



Congratulations, Class of 2026!

Nearly 1,100 members of the Bergen class of 2026 celebrated at the Prudential Center during the College's 57th annual commencement exercises on May 15. Joined by thousands of faculty, staff, family, friends and special guests, the class featured students such as valedictorian Alexie Kotfisz. During her remarks, she encouraged her peers to follow their hearts – even if it means making difficult choices along the way, as she did.

"Standing here today proves that our circumstances may challenge us, but they do not have to define our limits," she said. "There is no ideal path. So, listen to yourself, give yourself grace and learn from every setback."

Kotfisz entered the College expecting to pursue

a career in the culinary arts after earning acclaim as a top high school pastry chef. However, enrolling at Bergen unlocked another interest – mathematics – that ultimately inspired her to change her entire professional outlook. At Bergen, Kotfisz earned a 4.0 GPA while remaining active in numerous on campus organizations. She will transfer to Ramapo University with a full scholarship to prepare to enter the field of mathematics education.

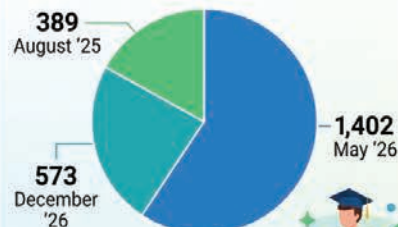
Graduates Sienna Jorge (pictured, bottom left) and Liam Setti also had featured roles during the ceremony, with Jorge performing the Star-Spangled Banner and Setti, the Student Government Association president, leading the graduates in the ceremonial turning of cap tassels after providing remarks.

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BY THE NUMBERS -

THE CLASS OF 2026

GRADUATES IN THE CLASS OF 2026



309
PHI THETA KAPPA
MEMBERS



66
4.0 GPAs



15
TURNING POINT
PROGRAM
STUDENTS



206
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
EARNING ASSOCIATE DEGREES
(EARLY COLLEGE/
DUAL ENROLLMENT)





1. President Eric M. Friedman and Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Andrew Tomko. 2. For the first time, the Prudential Center hosted Bergen's most important day of the academic year. 3. Perino Family Foundation Send-off Scholarship winners. 4. Grand Marshal Sarah Markgraf.

Commencement, *continued*

Special guests included State Assemblywoman Lisa Swain (D-38), who served as the keynote speaker. She discussed the "power of one."

"Be good, be kind, be creative, be giving, follow your passions, and remember, it's one step at a time," she said. "Today is not your finish line, but your starting one."

Board of Trustees Chair Dorothy Blakeslee, President Eric M. Friedman, Bergen County Executive James J. Tedesco III and Bergen County Board of Commissioners Vice Chair Tracy Zur also provided remarks, while Professor Emerita Sarah Markgraf opened the event as the grand marshal. Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Andrew Tomko served as master of ceremonies.

In a commencement tradition sponsored by donors to the Bergen Community College Foundation, eight randomly selected graduates received "send-off" scholarships to help begin their journey beyond Bergen. For the second

consecutive year, Assistant Director of Information Technology Business Operations Kirsten Perino and her family foundation sponsored five \$1,000 scholarships, with the College Foundation sponsoring a sixth \$1,000 award and President Friedman sponsoring a seventh. A pair of anonymous donors sponsored a \$500 scholarship in memory of Bergen Office of Specialized Services staff member Tiana Vega, and Daniel Vida, the son of Dean of Enrollment Services Peter Vida. Graduates Ivanna Mariela Caballero, Marylu Duran, Anya Magdalena Cornine, Nicole Alexandra Hernandez, Sierra Lee, Jocelyn Ortiz, Keondrya Melanie Pineda and Shawn-Anton Flenn Stretferdt Jr. each had their name randomly selected.

For the first time in Bergen history, the institution's signature event to celebrate its graduates took place in the state's largest city at the home of the New Jersey Devils. Bergen's commencement venue for the last nine years, MetLife Stadium, could not accommodate this year's event due to the venue's 2026 World Cup obligations. ■

They Said It

Soundbytes from Commencement 2026



"Bergen gave us the room to become more than we imagined. Now, we are leaving changed, with bigger dreams, stronger voices, and the courage to pursue what once felt out of reach."

Alexie Kotfisz
Valedictorian,
Class of 2026



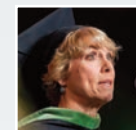
"By investing in education, we are investing in the future – and that future is you."

James J. Tedesco III
Bergen County Executive



"What makes life meaningful is not that it lasts forever, but that we choose to live authentically, fight for what matters, and make something meaningful out of the time we are given."

Liam Setti
Student Government President,
Class of 2026



"Your careers, your goals, your dreams – they may take time. They may take detours.

But persistence matters more than perfection."

Assemblywoman Lisa Swain (D-38)
Keynote Speaker



"Be someone who listens. Someone who shows up for those around you. Someone who builds bridges instead of walls. Be the glue."

Tracy Zur
Bergen County Commissioners
Vice Chair

Snapshotted



President Friedman and members of the Board of Trustees in attendance at Commencement 2026.



Pinning ceremonies took place on campus during the weeks leading up to Commencement 2026.



Commencement is always a family affair!



The on-campus academic awards ceremony recognized the top students of the class of 2026.



The grads' colorful caps help put a personal stamp on Commencement 2026.



Dean of Learning Support Khairia Fazal, Academic Coaching Supervisor Kelli Hayes, Writing Center Supervisor John Findura and Cerullo Center Manager Candice Kaup Scioscia.

Tutoring Center Receives Coaching Program of Excellence Award

Building on its reputation as one of the nation's best community college student support resources, the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center (CLAC) has received the "Coaching Program of Excellence Award" from the Association for the Coaching and Tutoring Professions (ACTP). The honor marks the latest major award from the ACTP for the Cerullo Center, which previously won the 2025 "Learning Center of Excellence Award" for two-year institutions.

"Creating an environment where both coaches and students can thrive is at the heart of everything we do and I think that intentionality is what sets us apart," Cerullo Center Manager Candice Kaup Scioscia said.

The award recognizes the Cerullo Center's focus on expanding awareness of their academic coaching and tutoring services and its efforts to strengthen how the Cerullo Center recruits, trains and supports their staff.

Academic Coaching Supervisor Kelli Hayes and Writing Center Supervisor John Findura accepted the award at the ACTP annual conference in March. The pair attended various panels focused on innovation, neurodiversity and assessment-based topics within the tutoring sphere. Both Hayes and Findura also presented "Student Centered Focus: Using Assessment to Drive Change," where they shared assessment practices developed at the Cerullo Center.

"I attended numerous presentations and had the ability to talk with a large number of tutoring and coaching administrators from colleges and universities around the country," Findura said. "Having worked in this field since 2009, it is always exciting to be around others who are involved in the same work and have such a deep knowledge base."

"I feel fortunate and grateful to work at a college that supports its learning center and all of its initiatives so well," Hayes said. We have such outstanding program because we have such dedicated and supportive coaches who are always coming to me with ideas for how to better serve and support our students and the Bergen community."

The Cerullo Center provides no-cost, one-on-one, walk-in and in-class tutoring in more than 200 academic subjects from over 100 professional and student tutors. Assistance areas include a math and science walk-in center, writing center and English language resource center.

Khairia Fazal, dean of learning support, and herself the recipient of numerous awards, has led the Cerullo Center for more than 20 years. A donation from Bergen County residents Henry and Edith Cerullo led to a rededication of the student resource in 2003. ■



A Real Page Turner: President's Book Club Conversations



As the latest entry in Bergen's continually expanding digital portfolio, the College launched the "Book Club Conversations" podcast with President Eric M. Friedman this spring. The periodic podcast hosted by President Friedman features a deep dive on a piece of literature selected by the president and a faculty/staff/administrator guest. The debut episode opened the series with a comprehensive discussion on Haruki Murakami's book *"The City and Its Uncertain Walls"* with Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Andrew Tomko. ■



Scan to listen to the debut episode!



LASA Heads Back to School

Professor Cesarina Vinas (left) and members of the Latin American Student Association (LASA) visited with elementary students from the Paramus Public Schools district this spring to share stories about Latin culture and educate some of the county's youngest learners. ■



Vice President of External Affairs Suzanne Wetzel; Manager of Workforce and Career Placement Nancy Podesta; President Eric M. Friedman; Executive Administrative Assistant Christine Silvestri; Executive Assistant to the Board of Trustees and the President Maria Ferrara; CIANJ President Anthony Russo; and Board of Trustees Member Ana Marti.

CIANJ Says Bergen Cares

The Commerce and Industry Association of New Jersey (CIANJ), in partnership with Commerce Magazine, recognized Bergen with a "Companies That Care Award" for brightening the holiday season of Valley Hospital patients through a teddy bear donation program. CIANJ celebrated Bergen during a morning ceremony on April 16 at the Glen Ridge Country Club.

"We are proud to celebrate these organizations that lead with purpose and make a difference beyond their business operations," CIANJ President Anthony Russo said. "It is always an honor to host this event and highlight the incredible work being done across New Jersey."

Maria Ferrara, Executive Assistant to the Board of Trustees and the President, organized a group of 14 volunteers at the College to stuff, fluff and dress teddy bears that ultimately ended up in the hands of some of Valley Hospital's smallest patients just days before Christ-

mas. Volunteers dressed the bears in colorful costumes, including mermaids, sports stars and college graduates. Ferrara said she felt compelled to raise the spirits of children spending the holidays undergoing medical treatments.

"For these children, the 'most wonderful time of the year' was very difficult," she said. "I think that's why we had such an overwhelming response from the College community to provide some much-needed cheer for the children. Everyone wanted to contribute to something positive that let them know that people in their community care about them."

Although more than 40 organizations earned recognition through the CIANJ program, Bergen represented one of only three from the higher education sector—and the lone community college. Bergen has secured six "Companies That Care" awards in the last decade. ■



ALUMNA SPOTLIGHT

Bernadette Duran ('20)

Alumna Bernadette Duran ('20), a former Student Government Association president, marches to her own drum ... she teaches music!

Duran, the band director and teacher at Bogota Junior/Senior High School, said Bergen helped change her life.

"I decided to attend Bergen because I felt lost in my major," Duran recalled, saying she originally sought to major in chemistry. "Bergen gave me the opportunity and the grace to explore myself."

Feeling conflicted about studying chemistry, Duran found inspiration to pursue a career in music through mentors and music professors Andrew Krikun and Daniel Sheehan.

"I was able to receive a great foundation at Bergen," she said. "The community, the support, and the professors made my time in college a valuable time."

Duran said her experience as SGA president helped her gain confidence, management strategies and communication skills. She also learned the importance of networking and making connections with others.

"Ask for help and make connections," she said. "You never know who will help you in the future."

After Duran graduated from Bergen with an Associate in Fine Arts with a concentration in music, she transferred to William Paterson University to further her studies in music. In 2023, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in music education with a concentration in classical saxophone. ■



Summer Classes? Kind of a Flex.

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Bergen's PTK delegation at the Catalyst Conference.

New Honors for PTK Chapter

The College's internationally recognized chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society of two-year colleges, has added a batch of new awards to its trophy case. Among them, the Alpha Epsilon Phi chapter received top 100 honors among 1,250 worldwide, two students won elections for PTK executive officer positions and Assistant Director of PTK and Honors Anna Gergen earned the "Distinguished Advisor Award."

"There is a lot of hard work that happens behind the scenes to make these recognitions possible; I am grateful to my co-advisor, Professor Lisa Mayer, along with the students, now and always," she said.

Gergen accepted her award at the annual PTK Catalyst Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, where honor society members from around the globe networked, engaged in educational forums and participated in a speech competition.

While there, students Beixi Chen and Endri Dobrovoda each won positions for PTK executive officer positions. Chen, Bergen PTK's director of recruitment and service, will serve as the Middle States region executive vice president for the 2026-27 academic year, while Dobrovoda, the current Bergen PTK chapter president, will serve as the Division I international vice president.

Additionally, Bergen Vice President of External Affairs Suzanne Wetzel received the "Distinguished College Administrator Award" at the Catalyst Conference for connecting PTK students and the Bergen Community College Foundation and Alumni Network.

"I am constantly inspired by this dynamic group of students and the impactful projects they lead to support our campus and community," she said.

Meanwhile, in the weeks following the conference, PTK student Chennelle Brown received the "2026 World Impact Scholar" award and a \$2,500 scholarship through PTK and Coca-Cola North America. The honor recognizes outstanding community college students prepared to contribute to their local economies and workforce. Brown previously served as Bergen's PTK chapter president during the 2024-25 academic year.

"I am elated and shocked because even though I had dedicated most of my time to PTK, I was doubtful I would receive any awards because there are so many exceptional people in the society from all across the United States and surrounding countries," she said. ■

New Faculty Senate Leadership



The College's Faculty Senate members have elected history Professor Christine Eubank as chair. Eubank succeeds English Professor Alan Kaufman, who did not seek reelection. Kaufman served as chair since 2006. In the role of chair, Eubank will lead the academic arm of the College's participatory and shared gov-

ernance structure that ensures faculty engagement and voice in institutional decision-making. Eubank has taught at Bergen since 2012. Professors Tomira Rozar (vice chair), Kevin Olbrys (secretary) and Tobyn DeMarco (treasurer) will join Eubank as senate officers for the 2026-2027 academic year. President Friedman will recognize Professor Kaufman at an upcoming ceremony. ■



The 2026 Speech Competition winners.

Speech Competition Returns

After a six-year COVID-19-induced hiatus, Bergen's Speech Competition once again found its voice this spring.

Led by communication Professors Gina Costa and Kathleen Williams, the pair revived the event that had not taken place since 2019 to offer students the opportunity to practice their research and public speaking skills.

"Many college students avoid public speaking due to fear or anxiety about presenting in front of others," Costa said. "The speech competition encourages students to step out of their comfort and challenge themselves. It also reminds the students how important these communication skills are for their future success."

In this year's competition, five students topped the field of 47, earning trophies and cash prizes sponsored by the Bergen Community College Foundation:

- **First Place:** Maria Veronica Aguiere Franco - "Connected But Alone: The Paradox of Our Generation"
- **Second Place:** Afazur Rahman - "The Day You Can't Tell What's Real Anymore"
- **Third Place:** Will Hering - "How John Locke Inspires Us to Educate"
- **Fourth Place:** Tiffany Gutierrez - "Understanding the Burden of Proof in Sexual Assault Cases"
- **Fifth Place:** Haesu Kang - "The Importance of Education to Us"

Costa said the event remains a success in more ways than one.

"We're not just teaching concepts in a classroom—we're giving students real chances to use their voices, take risks and grow," she said. "It's one thing to talk about communication; it's another to stand up and do it. This event gives students that space, and it reflects our commitment to helping them build skills that matter both in college and in their careers." ■