



Left: President Eric M. Friedman and Foundation Director/Chief Development Officer Peter Kirk thanked student ambassadors who volunteered their time at the gala. Right: Peter Kirk, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Chair Kevin O'Toole and Foundation Board Chair Dan Foley with the "Community Torch Award."

Gala Builds a Foundation for Scholarships

The Bergen Community College Foundation hosted its inaugural "Scholarship Gala" on December 3 at The Venetian in Garfield. The event raised more than \$200,000 for student scholarships. Over 300 community leaders, donors, faculty, staff, alumni and students attended the organization's signature fundraising event that recognized Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Chair Kevin O'Toole, the Southpole Foundation and Dr. Hillel Ephros for their commitment to supporting education.

"I am incredibly proud of the Bergen Community College Foundation Board of Directors for their leadership and helping to make this event a suc-

cess," Foundation Board Chair Dan Foley said. "I am also grateful for the many donors who contributed through sponsorships, pledges and ticket purchases. These acts of generosity will literally transform our students' lives through scholarships that allow them to pursue their academic aspirations."

Event speakers included President Eric M. Friedman, Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III and students who have benefited from much-needed scholarships.

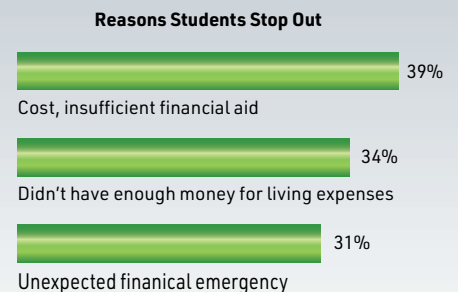
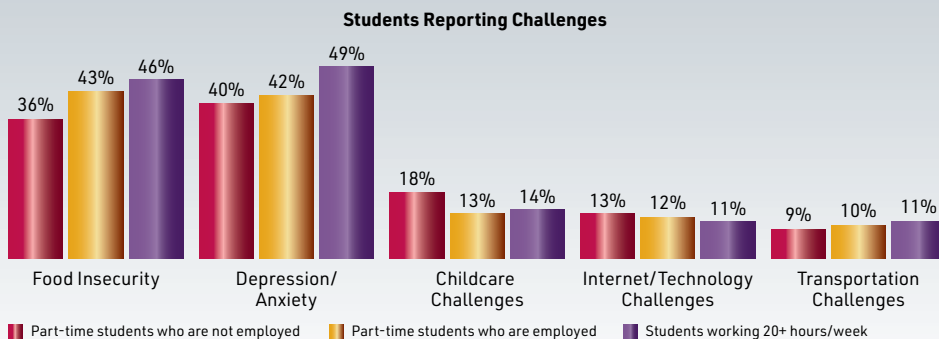
"We come together as supporters of Bergen Community College students who want to do

better for themselves and their families," President Friedman said. "That's the heart of the matter. We are a lifeline to people in our community. Pursuing the dream of a college education often takes a back seat when a student needs heat for their home, food for their family, or gas for their car to ensure they can drive to work. Scholarships make an education possible."

O'Toole received the "Community Torch Award" for his contributions as a regional leader, attorney and former elected official. In addition to his role as Port Authority chair, he founded, and serves as a managing partner of O'Toole Scriver, LLC.

Continued on page two.

BY THE NUMBERS - Why Students Need Your Support



All data provided by the Temple University Hope Center 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey.



1. Foundation Board Chair Dan Foley, Southpole Foundation Board of Directors members Gene Kang, Aaron Kwon and Kyunghee Choi, President Eric M. Friedman, Foundation Director/Chief Development Officer Peter Kirk. 2. Dr. Hillel Ephros and Ellen Ephros. 3. The sold-out event included more than 300 guests. 4. Julia Orlando, Donnalee Corrieri, Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III, Marion Troise, Sandi Weiss and Diane Darmody. 5. Students Brianna Miller and Estrella Luna provided testimonials on the importance of scholarships. 6. David Blakeslee, Foundation Board Member Philip J. Ciarco III, Board of Trustees Chair Dorothy Blakeslee and Kathleen Ciarco.

Gala Builds Foundation, *continued*

Representatives of the Southpole Foundation accepted the “Philanthropy Award” for their sustained efforts to support the College for the last two decades. Established in 2003 as the Khym Foundation, the organization supports underserved members of the New York and New Jersey community. The family members behind the foundation established the iconic streetwear brand – Southpole – in the 1990s.

Dr. Hillel Ephros received the “Dedication to Education Award” for his years of service as a Bergen dental hygiene faculty member and leader in the regional medical community. He directs the oral and maxillofacial surgery residency at St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center in Paterson as chair of the Department of Dentistry and Oral

Maxillofacial Surgery at the hospital. He continues to actively mentor Bergen students.

Elected officials from the County of Bergen, Senator Holly Schepisi (R-39) and Assemblymen Robert Auth (R-39) and John Azzariti (R-39) presented each of the honorees with legislative commendations.

A 501 (c) (3) nonprofit charitable organization, the Foundation awards student scholarships in amounts up to and including the full cost of tuition, fees and educational expenses to help them remain enrolled by reducing financial barriers. Donors contribute to the Foundation through one-time gifts, endowments and grants. Contribute at Bergen.edu/donate. ■

Gala Sponsors

- The Perino Family Foundation
- Russo Development
- Southpole Foundation
- DeCotiis, FitzPatrick, Cole & Giblin, LLP
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- Stephanie Jeanette-Reynolds and Reynolds Asset Management
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- Mi Na Ahn
- Novins, York, Jacobus & Dooley
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Snapshotted



The Leadership Lunch Series, presented by the Office of Student Life, helps students develop new skills.



Members of the newest nursing program graduating class received their pins in December.



Phi Theta Kappa inducted its fall 2025 class during an evening ceremony.



Checkmate: the annual chess tournament drew dozens of players for a test of wits.



Hosted by the Fashion Club and Threads, student designers presented their work on the runway in the Fall Fashion Show.

Trustee Honored, New Members Join

The close of the fall semester featured a number of news items from the Board of Trustees, including an award for Sheetal Ranjan and the installation of two new members to the College's governing body.



The New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) recognized Ranjan for her service as the council's chair for the past two years. NJCCC President Aaron Fichtner (pictured with Ranjan) said Ranjan has indelibly impacted the more than 250,000 community college students in the state.

"Dr. Ranjan's unwavering belief in the transformative power of community colleges has set a standard of excellence for all in the NJCCC," he said. "She has inspired community college leaders across New Jersey to work together toward a common vision and purpose. All 18 community colleges thank her for her leadership and commitment."

Among the progress initiated under Ranjan's leadership, the NJCCC developed the "Opportunity Agenda," a shared vision for the state's community colleges, in spring 2024 and updated that vision in fall 2025.

Staunchly devoted to higher education, Ranjan has served as a Bergen trustee since 2017 and as a member of the NJCCC executive committee since 2019. Nationally, she completed a term as the northeast regional chair of the Association of Community College Trustees. Ranjan works as a professor of justice studies and sociology

at Montclair State University. She has completed extensive research on violence prevention and intervention, securing \$7.5 million in grants to establish the Healthcare Approaches to Justice Collaborative at Montclair State. Ranjan has published numerous articles in peer reviewed journals such as *Contemporary Issues in Health, Crime, and Punishment*.

Meanwhile, longtime Bergen County government leader Michele Dilorgi and alumna Ourania Nassif Rahman ('25) joined the board this semester.

With 35 years of experience in public service and executive leadership, Dilorgi (pictured, right) currently serves as the executive director of the Housing Authority of Bergen County.



She oversees strategic operations, policy development and program implementation for the agency that develops housing opportunities for low-income families and adults. Previously, Dilorgi held numerous roles in local, county and federal government, including serving as chief of staff for Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III and leading district operations for two members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Among her accomplishments, Dilorgi played a critical role in the county's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. She also serves as a trustee for Bergen New Bridge Medical Center, a commissioner on the Bergen County

Commission on the Status of Women, a former elected councilwoman and a number of civic, faith-based and women's leadership organizations. The new trustee holds multiple credentials from Rutgers University.

Elected as the board's alumni trustee, Rahman (pictured, right) distinguished herself at Bergen as a member of the STEM Student Scholars organization. Among her work,



she conducted research on the antimicrobial properties of fungi and presented at the 2024 STEM C^2 Research Summit. Rahman also worked as a peer writing tutor in the award-winning Cerullo Learning Assistance Center. She graduated from Bergen with a 4.0 GPA as a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. Rahman now attends Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, studying computer science and cybersecurity. Her program of study will allow her to earn a bachelor's degree in 2027 and a master's one year later. At FDU, she participates on the Division I women's fencing team and founded the university's motorsports engineering club.

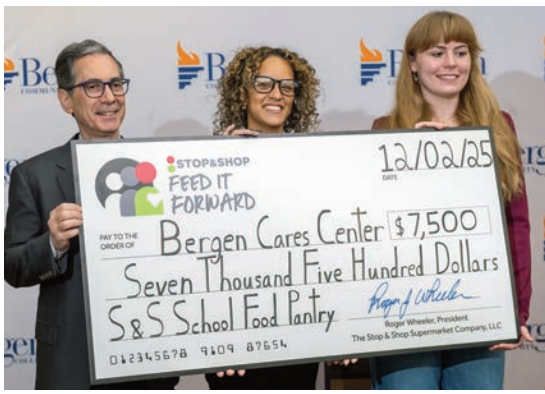
The College's 12-person board of trustees features nine individuals appointed by the county, two by the governor, and one elected by the student body. President Eric M. Friedman serves as an ex-officio member of the board. ■

Bergen Has Holiday Spirit

The College's annual Holiday Celebration provided an opportunity for faculty, staff, retirees, trustees and community partners to celebrate the season. The event featured festive foods, a gift basket raffle and live carolers (pictured). Attendees gave back by supporting the College's on-campus Bergen Cares Center through donating nonperishable household and essential items. The celebration also concluded "Bandit's Holiday Hide-n-Seek," a scavenger hunt activity for faculty and staff leading up to the event. Participants searched for stuffed animal versions of Bergen's mascot "Bandit" and photographed themselves with it in order to win prizes. ■



Edward Sanchez won the gift basket raffle (pictured, bottom, left). Mary-Ann Kho and Shawn Kane (pictured, bottom, right).



Left: President Eric M. Friedman, Bergen Cares Center Coordinator Annie Echeverry and student Julia Huber. Right: Students have access to nonperishable and fresh food options in the Bergen Cares Center.

Stop & Shop Fights Student Hunger

Representatives of the 350-store Stop & Shop grocery retailer chain recently donated \$7,500 to the Bergen Cares Center food pantry. Company representatives visited the College's main campus on "Giving Tuesday," December 2, to present the donation to Bergen officials.

"Stop & Shop's generosity reflects a commitment to supporting the community – a central value we share," President Eric M. Friedman said. "I hope you can see firsthand how your generosity impacts our college and our students. On behalf of the trustees and everybody that supports this college, we sincerely appreciate your support."

Stop & Shop established its food pantry program to help limit barriers impacting students' ability to succeed in the classroom. The program has grown to support 260 education-based pantries across its five-state footprint by providing gift card donations. External Communications

Manager Daniel Wolk represented the company at the donation event.

"At Stop & Shop, our number one goal has always been to combat hunger," he said. "I need to thank the entire faculty and staff here at Bergen Community College because the fact is, without you, these students would not be able to thrive in the next chapter of their lives."

To combat student hunger at the institution, the Bergen Cares Center offers food, clothing, emergency funds and rental/utility assistance to students, faculty and staff in need. Facing hunger in an academic setting can upset a student's health, focus on coursework and academic success, according to Cares Center Coordinator Annie Echeverry.

"Since opening, our pantry has made a meaningful impact, providing students with reliable

access to food and helping create an inclusive campus for everyone," she said. "Thank you to Stop & Shop for investing in our student success and for standing with us in this important work."

At the donation event, President Friedman said the Cares Center has evolved to meet student needs, including by establishing the Threads Clothing Closet, where students can receive clothing for occasions such as job interviews or simply going to class.

"The Bergen Cares Center has been recognized as a model for excellence in a community college," he said. "I'm very proud of this initiative."

Bergen student Julia Huber relied on the Cares Center as a new mother facing food insecurity and expressed her gratitude to Echeverry and the Center for its support.

"Imagine being a student in today's economy, trying to move forward, trying to build a better life while inflation rises," she said. "Now imagine walking to a place on campus where those worries suddenly have real solutions and staff smile at you and say 'you are not alone.' That is the difference the Bergen Cares Center can make for students like me."

Huber now works in the Cares Center alongside Echeverry, ensuring each student has their needs met, while creating a welcoming environment for students seeking help.

For more information on donating items to the Cares Center, or to inquire about support, email bergencares@bergen.edu. ■

FACULTY FOCUS

E-Sports, Real Homecoming for Coach

Thomas Derr ('17) maintains a loaded lineup: Bergen alumnus, high school history teacher, Bergen adjunct English professor and head coach of the College's e-sports team.



"Bergen gave me my start," he said. "I came back to Bergen because it represents a full-circle moment for me: from student, to professor, to coach, all in the same place that first believed in me."

With more than three decades of experience as a gamer and lifelong passion for building student engagement, Derr accepted the role of e-sports head coach to create opportunities for students both in competition and in personal growth.

"I want today's students to see that their time here can open doors they never imagined, just like it did for me," he said.

As a high school social studies teacher in Garfield, Derr has worked to inspire students to see the relevance of history in their own lives. At the same time, he guides students as they develop

their voices and critical writing skills by instructing English Composition as an adjunct professor at Bergen.

"Those moments of growth are what make teaching at Bergen so rewarding," he said.

Derr earned his associate degree from Bergen in 2017. He holds a bachelor's degree in history from Rutgers University (2019) and a master's degree in history from Rutgers University-Newark (2020).

"Bergen has always been more than just a steppingstone for me," he said. "It has been the foundation of a career dedicated to education, leadership, and community." ■

Student Elected to Public Office at 19

Student Alias Ragsdale, 19, took office last month as the youngest elected official in the history of the City of Clifton, New Jersey. Driven by a deep passion for service, Ragsdale ran for a seat on the city's board of education and won in November.

"As a commissioner on the Clifton Board of Education, I aim to bring a fresh perspective shaped by my recent experience as a student within our schools," said Ragsdale. "I look forward to collaborating with board members to strengthen our trade/certificate programs and overall, deliver meaningful results for both students and taxpayers. My goal is to lead with vision and integrity, guiding Clifton toward a future that supports every resident and strengthens our community – beginning with our schools which are most important."

Ragsdale's community involvement goes beyond this one election cycle. In August 2025, he helped distribute clean water to residents affected by the Paterson water main break.

"Participating in the effort to help those affected by the water main break in Paterson felt more

like a duty, to be honest," he said. "It began with a U-Haul truck and one pallet and grew to multiple 53-foot-long trucks from ShopRite and Walmart."

Through the initiative, Ragsdale not only provided support for his community but also connected with his community. "I enjoyed being able to talk to people and meet new people," he said. "It's always a joy of mine to be able to help others."

Ragsdale also serves as vice president of the Passaic County Young Democrats, corresponding secretary of the Clifton Democratic Club, a member of the Passaic County Youth Services Commission and a member of the Passaic County Democratic Committee.

Pursuing a degree in business administration with plans to become a lawyer, Ragsdale said his mother serves as an inspiration. Felicita has worked as a department coordinator in the Office of Health Services at Bergen for 36 years.

"I've been around the school all my life," he said. "Staying focused and committed to my educa-



tion has made me successful at Bergen," said Ragsdale.

He encourages other young people to get involved.

"Community service takes everyone," he said. "Reach out to local leaders, and just try to find ways to help your community." ■



Bears Bring Joy

With the "most wonderful time of the year" approaching, Executive Assistant to the Board of Trustees and the President Maria Ferrara sought to provide some much-needed cheer for children spending the holidays at the Valley Hospital in Paramus. Ferrara organized a group of 14 volunteers (pictured) at the College to stuff, fluff and dress teddy bears that would ultimately end up in the hands of some of Valley's smallest patients just days before Christmas. Volunteers dressed the bears in colorful costumes, including mermaids, sports stars and college graduates. ■



Commencement 2026 Will Rock!

May 15, 2026
10 a.m.

The Prudential Center

We'll see you
at the Rock!