

Bergen STEM Team Tops in U.S. ... Times Two!



Professor PJ Ricatto and students Alejandro Olarte, Estrella Luna, Derek Gonzalez and Lisandro Martinez.

For an unprecedented second time in four years, Bergen Community College STEM students have placed first in the nationwide Community College Innovation Challenge. Sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges and National Science Foundation, four Bergen students earned first place honors for their project, "Pop-Up Hydroponic Farming Made from Recycled Materials." Chemistry Professor PJ Ricatto mentored the students.

"All five of us were in tears," he said. "This was not an easy task."

Students Alejandro Olarte, Derek Gonzalez, Estrella Luna and Lisandro Martinez, along with Ricatto, travelled to Washington D.C. from June 9-12 to participate in the national competition alongside 50 students from 12 community colleges across the United States. Students also participated in an Innovation Boot Camp, providing them with professional development and mentoring meant to develop the teams' strategic communication and entrepreneurial skills.

The first-place project features what the team calls "stacks" - three-tiered towers of reclaimed shipping pallets, hydroponic beds and LED lights for growing plants. The team aims to

"Bergen's unprecedented first-place victory in the Community College Innovation Challenge is a testament to the extraordinary talent, dedication, and ingenuity of our STEM students and the exceptional guidance of our faculty. This national recognition underscores our commitment to fostering innovation and empowering the next generation of problem-solvers." - President Eric M. Friedman

place the stacks in unoccupied retail spaces, thereby giving the buildings a new purpose as "food-production community centers" to provide local residents with freshly grown produce. Inspiration for the project came from a 2023 *Journal of Obesity* study that found only 26

percent of New Jersey adults consume the recommended five daily servings of fruits and vegetables. Coupled with rising rates of food insecurity and so-called "food swamps" and "food deserts" where communities lack access to fresh produce, the students sought to affect change. Luna, a biology student, led the group's research into food swamps, food insecurity and hydroponic farming.

"Working with hydroponics overall has made me more interested in food supply and nutrition," she said.

Ricatto said the students communicated the issue clearly and explained how hydroponic farming can help remedy societal problems.

"I think I'm most proud of their ability to listen and adjust their pitch to make sure that it was as understandable as possible to someone who has no knowledge of this field," he said. Gonzalez, a chemistry student, said winning the Innovation Challenge meant more because of the bond the team developed.

"It was an amazing moment made unforgettable because I was able to share this victory with friends I care about deeply," he said.

Emily Vandalovsky, Dean of Math, Science and Technology, said the College has become a "magnet for STEM excellence". ■

BY THE NUMBERS - 100% Pass Rate

For two consecutive years, the entire Bergen dental hygiene graduating class has passed the Commission on Dental Competency and Assessments ("clinical boards") that officially license them for work in the field. Now that's something to smile about!





VP Suzanne Wetzel, Southpole's Kyung Hee Choi, Southpole's Sang Hwan Pak, Foundation Director Peter Kirk, Board Chair Dorothy Blakeslee and Southpole's Harold Lee.

Southpole Designs a Legacy at Bergen

In late spring, the Bergen Community College Foundation hosted members of the Southpole Foundation Board of Directors to accept a \$20,000 donation to the Foundation—the latest in a two-decade record of generosity. Since 2006, Southpole has donated nearly \$300,000 to Bergen in support of student scholarships.

Southpole Lead Board Member Sang Hwan Pak and members Kyung Hee Choi and Harold Lee visited the College to meet with students impacted by scholarships that honor the fashion designer company's founders David and Kenny Khym.

Alumna Catherine Park ('25) said the Southpole scholarship allowed her to present at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research in Pittsburgh last fall.

"It is one of the most acclaimed undergraduate conferences in the country and the kind of opportunity that I would not have been able to take advantage of had it not been for the Foundation's support," she said. "I believe that the continued support from the Southpole Foundation will allow students at Bergen to be able to access invaluable opportunities."

Meanwhile, psychology graduate Young Sook Park ('25) applauded the Southpole Foundation's contributions that supported Bergen's Institute for Multicultural Learning, an open access learning concept for underrepresented students.

"Learning in the institute's classes didn't just give me knowledge," she said. "It helped me realign my path in life."

To date, the Southpole Foundation has awarded \$4.3 million in grants to community-based organizations and community colleges in New York and New Jersey. ■

History-Making Art Honored

In recognition of a comprehensive project to restore a collection of outdoor sculptures at the main campus in Paramus, the institution has received a "Bergen County Historic Preservation" award from the Bergen County Historic Preservation Advisory Board. Professor Tim Blunk led the sculpture renovation effort.

"This award is the culmination of the work of many people on our campus, including our library staff, art history professors, and student researchers over the last ten years," he said. "These sculptors, many of whom have since passed away, worked at the highest level and have pieces in the most significant museums and art collections in the world. It had become a minor tragedy that the community was completely unaware of the works on campus."

Originally created by artists of international acclaim, many of the sculptures first came to the College at the conclusion of an outdoor exhibition at Van Saun County Park in 1974. At the time, the "New York Times" referred to the Van Saun exhibition as the "largest collection of outdoor sculp-

ture ever assembled in one place." With its park-like grounds, institutional appreciation for the arts and close proximity to Van Saun, the College's 167-acre Paramus campus appealed to the New Jersey Cultural Council, which championed the sculptures' relocation to the campus. College officials agreed, accepted the sculptures and placed them throughout the campus.

Over time, however, the sculptures began to deteriorate due to weather, age and environmental conditions, necessitating an investment in restoration.

In 2023, Blunk applied for and received a \$12,000 grant from the Bergen County Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs for a project that would seek to restore the sculptures to their original form.

In consultation with the sculptors or their descendants, sandblasting, welding repairs by Professor Mark Balzarette and students from the industrial technologies program, and painting, the sculptures now once again feature their original surfaces and colors. Blunk, who also directs the efforts of the institution's Gallery Bergen art exhibition space, said the award especially recognizes the individuals who helped bring the project to life.



Students participated in the restoration of outdoor art sculptures such as "Black & Red" by Eric Snowden.

"We saw this as a learning opportunity and assembled a fantastic group of students who researched the individual artists as well as the Minimalist period of art out of which these sculptures were born," he said. "The project was also directly hands-on: last summer, a team of students became proficient in some advanced techniques in art preservation." ■

Snapshotted



Retired United States Marine Corps member Rhonda Pekow Keynoted the Women Veterans Day event.



The creative arts took centerstage at the annual BICA showcase event.



Dozens of supporters gathered to raise the Pride flag in early June.



Staff Julia Gibson, Tabatha Jones and Dee Jackson helped the College celebrate Juneteenth.



The second annual Facilities Field Day brought the College community together for activities, games and lunch.



President Eric M. Friedman, Trustee Sheetal Ranjan, Tracy Rand and Vice President AJ Trump.

Specialized Services Director Receives NJCCC "Spirit Award"

For the second consecutive year, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges has recognized a Bergen leader with one of the organization's top honors. This year, Tracy Rand, the senior director of student access and transition services, received the "Spirit Award" recognizing her "above and beyond" service to community college students. Annually, the NJCCC recognizes the state's best faculty, staff, students, trustees and community partners through the New Jersey Community College Awards program. The NJCCC recognized the honorees during a banquet as part of the second annual New Jersey Community College Opportunity Summit in Atlantic City.

"The award is symbolic of the 'Community College Spirit' of perseverance, dedication and excellence," NJCCC President Aaron Fichtner said in a congratulatory letter to Rand. "[You have] demonstrated effort and outcomes of going above and beyond in service to community colleges and the students we serve."

For 15 years, Rand has led the Office for Specialized Services, which seeks to provide students, including those with disabilities, with the opportunity to fully participate in the College's educational programs. Under Rand's leadership, the College has developed a portfolio of resources for students that includes services, accommo-

datations and initiatives such as the Turning Point Program. The full-time, on-campus, two-year postsecondary education experience for young adults with intellectual disabilities allows enrollees to participate in college-level coursework and develop employment skills. Students have the opportunity to graduate with industry recognized credentials and a Certificate of Achievement from the College.

Rand also directed efforts to establish the Center for Adult Transition through funding received from the State of New Jersey. The center serves as a resource hub and offers customized peer mentoring and enhanced academic and social support to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Recognized as a statewide leader, Rand has worked in partnership with several New Jersey colleges to secure approximately \$7 million in federal grant funding to support the development and expansion of inclusive postsecondary programming for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

"Promoting inclusivity and a sense of belonging for all students, including those with disabilities, really captures the spirit of the American community college," Rand said. "I am proud that Bergen exemplifies this spirit."

Last year, the NJCCC selected Bergen Board of Trustees Chair Dorothy Blakeslee for the Ronald D. Winthers Community College Trustee Leadership Award as part of the organization's annual recognition program. ■



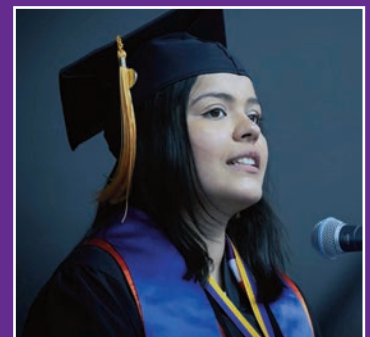
Roy Hidalgo-Ruiz
Rutgers Business School



Catherine Park
Bowdoin College



Francisco Maneri
Stanford University



Kaylie Quezada
Wellesley College

Oh, the Places You'll Go! Graduating from Bergen opens a world of transfer opportunities for students seeking to earn a bachelor's degree. Here's a sampling of the next destinations for members of the class of '25.



Foundation Scholarships Support Students

In May, the Bergen Community College Foundation awarded \$187,750 in scholarships to 237 students for the upcoming fall semester. The 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organization recognized the scholarship awardees during an afternoon ceremony at the College.

"By addressing the financial barriers to obtaining a college degree, the Bergen Community College

Foundation helps students realize their dreams," Foundation Board of Directors Chair Dan Foley said. "I am sincerely grateful for the donors who make these dreams a reality."

Donors contribute to the Foundation through one-time gifts, endowments and grants that support student scholarships, educational programs and special initiatives at Bergen.

More than 500 students applied for scholarships as part of the current awards cycle. Students apply by submitting information such as their program of study, GPA and essays. College faculty and staff volunteers evaluate student applications, score them and then the Foundation matches the highest ranked entries with individual scholarship criteria outlined in the donor funds. ■

Bergen Students Shine at Beacon Conference

Recognizing excellence in community college student scholarship, Bergen hosted the 33rd annual installment of the Beacon Conference at its main campus on June 6. A collaborative of 15 mid-Atlantic community colleges, of which Bergen is a charter member, have partnered to organize the event since 1993.

Supported by faculty mentors, the conference's interdisciplinary approach allows students from the gamut of academic disciplines—from biology to literature—to submit their research, essays and analysis for possible inclusion in the conference. Faculty evaluators advance the top three projects in each category to panel competitions at the conference.

Nearly 50 students, including 12 from Bergen, received invitations to the conference and competed in the panel competitions where winners received \$100 awards. Faculty from regional community colleges served as competition judges. Bergen students placed first in five categories, the most for any college with students

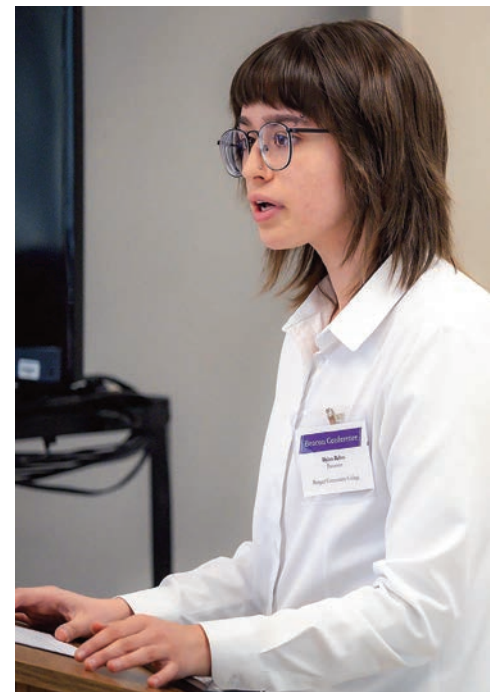
competing in the event. Bergen's winners were:

- **Vincent Jericho** - "The Evil Within: Moral Decay and A Good Man is Hard to Find." Mentor - Professor Mark Altschuler.
- **Hanieh Kachooee** - "The Feminization of Poverty in Iran." Mentor - Professor Lisa Mayer.
- **Francesco Maneri** - "Divided Inside: Examining the Failings of Nationalism Before and After the Unification of Italy." Mentor - Professor Sarah Shurts.
- **Catherine Park** - "The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Within Families." Mentor - Professor Laura Ochoa.
- **Dylan Rehm** - "Funding Academic Success in Low-Income Communities." Mentor - Professor Seamus Gibbons.

Professors Kelly Keane and Seamus Gibbons led the organization of this year's conference as co-directors.

"We appreciate these students, their scholarly endeavors, their appetite for knowledge and their fresh and exciting perspectives on many social issues expressed throughout the conference," the co-directors said in a statement.

Beacon began under a grant from the American



Dylan Rehm, one of five Bergen students who placed first in their category at the Beacon Conference.

Association of Community Colleges and the Kellogg Foundation in 1993. Partner colleges vie for the opportunity to host the event each year; Bergen has hosted the conference four times since its inception (1998, 2008, 2016 and 2025). ■



Education at the Heart of the Story

This story begins with a single mother and her daughter's dream. It ends with a gift for eternity.

As a child, Melissa Krieger dreamed of becoming a teacher. Her mother, Marilyn Wiener, did everything in her power to help her achieve that goal. They both knew that the lessons learned through education last a lifetime.

Persistent financial issues for the single mother led Wiener to encourage her daughter to apply for grants and scholarships that could help supplement what she could provide.

"She was so appreciative when I received federal grants to pay for college and so proud that I chose to become a teacher," Krieger recalled.

Now an education professor, Krieger sought to pay tribute to her late mother by establishing a Bergen Community College Foundation fund bearing their names.

"I needed to honor her life in some way, so what better way than to start a future teacher fund at Bergen," Krieger said. "I wanted to help students like me."

That's where student Cristian Tenempaguay enters this story. As one of Krieger's education students with a 4.0 GPA, Tenempaguay applied for a Foundation scholarship, hoping to supplement his educational costs. He ultimately

received the scholarship Krieger established in honor of her mother. As part of the blind-ranking evaluation process, Krieger did not know Tenempaguay would receive the award until after the process concluded.

"During class discussions he was a role model for his classmates," Krieger said. "Along with managing his considerable family and work responsibilities, he somehow manages to be a high performing student. He was the perfect candidate for this scholarship."

When Krieger learned Tenempaguay would receive the scholarship, she felt compelled to add additional funds to the award.

"Seeing the high level of dedication he has toward his studies, I feel even more connected to his success at Bergen and beyond," Krieger said. "So many of my students encounter the same struggles that I experienced as a first-generation college student. I am so happy to have the opportunity to play a small part in their college journey."

Following in his professor's footsteps, Tenempaguay aspires to teach and guide students in the right direction to help them to excel in life.

"This scholarship is truly a humbling and inspiring experience," he said. "It shows when you work hard, people around you notice it."

The prospective class of 2026 graduate credits his professor for helping to change his life.

"Crossing paths with Professor Krieger has been a blessing," he said. "I believe people like Professor Krieger make a difference," Tenempaguay said.

Krieger believes the scholarship carries a value far beyond the financial.

"I think the long-term impact is that Cristian now knows that there are lots of people rooting for him from the sidelines," she said.

To repay Krieger's kindness, Tenempaguay offered a gift, like education, that would last a lifetime – a poem, aptly titled "Eternity." For Krieger, Tenempaguay's desire to "pay it forward" brings the story back home.

"This experience came full circle for me, as I was able to honor my mother's life, while letting a student know just how important his success is to me," she said. "I feel deep gratitude that Bergen made this experience possible." ■

Eternity

And then I asked again,
 "Master, what of eternity?
 Can someone live forever?"
 He replied,
 "Indeed, there's a way to live
 forever -
 But not as you imagine.
 Our bodies must leave this world,
 Yet our essence can linger.
 Our actions ripple through time:
 The hearts we uplift,
 The students we ignite with dreams,
 The kindness we give freely
 These defy the bounds of years
 And carry us into forever.
 Like Socrates, sparking wisdom's
 flame,
 Like poets whose words still sing,
 Like a teacher who shapes a life
 What we do for others
 Becomes our eternal light."

Cristian Tenempaguay
 Dedicated to The Marilyn Wiener and
 Melissa Krieger Future Educator Fund