

inside Bergen

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Bergen STEM Student Research Center Director Chris Tully, Professor Ara Kahyaoglu, students Mateo Garcia, Roselyn Diaz and Lucas Hahn, and Dean of Math, Science and Technology Emily Vandalovsky.



Students such as Matan Spireo presented their research through poster displays.

Students Shape the Future at STEM Conference

From establishing a hydroponic garden in an urban bodega to developing a low-cost prosthetic arm and using artificial intelligence to track brain activity, Bergen students showed how they will engineer “what’s next” at the annual STEM C² Conference. As the signature event of Bergen’s renowned STEM program, the conference serves as a magnet for science, technology, engineering and math-minded students, faculty and industry professionals.

“Bergen has become a hub for STEM education in our region,” STEM Student Research Center Director Chris Tully said. “The conference gives our students a chance to peel back the curtain and show the world the incredible work they have completed at our college.”

The nearly 400 attendees at the August 12 event at the Paramus main campus came from 37 high schools, colleges, industry and government. The conference featured a career and transfer college expo, a panel discussion with industry professionals and a poster competition for students to present their research. Judged by industry leaders and faculty volunteers, Bergen students Roselyn Diaz, Mateo Garcia and Lucas Hahn topped the field of 39 entries for their findings on engineering a rapid response system

for detecting acute airborne toxins released from volatile organic compounds in academic and commercial environments. Professor Ara Kahyaoglu mentored the students.

“Our students are completing high-level research comparable to what you would see in graduate degree programs,” Bergen Dean of Math, Science and Technology Emily Vandalovsky said. “I expect entries from this year’s competition to become published in peer-reviewed journals – just as other Bergen student research has previously.”

Among the industry professionals in attendance, a delegation of representatives from Trane Technologies – the multinational heating, ventilation and air conditioning manufacturer – visited to discuss potential opportunities for collaboration with the College. The company has previously partnered with community colleges in California and Arizona to establish “living learning labs” on their campuses to create experiential learning initiatives for students. President Eric M. Friedman said a potential partnership remains exciting.

“This is about connecting education with industry to create a workforce development talent

pipeline where students participate in real-world, hands-on learning,” he said. “With a potential partner as accomplished as Trane, we can offer innovative educational opportunities that prepare students for good-paying, family-sustaining careers in various STEM fields.”

Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) Vice President of Membership and Educational Services Robin Matross Helms connected Trane with College leaders after seeing the institution’s commitment to STEM education as part of an international learning exchange program sponsored by ACCT last year. Bergen served as an inaugural partner in the program.

The conference also provided Bergen faculty and staff with the opportunity to showcase the College’s robust portfolio of STEM offerings, including work conducted under a \$4.5 million federal grant to prepare the next generation of food, agriculture, natural resources and human sciences workers. The NEXTGEN project supports scholarships, mentorships and experiential learning in areas such as agribusiness and food product processing systems. ■



Claudia Rubner and Bonnie Platter at the NISOD Conference.

Professor Pair Honored by NISOD

Adjunct professors Bonnie Platter and Claudia Rubner have earned the 2026 National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) Excellence Award for their commitment to teaching and student success. The pair travelled to NISOD's annual International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence in Austin, Texas last month to receive their awards.

"Bergen faculty bring incredible expertise and passion to the classroom," Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Andrew Tomko said. "Adjunct professors Platter and Rubner were honored by NISOD for their commitment to excellence."

The adjunct faculty members were nominated by their departments for the award. The Bergen Foundation generously sponsored travel and accommodation for the professors. Attendees will present their findings to the Foundation Board of Directors this fall.

Platter has instructed foreign languages at Bergen since 2015. Her teaching philosophy is centered on the diverse cultural backgrounds and talents that her students bring to the classroom.

"Teaching a language allows me to tap into the talents of my students," she said. "Over my fifty years as an educator, including a decade as an adjunct professor of French, I have been continually inspired by the diverse cultural backgrounds and talents my students bring to the classroom." Platter, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, builds success through warmth, trust, and fos-

tering a safe classroom. Prior to Bergen, she taught French for 33 years at Midland Park High School and served as the French club advisor until her retirement. She earned the Governor's Teacher of the Year Award. Platter holds a bachelor's degree in French and Spanish education from Rutgers University and a master's degree in educational administration and supervision from Montclair State University.

Meanwhile, Rubner has instructed English at Bergen since 2023. She said she approaches each day with "a great sense of purpose and wonder."

"I am proud to be a teacher," she said. "It allows me the ability and privilege to make a difference in the lives of my students and in return they have made a difference in my life and profession as an educator."

After briefly working in journalism, marketing, and sales, Rubner began her teaching career as a middle-school teacher in the Scottsdale Unified School District in Arizona. She wrote, taught, and implemented curricula in journalism and served as a co-designer of the Gifted Twice Program, an education program that empowered students through their unique strengths and abilities during the early 2000s. She holds a master's degree in education from the University of Phoenix.

NISOD, a consortium of community and technical colleges committed to promoting and celebrating excellence in teaching, learning and leadership, established the Excellence Awards in 1991. ■



Civitas Senior Director of Customer Development Jackie Harris and President Eric M. Friedman.

Civitas Helps Analyze Solutions

Representatives from new student affairs solutions partner Civitas visited last month and took part in a signing ceremony to officially kick-off Bergen's collaborative efforts with the firm. Civitas will help Bergen leverage institutional data to enhance advising and decision-making through predictive analytics, customized dashboards and institutional modeling. The resulting information will assist advisers, counselors and student support staff in supporting students through specialized interventions that lead to better outcomes and student goal achievement. ■



Snapshotted



President Eric M. Friedman joined higher education leaders for a discussion on workforce development at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.



Dean of Multicultural Services and Activities Deborah Manning led the festivities at the Juneteenth flag raising.



The College celebrated the newest class of Direct Support Professional program graduates in June.



Student Liam Setti and Professor Jim Bumgardner unveiled a plaque outside the Ender Hall Lab Theatre commemorating the life of departed professor Jared Saltzman.



Everyone's favorite mascot, Bandit, welcomed the new class of students at orientation.



President Eric M. Friedman acknowledging trustee Treasurer Patrick Fletcher.

Trustee Fletcher Honored by NJCCC

The treasurer of the Board of Trustees, Patrick Fletcher, has earned the Ronald D. Winthers Community College Trustee Leadership Award from the New Jersey Council of County Colleges. The award honors an individual who “exemplifies visionary trustee leadership at the local, state and national levels.”

The NJCCC recognized Fletcher as part of the New Jersey Community College Awards banquet that took place during the New Jersey Community College Opportunity Summit in Atlantic City in June. The NJCCC’s annual signature awards program recognizes the state’s top community college faculty, staff, students, trustees and partners.

“Patrick Fletcher exemplifies the very best of community college trustee leadership,” NJCCC President Aaron Fichtner said. “Throughout his career in education and through his service to Bergen Community College, he has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to students, thoughtful leadership, and a deep belief in the transformative power of education. We are proud to recognize Patrick with the Ronald D. Winthers Community College Trustee Leadership Award.”

Fletcher joined Bergen’s board in 2017 and has

served as treasurer since 2018. As a trustee and the current Bergen County Executive Superintendent of Schools, he represents an important liaison for the College and county government officials. Additionally, he frequently accompanies Bergen President Eric M. Friedman on legislative and advocacy visits, lending his expertise and voice to championing the needs of community college students.

“I will treasure this award,” Fletcher said at the College’s June Board of Trustees meeting. “I would like to say thank you to my fellow trustees because without your support, there is no way we can achieve these types of awards. Nor could we do it without the faculty and staff who help to provide the wonderful opportunity for our students to grow and learn.”

Before retiring as the longtime River Dell Regional School District superintendent, he held leadership roles in the Rutherford, Closter, Englewood Cliffs, and Glen Rock school districts. For his efforts in supporting student success, Fletcher received the 2014 New Jersey Association of School Administrators Northern Superintendent of the Year award and the 2018 Distinguished Service Award. He holds a B.A. from Lafayette College and an M.A. from Seton Hall University. ■



Putting the Unity in Community

The Institute of Multicultural Learning hosted a week-long summer program for local Korean-American citizens, offering them the chance to participate in lectures facilitated by Bergen professors — including Kil Yi (pictured, top) — panel discussions with business leaders, and opportunities to learn new skills. Topics included everything from personal financial wellness, to artificial intelligence and the psychology of aging. President Eric M. Friedman (pictured, bottom) hosted a luncheon for members of the community. ■

A Tale of Two Bergens



From one Bergen to another! When scores of Norwegians arrived in the United States to watch their country’s team compete in the FIFA World Cup, they immediately felt right at home in Bergen County. As it turns out, Bergen shares its name with the second-largest city in Norway!

That discovery led Norwegian journalist Raymond Lidal on his own journey to learn more about Bergen County, USA. He connected with the College’s Executive Director of Public Relations Larry Hlavenka to discuss the shared lineage of the two Bergens.

Scan to listen to the NRK Radio interview, where Lidal and Hlavenka discuss if Bergen County residents know about the existence of Bergen, Norway; the Norwegians’ impact on the World Cup in Bergen County; and much more in this story that asks “what’s in a name?” ■



(The English segment of the interview begins at 1:41; the College gets a call-out at 6:52!)

2026 Fall OpenHouse
OCTOBER 15 | 3 - 6 p.m.
 For more information, visit openhouse.bergen.edu.



The Model U.N. team, including group leader Hind Fettachi (fourth from left).

Model U.N. Team Makes Real Impact

Bergen students traveled to the National Model U.N. Conference in New York City this spring and returned home with two major awards – becoming a true experiential learning opportunity.

Out of 5,000 students from more than 130 countries, Bergen Model U.N. President Hind Fettachi earned the “Outstanding Delegate” award, making her the only community college student from New Jersey to win the honor. She also led the Bergen team to “Outstanding Delegation” recognition at the conference.

“I am grateful not only for the award, but for the opportunity,” Fettachi said. “Bergen gave me a place to grow, challenge myself and pursue experiences like this. This achievement represents more than one week at a conference. It represents sacrifice, perseverance, growth, and the belief that where you start in your personal life does not define how far you can go.”

At the conference, Fettachi represented the United Arab Emirates in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Committee. In her role as head delegate, Fettachi researched and wrote proposals, session plans and speeches. The team used UAE’s official policies and diplomatic posi-

tions as a starting point so they could better understand potential allies and opposing viewpoints.

“I intentionally chose one of the most challenging committees because I wanted to step outside my comfort zone and challenge myself,” she said.

Aside from the awards, Fettachi believes the team’s chemistry became the lasting memory from the trip.

“We became a real team, always there for one another and encouraging each other, and celebrating each small victory together,” she said.

Fettachi also enjoyed meeting delegates from other countries, getting to know people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

“It was inspiring to exchange ideas and build friendships with people we may never have met otherwise,” she said. “Being in a place where real diplomacy happens reminded me why this work matters and inspired me to continue pursuing leadership, international affairs and opportunities that create impact.” ■



(From top) The Perino family; picture-perfect conditions led to picture-perfect swings; the post-golf tricky tray sent winners home happy; Director of Athletics Erin Van Nostrand sunk this eight-footer for birdie.

All College Forum Leadership News

In the last five years, the All College Forum has become an integral part of the College’s participatory and shared governance structure, ensuring voice for students, faculty and staff. In recognition of her inaugural leadership of the group, President Eric M. Friedman honored outgoing chair Assistant Vice President of Information Technology Nishika Gupta alongside the incoming chair, Professor Julie Seda, at the last meeting of the academic year in the spring. The meeting also featured the announcement of a new vice chair, NJ STARS Coordinator Julia Gibson, who won an election for the position. The new leadership team welcomes the input of the College community at acf@bergen.edu. ■



Birdies “Fore” Students

The inaugural “Birdies for Bergen” golf outing hosted by the Foundation in support of the College’s athletics programs saw 80 golfers hit the links at White Beeches County Club in June. The event raised more than \$50,000 with the Perino Family Foundation serving as the event’s title sponsor. The Foundation’s next major event will take place on December 3 with the return of the Annual Scholarship Gala. To make your own donation to support students, visit bergen.edu/donate. Your support matters! ■



Cerullo Learning Center Manager Candice Kaup Scioscia, Dean of Learning Support Khairia Fazal, Board of Trustees Chair Dorothy Blakeslee and President Eric M. Friedman.

Honoring Esprit de Corps

First used by the military to convey the importance of shared goals, honor and pride, President Eric M. Friedman has introduced an "Esprit de Corps" award for Bergen staff. At the June Board of Trustees meeting, President Friedman presented a plaque to the Cerullo Learning Assistance Center staff as the inaugural recipients of

the award for their record of support for students. The tutoring center has won numerous awards recognizing it as one of the best in the country. Khairia Fazal, dean of learning support, led the Cerullo Center for more than 20 years before retiring in July. ■



Professors Jim Bumgardner and Linda Seidman (left); Yahendry Tavaréz, Bergen County Commissioner Germaine Ortiz and Jang Luis Mok Perez (right).



County of Bergen Recognizes Students, Faculty, Staff

In celebration of inclusivity, Bergen County government officials recognized members of diverse communities during a series of events this summer. First, county leaders honored professors Jim Bumgardner and Linda Seidman at the county's Pride flag raising event, cheering their "participation, dedication and contributions to the LGBTQIA community." Meanwhile, during the county's Caribbean Heritage Month event, officials recognized students Jang Luis

Mok Perez and Yahendry Tavaréz for their perseverance and dedication to their peers. Finally, at the Colombian Independence Day Celebration, Bergen County recognized Nico Betancourt, who starred as a soccer player as part of last season's Region 19 championship team, and longtime graphic designer in the Marketing and Communications department Cristina Grisales. ■



Students Shine at Beacon Conference

Four Bergen honors students placed first in their categories at the 34th annual Beacon Conference, an interdisciplinary showcase for community college student research. Sixteen Bergen students presented their research at this year's conference hosted virtually by the State University of New York's Westchester Community College in June. Faculty mentors, such as Judith K. Winn School of Honors Director Seamus Gibbons, assist the students.

"It is always such a competitive conference," Gibbons said. "If a student gets their paper accepted into the panel presentation at an annual Beacon Conference, that alone means that this is a scholarly-level paper."

Bergen students placing first in their categories were:

- Afazur Rahman, "The Existential Dangers in AI: We Need to Act Now."
Mentor - Professor Kelly Keane
- Ryhan McHugh, "Epic Women: Who's to Blame."
Mentor - Professor Daniel Salerno
- TianaMarie Allen, "The Psychological Burdens in International Adoption."
Mentor - Professor Seamus Gibbons
- Cristian Tenempaguay, "Understanding the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Causes, Challenges, and Policy Responses in the United States."
Mentor - Professor Melissa Krieger.

The Beacon Conference began under a grant from the American Association of Community Colleges and the Kellogg Foundation in 1993 with a consortium of institutions joining together each year to host and sponsor the event. Bergen has hosted the conference four times since its inception (1998, 2008, 2016 and 2025). For more information, visit beaconconference.org. ■