and let yourself be inspired by them.”

“Your classmates and clinical educators have the potential to become lifelong colleagues and cherished friends. Lean on them, learn from them and let yourself be inspired by them.”

Abbey Carlson, MS, CCC-SLP, 2021 Rush graduate

Lasting connections: SLP alumni reunite at Chicago meeting

The 7th Head and Neck Cancer Symposium for the Advanced Practitioner in Chicago in September 2024 had a strong showing of alumni from Rush’s Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) program.

“I can’t tell you how gratifying it was to see these students who have become expert clinicians,” says Mary Bacon, MA, CCC-SLP, associate professor emerita.



From left to right: Rush SLP alumni Margaret (Maggie) Dhom, MS, CCC-SLP (2014); Ellen Smith MacCracken, MS, CCC-SLP (1985); Mary Bacon, MA, CCC-SLP, associate professor emerita; Anna (Eaton) Bowen, MS, CCC-SLP (2006); Michele Turk Brown, MS, CCC-SLP (2012); and Meghan Kelly, MS, CCC-SLP, BCS-S (2013).



From left to right: Mary Bacon, MA, CCC-SLP, associate professor emerita, and Jessica Wind Gregor, MS, CCC-SLP, BCS-S (2010). Gregor presented on “Swallowing Protocols for Head and Neck Cancer Patients: Robust Esophageal Screening Test (REST)” and on “Internal Lymphedema and Advanced Pneumatic Compression for Improved Function.”



From left to right: Ellen Smith MacCracken, MS, CCC-SLP (1985), and Mary Bacon, MA, CCC-SLP, associate professor emerita. MacCracken was a program director for the conference. She is an assistant director of therapy services for the Speech and Swallowing Department at UChicago Medicine.



The simulation lab helps respiratory care students at Rush develop their preclinical competencies. From left to right: Second-year student Lizzy Krell; Tyler Weiss, MSc, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FCCP, assistant professor and director of clinical education for the Respiratory Care program; and second-year student Shivani Grover.

Respiratory care students learn how caring is personal

Respiratory therapists take care of patients from the second they are born to their last breath, creating countless opportunities to influence the patient and family experience, says Tyler Weiss, MSc, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FCCP, assistant professor and director of clinical education for Rush's Respiratory Care program.

To help respiratory care students at Rush approach every patient interaction with respect and dignity, faculty encourage them to see patients as beloved family members and friends.

"It empowers them to give all they can to care for their patients," Weiss says.

Building the skillset to support patients

Before students face real-world patient care situations, they gain confidence with their technical skills in Rush's high-tech simulation lab during their preclinicals, says J. Brady Scott, PhD, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FAARC, FCCP, professor and Respiratory Care program director.

During clinicals, faculty guide students on balancing the need to make quick clinical decisions with treating patients and family members with empathy and compassion.

"Our students get over a thousand hours of clinical time, which is a lot of face time with patients," Scott says. "As faculty, we try to engage students constantly about the patient connection." Faculty also keep an open-door policy and invite students to reach out whenever they need support coping with a difficult case.

Inspired to create change

Lizzy Krell, a second-year student who grew up in Minnesota, wanted to become a respiratory therapist because she was inspired by their heroic efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. She chose Rush because the program underscores leadership and advancing the field to improve patient care. "I knew this was the place that would help me become a leader who could make a positive change," she says.

Caring for people in their final hours has helped Krell appreciate the importance of always striving to treat patients and families with kindness and respect. "It makes you a better provider," she says.

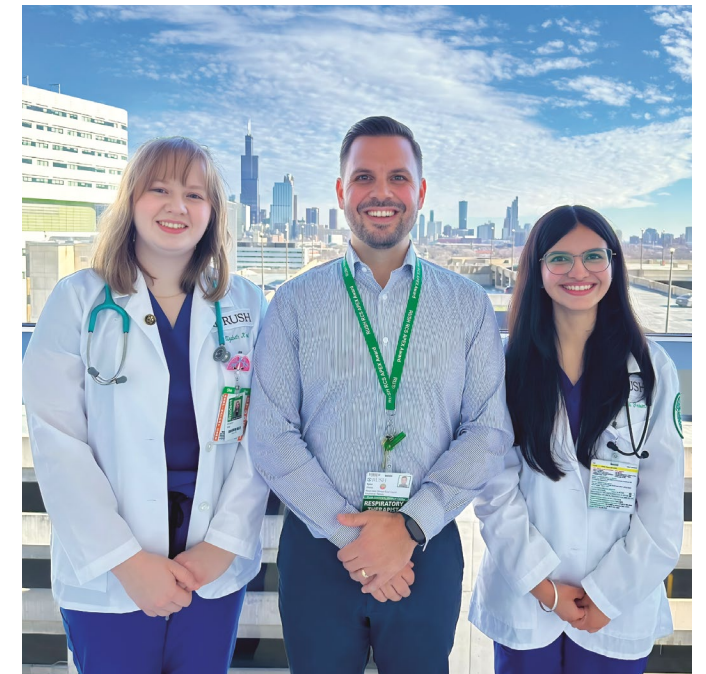
Speaking patients' language

Shivani Grover understands how caring is personal through her experience as a respiratory therapist in southern India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Motivated to pursue an academic career, Grover applied to master's level programs in the United States and chose Rush for its reputation and the fact that it is the only institution to receive the Apex Award from the American Association for Respiratory Care for both its acute care and education programs.

"The program's emphasis on critical thinking, research and advanced clinical skills aligned perfectly with my career goals," says Grover, now a second-year student at Rush.

As a respiratory therapist in India, Grover learned five new languages so she could better communicate with a

diverse group of patients and their families. To help her forge a stronger connection to her many Spanish-speaking patients at Rush, she is learning yet another language — her ninth, in fact. "In this profession, compassion is as important as competence," Grover says. "Being able to emphasize with them, understand them and build trust speaks volumes."



Because of the smaller class size, respiratory care students at Rush develop strong connections with faculty and each other. From left to right: Krell, Weiss and Grover.

"Our students get over a thousand hours of clinical time, which is a lot of face time with patients. As faculty, we try to engage students constantly about the patient connection."

J. Brady Scott, PhD, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FAARC, FCCP, professor and Respiratory Care program director

Online SBB and CLM programs offer opportunities for valuable networking

Even though Rush's Specialist in Blood Bank Technology (SBB) certificate and Master of Science degree in Clinical Laboratory Management (CLM) programs are both online, students still have personalized learning experiences and opportunities to develop connections with faculty and fellow students, says Laurie Gillard, MS, MLS(ASCP), SBB(ASCP), associate professor and SBB program director.

"You're going to work very hard in our programs, but they will give you many more career opportunities down the road," Gillard says. "It's not just about what you learn, but also the relationships you make. Our faculty is very accessible and responsive to students. They can always reach out to us, because we're here to support their success."

Colleagues and fellow Rush students

Dustin Robles-Garcia, MBA, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}, senior director of laboratory at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center in New Jersey, chose to pursue an SBB certificate so he could gain additional expertise and further his career.

"I selected Rush University for its reputable online SBB program, which is highly regarded in the field," says Robles-Garcia, who grew up in New Jersey. He says the instructors understand the demands of working professionals and provide flexible options to accommodate students' schedules.

He also appreciates the connections he has made. "I greatly appreciate that this program offers diverse

resources, connecting students from across the country who work in various hospitals, immunohematology reference labs and donor centers," he says.

His colleague, Randy Frazier, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}, blood bank supervisor at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center, also enrolled in Rush's SBB program. Frazier, who is also from New Jersey, oversees two hospital blood banks and transfusion activities at two cancer centers and an EMS helicopter program.

"It's been great to have my director, Dustin, in the program with me, as he is able to support me in my daily work with the same knowledge base as I have," Frazier says.

Through Rush's program, Frazier has connected with peers working at other blood banks, donor centers and reference laboratories. "Through assignments and discussion boards, I have been able to gain perspective of current practice in other laboratories all around the country," he says. "So far, the most value that I've gained from the SBB program is learning in-depth theory about the patients and cases that I see on a daily basis. It's always exciting to run into something at work that I've learned about in class."

An advocate for giving your all

Gabrielle Smith, MS, MLS(ASCP)^{CM} SBB(ASCP)^{CM}, a blood bank supervisor who oversees 12 staff at St. Joseph Hospital in Bethpage, N.Y., fell in love with blood banking because it offers a lot of variety. "Every day in the blood bank is different," she says. "I love the spontaneity."

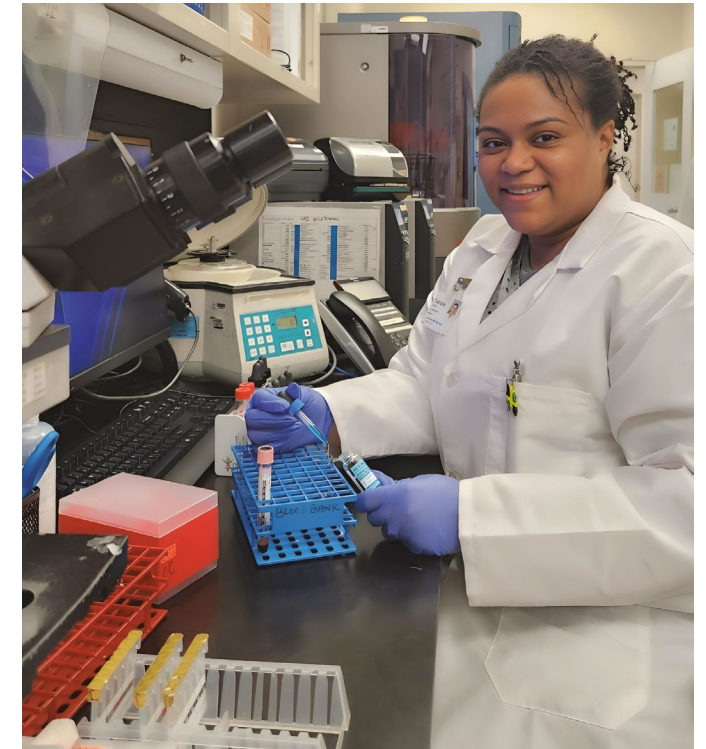
Smith, who is from Brooklyn, N.Y., earned her undergraduate degree in clinical laboratory sciences from Stony Brook University and chose Rush's online SBB and CLM programs so she could pursue both interests. "I loved the fact that I could get a master of science in CLM and also learn more about blood banking," she says.

She says Rush faculty are helpful and responsive, even though the programs are online. "The faculty respond to you very quickly, whether you have a question about something related to class or even if you're on the bench and need help," she says. She offers of an example where Rush faculty connected her to lab leaders at trauma centers with experience on a protocol using low-titer O whole blood for emergency situations, which she implemented at her previous facility. "It's awesome to see people coming together to enhance our profession," she says.

Smith graduated from the CLM program in December 2024 after completing the SBB program in 2023. While working toward her CLM degree, Smith also got married and went on a safari in Tanzania and Kenya last summer. "It was a lot, but I got it done!" she says. To those looking to advance their careers through the SBB and CLM programs, Smith offers this advice: "Put 100% of yourself in it, and you will get 100% back — and more."

"It's not just about what you learn, but also the relationships you make. Our faculty is very accessible and responsive to students. They can always reach out to us, because we're here to support their success."

Laurie Gillard, MS, MLS(ASCP), SBB(ASCP), associate professor and SBB program director



Gabrielle Smith, MS, MLS(ASCP)^{CM} SBB(ASCP)^{CM}, a blood bank supervisor who oversees 12 staff at St. Joseph Hospital in Bethpage, N.Y., completed Rush's online SBB and Master of Science in Clinical Laboratory Management (CLM) programs.



From left to right: Randy Frazier, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}, and Dustin Robles-Garcia, MBA, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}, are colleagues at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center in New Jersey — and students in Rush's online Specialist in Blood Bank Technology (SBB) certificate program.



Rush students learn how to partner with community health mentors as part of their Interprofessional Education course. With support from social workers, students also collaborate with faculty and students from other teams and disciplines.

Social workers guide others on making person-centered connections

Whether social workers at Rush are collaborating on a patient's care plan or helping advance person-centered policies to support at-risk populations at the national level, building relationships is essential, says Robyn Golden, MA, LCSW, chairperson of the Department of Social Work at CHS and associate vice president of social work and community health at Rush.

"As social workers, we recognize the value of coalition building," Golden says. "It makes such a difference when you're speaking not just for yourself but also for many others. When you stand with others, you stand stronger."

When connections reflect cultural values

Social workers at Rush also recognize that developing interpersonal connections by demonstrating a genuine interest in others is an important cultural value for many populations they serve, including Latinos, says Grisél Rodríguez-Morales, MSW, LCSW, senior manager of health promotion programs in the Department of Social Work and Community Health at Rush.

"The Latino value of *personalismo* embodies a way of approaching a conversation with warmth, caring and trust to build a fruitful relationship," she says. "As health care workers, it is important to attend to these cultural values of our patients."

Fostering a team approach to care

Rodríguez-Morales also believes health care professionals benefit from interdisciplinary relationships and strives to incorporate that while directing the social work and community health portion of Rush's Community Health Mentor program through the Office of Interprofessional Education (IPE).

As part of the IPE502 course, Rush students from 17 different programs work together while building connections with older adults and individuals with chronic health conditions and other impairments who serve as "community health mentors." Their goal is to learn how to deliver person-centered care to people with chronic health conditions.

"With diverse, interpersonal relationships, you become aware of different perspectives and the issues you need to advocate for," Rodríguez-Morales says.

Lizzi Chandler, MSW, LCSW, manager of clinical excellence and training in the Department of Social Work at CHS and the Department of Social Work and Community Health at Rush, agrees on the value of interdisciplinary education. She co-facilitates an Issues in Counseling class, designed for audiology and speech-language pathology students at Rush, that covers patient-centered activities such as motivational interviewing and having difficult conversations with clients.

"Social work is uniquely aligned to teach these approaches from an interdisciplinary lens," she says.

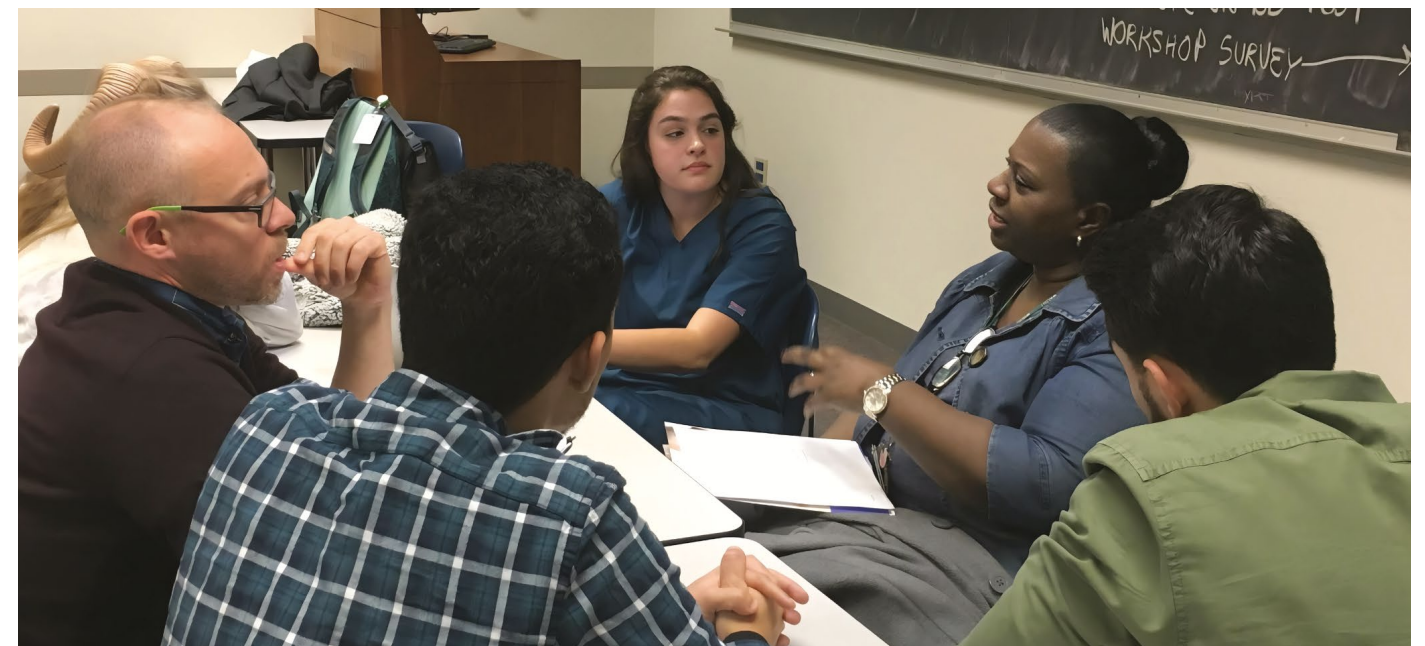
Using connections to prevent burnout, advance careers

Developing authentic connections is also foundational to help prevent and address burnout and compassion fatigue in health care settings. This is the goal for social workers at Rush's Center for Clinical Wellness who offer free mental health services to clinicians, students and staff.

Considered "connectors" in their field, social workers at Rush also provide mentorship to recent LCSW and MSW graduates across the country, Rodríguez-Morales says. As past chair of the Chicago District for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and past president of the Illinois Chapter for NASW, she has helped young professionals build their career networks.

"As social workers, we recognize the value of coalition building... When you stand with others, you stand stronger."

Robyn Golden, MA, LCSW, chairperson of the Department of Social Work at CHS and associate vice president of social work and community health at Rush



By working with community health mentors and social workers, students learn how to deliver person-centered care to people with chronic health conditions.

Rush perfusion students benefit from faculty, peer mentorship

Second-year perfusion student Makenna Ellis discovered perfusion after a babysitting job for a perfusionist led to an opportunity to shadow him in the operating room. During her interview for the program at Rush, she felt welcomed by the faculty immediately. “They just made me feel relaxed and comfortable,” Ellis says. “It was the instructors that made me choose Rush’s Cardiovascular Perfusion program.”

During her first year at Rush, Ellis proposed a mentorship program for incoming students, building on the warm reception she experienced during the application process. With faculty’s blessing, Ellis created a peer mentoring program that matches second-year students on their clinical rotations with first-year students starting the didactic portion of their program. Before the school year starts, each second-year mentor sends a personal note and goody bag to their first-year mentee.

“It’s a way to tell each of them that ‘you’ve got this,’ and that ‘we’re here for you,’” says Ellis, who is from Wisconsin and plans to work in Chicago after graduation.



From left to right: First-year perfusion student Bailey Reitsma reaches out to her second-year mentor, Makenna Ellis, regularly for guidance and support.

Thriving through mentorship

Bailey Reitsma, who grew up in Michigan, says Ellis’ mentorship has helped her adjust to being a first-year perfusion student. Before school started, Ellis showed her around the Rush campus, so she knew where to go on the first day of class. Since then, Ellis has continued to offer encouragement, even while on her clinical rotations at other hospitals.

“There have been numerous times when I’ve asked Makenna for advice on how to deal with stress, anxiety, studying, etcetera, and she has given me great guidance and support,” Reitsma says. “It is so nice to have someone to talk to who went through the exact same things that I am currently going through.”

Like Ellis, Reitsma chose Rush because she felt an immediate connection to faculty during her interview and was impressed with the structure of the program. “Rush values providing students with hands-on learning experiences with simulation labs and clinical observations,” Reitsma says. Rush’s favorable student-to-faculty ratio was another factor. “This enables students to have more one-to-one time with faculty and also allows students to communicate with faculty members quickly if there are any questions,” she adds.

Prepping students for time at the podium

Having access to perfusion faculty who prioritize mentorship enhances students’ education at Rush. “When students know they can come to us, they learn the material more effectively,” says Julie Collins, MS, CCP, LP, cardiovascular perfusion program director.

Rush perfusion students also receive individualized support from faculty if they choose to present at local, regional and national conferences. Faculty not only assist students through the submission process, but they will also help students develop an outline, revise their slides and polish their presentation skills before speaking to an audience. Faculty are also on hand at the meeting to cheer on students and be a friendly face in the crowd, Collins says.

Ashton Warlick, a second-year perfusion student from Pennsylvania, presented on an innovative technique called ex vivo liver machine perfusion at three different regional and national conferences: the Chicagoland Perfusion Foundation, the Wisconsin Perfusion Society and the Sanibel Symposium. Prior to the first meeting, Rush faculty coached him on developing his slides and honing his presentation skills.

Although Warlick was nervous before the first presentation, his success made him eager to present again. “I felt encouraged to bring what I learned to the perfusion world,” he says.

Warlick, who also worked at the Sanibel Symposium as an intern, says the opportunity to explore liver perfusion and present before a large audience was a valuable learning experience. “I try to be a ‘yes man’ in my education and chase down opportunities, so saying yes to this was important for me,” he says. “And when I did it, all the hard work paid off.”

“When students know they can come to us, they learn the material more effectively.”

Julie Collins, MS, CCP, LP, Cardiovascular Perfusion program director



From left to right: John Englert, CCP, LP, instructor, presented second-year perfusion student Ashton Warlick with the Jeff Riley Memorial Scholarship following his presentation at the Sanibel Symposium.

HSM students get rare access to consulting leaders

The supportive culture within the Master of Science in Health Systems Management (HSM) program was ultimately what drew Kevin McCarthy, MS-HSM, a 2013 graduate, to return as adjunct faculty to share his knowledge from the consulting world.

“At Rush, there is an ethos within the HSM program that’s always resonated with me, and that is to pay it forward,” McCarthy says. Since 2017, he has been teaching one of the program’s most popular elective courses on consulting during the spring semester.

Thinking like a consultant

McCarthy finished the HSM program while working in information systems at Rush. “One of the things I

really loved about the HSM program was the teacher-practitioners, who brought tangible, real-world knowledge. They were working every day but still made time for me,” he says.

In 2013, he left Rush to join Navigant — which changed its name to Guidehouse in 2019 — as managing consultant. Today, he is a director at the firm. Every fall, McCarthy invites Rush students to visit Guidehouse. “It’s a chance for them to meet some of the key stakeholders in

our organization and see what consulting looks like day to day, so it’s not just theoretical,” he says. “The students also make connections and meet people other than me who can help mentor them in their career.”

For students in both the full-time and part-time/residential HSM tracks, the visit is a highlight of the program. “While the students can get overwhelmed with lunch-and-learns and networking events, the visit to Guidehouse is by far the best on their schedule,” says Diane Howard, PhD, MPH, chairperson of the Department of Health Systems Management. “It’s because Kevin works to present a compelling and engaging course where students can see themselves as consultants.”

The Consulting course, like the rest of the HSM curriculum, is designed to help students succeed in a variety of leadership roles in health care. “Consulting is experiential, so while this class isn’t going to make you a great consultant on its own, it does provide a framework that will serve you well if you go into consulting,” McCarthy says. “But even if you take another role in the health care industry, you can apply the same framework.”

Small classes, big benefits

Small class sizes within the HSM program — which is ranked among the top 5 programs in the country, according to *U.S. News & World Report* — allow students to benefit from more personalized mentoring from faculty like McCarthy. For example, he helps prepare students for interviews with consulting firms, such as helping them navigate the differences between a behavioral interview and a case study interview.

Cultivating connections is important in most health care careers, but it is especially critical in consulting. “That’s how I’ve advanced in my career,” McCarthy says. “I always tell my students that I’m happy to help them use my network.”

“At Rush, there is an ethos within the HSM program that’s always resonated with me, and that is to pay it forward.”

Kevin McCarthy, MS-HSM, consultant and adjunct faculty in the Department of Health Systems Management



HSM students and alumni meet during a visit to Guidehouse. From left to right: Astha Garg (2024), Ashraf Abu-sirrieh (2023), Uddish Mondal (2023), Kruti Patel (2024), Peter Barth (2015) and Kevin McCarthy (2013), who teaches the Consulting course at Rush.

Nationally recognized excellence

CHS programs that are able to be ranked regularly rank among the best in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report*, proving graduates gain the knowledge and skills to succeed.

Our current *U.S. News & World Report* rankings:

#5

Health Systems Management

#9

Audiology

#18

Occupational Therapy

#28

Speech-Language Pathology

Chaplains connect to help others heal

Chaplains provide psychosocial and spiritual support to patients and families facing important life decisions or grieving a diagnosis or death.

“There’s a profound privilege in having people willing to let you into their lives, and we try to never take for granted that we are accompanying someone in their decision-making, their spiritual wondering or their grieving,” says Clayton Thomason, JD, MDiv, associate professor and chairperson of the Department of Religion, Health and Human Values.

To help resident chaplains offer support during such sensitive moments and improve the quality of their spiritual care relationships, the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program at Rush challenges them to learn from their relationships with each other.

A unique approach to teaching relationship-building

At Rush, chaplain residents participate in group discussions about specific patient interactions, as well as a weekly interpersonal relations group (IPR), during which the group reviews their interactions with each other.

“Some of the ways we’ve learned to behave are self-protective because we’ve been wounded, and getting feedback on how people outside our family circle perceive the ways we engage with others can be eye-opening,” says Christy Howard-Steele, MS, MS, MDiv, APC BCC, ACPE, CPE program director in the Department of Religion, Health and Human Values.

Group feedback offers valuable insights

“IPR is about the health of the group and learning about ourselves, but it is also a place where we can practice techniques that we go on to use with patients,” says Sophie Grosserode, MDiv, chaplain resident.

Another chaplain resident, Christina Maldonado, MDiv, values the opportunities to get feedback from her fellow chaplains during IPR. “It grows intimacy in the group and helps people trust each other more,” Maldonado says.

Chaplain resident Jennifer Pope, PhD, says getting the group’s comments on her personal interactions has helped her practice humility and curiosity. “I don’t know why every job doesn’t have this kind of process to help you improve how you relate to others,” Pope says.

For chaplain resident Stephanie M. Perkins, the group has helped her identify tangible ways to improve her listening skills, so she can better understand what patients need. “Being willing to face yourself is the greatest triumph,” Perkins says. “And when you face yourself, then you will be able to connect with the patient.”

“Getting feedback on how people outside our family circle perceive the ways we engage with others can be eye-opening.”

Christy Howard-Steele, MS, MS, MDiv, APC BCC, ACPE, Clinical Pastoral Education program director



Group celebrations, like a birthday tea party, help chaplain residents form bonds. From left to right: Chaplain residents Christina Maldonado, MDiv; Stephanie M. Perkins; Kwang-Jin Oh, PhD; Jennifer Pope, PhD; and Sophie Grosserode, MDiv. On the far right is Christy Howard-Steele, MS, MS, MDiv, APC BCC, ACPE, CPE program director.

2025 Rush Commencement shines light on CHS

A distinguished faculty member and an inspiring AuD student were honored at Rush University’s 53rd Commencement on May 3.

Diane Howard, PhD, MPH, FACHE, professor and chair of the Department of Health Systems Management, had the honor of serving as University Marshal for her significant accomplishments in teaching, research, service and patient care. She teaches a wide range of courses and has served in leadership roles at Aetna, the American Hospital Association and other prestigious health care institutions.

Louisa Mahlon Forrest, AuD, was selected as student speaker for the Rush University Class of 2025 based on an essay and her achievements while completing her doctorate in audiology. Forrest was active in the Rush Auditory Research Laboratory, where she conducted research on environmental, or non-speech, sound comprehension in cochlear implant users. Forrest

presented her research at Rush’s annual Ear Day, a research conference on hearing science.

In her speech, Forrest credited her kind, energetic faculty members for inspiring her throughout her time at Rush. “It has been electric being surrounded by people who clearly love what they do,” she said. “And that love is both inspiring and contagious.” She also recognized her fellow classmates for helping her reach this milestone and providing continued inspiration. “In times when I am feeling overwhelmed, I lean on my classmates, I think about their strengths, I ask myself what they would do in my situation, and I try to be all the things I admire most about them,” she said.



Diane Howard, PhD, MPH, FACHE



Louisa Mahlon Forrest, AuD

**Rush University College of Health Sciences
is cultivating experts in**

**Audiology
Blood Bank Technology
Cardiovascular Perfusion
Clinical Laboratory Management
Clinical Nutrition
Health Sciences
Health Systems Management
Imaging Sciences
Medical Laboratory Science
Occupational Therapy
Physician Assistant Studies
Religion, Health and Human Values
Respiratory Care
Social Work
Speech-Language Pathology
Vascular Ultrasound**



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