

Rush University College of Health Sciences

Impact

Expanding the boundaries
of research, teaching
and patient care

**BSHS, HSM Dual Alum
Leads Strategy to Support
the Front Line**

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The Opportunities Edition

Impacting individuals, communities and the world, one degree at a time



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On the cover: Olivia Velasquez, MS-HSM

Impacting Individuals, Communities and the World, One Degree at a Time

Since 1975, a degree from the Rush University College of Health Sciences (CHS) has launched thousands of influential careers in academia, research, management and clinical care. After successful completion of our highly respected undergraduate and graduate programs, our alumni deliver evidence-based care that heals individuals and transforms communities. They advance innovative research projects to combat health disparities and improve individual and population outcomes. They also train the next generation of health care leaders, who go on to make an impact around the globe.

Yet before they can accomplish this important work, many rely on financial support during their seminal years at Rush. In 2025, Rush University awarded \$13.4 million in scholarships, which helped defray tuition costs for many CHS students.

This issue of *Impact* includes stories that not only reinforce the substantial value of a Rush degree but also the vital role of scholarships for some pursuing a career in the health sciences. We highlight students, faculty and alumni who are building on the knowledge and skills they developed at Rush to advance their fields. Their compelling stories demonstrate how investing in students' dreams has a ripple effect, which benefits all of us.

If you have supported the CHS Scholarship Fund in the past, please know that the deep gratitude expressed by many featured in these stories is for you. Without your support, such promising students might never know the value of a Rush degree.

Beyond providing critical financial assistance that allows students to fully engage in their CHS education, scholarships help affirm their potential. With support from the Rush community, students have the assurance they need to take advantage of the wide range of challenging opportunities at CHS that will make them better leaders in their chosen field.

We hope the incredible work of our students, faculty and alumni presented here will motivate you to continue to support each other as you strive to achieve your own personal and professional goals. Together, we can have a meaningful impact, one Rush degree at a time.

Jason S. Turner, PhD, MAE

Dean and Professor, College of Health Sciences
A. Watson Armour III Presidential Professorship



\$13.4 million

in donor and institution funded scholarships, grants and awards to **969 students, or 33% of learners enrolled across all three colleges** — representing the highest dollar amount distributed to the largest group of students to date



Second-year vascular ultrasound student Allison Czekala is completing her clinical rotations at Springfield Memorial Hospital, where she plans to work after graduation.

Financial Support Helps Vascular Ultrasound Student Flourish

Allison Czekala did not know her calling at a young age, although she was interested in health care. Before applying to Rush's Bachelor of Science in Vascular Ultrasound program (which has been renamed the Bachelor of Science in Diagnostic Medical Sonography, with the first cohort matriculating fall 2026) she was studying dental hygiene at another college. Not inspired to continue that program, she applied to Rush because she was motivated on a more personal level by her grandfather's need for routine vascular ultrasounds.

Although Czekala, who grew up in Joliet, Ill., was nervous about commuting to Chicago to learn at a prestigious academic medical center like Rush, she quickly gained confidence because of the small class size and supportive culture.

"Initially, I felt like a little fish in a big pond, but then I realized how tight our little group is," she says.

Personal growth during clinicals

After their first year of classes at Rush, second-year students like Czekala complete four, 10-week rotations in metropolitan areas like Seattle, Miami, Boston and Chicago as well as smaller cities like Springfield, Ill.

Czekala's first rotation was at Springfield Memorial Hospital, and moving downstate meant she would live away from home for the first time. Success came quickly — within her first 10 weeks there, she signed a three-year contract with the hospital that will be in effect once she graduates and passes her boards.



Czekala celebrated her job offer at a favorite restaurant.

"The staff here have just welcomed me with open arms," she says. In fact, her co-workers often invite Czekala to have home-cooked meals with them. They've also helped her learn new "adulting" skills, like cooking and knitting. "I'm becoming a whole different person," she says.

Czekala will complete all her rotations in Springfield, a city she loves. On her days off, she explores favorite city locations like Washington Park.

The value of scholarships and stipends

In addition to having the skills and drive to pursue her studies, Czekala has thrived in the program because of financial support that helps ease her family's burden. "Without scholarships, I wouldn't be here," Czekala says, adding that she has two younger sisters who are also pursuing college. In addition, the stipends she's received from Rush during her clinical rotations have been valuable. "They have helped me greatly with groceries and even gas so I can go home to see my family," she says.

Helping students balance their demands

Scholarships are essential for talented students like Czekala to maintain a balance between their work, school and personal commitments, according to Jacqueline Ortiz, MA, RVT, assistant professor and Diagnostic Medical Sonography program director.

"The scholarship opportunities afforded our students alleviate some of the financial burden they carry and hopefully allow them to focus more on their studies and families," Ortiz says. "These scholarship awards potentially give the students some of their time back and hopefully reduce some of their stress, allowing them to give their full attention and dedication to their studies, thus enhancing their education and the subsequent care they will give to their future patients."

"The scholarship opportunities afforded our students alleviate some of the financial burden they carry and hopefully allow them to focus more on their studies and families."

Jacqueline Ortiz, MA, RVT, assistant professor and Diagnostic Medical Sonography program director

Program's Name Change Reflects Expansion

Rush University's Bachelor of Science in Vascular Ultrasound has been renamed the Bachelor of Science in Diagnostic Medical Sonography to reflect the addition of new course content.

"We have added the abdominal extended concentration to the existing vascular concentration curriculum," says Jacqueline Ortiz, MA, RVT, assistant professor and Diagnostic Medical Sonography program director. "Effective Fall 2026, students completing the program will learn both diagnostic ultrasound concentrations." The expanded curriculum may increase employment opportunities for graduates upon graduation.

A True Influencer: Clinical Nutrition Alum Advances Kidney Patient Education



Melanie Betz, MS, RD, CSR, LDN, FNKF, FAND, is a full-time health blogger and influencer, known as the Kidney Dietitian. She says her Rush degree gave her confidence to conduct research and explore her passion for patient education.

While social media is flooded with health influencers, Melanie Betz, MS, RD, CSR, LDN, FNKF, FAND — also known as the Kidney Dietitian — is a true standout. After graduating from Rush's Master of Science in Clinical Nutrition with Dietetic Internship program (now known as the Clinical Nutrition – Dietetic Integrated Track program) in 2011, Betz saw a gap in nutritional information about kidney health and used her knowledge and creativity to fill it.

Prior to starting the blog, Betz advanced her career through roles in industry and academic medical centers, including Rush and the University of Chicago Medicine. While collaborating with kidney stone researchers at UChicago Medicine, she encountered a lack of credible online information for nephrology patients.

"I was inspired to share what I was learning with the world, because I was just so disgusted and saddened by the complete misinformation on kidney disease and kidney stones available for patients," she says.

Blogging for better outcomes

In 2020, Betz founded the Kidney Dietitian blog to provide science-based kidney nutrition information to patients and professionals. "It was my COVID project," she says. Since then, Betz has expanded her brand with a podcast, newsletter and social media presence, reaching about 20,000 people around the globe each day through her popular online platform.



From left to right: Betz, Kim (Kerr) Marsh, Devon (Romano) Toia and Samantha Rifkin celebrate their achievements at the 2011 Rush University Commencement.

Today, she is a full-time entrepreneur and recognized expert on nutritional strategies for kidney health. Betz currently chairs the renal practice group for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and has served as president of the Illinois Council on Renal Nutrition for the National Kidney Foundation of Illinois.

Learning from Rush faculty

Betz credits her years at Rush for giving her the confidence to pursue her interests and share her knowledge with the online community. She is especially grateful for faculty like Sarah Peterson, RD, PhD, LDN, assistant professor and acting Clinical Nutrition – Dietetic Integrated Track program director. "She helped shape my understanding and passion for research, which is a strong point of Rush's nutrition program," she says. Since graduating, Betz has published several studies in peer-reviewed journals.

A Michigan native, Betz completed her undergraduate work at Michigan State University. When she is not blogging, podcasting or presenting at conferences, Betz is raising her four-year-old twins or cheering on her beloved Michigan State Spartans.

She also stays connected with Rush by mentoring students who share her interests. To those pursuing a Rush degree, Betz offers this advice: "Rush is such a special place because of the true multidisciplinary culture. Make sure you take advantage of all the different experiences, because you never really know which skills you will utilize later in your career."

"Being a Rush alum means you've trained with some of the best in the field and are ready to make a real difference."

Mark McInerney, DHSc, RD, LDN, assistant professor, Clinical Nutrition – Dietetic Integrated Track program

Turning passion into purpose

"Melanie is a true trailblazer," says Mark McInerney, DHSc, RD, LDN, assistant professor, Clinical Nutrition – Dietetic Integrated Track program. "What really stands out is how she's built a brand around something she's deeply passionate about, and that takes a lot of dedication and drive."

To McInerney, Betz's success exemplifies how Rush faculty don't just teach students — they also empower them. "We provide a strong foundation in science and practice, but we also encourage students to think big by exploring their interests and taking on challenges beyond the classroom," he says. "The combination of knowledge, experience and confidence sets our graduates apart and positions them to lead right from the start."

With a Rush degree, graduates like Betz go on to be true influencers in many fields, from public health to sports performance to research to the food industry. In this way, a Rush degree not only helps open doors to opportunities, but it also helps graduates stand out as respected leaders in the world of nutrition, McInerney explains.

"Being a Rush alum means you've trained with some of the best in the field and are ready to make a real difference," he says. "Our graduates are recognized for their expertise and professionalism wherever they go. They bring both knowledge and heart to the work they do, improving lives and advancing the profession every day."

Alum Exemplifies the Scope of Possibilities Within Audiology

Look at any peer-reviewed audiology journal, textbook or conference agenda, and you will likely find a contribution from Christopher Spankovich, AuD, PhD, MPH. Since earning his Doctor of Audiology (AuD) from Rush 10 years ago, Spankovich — a noted researcher on the early identification and prevention of acquired forms of hearing loss — has authored or co-authored more than 100 articles and eight book chapters. He has also presented more than 60 lectures at audiology meetings around the globe.

As professor and vice chair of research in the Department of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery at University of Mississippi Medical Center, Spankovich is testing how therapeutic interventions to cool the ear canals might reduce hearing loss from noise exposure and toxic drugs. He also conducts epidemiological research to identify and modify determinants of hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and balance disorders.

Yet audiology wasn't his initial career choice until a mentor inspired him to pursue research that resonated with him on a personal level.

From MPH to AuD

While pursuing his master's in public health (MPH) from Emory University, Spankovich assisted a distinguished researcher who had sustained a spinal cord injury and wanted to prevent it from happening to others. The experience inspired Spankovich to study hearing loss, which he has experienced in his right ear since age 14.

After earning his MPH in 2002, he entered Rush's Doctor of Audiology program. As a Rush student, Spankovich applied what he was learning in the classroom while working alongside faculty in the clinic. "The early clinical exposure was an amazing opportunity at Rush," he says. He also valued that Rush's program is within an academic medical

"There's only a small percentage of Doctor of Audiology programs that are housed in medical centers, and it makes a world of difference to be learning in the same environment in which you're interacting with patients and other health professions."

Christopher Spankovich, AuD, PhD, MPH, 2016 AuD graduate and leading audiology educator and researcher

Christopher Spankovich, AuD, PhD, MPH, performs basic science research in animal models to understand how therapeutic interventions to cool the ear canals might reduce hearing loss from noise exposure and toxic drugs.

center. "There's only a small percentage of Doctor of Audiology programs that are housed in medical centers, and it makes a world of difference to be learning in the same environment in which you're interacting with patients and other health professions," he says.

Diverse clinical, research experiences

Rush's AuD program is characterized by a wide-ranging, rigorous didactic program of study and exceptional, diverse clinical experiences that bring that knowledge into practice, according to Amy Winston, AuD, CCC-A, assistant professor and AuD program director, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences.

"By exposing students to the many potential career paths they could choose to pursue and arming them with the requisite knowledge, we foster a broad understanding of the impact they can have as professionals and instill in them the confidence necessary to bring positive growth to the field of audiology," Winston says. "For this reason, Rush grads are in demand across myriad employment settings, including industry, medical centers, educational institutions and private practices."

While at Rush, Spankovich also honed his research acumen on several projects, including tinnitus studies by Richard Peach, PhD, professor emeritus in the Department of

Communication Disorders and Sciences. He also worked on cochlear implant research led by Valeriy Shafiro, PhD, professor and chairperson of the department. During his fourth-year clinical externship at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center, Spankovich collaborated with renowned audiology researcher Robert Sweetow, PhD, who inspired him to pursue a PhD.

From AuD to PhD

After graduating from Rush in 2006, Spankovich earned his PhD in hearing sciences and molecular physiology from Vanderbilt University in 2010. He served on the faculty at the University of Florida for five years before joining the University of Mississippi in 2016.

As an educator, he urges students to cultivate a habit of lifelong learning. "I tell my students — because this was instilled in me while I was at Rush — that you'll be an audiology student for the rest of your career," Spankovich says. "And if you look at it that way, you will never get burned out because you're always learning and growing."

When he's not teaching, working in the lab or consulting on medico-legal cases, Spankovich enjoys surfing, tennis and camping with his wife, Keyla, and their three children, Kiah (12), Key (8) and Isla (5).



From top, then clockwise from left to right: Spankovich as Thor with son, Key, also dressed as Thor; wife, Keyla; son, Kiah, dressed as a dinosaur; and daughter, Isla, dressed as a mouse for Halloween.

An example of excellence

Spankovich illustrates the heights that graduates can reach with a Rush AuD degree, which is recognized across the country as a standard of excellence, according to Winston.

"Simply put, Dr. Spankovich exemplifies the expansive scope of the field of audiology," she says. "He has excelled as a teacher, researcher, clinician, author, editor and medico-legal consultant. And to each of these efforts, he has brought fierce curiosity and a drive to learn and push the profession forward."

Scholarships Help Perfusion Student Reach National Spotlight



Rush perfusion students at the 2026 American Academy of Cardiovascular Perfusion conference in Florida. Back row from left to right: Bailey Reitsma (second year), Kelly Russell (second year), Madison Walny (second year), Zack Merwin (first year) and Roberta Jokubauskaite (first year). Front row from left to right: Justin Hobson (first year), Ashley Smith (first year), Hannah Calcote (first year) and Lanette Choi (first year).

While working as an emergency room and neuro intensive care room nurse at the University of Kansas Medical Center, Ashley Smith got a sign that it was time to make a career change. The moment played out like a scene from a movie: On a particularly hectic day at the hospital, Smith plowed into a perfusionist with her hot coffee.

“I spilled my coffee all over him, and when I read that his badge said ‘perfusionist,’ I asked him what he did,” Smith says. After he explained his role in the cardiac operating room running the heart-lung machine, she decided to shadow him. Smith was immediately drawn to the perfusionist’s autonomy and vital role on the heart surgery team.

“I knew this was exactly what I wanted to do,” says Smith, an Iowa native and former volleyball player at the University of Iowa.

Representing Rush

Smith chose the Master of Science in Cardiovascular Perfusion program at Rush because of its location in Chicago and the sense of community created through its smaller class sizes and accessible faculty, which help everyone feel more connected and engaged.

As a first-year perfusion student, Smith is making the most of her education. In February, Smith presented the results of a research study at the American Academy of

Cardiovascular Perfusion (AACP) national conference in Florida, where she earned AACP’s Lawrence Scientific Presentation Award. The research focused on optimizing the administration of the drug protamine, which is given after a heart patient is weaned from a bypass machine.

Smith’s decision to present the findings at AACP reflect her leadership, professionalism and scholarly engagement, according to Julie Collins, MS, CCP, LP, Cardiovascular Perfusion program director.

“Ashley has consistently demonstrated an exceptional commitment to saying ‘yes’ to opportunities that advance her learning, support our program and contribute to the broader perfusion community,” Collins says.

Scholarships support student growth

In addition to presenting at AACP, Smith serves as the AACP class representative and chief networking officer for Rush’s Perfusion Student Government Association. She is currently involved in a research project with ECMO patients that examines whether ventilation improves during verticalization with the Kreg bed, using the Timpel belt to assess changes in lung ventilation in real time.

One factor that has helped Smith take advantage of such opportunities is the financial support she receives from Rush. She has benefited from graduate assistant, merit, recruiting and essay-based scholarships, which have reduced financial stress and opened the door for her deeper involvement in research, professional service and leadership roles.

“Scholarships have played a major role, allowing me to fully focus on my education and growth in this field of health care,” Smith says. “Easing that financial burden has given me that freedom to really immerse in all these

learning opportunities. It also serves as a reminder that the faculty believed in me from the beginning. When someone invests in you, you owe it to them to show them everything you have, and scholarships have given me the opportunity to do that.”

When students like Smith can fully engage themselves in scholarly work, leadership and professional development, the entire field benefits, Collins explains. “Scholarships allow students to focus on growth rather than barriers, and in turn, they become more engaged, capable and empowered emerging professionals,” she says. “Ultimately, scholarships help cultivate highly prepared, well-rounded

perfusionists who become leaders in the field, better preparing them for providing excellent patient care, driving innovation and strengthening the future of cardiovascular perfusion.”

A bright future ahead

While Smith still has another year before she graduates, she is considering research and teaching positions in the future.

She encourages other prospective students to fully immerse themselves in their Rush education and foster connections with faculty and other classmates. “Growth doesn’t happen only in the classroom,” Smith says. “It also happens outside of the classroom when you’re collaborating with others.”



From left to right: Smith is working with Julie Collins, MS, CCP, LP, Cardiovascular Perfusion program director, on a research project using the Timpel belt to assess changes in lung ventilation in real time.



Smith was awarded the Lawrence Scientific Presentation Award for presenting a study on the impact of protamine on activated clotting time at the American Academy of Cardiovascular Perfusion conference.

“When someone invests in you, you owe it to them to show them everything you have, and scholarships have given me the opportunity to do that.”

Ashley Smith, first-year perfusion student



From left to right: Jason Turner, PhD, MAE, presented Ron Rojas with the Dean's Award for outstanding academic achievement before commencement in 2024.

SBB/CLM Alum Leads Major Standardization Project in 21 Hospitals

Ron Rojas, MS, SBB(ASCP)^{CM} isn't just a subject matter expert (SME) in science fiction and the best places to explore Europe. In his professional role as technical specialist in blood bank at SSM Health DePaul Hospital in Bridgeton, Mo., he serves as an SME for a systemwide transfusion medicine standardization project involving 21 hospitals across four states. He also innovates using new

technology to support continuous quality improvement initiatives across the health system.

Rojas credits two online Rush programs — the Specialist in Blood Bank (SBB) Technology certificate program and the Master of Science in Clinical Laboratory Management (CLM) program — for giving him the credentials and confidence to take on this impactful work.

Real-world acumen to transform care

Rojas, a native of Springfield, Ill., earned his SBB certificate in 2023 and his CLM master's degree in 2024. He says the two online programs helped build not only his technical acumen but also his leadership and management skills. In particular, the personalized tutoring, support and guidance provided by Rush faculty prepared him to think critically, lead teams and manage complex laboratory operations. "The faculty were very accessible, and I thought, this is the type of leader I want to be," he says.



Since earning his SBB certificate in 2023 and his CLM master's degree in 2024, Rojas has implemented new technology and procedures for his blood bank.

When students graduate from the SBB or CLM program, they leave prepared to guide change, mentor others and contribute to the profession in ways that go beyond their pre-Rush, day-to-day roles, according to Laurie Gillard, MS, MLS(ASCP), SBB(ASCP), associate professor and SBB program director.

"Ron Rojas represents what Rush stands for — strong leadership, dedication to quality and a genuine commitment to advancing the field of laboratory medicine," Gillard says. "Ron's career path and accomplishments show how the foundation built at Rush can lead to meaningful impact in both the workplace and the broader professional community."

Balancing rigor and readiness

SBB and CLM alumni serve in many roles, from transfusion medicine/blood bank managers to clinical laboratory directors to transfusion safety officers to project managers at large biotechnology companies.

"A Rush degree carries real weight because it reflects a balance of academic rigor and professional readiness," Gillard says. "Our graduates are known for their competence, confidence and ability to lead with integrity. Earning a Rush degree means joining a community that's respected across health care for its excellence and its commitment to improving patient care."

Credibility from credentials

For Rojas, completing the two Rush programs has given him the authority to question long-standing processes and the confidence to effectively collaborate with others on solutions to enhance patient care. "Because I have the credentials now, I can challenge ideas and change the culture around blood bank," he says. By encouraging others to be accountable and proactive, he hopes to identify more opportunities to advance quality across the system.

When Rojas isn't at work, he likes to recharge by reading anime or science fiction, or exploring new global destinations with his spouse, Sugianto. On a recent trip to Europe, they explored Scottish castles and the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin.



From left to right: Rojas' spouse, Sugianto, with Rojas on a recent trip to Scotland, where they explored Edinburgh and other destinations.

"A Rush degree carries real weight because it reflects a balance of academic rigor and professional readiness."

Laurie Gillard, MS, MLS(ASCP), associate professor and Specialist in Blood Bank Technology program director

Imaging Sciences Alum Uses Degree to Teach and Inspire Others

Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, Kristina Khalvati, BS, RT(R), MR, CT, MRSO, became intrigued by imaging sciences after receiving X-rays and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans for a high school soccer injury.

Mesmerized by the technology and inspired by the technologist who took her images, Khalvati pursued a career in the field.

While attending X-ray school at a community college in 2008, Khalvati had a clinical rotation at Rush. More than a decade later, she opted to advance her education and earn a bachelor's degree at Rush so she could supervise and teach others. "I chose Rush University because of its outstanding reputation and clinical training," Khalvati says. "I also valued Rush's strong focus on leadership and its emphasis on preparing students for evolving clinical roles within advanced imaging."

From student to supervisor to application specialist

After graduating from Rush in 2021, Khalvati became lead cardiac MRI technologist at Ascension Alexian Brothers in Elk Grove Village, Ill. She later became supervisor of the MRI department and led her organization through its American College of Radiology MRI accreditation process. In March 2026, she became an application specialist for Vista AI, which develops MRI acquisition software that uses artificial intelligence. She teaches MRI technologists and cardiologists how to use the software at various health systems.

Thanks to her Rush degree, Khalvati has also taught an MRI course at a local community college. "I am able to give back by helping future imaging technologists build careers rooted in integrity, compassion and professionalism," she says. "Sharing my knowledge allows me to help students grow in confidence while emphasizing the human side of health care — where empathy and technical excellence go hand in hand."

Finding purpose in lifting others up

Khalvati generously provided clinical experiences for Rush imaging sciences students at her former hospital. She encourages students to use their clinical rotations to develop strong professional habits and build their network.

"Kristina embodies what is possible with a Rush degree: personal transformation, leadership and a commitment to lifting others as she rises," says Merima Karastanovic, EdD, MS, RT (R) (MR) (ARRT), assistant professor and Imaging Sciences program director. "Her story reflects not just career advancement but also purpose-driven impact. She is a shining example of how our graduates turn education into influence."

A foundation for personal, professional growth

Rush's Imaging Sciences program emphasizes critical thinking, evidence-based practice and building a strong professional identity, while helping students gain the confidence to drive change, Karastanovic explains. "They learn to advocate, innovate, collaborate and inspire — not just by improving patient care, but also by influencing teams, shaping systems and guiding the next generation of professionals," she says.

"A Rush degree is more than an education — it provides a strong foundation for a lifetime of growth, leadership and meaningful impact."

Merima Karastanovic, EdD, MS, RT (R) (MR) (ARRT), assistant professor and Imaging Sciences program director



Khalvati credits her Rush degree for creating opportunities to lead and teach others.

At home, Khalvati unwinds by walking Diamond, her Jack Russell terrier. She also refurbishes furniture and listens to hip-hop performed by her son, Isaiah, who attends college in Chicago. "As a young mom, my career journey has always been closely tied to my family, who are a profound source of inspiration for me every day," she says.

In Karastanovic's view, "A Rush degree is more than an education — it provides a strong foundation for a lifetime of growth, leadership and meaningful impact. Our graduates leave with not only rigorous academic preparation and hands-on clinical experience, but also with the confidence, skills and sense of purpose to make a difference in their communities, inspire others and shape the future of their profession."

Kristina Khalvati, BS, RT(R), MR, CT, MRSO, led one hospital through a successful American College of Radiology MRI accreditation.



Olivia Velasquez, MS-HSM, is chief operating officer at HCA Florida Sarasota Doctors Hospital.

BSHS, HSM Dual Alum Leads Strategy to Support the Front Line

Scholarships helped Olivia Velasquez reach her goals

As chief operating officer at HCA Florida Sarasota Doctors Hospital, Olivia Velasquez, MS-HSM, supports patient care using the financial, strategic and leadership acumen she developed as a Rush undergraduate and graduate student.

Velasquez oversees operations at the 155-bed, acute care facility known for delivering high-quality, patient-centered care to the Sarasota community. As part of HCA Healthcare, the hospital offers a broad range of specialties, including emergency care, orthopedic and spine services, cardiovascular care, minimally invasive surgery and comprehensive rehabilitation. Before taking on her current role, she was vice president of operations at TriStar Summit Medical Center, another HCA facility located in Hermitage, Tenn.

The dual alum says learning how health care administrators can support patient care through adept strategic planning and execution were key takeaways from her formative years at Rush.

“That’s where I feel I can make the most impact — by saying, how do we do this the right way?” says Velasquez.

Finding her focus through BSHS

While Velasquez was in high school, her father had an accident that prompted her to stay close to home for college. After earning an associate’s degree in biology, the Chicagoland native entered Rush’s Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences (BSHS) program in 2016.

“The best thing I did to put myself ahead and set myself up for success was choosing a program where I was actually cared for and seen as an individual.”

Olivia Velasquez, MS-HSM, a Rush dual alum and chief operating officer at HCA Florida Sarasota Doctors Hospital

The pivotal decision put Velasquez on the right career path. “The best thing I did to put myself ahead and set myself up for success was choosing a program where I was actually cared for and seen as an individual,” she says.

Although she was initially interested in becoming a physician assistant, Velasquez learned she was better suited for the C-suite than the bedside after shadowing clinical and nonclinical leaders at Rush. “If you have an affinity for health care, it’s a great program for you to learn more about yourself and your options,” she says.



While vice president of operations at TriStar Summit Medical Center, Velasquez campaigned in the community for approval of a new freestanding emergency department.

Velasquez also benefited from the personalized support provided by BSHS faculty and staff. She credits Dina Batlivala Tresselt, PhD, associate dean of student affairs and enrollment management and assistant professor, and Mary Jo Guglielmo, MPH, assistant dean, assistant professor and director of undergraduate studies, with guiding her toward Rush’s Master of Science in Health Systems Management (HSM) program.

Creating future leaders

After completing a summer internship with HSM faculty following graduation from the BSHS program, Velasquez began working toward her graduate degree in 2018. “The HSM program is recognized as one of the top programs in the country, so it was not a hard decision to stay at Rush,” Velasquez says. “There are so many things about the program that contributed to me being successful today.”

Integrated within Rush University Medical Center, the HSM program is focused on training the next generation of leaders and transforming health care through teaching, service and research, according to Diane Howard, PhD, FACHE, chairperson, Department of Health Systems Management. “The HSM program helps develop students’ analytical, communications, strategic, financial and operational skills across the employment marketplace,” Howard says.

Faculty have designed the curriculum so students can connect to health care executives across the industry, which elevates the value of the degree. “While the HSM program offers advanced classroom training taught by practitioners in the field, it also provides students with internships, networking opportunities and alumni coaching by leaders in the association, consulting, data management, hospital, insurance, information technology and practice management fields,” Howard explains.

Students also benefit from opportunities to apply classroom learning and leadership skills to real-world scenarios, according to Howard. As soon as the first term, Velasquez was developing competencies and gaining practical job experience through a facility internship.

In her first year in the program, Velasquez also represented Rush at the National Association of Health Services Executives student case competition, where students

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from 30 universities compete each year to resolve a health care issue. The case required Velasquez and two HSM classmates to address the recruitment and retention of Medicare and Medicaid enrollees in Maryland, the District of Columbia and Virginia. At the competition, held in Orlando, Fla., she interviewed with health care companies across the country including HCA Healthcare.

Meeting an HCA recruiter as a first-year HSM student was transformative for Velasquez, who secured an administrative fellowship with TriStar Summit Medical Center after graduation. “The case competition is what led me to my role with my company — I can directly attribute it to that,” Velasquez says.

As with the BSHS program, the HSM faculty provided Velasquez with individualized mentorship. “Overall, there was a ton of support,” she says. “They make sure that you’re successful.”



From left to right: Tony Madison; Kechi Okocha; Jonathan Balthazar; Cydney Morris; Diane Howard, PhD, FACHE, chairperson, Department of Health Systems Management; Taylor Drodz; Olivia Velasquez and Benjamin Perkins. The HSM students (now alumni) represented Rush at the National Association of Health Services Executives student case competition in 2019.

The impact of scholarships

In addition to receiving personalized career coaching and mentorship while pursuing her BSHS and HSM degrees, Velasquez also benefited from financial assistance from Rush. “It’s easier to navigate the educational system that we have in this country when you have financial support, and in this case, I needed it,” she says. “I didn’t have to jump through hoops to get it, which was amazing, so having that was a huge weight off my back.”

According to Brinda Bradaric, PhD, assistant professor and program director in the BSHS program, “Scholarships not only help minimize financial stress and allow students to focus on academics, they also boost career flexibility by lowering post-graduation debt. We do our best to ensure that as many students as possible have access to scholarships.”

With financial assistance, promising students can develop into leaders like Velasquez who help drive better patient care across the industry. “By completing the BSHS program, Olivia opened a world of opportunities,” Bradaric says. “We couldn’t be more proud of her and of the work that she is doing as a dual alum.”

Gratitude and advice

While in Nashville, Velasquez made time to explore the area for hiking opportunities and hole-in-the-wall restaurants. Since relocating to Florida in March, Velasquez has been focused on her new role in the C-suite. At home, she cares for two pet geckos, Tang and Mambo, that she adopted from a friend who needed support.



When she’s not working, Velasquez enjoys exploring the outdoors. While in Tennessee, she hiked Stone Door Trail.

Velasquez is grateful for her Rush degrees, which put her on the right trajectory early on in her career. “In your first role, they care about the quality of education you received, and if they know people who have come from there, they might even have a preferred recruitment pipeline from those schools,” Velasquez says. “I learned really quickly to appreciate the opportunities that I had because I was associated with Rush.”

As a health care leader, Velasquez mentors other aspiring executives and encourages them to recognize that the value of their degrees is magnified by their own efforts. “Your education is what you make of it,” she says. “You are building your own foundation for your career and for your life in general.”

PhD Fights Alzheimer’s

As a longtime informatician, Gustavo Jimenez-Maggiora, PhD, MBA, believes we are entering a golden age of innovation, thanks to artificial intelligence (AI). “This idea that we can combine AI with human expertise, compassion and creativity in an innovative way really motivates me,” Jimenez-Maggiora says. “The possibilities are endless.”

Applying such technology to improving the diagnosis and treatment of Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is his life’s work. Since 2015, he has directed the informatics section at the USC Epstein Family Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute (ATRI) at Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California. He leads a team of 50 engineers, computer scientists, data scientists and data managers who build informatics platforms to support ATRI’s observational studies and drug trials. He also oversees visionary data-sharing projects like a4studydata.org, which makes trial datasets available for researchers around the globe.



Jimenez-Maggiora routinely mentors early-career informaticians and is optimistic about how AI can augment human expertise to drive better diagnostic tools and treatments for Alzheimer’s disease. Photo courtesy of ATRI.

Post-degree success

Aiming to become an academic, Jimenez-Maggiora entered Rush’s PhD program in 2019, driven in part by the institution’s renowned AD research program. His dissertation explored the use AI in safety monitoring of AD clinical trials. “It was providential, because I started my dissertation project at the same time the most recent generation of AI innovations started to take off,” he says.

After he earned his PhD in 2024, his research was published in the *Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer’s Disease*. He presented his findings at the National Institutes of Health and the international Clinical Trials on Alzheimer’s Disease Conference. The informatician also secured a faculty position as an assistant professor of research neurology at USC.

Jimenez-Maggiora, who values mentoring early-career informaticians, advises PhD candidates to surround themselves with supportive peers when the coursework seems overwhelming. “If you’re able to push you through the tough times, there’s just tremendous opportunity on the other side,” he says.

The value of a Rush PhD

“Dr. Jimenez-Maggiora exemplifies our program’s core mission of developing scholar-practitioners who translate rigorous research into meaningful health improvements for vulnerable populations,” says Douglas Kuperman, PhD, RRT, chairperson of the Department of Health Sciences and director of the PhD in Health Sciences program.

“Dr. Jimenez-Maggiora exemplifies our program’s core mission of developing scholar-practitioners who translate rigorous research into meaningful health improvements for vulnerable populations.”

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

Jimenez-Maggiora’s professional success post-PhD is indicative of the value of a Rush doctorate, Kuperman adds. “His trajectory demonstrates how our program cultivates the research skills, professional networks and strategic vision necessary for alumni to advance rapidly into positions where they shape practice, policy and the future direction of health sciences,” he says.

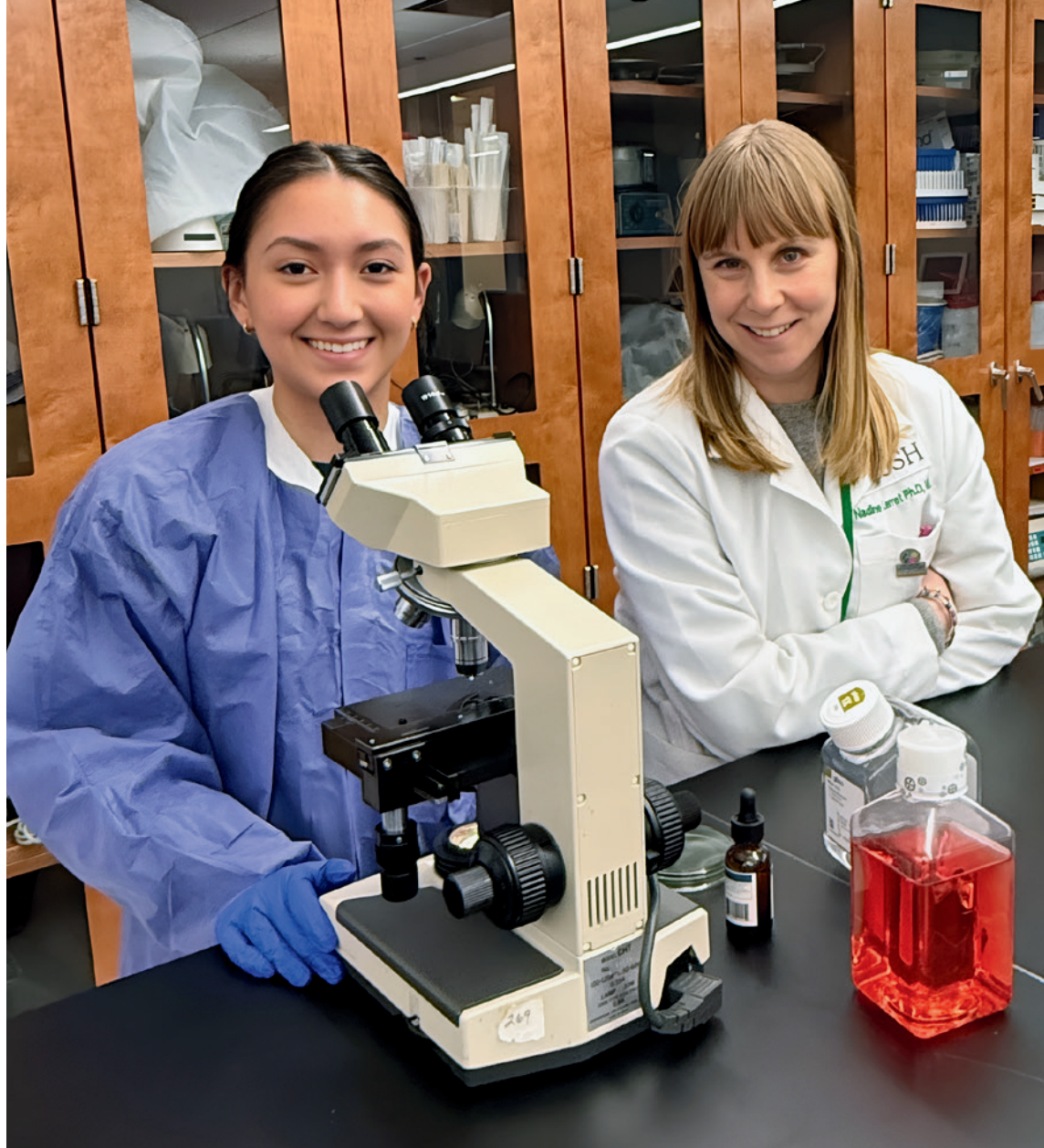
MLS Student Finds Many Forms of Support at Rush University

As a first-year student in the Master of Science in Medical Laboratory Science (MLS) program, Ava Artz has demonstrated a collaborative spirit and genuine passion for laboratory medicine, according to faculty.

“Ava’s peers consistently seek her guidance, and faculty recognize her exceptional combination of academic excellence and professional enthusiasm,” says Nadine

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

Such qualities position Artz for success as a future leader in laboratory medicine. “I anticipate she will make significant contributions to our profession and positively impact patient care throughout her career,” Lerret adds.



From left to right: First year MLS student Ava Artz in the lab with Nadine Lerret, PhD, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}, associate dean of academic and AI integration, associate professor and MLS program director.

A natural laboratory leader

Becoming a laboratory leader wasn’t Artz’s initial career goal — she initially pursued accounting at Lewis University and participated on the school’s dance team when she wasn’t studying. However, a prerequisite biology class prompted her to switch to biology, rekindling a prior love of science.

Not interested in direct patient care, Artz was intrigued by laboratory science after delving into hands-on research at Lewis. “It’s an amazing profession for those who might not want to pursue patient-based care but also want to help make a difference,” she says.

Artz chose Rush because of the curriculum’s emphasis on leadership and experience gained through clinical rotations. “The amount of clinical experience you get at Rush really stuck out to me, and I wasn’t finding that at other institutions,” she says.

Artz is eager for her clinical rotations next year and hopes to land a role in a hospital laboratory in Chicago after graduation.



Before coming to Rush, Artz attended Lewis University, where she was a member of the school’s dance team.

Decreasing students’ financial burden helps attract more emerging leaders like Artz to the field. “When an MLS student receives a scholarship, their end loan burden is reduced,” Lerret explains. “This reduced debt is especially important in a behind-the-scenes profession like MLS, which is often undercompensated relative to other allied health roles. By giving students scholarships, we are enabling graduates to pursue leadership, specialty training and retention in the field, rather than making decisions driven primarily by financial pressure.”

For Artz, receiving financial support has done more than alleviate her financial burden. “Besides allowing me to fully focus on my education, the scholarship also pushes me to want to do better and be a leader in my group,” she says.

“Besides allowing me to fully focus on my education, the scholarship also pushes me to want to do better and be a leader in my group.”

Ava Artz, first-year MLS student

Scholarships provide an added ‘push’

Artz values the support she receives from her peers in the MLS program. “We all really push each other to succeed,” she says. Like many Rush students, she also benefits from another kind of support: financial assistance.

“Scholarships reduce financial strain for our MLS students, many of whom work part time or full time while managing a rigorous clinical and academic schedule,” Lerret says. “By offsetting tuition and living costs, scholarships allow students to potentially be more engaged in coursework, clinical rotations and professional development.”

Scholarship Unlocks Opportunities for Respiratory Care Student

Second-year respiratory care student Dino Frulla is a strong critical thinker who approaches every challenge with curiosity and humility, his professors say. They also praise him for his drive to understand not only the “how” but also the “why” behind clinical decisions and his commitment to patient-centered care and lifelong learning.

Because of these qualities, Frulla will likely go far with his Rush degree, following in the footsteps of other Rush grads who have become leaders the field. “Being in this program has opened so many doors for me,” Frulla says.

A calling to care

Frulla grew up in Bridgeport on Chicago’s South Side and was captivated by math and science at a young age. A first-generation college student, he earned a biology degree from Florida State University. He applied to Rush’s program after a shadowing experience, during which he witnessed a Rush respiratory therapist remove a recovering patient from a ventilator. “That was the moment I knew that this was what I wanted to do,” Frulla says.

He chose Rush — one of only a few programs in the nation to offer a master’s degree in respiratory care — because of its strengths in academic medicine, research and clinical care. “It’s the all-in-one perfect program,” Frulla says.

How scholarships support dreams

To help students like Frulla reach their personal and professional goals, Rush provides a wide range of scholarships and grants. “Scholarships play a vital role in reducing the financial burden associated with graduate



Second-year respiratory care student Dino Frulla says financial support allows him to focus on his education, which includes assisting with research that will have a direct impact on patient care.

education,” says J. Brady Scott, PhD, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FAARC, FCCP, professor and Respiratory Care program director. “However, beyond the financial aspect, scholarships serve as a powerful form of validation, recognizing the dedication, perseverance and academic excellence that students like Dino invest in mastering their profession.”

Frulla’s scholarship, offered as a graduate assistantship, has enabled him to make meaningful contributions to ongoing research addressing complex clinical questions that directly impact patient care, Scott adds. For example, Frulla is helping researchers test a new imaging system called electrical impedance tomography to analyze changes in lung volume, which can guide mechanical ventilation strategies to improve patient outcomes.

“Through this experience, Dino is developing critical research and analytical skills while learning how evidence translates into practice. Opportunities like this not only strengthen Dino’s professional foundation but may also inspire a long-term academic and research trajectory,” Scott says.

Beyond being a valued learning opportunity, the assistantship provides Frulla with life-changing financial support. “I can focus solely on my education and not worry so much about financial strain, so it’s really helped me in that regard,” he says.

A promising future

While Frulla enjoys research, he has been inspired by faculty like Andy Klein, MS, RRT, RRT-ACCS, RRT-NPS, AE-C, FCCP, FAARC, to pursue teaching and direct patient care after graduation.

During his remaining time at Rush, Frulla plans to “stay curious” and continue to take advantage of the program’s accessible faculty. “They truly want you to grow and advance our profession,” he says.

To recharge from the stresses of graduate school, Frulla relaxes with his best friends: a yellow Labrador retriever named Millie and a German short-haired pointer named Hazel. He also enjoys running on the lakefront during warmer months, participating in half-marathons and reading mystery novels.



Frulla is an avid runner who enjoys competing in half-marathons when he’s not studying.

“Scholarships serve as a powerful form of validation, recognizing the dedication, perseverance and academic excellence that students like Dino invest in mastering their profession.”

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

Respiratory Care Faculty, Students Converge at National Meeting

Dozens of current and future respiratory therapists with a connection to Rush exchanged their insights at the Chest 2025 Annual Meeting in Chicago during Respiratory Care Week last October.



“It was truly great to see everyone together — students, faculty and alumni — representing the Rush Respiratory Care program. Watching our students engage and ask questions, and seeing alumni present their work, were proud moments for me personally,” says J. Brady Scott, PhD, RRT, RRT-ACCS, AE-C, FAARC, FCCP, professor and Respiratory Care program director. “The enthusiasm they all brought reminded me why conferences like CHEST are so valuable: They connect us to the broader profession, spark new ideas and remind us of the impact respiratory therapists have across every area of patient care and research.”



The Sky's the Limit for PA's Career

U.S. Navy Lt. Emily Ritsema co-piloted a T-6A Texan aircraft during flight school.

While physician assistants are trained to confidently manage all types of emergencies, most haven't escaped a submerged helicopter or swam a mile wearing a flight suit. Yet these are just some of the challenges that U.S. Navy Lt. Emily Ritsema has overcome since graduating from Rush's Master of Science in Physician Assistant (PA) Studies program in 2021.

Aligned values drew her to Rush

A Michigan native, Ritsema always wanted a career serving others. After working for three years as an administrator for a nongovernmental public health organization in East Africa, she chose to have a more direct impact on patient care. She entered Rush's PA

Studies program in 2019. "I was really drawn to their focus on community impact and involvement," Ritsema says. "Coming from a nonprofit background, I didn't want to just focus on myself and my own training — I also wanted to give back to the community as well."

While at Rush, she continued her passion for service as a student government leader and volunteer for the mobile medical unit and community health clinics on Chicago's West Side. Ritsema became a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps after graduation, even though she had no military background. "I felt like it would be a good fit for me — the adventure and the challenge of it, and I really wanted to live overseas again," she says.

After graduation, Ritsema completed a two-year tour in Japan, treating active and retired military personnel in a family medicine clinic at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, near Hiroshima (although they are distinct military branches, the U.S. Navy provides medical care for the Marine Corps). She then returned to the U.S. to attend flight school at the Naval Aerospace Medical Institute in Florida, where she became an aeromedical PA. Her decision to hit the skies was inspired by the flight doctors she met in Iwakuni who flew with their assigned squadrons.



Before attending flight school, Ritsema was stationed in Japan and toured Matsumoto Castle in Nagano.

Adventures in the skies

During nine months of flight school, Ritsema learned about aircraft and flight rules, completed water survival training and co-piloted T-6 single-engine and rotary-wing aircraft. The experience allowed her to grow personally and professionally.

"If you face hard things that you don't think you can do, it produces a resilience that helps you with the next set of challenges," she says.

Ritsema is now stationed at the Marine Corps Air Station New River in North Carolina, where she cares for a squadron of 400 Marines. She recently completed several months of training in the desert with her squadron.



From left to right: Ritsema's fiancé, Walker, and Ritsema in front of a T-6A Texan at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Fla.

When the time is right, Ritsema, who is engaged to a flight surgeon, plans to return to civilian life and work in a surgical environment. Wherever she and her fiancé land, she is ready for the next adventure.

When she looks back on her days at Rush, Ritsema values not only how the program helped launch her exciting career as a PA but also how it introduced her to some of her best friends. "It's hard to imagine life without them, and that was all because of Rush that we formed that bond," she says.

Having a global impact

"Emily exemplifies the diverse opportunities and impact that a Rush education can provide," says Alyssa Knueven, MS, PA-C, CAQ-PED, assistant professor and PA Studies program director. "Her career spans clinical practice, international service and advanced aeromedical training in the Navy, demonstrating how Rush graduates can serve communities and influence health care in unique and meaningful ways."

The PA Studies program at Rush is designed so graduates can thrive in the many environments where PAs make a meaningful impact, Knueven explains. "Our program emphasizes rigorous clinical training, interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership development. By fostering critical thinking, adaptability and a commitment to service, we prepare our graduates to take initiative, innovate and lead in a variety of health care settings," she says.

For alumni, the value of a Rush degree can be measured in the influence they have across the globe. "A Rush degree goes beyond preparing PAs for clinical practice," Knueven says. "It gives our alumni the confidence, resilience and leadership skills to make a meaningful impact around the world."

"A Rush degree goes beyond preparing PAs for clinical practice. It gives our alumni the confidence, resilience and leadership skills to make a meaningful impact around the world."

Alyssa Knueven, MS, PA-C, CAQ-PED, assistant professor and PA Studies program director



Second-year SLP student Katia Gomez cared for adults with neurogenic language disorders like aphasia during her clinical rotation at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab.

SLP Student's Dreams Supported by Scholarships

Katia Gomez, a second-year student in the Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) program, was motivated to enter the profession after seeing the life-changing impact of speech therapy on her grandmother's recovery following a stroke.

"I realized it was my calling to give back by entering this profession that's so deeply rooted in supporting individuals with communication and swallowing disorders," Gomez says.

A wide range of clinical experiences

Gomez chose Rush's SLP program because of the breadth of unique clinical and educational opportunities available to students.

One highlight of the program for Gomez was a multidisciplinary course on tracheostomies and ventilators that included actors with simulated tracheostomies. "It really helped me feel more comfortable learning and closely collaborating with other disciplines like respiratory care," she says. "I'm certain I wouldn't be able to get that kind of experience in other programs."

Gomez has also valued the opportunity to serve different populations during her clinical placements. At Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, she cared for adults with neurogenic language disorders like aphasia. She also worked with inpatient rehab patients at Rush Specialty Hospital and bilingual children at a dual-language public school in Chicago.

In addition, she believes Rush SLP students benefit greatly from the teacher-practitioner model. "It's truly a privilege to learn from professors who are currently practicing," Gomez says. "All of my professors are genuinely passionate about the courses they teach."

'Transformative' support

Gomez, who was raised in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood and identifies as Mexican American, says her grandmother is proud of her decision to pursue speech-language pathology. "She's really excited for me to fill the gap because there's not a lot of people from my background who typically enter the profession," she says.

She is also grateful for Rush's financial support, which she describes as "transformative." "It's alleviated my financial burden significantly, but it's also opened doors for me to accomplish dreams that I, as a little girl, never thought possible," she says. In the future, Gomez hopes to open a rehabilitation clinic with other culturally and linguistically diverse SLPs to care for underserved populations.



From left to right: Before attending Rush, Gomez graduated summa cum laude from Saint Xavier University and was inspired to become a speech-language pathologist by her grandmother, Soledad.

Scholarships prepare future SLP leaders

Shannon Theis, PhD, CCC-SLP, associate professor and SLP program director, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences, says Gomez exemplifies the core values of Rush University through her lived experiences and actions.

"Katia demonstrates leadership, academic excellence and a clear commitment to advancing health equity within the Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology program and our community partnerships," Theis says. "Katia's professionalism, insight and dedication make her an outstanding representative of the mission and values at Rush University."

According to Theis, scholarships can have a profound impact on students like Gomez by reducing their financial stress and allowing them to fully focus on their academic success, clinical training and professional development during graduate school. "For many students, scholarship support makes graduate education accessible and attainable. Beyond the financial relief, these awards also serve as a powerful reminder regarding potential contributions and reinforcing a sense of belonging and confidence within the academic community," she explains.

By allowing students to fully engage in coursework, clinical training, research and service activities, scholarships also help prepare the next generation of leaders in the field. "Students who feel supported are better positioned to innovate, collaborate and lead, especially with addressing health disparities and serving diverse populations," Theis says.

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Shannon Theis, PhD, CCC-SLP, associate professor and SLP program director, Department of Communication Disorders and Sciences

Elevating Degrees Through Ethics, Research and Social Work



Interdisciplinary coursework and research projects allow students at the Rush University College of Health Sciences (CHS) to become more successful clinicians and leaders. Whether students are collaborating to solve ethical dilemmas or health inequities, or contributing to nationally funded research studies, these opportunities enhance the value of their Rush degrees.

Cultivating ethical professionals

Ethics are ingrained in every aspect of health care, from patients acknowledging the potential risks of treatment through informed consent to scientists conducting animal and human research studies. What’s more, as artificial intelligence and other technologies influence health care, they present fresh challenges in bioethics. To help navigate

these real-world issues, CHS offers an interdisciplinary course on ethics for all graduate students.

“We want to illustrate for all students how inherently interdisciplinary the field of bioethics is,” says Clayton Thomason, JD, MDiv, associate professor and chairperson of the Department of Religion, Health and Human Values, who teaches the Introduction to Health Care Ethics course. “We use examples and illustrations from all the programs to help students understand their impact, whether they are working in the laboratory or at the bedside.”

Thomason also teaches undergraduate ethics courses, which are designed to help students in the health sciences and imaging sciences programs apply ethical principles to their own practice. “What we want to do is prepare

our students to be good professional citizens in their various fields,” he says.

Social workers: Early ‘influencers’

Similarly, CHS students benefit from interdisciplinary courses that integrate key principles of social work, according to Grisel Rodríguez-Morales, MSW, LCSW, assistant professor in the Department of Social Work and the Community Health Mentor program director in the Office of Interprofessional Education.

“The person-in-environment theory is a foundational concept in social work,” Rodríguez-Morales says. “Through interprofessional education in which social work is also involved, students from all disciplines and colleges begin to understand that patients are dealing with much more than physical symptoms and how important it is to address social drivers of health.”

Such experiences allow students to “go beyond the textbooks,” Rodríguez-Morales adds. “Equipped with the skills and person-centered framework that are essential to achieving health equity, they can influence and have a positive impact as providers after graduation,” she says.

Since the late 19th century, social workers have pioneered what it means to be an “influencer” by partnering with health care teams to support those in need and challenge the status quo, Rodríguez-Morales explains. “It’s an empowering message that comes across when we teach, practice and collaborate in interprofessional teams and that consequently can result in the type of social and political action needed to ensure equal access to services and resources,” she says. “Those who’d like to be influencers can count on the advice, collaboration and support of social workers, especially when seeking to ensure health equity and the general welfare of our society.”

Helping students, older adults through research

Research opportunities available at CHS also further elevate the value of a Rush degree. For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded a second round of a three-year project at Rush to provide occupational therapy assessment and home modifications to older adults living on Chicago’s West Side

and elsewhere in Cook County. The new funding not only represents a significant expansion of the program but also an opportunity for students in Rush’s Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) program to engage in valuable research.

“While our first round of funding served 60 adults, the most recent \$2 million award will serve 120 adults,” says Lauren Little, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, associate dean of research for CHS and professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy. “As part of this project, students can be involved in an emerging area of practice, home modifications, which involve systematically assessing and adapting a person’s physical environment to support functional performance, safety, independence and participation in meaningful occupations.”

Little explains that OTDs are uniquely qualified to lead this work because they integrate clinical knowledge of medical conditions, functional limitations, biomechanics, sensory needs and psychosocial factors with expertise in environmental design and activity analysis. “When students have the opportunity to work on research projects, particularly those in emerging practice areas or those that engage the community, they are well positioned to excel in their future work as clinicians,” she says.

“When students have the opportunity to work on research projects, particularly those in emerging practice areas or those that engage the community, they are well positioned to excel in their future work as clinicians.”

Lauren Little, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, associate dean of research for CHS and professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy

An OT's Global Impact

Lauren Stanley, MS, OTR/L, C/NDT, is proof that one person's vision can have lasting global influence. Stanley is founder and executive director of Therapists Beyond Borders (TBB), an international nonprofit organization that empowers people with disabilities through community-based training programs. To date, her team has held trainings for more than 5,000 community members and clinicians and impacted more than 50,000 individuals in Kenya, Ethiopia and other sites in east Africa.

Finding her mission

Stanley, who grew up in the Chicago suburbs, earned her master's degree in OT from Rush in 2010 (the program converted to a doctorate in 2017). She was inspired to work with children with neuromotor disorders because of her pediatric rotations and mentorship from the late Beverly Myers, MHPE, CHT, OTR/L. "Bev was amazing, and neuro became my favorite topic because of her," Stanley says.

After moving to Houston and earning her neuro-developmental treatment certification, Stanley cared for children with neuromotor conditions in outpatient, home health and school settings. An avid traveler, she founded TBB in 2018 after witnessing firsthand how medical mission trips failed to provide sustainable solutions. "The need for locally sustainable rehab programs around the world is overwhelming," Stanley explains. "About 16% of the world's population is living with a disability, and many of those individuals lack access to care."



From left to right: Lauren Stanley, founder and executive director of Therapists Beyond Borders (TBB), and Mary Musyoki, OT, TBB's local program manager, at the World Federation of Occupational Therapy Congress in Bangkok last February.

Today, her global team includes occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech-language pathologists who use a virtual "training-of-trainers" model. By co-developing training on topics like stroke and back pain with clinicians abroad, TBB empowers local teams to educate their own community members and clinicians. "Our role is working collaboratively as a global team to bring evidence-based practice and resources so the local team can implement it," she says.

Staying connected to Rush

Stanley's team has co-authored a manuscript on TBB with Rush faculty and stays connected through other projects.

"Lauren represents the very best of what Rush OT strives to cultivate — clinical excellence, global leadership and deep compassion in service of others," says Becky Ozellie, DHS, OTR/L, FAOTA, chair, associate professor and Occupational Therapy Doctorate program director. "Her work with children with neuromotor disorders, combined with her commitment to ethical, sustainable international practice through TBB, demonstrates remarkable impact and integrity. Lauren's career reflects not only professional achievement but also the values, curiosity and heart that make our alumni truly exceptional."

Ozellie says Rush graduates like Stanley leave with the skills, confidence and professionalism to step into real-world practice and make a difference right away. "More than anything, a Rush education shapes clinicians who care deeply about their work and the people they serve."

"More than anything, a Rush education shapes clinicians who care deeply about their work and the people they serve."

Becky Ozellie, DHS, OTR/L, FAOTA, chair, associate professor and OTD program director



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