

UNC


magazine

Being *first* is Something to Celebrate

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recognition for serving first-
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Exercise Their Way to Longer,
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UNC's water conservation project will convert 3.4 acres of landscape into water-conscious plantings, reducing water use by 86% and saving about 2 million gallons per year. Read more on page 37.

Fellow Bears,

As we close out another academic year, it is an opportunity to reflect on all we have accomplished and assess the opportunities and challenges ahead. While the shifting landscape at the federal level has led to some uncertainty for higher education institutions across the country, we continue to look to our strategic plan to serve as our foundation and inspiration in all we do. Our commitment is that we exist to transform the lives of our students, knowing one day they will carry their experiences into the world as alumni. Our community members illustrate the value and impact of that promise every day.

In this edition of *UNC Magazine*, you will find stories about our students and alumni that exemplify the qualities and character we, as an institution, hope to reflect — resilience, collaboration, service to community, and pursuit of excellence — as we remain focused on our shared vision to guide our work.

Aligned with our efforts to put students first in that work, we are honored and proud to share the recent state and federal designations that recognize our efforts to support the more than 40% of UNC students that are first-generation college students. We asked some of them, as well as alumni, to share their stories about what it's like to navigate and persevere through the uncertainty of becoming the first in their families to earn a college degree. Their stories are inspiring.

This edition also illustrates journeys of outstanding achievement, including our very own faculty being nominated for and winning at this year's Grammy Awards, an alumna who earned the highest honor bestowed by the federal government for excellence in mathematics teaching, and the 100-year anniversary of UNC's national championship-producing wrestling program.

From our students to our faculty to our 2025 Honored Alumni, these stories showcase a breadth of remarkable talents, leadership and commitment, and serve as an example of what can be accomplished when we remain focused on doing work that matters. At UNC, we build champions who exceed expectations and build stronger, better communities through teaching, health care, criminal justice, business, the arts, athletics and more.

Go Bears!



Andy Feinstein
President



The *Rowing, Not Drifting 2030* Strategic Plan can be found online at unco.edu/strategic-plan

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Being First

First-generation students and alumni discuss overcoming barriers, breaking new ground, carving out opportunities and tackling challenges. See how those experiences defined their journeys at UNC and beyond. Pictured: Roxana Villezca, sophomore Nursing student

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

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 If you would like your class note to appear in *UNC Magazine*, please email it to alumni@unco.edu along with your name and class year.

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Art in the City

UNC alumni are creators, collaborators and connectors transforming Greeley's public art scene one work at a time

If you haven't been to Greeley recently, the artistry along the 8th Avenue corridor that stretches from the north end of campus and into downtown might surprise you. Splashes of color climb up and around buildings. Eye-catching sculptures line the sidewalks. Over the past decade, what was once a rather unremarkable swath of concrete and commercial buildings has blossomed into a vibrant and exciting urban canvas.

Equally as impressive as the art on display are the UNC alumni who helped create and curate this transformation. They are key threads in the tapestry of creators, collaborators and connectors — on scene and behind the scenes — whose efforts are helping to position Greeley as a public art destination.

It's a widely held belief that public art is good for cities. It can create a sense of pride and belonging, showcase the history and diversity of a community, increase business traffic and contribute to economic vitality and growth.

There are more than 200 city-owned outdoor public art pieces throughout Greeley, ranging from traditional murals and sculptures to more unique installations like storm drain covers and utility box wraps.

About 50 of those pieces are the works of UNC alumni representing a broad array of talents. The list includes muralists and painters Armando Silva, '10, Betony Coons, '08 and Eleanor Yates, '98, and sculptors Colette Pitcher, '91, Debbie Dalton, '75 and Lori Acott, '83, M.A. '88—just to name a few.

ARTISTRY IN MOTION

As the city's investment and planning for art has evolved, so has a friendly, grassroots collaboration between artists, the Greeley Art Commission, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and the Greeley Creative District.

Many point to Silva's 2011 Einstein mural, a partnership between the artist and the DDA, as the catalyst to what Bianca Fisher, '07, refers to as Greeley's public art renaissance.

"It's such a cool piece because it really proved the viability and the impact of public art, especially public murals downtown," said Fisher, executive director of the DDA.

That project was so successful that Silva and the DDA teamed up again. With the added collaboration of the Greeley Art Commission, the group spearheaded the 2014 Art Alley project, a series of 13 musical themed murals that transformed the alley downtown between 8th and 9th Streets.

While Silva served as the lead artist on the project, he was joined by another local artist and fellow alumna Betony Coons, '08. Her mural *Middle Sea* depicts a large black boat and other silhouettes against an aqua blue background on the north end of the alley.

As the mural scene was expanding downtown, a significant sculpture installation was getting off the ground along the 8th Avenue corridor. The Uptown Tree Project, a series of interpretive tree sculptures and a nod to Greeley's recognition as a Tree City USA, came from Greeley's public art coordinator Kim Snyder, '03.

Snyder, who has been overseeing the city's public art collection since 2008, was so inspired by a similar installation she saw in California that she brought the idea back home.

Between 2014 and 2023, 34 tree sculptures have been installed along 8th Avenue. They include Pete Niehoff's, '10, 18-foot-tall *Awareness* near 1430 8th Ave., an interpretation of the *Truffula Trees* from Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, and Collette, '81, and Gary Pitcher's *Bird Watching*, near 1335 8th Ave., a four-sided triangle shape depicting birds in the Greeley area.

EXPANDING GREELEY'S CANVAS

Since 2011, more than 50 murals and dozens of sculptures have been added throughout Greeley.

One of the most recent installations was this past September when Silva teamed up with musician-artist manager-creative entrepreneur Briana Harris, M.A. '14, to produce *WeldWalls*, Greeley's first-ever mural festival. In collaboration with *WeldWerks Brewing Company*, the duo hosted seven artist teams over two days to create art reflecting the theme "The New West." The collaboration resulted in nine new, vibrant visuals that are certain to bring more foot traffic to downtown Greeley.

"I think the city's transformation speaks to the fact that people constantly underestimate Greeley and the people here and their hunger and capacity for interesting, quality things," said Harris.

"When you come to the table with a strong vision and a good idea, there's that hunger and opportunity here. You have a lot of really excited collaborators. And you have a lot of open doors that you might not find in a bigger market—at least not at the grassroots level like in Greeley."

"While it may be challenging to measure its impact, public art is a powerful economic driver, particularly in tourism," said Fisher.

"However, for Greeley, its significance goes beyond economics—it has played a crucial role in shaping the city's identity, something Greeley has long sought to define. Public art has become a symbol of creativity, excellence and optimism, reflecting the spirit of our community."

—Deanna Herbert, '92



@UNC



GO BEARS!

Wrestling Program Has Punched Above Its Weight for 100 Years

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE MAT

Since its humble beginnings in 1924, the University of Northern Colorado's Wrestling program has earned national recognition. This year, the program celebrated its 100th anniversary and everything, and everyone, that's shaped the program into what it's become today.

This season, the Wrestling team regularly packed the Bank of Colorado Arena with thoughts of fans excited to watch a team that boasted a 2023 NCAA Champion and two new All-American Wrestlers. This is the first time UNC has had two All-Americans in the same season since 1966.

"The program has a ton of history, and we want to make sure it's the best program in the state of Colorado—and that we put UNC Wrestling on the national radar," said Troy Nickerson, UNC's head wrestling coach since 2014.

"We want to win at the highest, highest levels, but being on UNC's Wrestling team is about more than just the sport," said Nickerson. "We want to make sure we're developing great young men and setting them up for success through the rest of their lives."

But like the sport of wrestling itself, the program has had its share of takedowns and falls.

Under Coach Royce R. Long, the Wrestling program made its first appearance as Colorado State Teachers College (now UNC) during the 1924-25 season. The Wrestling team participated in two intercollegiate matches.

In 1987, when a 24-year-old Jack Maughan started coaching UNC's Wrestling team, they hadn't won a match in over two years. But just a few years later, the Bears were the team to watch, earning top finishes in national competitions.

With its strong traditions and community connections, the UNC Wrestling program has a dedicated fanbase that supports the team on and off the mat. Likewise, the Greeley community has enthusiastically shown up to cheer on the Wrestling team through the years. This dates back to the days when Gunter Hall was home to UNC Wrestling and filled to capacity and later when crowds in Butler-Hancock Hall shattered attendance records during the NCAA Division II championships hosted at UNC in 1996.

"We had some great athletes on our team, and we started to find a lot of success," said Maughan, who coached the team until 2008. "Relationships and people make a huge difference in sports and that's always been part of the UNC Wrestling story."

Flashback to the early days in 1924. That same idea has been at the heart of the Wrestling program since its very first coach, John Hancock, was at the helm.

When Hancock took the job, he had never wrestled himself and the student-athletes trained on mats made of horsehair. But during his 32-year tenure from 1925-66, Hancock led the team to win the Rocky Mountain Championship 30 consecutive times and coached two

national championships. Hancock also provided leadership to UNC Athletics, coaching Men's Track for 30 seasons and serving as Athletics director for 34 years.

"He established an incredible foundation for the program," said Maughan. He adds that he was fortunate to know and learn from Hancock during his time as a coach, along with Hancock's successor, Jack LaBonde, Sr., who was head coach for the UNC Wrestling program from 1966-80.

"John was very successful, but he wasn't solely focused on how to win. He wanted to build a culture that helped his athletes thrive as students and humans."

Bob Smith, '58, joined the team under Coach Hancock then went on to coach high school wrestling for 42 years, racking up dozens of honors and awards throughout his career. He regularly attends matches in Greeley to cheer on the team because he thinks wrestling is the "best sport in the world" and wants UNC Wrestling to continue to be a point of pride for Greeley.

"Coach Hancock wanted to make men out of boys," Smith remembers. "We had a lot of camaraderie on our team and learned a lot about life from the mat."

When Maughan took over the program, he embraced that same philosophy and focused on coaching the whole person, not just the wrestler. He's remained close to many of the athletes that he coached during his 22 years with the program, attending many weddings and other life events over the last several decades.

"Wrestling isn't just about what someone can do on the mat," said Maughan. "You really want the athletes to know that you believe in them, care for them and want the best for them."

"Our culture is a real highlight of the program," adds Nickerson. "When you have strong leadership and great individuals, it brings out the best in everyone."

UNC Wrestling increased in stature and grew its national reputation for success on and off the mat when it joined the highly competitive Big 12 Conference in 2015. The conference has earned a reputation for being one of the best wrestling conferences in the country, says Nickerson.

"It seemed like a great opportunity to put our program on another level and pursue even higher success," said Nickerson.

The UNC Wrestling team has always punched above its weight. Throughout the last century, the program has flourished, thanks to significant and generous donor and alumni support. The Wrestling program boasts the largest endowment of any sport at UNC, in large part due to a key philanthropic initiative Maughan championed for tirelessly.

Nickerson says they're doing more with less and beating some of wrestling's top teams for the first time in program history. The arena in Greeley continues to attract more and more fans each season, growing nearly 10% each year, according to Nickerson. The team is hitting exciting new milestones every season and they have no plans to slow down anytime soon.

"I think we're far from the ceiling," he said. "I don't know what our ceiling is, but I know we haven't reached it yet. We've got a good group of dedicated student-athletes who are going to continue to push any barriers in their way and continue to strive for more."

—Emily Halnon and Debbie Farris



HEAD WRESTLING COACH JACK LABONDE, SR. (1966-80)

Coach LaBonde watches as Athletics Director John Hancock explains a hold to wrestlers Gordon Fisher and Harry Harrison. Hancock coached UNC's Wrestling program for 32 seasons, Men's Track for 30 seasons and served as Athletics director for 34 years.

A Century of Wrestling Success

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CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

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**NATIONAL CHAMPIONS SINCE 1961 —
WITH ANDREW ALIREZ EARNING THE MOST
RECENT ONE IN 2023 AND THE FIRST NCAA
DIVISION I ERA INDIVIDUAL TITLE**

23

**HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES
2 TEAMS, 3 COACHES AND
18 INDIVIDUALS**

70

**ALL-AMERICANS, INCLUDING TWO
FROM THE 2024-25 SEASON**

JAVI LOMELI
Business Administration,
Marketing concentration

FELIX GARCIA
Business Administration

Two Friends, One Mission — To Serve Through Brotherhood

It's not every day that a fraternity with just two members receives statewide recognition.

At the National Philanthropy Day award ceremony in Colorado in November 2024, the Arcani Chapter of Lambda Sigma Upsilon Latino (LSU) Fraternity at UNC received the prestigious Service Organization of the Year honor. This award, presented by the Colorado Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, celebrates the fraternity's dedication to service and leadership—something remarkable given the chapter's small size but mighty spirit.

"The accomplishments of this Latino fraternity exemplify the spirit of volunteerism and community service. The members have shown exceptional leadership and commitment, motivating others to join causes and make a difference," said Keri Knight, director of Student Activities and Fraternity and Sorority Life at UNC.

“What is most remarkable is not only that they are only two members, but that they never got any kind of support from paid staff. They have done it all by themselves.”

“It felt like a culmination of all the struggles and to see that everything we have been through together is worth it,” shared the president of the chapter, Felix Garcia. Garcia is studying Business Administration and is the treasurer for the Mexican American Studies Society on campus.

Javi Lomeli is a key piece of this duo, too. Lomeli, who came to UNC from Indiana, is studying Marketing at the Monfort College of Business and is passionate about branding for nonprofit organizations.

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Since its founding in 2012, the Arcani Chapter has demonstrated that impact is not measured by size alone but by the depth of commitment. Garcia and Lomeli attribute their success to their unwavering focus on the chapter's core values: academic excellence, cultural awareness, being role models to the community and brotherhood.

When Garcia started college at UNC after moving from New York, the chapter was inactive, so he decided to bring it back by himself. But one day, while tabling for the fraternity at the Youth Involvement Fair, Lomeli came by to ask a couple of questions about it. Lomeli confessed he didn't really pay attention to what Garcia said, but later, when they went to have dinner, he decided to become part of the fraternity. And that was the beginning of this strong bond.

“Trying to navigate being a first-generation Latino college student, going to a place I've never been to and far away from my family felt like all the odds were against me,” said Garcia. “Eventually, Javi came along. We both come from similar backgrounds, so we instantly created this deep brotherly bond.”

From organizing food distribution drives to mentoring local youth, to raising thousands of dollars or just simply going to play with children in need, the Arcani Chapter's activities are as diverse as they are impactful.

“This award isn't just about what we've done as a chapter,” Garcia said. “It's about the partnerships we've built, the communities we've supported and the impact we've made together. It's a reflection of what can happen when you lead with heart.”

Last April, the fraternity collaborated with the Denver-based social services organization Servicios de la Raza to assemble and distribute 100 bags of food to families in need. This project brought together over 25 volunteers from different Greek organizations across Colorado, showcasing the chapter's ability to unite people for a common cause.

“This award is a reflection of what happens when you lead with heart.”

—FELIX GARCIA

IMPACT BEYOND BORDERS

The Arcani Chapter's commitment to service goes beyond Colorado. In 2023, they embarked on a transformative journey to Puerto Rico. There, they partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to remodel facilities, repaint classrooms and donate tablets to improve educational opportunities for local youth. Raising over \$10,000 for this initiative, the fraternity demonstrated that service knows no boundaries.

Locally, the efforts are equally impactful. Through the national nonprofit organization Helping Youth Prepare for Excellence (HYPE), a mentorship program dedicated to empowering teens to live life on purpose and with purpose, the Arcani Chapter guided countless young people in Greeley.

“We go to Greeley West [High School] to teach workshops about academic excellence — why to pursue a college degree, how to build a resume or how to prepare for interviews,” said Lomeli.

The chapter also established the LEAD (Latinos Education and Development) Scholarship and awarded \$500 to support a high school senior attending UNC.

The fraternity focuses on service and leadership development. They assist at the Weld County Food Bank, coach Special Olympics basketball programs and participate in school field days as a way to inspire others.

“What we do as an organization is to give Latino college students a home,” said Garcia. “A place for them to grow as leaders and to bring change to their communities.”

Their leadership through service was also evident when the fraternity engaged with local politicians and community leaders. They advocated for issues affecting underserved populations and raised money for the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Northern Colorado in Greeley.

“I live under Muhammad Ali's quote that ‘The service we give to others is the rent that we pay here on Earth,’” said Lomeli.

The Service Organization of the Year award is a crowning achievement in the Arcani Chapter's decade-long journey of service.

“This is more than an award for our chapter,” Garcia emphasized. “It's a call to action for everyone in the UNC community to see what's possible when we work together. We learned from UNC that we can be pretty small but pretty mighty.”

—Carlos José Pérez Sámano

TIM GOCKLIN
Oboist, adjunct professor
and Artist in Residence

Setting the Bar High

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

Music faculty raise the standard of excellence at the 2025 Grammys, in the industry and for the next generation of musicians

Wearing a classic black tuxedo over a white button up shirt and a purple velvet bowtie, Tim Gocklin, oboist, adjunct professor and Artist in Residence at UNC's School of Music, attended the Crypto Arena in Los Angeles on Feb. 2 for the 67th Annual Grammy Awards.

Gocklin and the four other longtime members of the Akropolis Reed Quintet, who have been creating music together for the last 16 years, were about to find out if they would become Grammy winners. Their song "Strands," created with drummer Christian Euman and composer/pianist Pascal Le Boeuf, was nominated in the Best Instrumental Composition category.

As their category approached, anticipation was building when actor, comedian and singer Wayne Brady spoke the famous suspenseful words, "And the Grammy goes to ...

"... 'Strands' by composer Pascal Le Boeuf, Akropolis Reed Quintet, and Christian Euman."

It was music to Gocklin's ears. His hands went straight to his face in pure shock and excitement. After taking two

seconds for the news to sink in, Gocklin, and the whole team, ran up to the stage with tears in his eyes to stand behind Le Boeuf, who briefly and beautifully thanked the Recording Academy for the recognition.

"We are so thrilled, stupefied and extremely excited," Gocklin said. "There are so many deep emotions of gratitude and love in reflecting on everything that brought us to this moment."

The Akropolis Reed Quintet is an ensemble of five different reed instruments—oboe, alto saxophone, bassoon, clarinet and bass clarinet. The group began recording their latest album *Are We Dreaming the Same Dream?* in 2020, completing it in 2022.

The album brings together the reed quintet, piano and drums to create quite a special jazz and classical fused experience. Throughout the record, and especially in the award-winning song "Strands," the musicians explored the concept of the American dream.

"The project is a dedication to the music of Geri Allen, Dave Brubeck and George Gershwin and a commentary on how we in America are all woven from different 'strands' that come together to create something beautiful," Gocklin said. "It's an amalgamation of our different musical styles."

CHASING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Gocklin worked on the Grammy Award-winning project while teaching at UNC. He's grateful he can work with students in the classroom while honing his professional expertise. He says one of the biggest benefits students in UNC's School of Music have is the opportunity to learn and study under many faculty members who excel in the music industry.

"My goal is to inspire my students through practicing what I preach with regards to hard work, consistency and perseverance," Gocklin said. "It's also important to show them that it's not all about how well they play, it's about collaboration, how you work and how you communicate with people. 'Be someone who people want to work with,' as my teacher Steve Taylor at Yale told me."

Several of Gocklin's colleagues have successful careers outside the classroom. For example, professor of Music, Jazz Guitar Steve Kovalcheck, M.M., was also recognized by the Recording Academy this year. He played on the album *And So It Goes* nominated for Best Large Jazz Ensemble.

Although the Grammy went to another musical group, Kovalcheck walked away with the experience of a lifetime playing with the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra led by bassist/composer John Clayton and drummer Jeff Hamilton, who are legendary jazz musicians.

"They have more than 50 years of experience in the industry, working with everyone from Quincy Jones to Whitney Houston to Barbara Streisand and Diana Krall," Kovalcheck said. "I'm very grateful they asked me to record with them."

Another accomplished faculty member is Director of Music Technology Socrates Garcia, D.A. '13. His talents and successes as a recording engineer and producer earned him a spot on the voting body of 13,000 professionals who determine the Grammy Award winners, a position he has held for the past 12 years.

"It's a service that I love to do," Garcia said, "Having a Grammy is a big deal, it's a big accomplishment, so I don't take it lightly."

To become a voting member, Garcia had to qualify by gaining a certain number of recording credits on albums sold regionally and internationally. Throughout his career, Garcia has performed as a touring musician, guitarist and keyboardist in many Latin American countries, including Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Aruba and throughout his home, the Dominican Republic. He typically plays with his big band, the Socrates Garcia Latin Jazz Orchestra.

As for the Grammys, each year, Garcia votes in two rounds, the first deciding who should be nominated and the second deciding who should receive an award.



Socrates Garcia, D.A. '13
Director of Music Technology



Steve Kovalcheck, M.M.
Professor of Music, Jazz Guitar

"I spend literally days listening to music I don't know as I go through the voting process. It's a lot of listening and a lot of fun," Garcia said.

Garcia, who has worked on a project that won two Grammys and other Billboard topping chart projects himself, doesn't vote on every award. He votes on the most prominent awards, such as Record of the Year and Artist of the Year, as well as awards involving producing and engineering — his expertise. While he can't say who he voted for, Garcia says his fellow UNC faculty members' works were well worth the nominations.

"Steve and Tim were great and well-deserved," Garcia said. "And just like all of our faculty do, they'll be able to bring back their whole Grammy experiences to their students in the classroom."

GRAMMY-WORTHY TEACHING

Teaching beyond the textbook is one of Garcia's favorite aspects of his job.

"I love to share anything and everything I've learned. My students will tell you that I don't hold back," Garcia said. "For example, a recent graduate interned in my recording studio. She left with credits on a movie and two albums. Those are the kind of things I like to share. Everyone needs experience."

And his sentiment is echoed by Grammy-nominated Kovalcheck.

"We have a lot of connections to all the major music capitals in the country — Nashville, New York and L.A. Students know that this is a place where it doesn't matter what level they are at, they're going to be challenged and they're going to get supported through those challenges," Kovalcheck said.

"In the School of Music, we are like a family. As soon as you come here and see how we work together, you feel that it's a very unique place. I always say that what we have here is special."

—Sydney Kern

Making It Our Business to Upskill

New career readiness initiatives give business students a competitive advantage and a good cup of coffee

Career readiness is an integral part of a business education from UNC — and employers are noticing. In 2025, the Kenneth W. Monfort College of Business (MCB) is deepening its commitment to career readiness by launching a pair of new initiatives that will empower students to stand out in a competitive job market — and find success in their careers.

“It’s our mission to help students be ready to excel in their careers,” said Keiko Krahne, interim dean at MCB and faculty member since 2000. “We believe students benefit from expanding their education beyond the classroom walls. So we offer many immersive, hands-on learning opportunities that help our students develop essential professional skills and knowledge.”

Employers have long recognized the caliber of job applicants graduating from MCB. Last year, MCB published a summary of employer feedback for their Professional Experience Program, which reinforced that immersive professional experiences benefit both students and employers when students enter the workforce. Nearly 98% of employers reported they were very satisfied with their student’s ability to contribute to their organization.

UPSKILLING WITH MICROCREDENTIALS

This spring, MCB is rolling out a new partnership with the online learning platform Coursera, so students can learn job-relevant skills that will increase their employability and help them excel in their careers.

Coursera offers more than 10,000 courses, specializations and professional certificates that are taught by leading universities and companies like Google, IBM, Salesforce and Meta. The platform was developed by Stanford professors to apply academic rigor to workforce training that can be leveraged across careers in business, technology, data science and other industries.

“Gaining microcredentials through Coursera will give our students a powerful advantage in the job market,” said Daniel Brannon, department chair of Marketing. Microcredentials are courses and certificates designed to provide students with expert

knowledge, skills and abilities in specific areas of business. They can be used to indicate competence and proficiency to potential employers.

Students can complete Coursera courses on their own or as part of a class assignment, which is designed to supplement their learning. As this initiative further develops, MCB may consider ways to help students stack credentials so that they will be ready for a job in a particular industry.

“We know that a business degree is a relatively common degree, so we want to enable our students to pursue additional real, specific learning outcomes that can give them a leg up as they’re entering the workforce,” said Brannon.

When MCB senior Nasim Martin heard about Coursera in his Talent Management class, he was immediately interested because he thought a professional certificate would benefit his career plans. Martin wants to go into digital marketing or small business consulting and was excited about how well certain courses aligned with his career aspirations, like the Google Digital Marketing & E-commerce Professional Certificate.

“Getting a professional certificate in digital marketing through Coursera is a perfect match for where I’m trying to go in my career,” Martin said. “It gave me so much information about industry trends and helped me build confidence to apply these professional skills wherever I go with my career.”

A primary reason MCB leadership wanted to launch this partnership is because upskilling in microcredentials is a proven way for MCB graduates to stand out in a crowded field of job applicants.

According to a 2022 report by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), employers place a high value on potential employees who have worked toward additional credentials. Workers who hold alternative credentials bring value to the workplace, according to the report.

MCB’s alumni who are in hiring positions agree with this finding, including Jared Schroder, ’05, founder and CEO of SEMOptimize, a digital marketing agency based in Denver. Schroder advocated for the use of Coursera at MCB because he believes microcredentials can help a candidate’s application stand out when they’re competing against 50 or more similar applicants.

“If you have a Google certification in Google Ads, or you have an analytics background or certifications in AI, [those] are big value adds that would make us look towards you,” said Schroder.

Some MCB faculty members plan to incorporate Coursera certificates directly into their curriculum, since many of them complement academic principles students are already learning. This will also help students tackle

the self-guided instruction with added accountability and support.

“By combining documented soft skills and technical expertise from Coursera with the knowledge gained from working with exceptional faculty, students gain a distinct competitive advantage in the job market,” said Ben Moore, director of the MCB Advising and Student Success Center.

SERVING UP HANDS-ON TRAINING

Later this year, MCB will also launch a new student-run coffee shop. But it will give them much more than barista training to brew a good cup of coffee. Students will gain hands-on experience with designing and operating a small business. The coffee shop will be housed in the basement of Kepner Hall and students are responsible for everything from marketing and inventory management to menu design and serving coffee to the campus community.

“This coffee shop is going to provide an incredible opportunity for applied learning, where we’ll take concepts that we’re learning about in the classroom and put them into practice through the coffee shop,” said Rachel Roberts, assistant professor of Entrepreneurship and director of Community Partnerships and Impact, who’s serving as the faculty lead on this project.

Students will rotate through every functional role within the coffee shop, so they get experience across the different components of running a business and learn how to solve problems across every realm of operations.

Roberts also plans to invite business professionals from the community to share their experience and knowledge with the students. Students can ask them about the real-time issues they encounter in the coffee shop and learn how to network and connect with potential mentors. Roberts hopes to engage UNC alumni in this effort.

Both the Coursera and the coffee shop are donor-funded initiatives that build on other experiential learning opportunities at MCB, including internships and certificates in digital marketing, human resources management, entrepreneurship and ethical leadership.

To further expand its hands-on educational experiences, MCB will launch a competitive sales team next year. “We want to add a lot of value to [a UNC] student’s business degree and help them hone valuable professional skills that they can carry into any career,” said Brannon.

This knowledge, technical know-how and relationship building skills will give students a professional depth and resiliency to either career and workforce fluctuations, explains Krahnke.

“By incorporating different levels of immersive learning opportunities into the curriculum, we help our students succeed,” she adds.

—Emily Halnon and Tamsin Fleming



Building a Healthier Colorado

Proposed College of Osteopathic Medicine takes shape from the ground up, literally

The next year will present multiple challenges and opportunities for UNC's proposed College of Osteopathic Medicine (UNC COM). Every element — physical facilities, curriculum, technological structure, faculty, staff and student cohorts — is being constructed simultaneously.

After breaking ground in the fall of 2024, construction crews will be pouring the concrete foundation and installing the steel building structure throughout the spring and summer. The project is moving through pre-construction and design phases and is on track for a June 1, 2026, completion date.

While concrete forms the literal foundation, the people and coursework constitute the college's conceptual foundation. The UNC COM and its College Advisory Board have developed a 2025-30 strategic plan that serves as the blueprint for the college.

The college's singular focus is graduating world-class physicians prepared to practice outstanding osteopathic medicine. The strategic plan begins with receiving accreditation from the Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation, with Pre-accreditation targeted for June 2025.

Other strategic goals include building a community of excellence using pedagogy for adult learners that cultivates critical thinking; creating an environment fostering academic and clinical excellence; developing a community that recognizes achievement and provides mentorship; creating a diverse, equitable, inclusive program; and integrating the COM into the surrounding community.

A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT BUILT FOR EXCELLENCE

The curriculum outline emphasizes adult learning rather than lecture-heavy formats. Although students will attend numerous lectures in their first foundational course, they'll transition to small group learning, case-based approaches and flipped classrooms.

"That's how adults learn," said Dr. Beth Longenecker, dean of the UNC COM. "Your patient doesn't walk in and say I'm having a heart attack. They walk in and say my jaw hurts. And you have to figure out do they have tooth pain? Is this a heart attack? Did someone punch them? Do they have TMJ? You have to think through everything."

The college will take a holistic, broad approach that's fundamental to osteopathic medicine and leans heavily into critical reasoning.

To support diverse learning needs, the COM will have a student success team monitoring progress and offering early intervention. Learning service specialists will provide mentorship, and peer tutoring programs will support academic success.

Longenecker recently made several key hires. She brought in Pierre Banks, Ed.D., as associate dean of Admissions and Student Affairs. Banks joined UNC from the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) John Sealy School of Medicine at Galveston, where he served as assistant dean for Admissions & Recruitment. At UTMB, he was also a clinical assistant professor teaching implicit bias, health equity and multiculturalism.

She also hired two department chairs who start July 1: Kelli Glaser, D.O., MPH, FCOFP, FNAOME, in Primary Care from Rocky Vista University in Parker, Colorado, and Jaime Hinojosa, M.D., M.S., in Anatomy from Sam Houston State University's College of Osteopathic Medicine in Texas.

TRAINING RURAL DOCTORS

The UNC COM will develop a special track for rural doctors this spring, partnering with the Eastern Plains Health Consortium to develop rural clinical experiences and possibly residency programs.

Though Longenecker is excited about this curriculum development, she acknowledges the work can't begin in earnest until faculty are hired.

Despite that, Longenecker has identified one key starting point: that all students begin with a strong foundation by taking a mandatory foundational biomedical science course. This approach is somewhat unique — Longenecker estimates only 30-40% of osteopathic medical schools use this model.

“We really want to be holistic in our approach. Maybe it will be easier for some students who come in with a really strong science background. That’s OK, they can focus more on anatomy and other things,” she explains.

A CURRICULUM FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES, HEALTHIER PEOPLE

UNC COM students will learn to proactively address community needs through a curriculum rooted in population health — examining health outcomes of groups rather than individuals. This identifies and addresses underlying causes of health disparities to improve overall community wellbeing.

By understanding interconnected factors affecting human health, osteopathic physicians can better influence how long and how well people live. This approach aligns with osteopathic medicine’s whole-person, community-based philosophy.

Students will spend their first two years on campus, followed by two years of clinical rotations. The first semester begins with 10 weeks of Foundations of Medical Knowledge, covering biochemistry, genetics, microbiology, immunology, physiology, pharmacology, neuroscience and nutrition.

Students will take courses in Clinical Reasoning, Anatomy and Imaging, Clinical and Communication Skills, plus Physicians, Patients and Community. This latter course focuses on professional identity formation, the physician patient relationship, population health and the impact of community on wellbeing.

PAYING FOR MEDICAL EDUCATION

Medical education is expensive. In 2024, the American Association of Osteopathic Medicine reported the average four-year cost to attend a public osteopathic medical college was \$297,881.

UNC COM will offer lower tuition than most COMs — \$55,000 per year — but scholarship support remains essential. Thanks to donors Bob and Bonnie Phelps, the COM will award the Phelps Family CAP Scholarship to two of its first students. This provides them \$30,000 annually — more than 50% of tuition — renewable for three additional years, totaling \$120,000 each.

With a longstanding commitment to philanthropy and UNC, the Phelps family funded this first COM scholarship to create incentives for top UNC students to continue on and pursue a medical degree.

The Phelps scholarships will be available to Colorado residents who earned a UNC degree (undergraduate or graduate), have above-average MCAT scores and a GPA in the top half of the inaugural class.

PREPARING STUDENTS ACADEMICALLY, SOCIALLY AND FINANCIALLY

The COM is hiring two learning service specialists and two financial aid counselors as part of its student support services. A student success committee will monitor student progress and meet with those performing below their peers on assessments, helping them to identify strategies for success.

“This is not a committee that’s focused on impeding progress or dismissing students. It’s one that calls you in and tries to figure out what we can do to give you the support you need to make it through. Sometimes it even comes down to, ‘You need to take a leave of absence. You’re dealing with way too much in your life right now,’” said Longenecker.

To destigmatize asking for help, all students will take a learning styles assessment before arrival and meet with learning service counselors during orientation. In addition, the COM will have a mental health counselor in its building and at the Counseling Center, normalizing mental health support.

EMBEDDED INTO THE COMMUNITY

Reflecting UNC’s values of community and service, the COM leadership team is integrating the college into the university, region and health care services. The college will partner with regional health care systems to develop graduate medical education and create pathways for UNC undergraduate students across northern Colorado to pursue medical education.

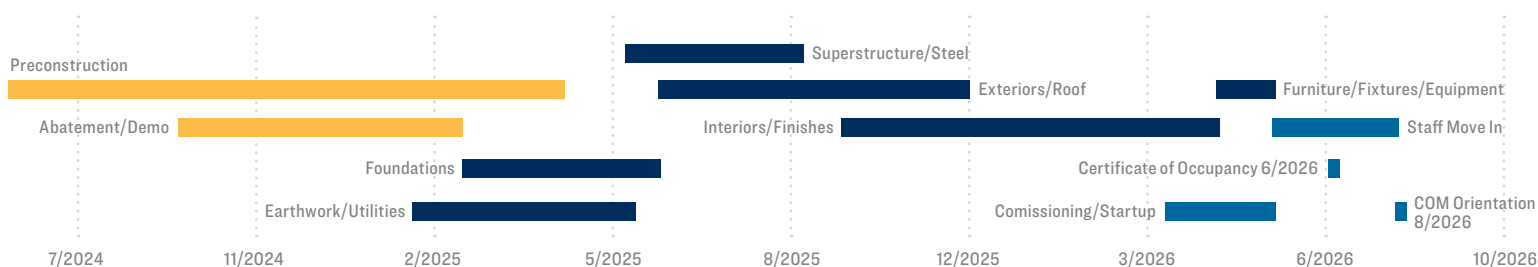
“Our community has been, and will be, vital to us as champions, collaborators and strategic partners. We are eager to serve our first classes of osteopathic medical students and work with our university and community partners to positively impact our communities and the health care workforce in Colorado,” said Longenecker.

—Debbie Farris

Watch Our Progress! This live construction camera shows minute-by-minute progress on the new building: unco.edu/liveview

From Construction to Student Orientation: A Roadmap to a Medical School

CREDIT: ADOLFSON & PETERSON CONSTRUCTION





Helping Cancer Patients Exercise Their Way to Longer, Better Lives

By Tamsin Fleming

Once known as a hidden gem, UNC's student and staff-led Cancer Rehabilitation Institute now has a long waiting list for patients

"If it weren't for this place, I'd be dead," said a man wearing a baseball cap and a black T-shirt.

He's sitting in a chair at the front of the exercise room, his blood pressure being taken by a student. "I would just sit at home, depressed."

Another woman wearing gray leggings and a long sleeve T-shirt arrived, visibly upset. But within 20 minutes, she was working out on an exercise bike, laughing with two students.

This is a normal Friday morning at the Ben Nighthorse Campbell Center, the one-story brick building home to the UNC Cancer Rehabilitation Institute (UNCCRI). The sound of interns and practicum students encouraging their patients could easily be mistaken for the upbeat chatter of friends as they get to work on that day's exercises. Their treatment is based on extensive medical training and best practices. Their goals are both lofty and weighty — help cancer patients live better, longer lives.

However, watching the smiles widen on the faces of patients, students and staff, it's clear that the work done here is powerful in ways not fully explained by science, at least not yet.

THE POWER OF EXERCISE

When Carole Schneider, Ph.D., a UNC professor of Sport and Exercise Science, was diagnosed with cancer in 1995, her treatments left her struggling with side effects like fatigue and muscular weakness. Then, there was little research on the effect of exercise on cancer survivors. But she and her doctor saw how the benefit of exercise directly counteracted the toxicities of her cancer treatment.

Schneider quickly realized this area of study had the potential to greatly improve lives. So, she enlisted the help

of her colleagues Cad Dennehy, Ph.D., and Dr. Sue Carter. With their help, they established UNCCRI in 1996 to study the role of exercise in cancer survivors' rehabilitation.

Today, the institute is recognized as a frontrunner in exercise-based cancer rehabilitation and is the only facility of its kind. UNCCRI has served over 1,000 adult cancer survivors with all types of cancer in various stages of treatment. More than 500 students participated in this experiential learning, conducting clinical and basic research in cancer rehabilitation.

In fact, researchers at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center published a study in 2023 in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* that found people diagnosed with cancer who regularly exercise reduced their risk of dying from all causes by 25% compared with people with cancer who did not exercise.

EXERCISE ONCOLOGY: EXTENDING LIFE

Students at UNCCRI work directly with patients during their rehabilitation work. Buck Covington is the current graduate assistant at the institute and a doctoral candidate in the Exercise Physiology program. When Covington learned about the work UNC was doing in exercise oncology, the use of exercise in addition to cancer treatments to help patients, his entire career trajectory shifted.

"[My advisor] was telling us about [UNCCRI] and the field of exercise oncology in general, and immediately I was enamored with the idea," said Covington, who before that, planned to go into a physical therapy program.

In August of 2020 when Covington first arrived at UNC, he was a doctoral student intern at UNCCRI working with individual patients on their rehabilitation plans. Both then and now, the institute opens bright and early at 7 a.m., with patients coming in every hour for hour-long appointments. Students chat informally with their patients to see how they're feeling that day before starting their session.

Students are right there with their patients every step of the way. Students take a completely hands-on approach in every session, from taking vitals to leading the patients in aerobic activity and resistance training.

Patients participate in a four-phase program, with the first three phases lasting 12 weeks and the last phase lasting as long as they like. Each phase is fully customized to each

patient by their student intern. At the beginning of each phase, patients undergo an extensive evaluation to establish their fitness baseline, which students and researchers use to gauge fitness maintenance and progress.

GIVING HOPE, GAINING WISDOM

While patients reap the many benefits of exercise and a student intern to keep them accountable, the students benefit from their patients as well.

“There does seem to be some sort of effect between having a younger population of students who are learning and looking forward in life and more hopeful about the future, [work] with someone who’s maybe at the end of life, or at least not looking forward the same way we are,” said Covington.

“I think it causes a synergistic effect where we’re imparting hope on them, and they’re imparting wisdom and guidance on us.”

Covington has personally gone above and beyond for his patients. At one point, a patient’s health deteriorated to the point that they were no longer able to come into UNCCRI for their treatment. Rather than allowing that to be the end of the patient’s relationship with UNCCRI, Covington and another student went to the patient’s house multiple times a day, five days a week for nearly a year.

“They were there up until the day he died. That’s the kind of commitment that a lot of these kids have. It means that much to them,” said Reid Hayward, Ph.D., director of UNCCRI.

For Clay Drake, ’90, UNCCRI has been a game changer in his cancer treatment.

When Drake was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a type of cancer affecting the white blood cells that produce disease- and infection-fighting antibodies, in 2016, he was given five years to live based on the aggressiveness of the cancer. Despite that, Drake didn’t focus on the timeframe. Instead, he decided to do everything he could to improve his health.

Even at points when Drake’s treatment wasn’t working, or he had to spend multiple months in the hospital, he never stopped trying to get ahead of his diagnosis. He underwent experimental procedures, including two different stem cell transplants using both his and a donor’s stem cells.

It wasn’t until about a year after undergoing the stem cell transplant that Drake found out about UNCCRI, and it ended up making all the difference.

“When I first started going [to UNCCRI], I couldn’t use my left leg, but it changed everything. We were at a point where we didn’t know what we were going to do. And here I am, nine years later, talking about this place,” said Drake.

Drake has been a patient at UNCCRI for about eight years now and has full use of his left leg.

He credits the structure of UNCCRI’s program with holding him accountable to exercise. Drake and other patients know that when they don’t go into UNCCRI it doesn’t just affect them, it affects their student interns too. Throughout their course of rehabilitation, they develop a mutually beneficial relationship where patients gain strength and improve their health, and the students gain hands-on experience working with patients.

Each relationship is different, with some developing a deeper bond than others. The relationships Drake has fostered with his student interns have each been distinct. One student, with whom he trained for two and a half years, had a particularly significant impact on him.

“He just got a job with UCHealth in Denver. He’s going to be doing some rehab-related stuff ... and he’s going to find his way. That’s the kind of stuff that’s more powerful to me than just the exercise piece. Certainly, the exercise is why we do it, but it’s also about the relationships,” said Drake.

To this day, Drake and that former student keep in touch, golfing together at least once every summer. Drake even tried helping their partner find a job when he learned they were trying to move closer.

“I’ll do whatever I can if that’s the direction they want to go and I can help them,” said Drake, “I will absolutely do it.”

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE EXERCISE

The strength and depth of the relationships built at UNCCRI are a testament to the culture that’s been developed from the very beginning.

Hayward has poured his heart and soul into the institute since 1998. Schnieder was Hayward’s advisor while pursuing his master’s degree at the University of Kansas. He was almost immediately recruited to work at UNCCRI after its inception.

Hayward’s background in cardiovascular pathophysiology, the study of disorders affecting the heart and blood vessels, was a natural match for the institute. Many of the chemotherapy drugs and radiation drugs cause damage to heart tissue, called cardiotoxicities. Hayward’s expertise in that area, coupled with his understanding of the healing properties of exercise, made him the perfect addition to the small but mighty team.

From the beginning, UNCCRI studied the effects of exercise on the cardiotoxicities of chemotherapeutic drugs. Some of their findings show that exercise does protect the heart from the negative effects of chemotherapy.

Exercising allows the heart to create proteins that pump the toxic drugs out of the heart, reducing the damage they can cause. Hayward and his team found that those toxicity-fighting proteins are not created inside tumors, but instead they add protection to the heart without affecting the drugs’ ability to fight the cancer.



PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

The research conducted at UNCCRI today is examining new ways to understand the correlation between exercise and cancer recovery.

For example, one study looks at lactate, a naturally occurring chemical compound produced by the body when cells break down carbohydrates for energy. Lactate is produced at higher rates when oxygen levels are low, such as during exercise.

UNCCRI students are evaluating whether there is a difference in how quickly patients break down lactate before and after their 12-week session at the institute. Finding a difference would allow researchers and practitioners to better understand how the program affects metabolism and how it can improve different health markers related to cancer.

Another study is evaluating whether exercising at certain times of day impacts the body's ability to maximize the benefits of exercise therapy.

Since its founding, UNCCRI has produced more than 150 national presentations, journal articles and manuscripts culminating in a published textbook. International and national educational programs in addition to public and private consulting firms that teach others how to implement and manage cancer rehabilitation centers have recognized UNCCRI as a leader in the field.

Every patient who comes through UNCCRI's program has their data, such as their cancer treatment history and

vitals, saved in the institute's database. Saving current patient data for future use allows students to look back and evaluate whether a certain variable might have an impact on patient outcomes before they actually design a study around it.

A CULTURE BUILT ON PERSONAL CARE

While UNCCRI is doing incredible work on the quantifiable aspects of cancer rehabilitation, the interpersonal aspect that so many patients emphasize has its own profound effects.

"There's something that happens between the students and the patients. It's something that I can't describe because it's more than the sum of its parts. There's synergy there that happens with them," said Hayward.

The hands-on work that students do with patients results in innumerable positive health outcomes. But it's the relationships they build that keep patients coming back.

The community fostered at UNCCRI has a profound impact on the lives of both students and patients, giving students invaluable career experience and patients the ability to take aspects of their health into their own hands, literally. The powerful connection and care patients experience from students and staff at UNCCRI plays a vital role in forging a transformative rehabilitation experience. **UNC**

Being *first* Celebrate

is Something to

By Debbie Farris
Photography by Woody Myers

UNC recently earned state and national recognition for serving first-generation students. Here's what that looks like.

Being first can be a good thing. But in college, being first in your family to pursue higher education can make things challenging and disorienting. For first-generation students, it's often about overcoming barriers, breaking new ground, carving out opportunities and tackling challenges along the way.

At UNC, first-generation college students bring unique strengths and perspectives that define their journeys and enrich the campus. But that comes with pressure to not mess up or let down family, friends, teachers and others who cheered them on. The pressure to succeed — whether internal or external — can be debilitating.

UNC is well-positioned to serve first-gen students better than many other universities. The university offers dozens of specially designed programs and services to keep first-gen students on track academically, financially and socially.

This fall, UNC received two important designations recognizing its service to first-gen students. In November 2024, UNC earned

designation as a FirstGen Forward Institution by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, becoming part of a national, collaborative network serving millions of first-generation students.

During First-Generation Celebration Week, UNC also received the Colorado Department of Higher Education's inaugural First Generation-Serving Campus designation, awarded to select universities enrolling a higher-than-average number of first-generation students for at least three years. In fall 2024, UNC enrolled 44% first-gen undergraduate students, compared to the national average of 34% and the state average of 37%.

"Navigating college as a first-generation student often means facing unique barriers, like understanding complex systems, finding resources or simply feeling a sense of belonging," said Flora Powells, M.A., director of UNC's Center for Human Enrichment (CHE), a TRiO Student Support Services Program.

In their *words*

Current students and alumni share what it means to be a first-generation college student at UNC — their experiences, challenges, fears, opportunities and successes. Their grit, adaptability, hard work, commitment and resiliency shine through.

A PLACE THAT FEELS LIKE HOME

Elisabeth Hernandez-Caballero

Junior Nursing student

Hometown: Denver, Colorado

For Elisabeth, finding a college where she felt like she belonged and leaving her family were some of the most challenging parts of being a first-gen student.

“I didn’t know where to start or how to prepare ... what to look for or what a good school looked like, along with not knowing how to navigate FAFSA to get financial aid. It took a lot of learning and patience. It was a challenge to leave my family and move to Greeley,” said Elisabeth.

While she wanted to earn a college degree for herself, she also wanted that for her family.

“I decided to pursue a college degree because my parents didn’t get the chance to go to college due to financial barriers and responsibilities. I want to show my parents that all their hard work is getting paid off,” said Elisabeth.

After overcoming those challenges, Elisabeth settled into university life.

“UNC is the best fit for me because there is an amazing community that is very welcoming and willing to help. The size is great. It’s not too big where I can get lost but not too small where everyone knows me,” she said.

“My BSN means a lot to me. It is an accomplishment for my parents to say thank you for all their hard work. It means that I am part of that generation of theirs to go to college and get a degree, especially being Hispanic. It means that I can be that nurse during vulnerable times just [like when] someone was there with my mom before she became an angel,” shares Elisabeth.





A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Roxana Villezca

Sophomore Nursing student

Hometown: Denver, Colorado

For Roxana, being first-gen means more hard work to navigate study habits, time management, processes and financial aid.

“Being a first-generation college student means that it is going to take a lot more hard work for you than for a traditional student ... to figure out those simple questions,” said Roxana.

“For example, FAFSA. The first time filling that out was so scary. I often lean on my mom for advice or help. She was like, ‘I have no idea. This is the first time I have no idea how I can help you.’

“My parents had me at the age of 16. My mom was a straight A student in high school. She attempted to go to college, but taking care of a 2-year old at the same time ... is that really the easiest thing to do?” said Roxana.

“They were very supportive but [it’s been] a little challenging financial wise just because going to university is really, really expensive,” she said. “Thankfully, I have two scholarships, Stryker and Reisher. Two really good ones that help me be who I want to be here as a student.

“The CHE program helped me find so many resources. That just really opened a lot of doors for me.” UNC’s CHE is a federally funded TRiO program that serves about 200 students per year. Roxana first learned about CHE at Destination UNC, an event for newly admitted students.

“I came to check out the campus with my family. I went into one of the seminars and that’s where I saw Flora [Powells],” recalled Roxana.

“I felt like right off the bat we just had such a good connection. I felt like she really understood where my family and I were coming from. So, I knew from that start UNC was going to be my

home. And CHE was going to be my home away from home.”

Roxana fell in love with UNC when she first set foot on campus.

“I just loved campus. I loved how it had a very small ratio of professors to students. I think that’s really beneficial. You don’t really see that anywhere else. It’s usually big classrooms or big lecture halls.”

She cites the strong faculty and staff support as important to her success.

“The biggest thing is every professor at UNC I’ve met is just super understanding. Whether it’s that I work at the CHE front desk, whether it’s I didn’t get good enough sleep last night, I was up until 2 a.m. studying for an exam ... They are super understanding.

“Overall, everyone’s super helpful. You always feel like you have a group of 10 people behind you,” said Roxana.

Imposter syndrome is common among first-gen students — a persistent feeling of self-doubt, believing you don’t belong despite your hard work.

“I think there’s a high rate of imposter syndrome within the first-generation community, especially for Hispanic first-generation students. There’s always this idea in the back of your head that no matter how much effort you put in and no matter how good you do, there’s always room for improvement,” said Roxana.

“I was studying for many hours every night and then I get an 80 on the exam. Sometimes I didn’t feel like it was enough, that maybe I could have studied harder.”

CHE has been instrumental in Roxana’s success.

“We have study nights at CHE. Even though we’re all different majors, it’s just nice to have that community. We know the struggles that other students are going through, so being able to have empathy really helps build that community and that vulnerability.”



THE COMPLETE UNKNOWNNS

Sage Pennethy

Senior Healthcare Administration student

Hometown: Pueblo, Colorado

For Sage, the most challenging part of navigating college was feeling lost and unsure.

"I had no clear direction, and it was overwhelming to navigate all the unknowns. I had so many questions, but I didn't always know where to turn for answers. I distinctly remember nearly dropping out during my freshman year because of the immense pressure I placed on myself to meet everyone's expectations," said Sage.

The aspiring health care professional found the resources she needed through UNC's Soar program and encouragement from her grandmother.

"I found tremendous support from Melinda Gurule, the Soar success coach. Her guidance, patience and ability to listen to my endless rants helped me navigate this journey and gave me the confidence to push forward."

UNC's Soar program is often the first stop for students trying to find their way through college life. The staff provide academic advising and support for all types of students struggling with the transition to college.

"My grandmother has been my greatest source of support. She raised me from a young age, and her wisdom and love always helped calm my fears. She reminded me that it's okay to feel scared and lost, but that I was supported no matter what I chose to pursue," said Sage.

To serve others, Sage is a mentor to first-year students in Soar programs, such as Bears First, Denver Scholars, Independent Youth and First-Generation programs.

Sage receives strong financial support at UNC which includes the merit-based Presidential Scholarship, providing at least \$3,000 per year, as well as scholarships from community organizations.

"Despite facing challenges, including the thought of dropping out my freshman year, I stuck with it. This degree is a testament to my resilience. It proves that even when life seemed overwhelming, I could push through. The tears, the late nights and the triumphs are all part of this journey. I'm proud to say that I, Sage Pennethy, will be a 2025 UNC graduate!"

PAYING IT FORWARD TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Nikki Cooper, '15

Communications

Hometown: Pavillion, Wyoming

Nikki Cooper, '15, arrived at UNC from Pavillion, Wyoming, a rural town of 200 people. She grew up on a farm and was first in her family to attend college.

"I'm really grateful that I found UNC on a whim because it was basically close enough but far enough away. I loved the campus. It just seemed so welcoming," said Nikki.

The former Communications major reflects on her first-gen experience at UNC.

"If you miss class, your professor is going to know. And I say this in the best way because it's great to feel seen as someone who's a first-gen. We are not seen very often. We're often overlooked in the processes and in the system," said Nikki.

"When the professor sees you and when the professors want to engage with you and want the best for you, like if you miss class and they care, that is so important to your success on campus."

She says feeling like she belonged was probably one of the biggest indicators of success.

"I think small class sizes, being able to show up and talk to your professors, and them knowing who I was allowed me to have opportunities that I don't think I otherwise would have had if my professors didn't know me. They're like, 'Oh, this sounds really great for you. Try this.' I think that's not something you're gonna get at all institutions," explains Nikki.

Nikki's rural upbringing and first-gen experience at UNC helped start her career in higher education, from the University of Nebraska to Stanford and now at Massachusetts Institute of Technology as assistant director of Admissions for Rural Outreach.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NIKKI COOPER

"My position is specifically for rural and small-town student outreach," said Nikki

The new initiative is called the STARS (Small-Town and Rural Students) College Network, a partnership with 32 top colleges across the U.S. to recruit and support students from rural and small-town backgrounds.

"As someone who was a first-gen student, I can understand and really honor that experience." Although not part of her official job, Nikki mentors first-gen students through a program at MIT.

"I really wanted to pay it forward ... to be that person for somebody else."

Like many first-gen students, Nikki had doubts along the way.

"I didn't think I was going to be able to graduate college. And then I did it ... I was the first one in my family to [do it]. It was a big moment for me and for my family, who may not have had the same opportunities as me but were incredibly proud."

Nikki attributes much of her success to the time she spent as a work-study in UNC's Honors and Leadership Program.

"I don't think I could have done it without the program and the people I met along the way," said Nikki. Financial concerns are almost always a constant pressure on first-gen students. Nikki received financial aid, including a federal Pell Grant, an El Pomar Scholarship and many smaller scholarships.

When asked what being first-gen means to her, Nikki responds, "Everything was unknown to me ... and not even really knowing that you were first-gen ... you knew you were first-gen, but you didn't know what that meant."

"I think at every step of the way, you're kind of figuring out something new. And I didn't really have anyone at home to call about college advice. Like do I join a sorority? What do I do? Do I do research?"

"I wish more people knew about UNC because of the attention students get — especially if you're someone from a background that might need support, and you want to be seen if you're from a minority or marginalized background," said Nikki.

Working with "many smart people" in her career, Nikki often surprises them with her love of her college experience.

"When I talk about the opportunities available [at UNC], people are always so shocked. But I tell them, 'You'd be surprised at the support and resources I received,'" she said.

UNC, Nikki adds, was the perfect place for her to learn and grow as a first-gen student.

"I remember visiting campus and feeling like they knew I was first-gen and would need some help. I've never felt unprepared, if anything, UNC gave me confidence. I could engage in class, and my smaller class sizes made a big difference.

"There was a lot of leadership development in my [academic] programs and in the leadership program that helped me understand my place in the world."

PUSHING THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE

Vianney Ocampo-Zapien

Junior, double major in Early Childhood Education and Psychology
Hometown: Fort Lupton, Colorado

For Vianney, being a first-gen student means getting a college education her parents couldn't. The importance of education has been instilled in Vianney since she was a child. She knew she was going to college, even though her parents were not able to pursue higher education.

"Even though they didn't have much of an education background, they believed that education is an essential tool in life," said Vianney.

"Being a first-gen student, you may have obstacles in the way, but because of those trials and errors throughout your college career, it makes you more capable and responsible."

She found her way to UNC at the recommendation of her teachers, a testament to the university's powerful Bear alumni network.

"I was interested in studying education and a lot of my teachers in Fort Lupton actually went to UNC. My favorite teacher, Ms. Schroeter, told me UNC was an excellent school. And I took her suggestion."

Vianney knew UNC was the right fit for her.

"I enjoy smaller class ratios offered at UNC. They offer a more personalized learning experience. In the Early Childhood [program], I often see familiar faces and enjoy my peers. I've had some of the same professors, so I know their structure and their guidelines. I don't panic because I already know the routine," said Vianney.

For many first-gen students, financial aid is complex and intimidating.

"The tricky part [for me] was financial aid. I remember when I first entered, I saw that big number and I was freaking out. I remember thinking, 'Oh, no! Is it gonna go away? How come my scholarships haven't gone through?'" she wondered.

"But I made some calls and turns out it takes a while. I had to go out of my way, to do my research and to call people because no one had told me before."

Vianney is supported by the Stryker Scholarship and the Gayle K. Lord Scholarship.

Reflecting on her proudest moments, Vianney gets quiet, mulling over her experiences.

"I guess just making it this far. I'm three years in. I never thought I'd get this far. I remember when I was a senior in high school telling myself, 'I don't think I'm going to make it.'"

"I didn't have high expectations for myself. I thought I would be struggling and even through all the ups and downs in the three years, I still managed to push through. I think for anyone, at any point in college, that is such a huge accomplishment," said Vianney.



FULL CIRCLE SUPPORT

Brandon Lagunas, '17
Criminal Justice
Hometown: Greeley, Colorado

Brandon Lagunas, '17, a Greeley local, graduated from UNC with a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice to become CHE's assistant director. But college wasn't ever on his radar growing up.

"Throughout middle school, I didn't really have the resources, the mentors, nobody in my family went to college ... and so [college] wasn't really within my scope," said Brandon. Two programs illuminated a path to college for him — GEAR UP and the Greeley Dream Team.

"I always thought that college wasn't meant for me. I would never see representation of my community within college. I was just expecting to go into the workforce as soon as I graduated, but what was interesting was my mom.

"She actually started at Aims Community College and then we entered UNC together in 2012," said Brandon. "She got her associate degree, and she really inspired me. At the age of 48, she was going back to school. I'm like, 'OK, my mom is really inspiring me to push forward. We could both get our degrees together.'"

Brandon was introduced to his future job on orientation day.

"On orientation day, I remember seeing a workshop for first-gen students. It was CHE. I just walked in because I saw the words 'first-gen.' I'm like, 'Oh, I think I'm one of those,'" recalls Brandon.

"The director at the time was Julie Trujillo. I met her and loved her instantly. She made me feel warm and welcomed

right away. She interviewed me, and I was able to get into the program. And then I brought my mom in the program with me.

"[CHE] really fostered that welcoming environment and made me feel included instantly within the university. It made this big world I was going into a lot smaller and cozy."

CHE proved essential to help Brandon navigate college.

"Going into my junior year, I wasn't sure if I was even going to finish school or not. [CHE staff] reworked my degree, created a study guide for me to show different resources on how to be successful, got me a summer position with another TRiO program, Upward Bound, at CSU."

Things have come full circle for Brandon. "My director right now, Flora Powells, was actually my academic advisor for CHE. So, when I say it's a full circle moment, it's full circle!"

"There is so much pressure when it comes to being a first-gen student. I just felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders, and Flora really help lift some of that weight for me."

In his role as assistant director of CHE, Brandon can pay it forward.

"My goal as a leader here is to ensure that all of my students receive personalized academic advising, financial aid literacy and access to resources that are going to help them transition successfully into college.

"It's really all about meeting the student where they're at," he adds. **UNC**





HONORED ALUMNI CELEBRATION

L-R: Maria Nomie Ketterling, M.A. '85,
Trustee Annette R. Martinez, '86,
Deana Lemos-Garcia, '05, M.A. '18,
Neal Kingman, '10, David Diggs, M.A. '84,
Jeff Crabtree, '05

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

CELEBRATING 2025 *Honored* ALUMNI

Inspiring Stories of Leadership, Innovation and Impact

Long after their days as students, UNC alumni carry the spirit of their alma mater into the world, shaping lives and communities in ways that extend far beyond themselves.

Each year, UNC recognizes alumni whose lives and achievements exemplify the university's core values of leadership, service and community impact. These six remarkable alumni embody the spirit of giving back, using their talents and resources to uplift others and create meaningful change in the world. Their community ties are not just connections, but also lifelines that inspire them to make a difference.

Believing in Bear Country

Across diverse fields — from academia and corporate leadership to entrepreneurship and community development — the contributions of these six alumni have made a profound impact.

“All of our Honored Alumni share a deep commitment to their communities and a drive to make a difference. They reflect the best parts of UNC, inspiring the next generation of Bears to dream big, care deeply and give back.”

—Allie Steg Haskett, '03

Vice President of University Advancement





Jeff Crabtree, '05

A fifth-generation entrepreneur, Jeff Crabtree, '05, earned his degree in Business Economics from UNC.

"I started in 2001 and immediately fell in love with economics," said Crabtree. "The professors were phenomenal. When I was attending class, it felt like I was the only student in the room."

His educational experiences equipped him with the tools to open his own business just three months after graduating. In 2006, he founded Crabtree Brewing Company, which has since become a local institution known for its innovative brews. Nearly two decades later, Crabtree Brewing has become a staple in the local craft beer scene.

Under Crabtree's leadership, the brewery has earned recognition for its flagship and seasonal brews while embracing sustainability practices that reduce its carbon footprint. Crabtree has helped shape Greeley into a destination for craft beer enthusiasts, fostering a sense of camaraderie and collaboration among local breweries.

Beyond his work at the brewery, Crabtree serves as a city council member in Evans, Colorado, where he focuses on education, sustainability and community development.

Having learned so many lessons from his educational experiences and community connections at UNC, Crabtree is eager to help the next generations of Bears looking to make their mark in the world.

"My advice to you is just do it. Have the confidence in yourself and really dig deep with everything you have gained from the university in that personal toolbox and just run with it. There's a wealth of knowledge and support in our communities, but you'll never know if you don't at least try."



David Diggs, M.A. '84

When David Diggs, M.A. '84, arrived at UNC to pursue his master's degree in Geography, he was searching for a purpose. "In UNC parlance, I suppose, I was drifting and not rowing," said Diggs. After he graduated, he found his calling as a college instructor.

Diggs returned to Greeley in 2001, when he chose to leave his tenured professorship at the University of Central Missouri to be a temporary lecturer in UNC's Geography department. Over the next 18 years, before retiring as professor emeritus, Diggs became known as a champion of experiential learning.

One of his most enduring contributions was developing the foundational sequence of courses for the Geographic Information System (GIS) major and minor programs in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

GIS is a computer system for capturing, storing and displaying data related to unique geographic locations, and Diggs spent countless hours in the GIS lab on campus, training students in research techniques and exposing them to the realities of professional life.

Diggs encouraged his students to attend conferences and broaden their networks, knowing that one of those connections "is going to be the one where you're going to meet somebody that helps you down the line."

This ethos of mentorship created a ripple effect. GIS alumni often returned to UNC to collaborate with him or mentor others, fostering a vast network of geospatial professionals across Colorado.

Even in retirement, Diggs continues to give back. He and his wife Mari established the David M. Diggs Excellence in Geography, GIS and Sustainability Scholarship, knowing that specific program awards like these can not only ease financial burdens but set graduates apart from other job applicants down the road.

For Diggs, leading by example wasn't a responsibility — it was a privilege.

"People need role models, and it feels like a lot of people have no interest in being role models," said Diggs. "But there are those who do. And I was one of those. I think that there are a lot of faculty at UNC who have that interest in being good role models. I don't think you find that at a lot of universities."



Deana Lemos-Garcia, '05, M.A. '18

Deana Lemos-Garcia, '05, M.A. '18, has dedicated her life to fostering growth, empowering individuals and creating a lasting impact on her community.

A two-time UNC graduate, Lemos-Garcia earned her bachelor's degree in Psychology and her master's degree in Higher Education Student Affairs Leadership.

"I was a first-generation non-traditional student," said Lemos-Garcia. "I was also a single parent trying to raise two small children. So for me, my purpose for reaching my degree was so that I could financially support my family."

After roles with the City of Greeley and Ball Aerospace, Lemos-Garcia now serves as the human resources business partner at Hensel Phelps, one of the largest construction managers in the country.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Lemos-Garcia is a dedicated community leader and advocate. She founded the BMS Foundation in memory of her daughter, who was pursuing her master's degree when she passed away. "For me, leaving her legacy and providing scholarships to women of color who want to pursue a post-secondary degree is beautiful."

Since 2020, Lemos-Garcia has served on the Greeley Dream Team's Board of Directors, where she supports students in Greeley-Evans School District 6 who are working their way through school and trying to achieve a college degree.

Lemos-Garcia makes a point to stay connected to UNC, whether through attending visit days for prospective students or volunteering through the Bear to Bear initiative in which alumni write welcome letters to new students.

"I feel that it's important for people to feel right off the bat that they are welcomed and that they belong," she said. "UNC made me feel like I belonged."

Lemos-Garcia often draws on her own experiences as a student and a professional to inspire those around her.

"I am proud to be a representative of what UNC values in its community members. And really, it all stems from UNC, which taught me to network and build self-confidence," said Lemos-Garcia. "I will be a Bear and represent UNC for the rest of my life."



Maria Nomie Ketterling, M.A. '85

For Maria Nomie Ketterling, M.A. '85, community has always been at the center of her life. Growing up in Park City, Montana, she completed her undergraduate degree in Sociology at Montana State University before moving to Greeley.

"Our initial plan was to stay for a couple of years and then move back to Montana," said Ketterling. "That was about 48 years ago."

Ketterling started her career in the Weld County Sheriff's office, working to address the unique needs of at-risk youth and families, and spent over two decades leading initiatives aimed at creating positive outcomes for youth in Weld County.

Most recently, Ketterling served as program coordinator for Weld County Prevention Partners at North Range Behavioral Health, where she worked to address youth substance abuse through prevention programs and community education.

Together with her husband Mike, Ketterling established a scholarship at UNC to support students working at Michener Library—a reflection of their shared belief in the transformative power of libraries.

"Libraries are really magical places," said Ketterling. "I thought it would be great if we could support the libraries and continue to train librarians for the future."

From volunteering with Partners, a community-based mentoring program taking a prevention-based approach to serving kids in at-risk situations, to serving on the Eaton Public Library Board, Ketterling has dedicated countless hours to strengthening the lives of others. In 2023, Ketterling and her husband Mike were named Humanitarians of the Year by the United Way of Weld County.

"Make sure you're involved with your community," shared Ketterling. "Just join. Just be a part of things. Just participate. Just do it."



Neal Kingman, '10

A standout student-athlete on the Bears Men's Basketball team, Neal Kingman, '10, learned the value of teamwork and perseverance on the court.

"I think UNC offers something incredibly unique to a student-athlete, because you're a Division I athlete, but the student to teacher ratio is 14:1 or something like that, which is incredible," said Kingman. "UNC offers an opportunity where you're not just one person in a class of 225, you're one person in a class of 25."

Since earning his degree in Business Administration, Kingman has built a reputation for integrity, relationship-building and exceptional customer service in the banking industry. His clients frequently praise his proactive and personalized approach, as well as his ability to simplify complex financial processes.

In addition to mentoring students in the Monfort College of Business, Kingman serves on the Success Foundation Board, which supports educational initiatives in Greeley-Evans School District 6.

"District 6 is one of the largest districts in the state, but we have [the majority] of our kids living at or below the poverty line," said Kingman. "So that makes it really challenging for those kids to really think about anything outside of just going to school and going home. What we're trying to do with the Success Foundation is remove those barriers [to participate] in the band, or the basketball team, or STEM training."

For Kingman, giving back is a way to honor the support he received as a student.

"Honestly, I could not have picked a better place," he said. And he knows that he has even more to offer to his community. "I think anybody's goal is to leave a positive legacy of some sort. And, you know, I'm far from done."



Trustee Annette R. Martinez, '86

Trustee Annette R. Martinez, '86, has built her life around leadership, service and creating opportunities for others. As a first-generation college student, Martinez found the support and inspiration she needed at UNC, where she earned her degree in Biology.

"[UNC] was small enough where you could really engage," said Martinez. "I knew my professors. I had the great opportunity to really learn and meet people. It was just such a great experience."

Martinez led a distinguished 34-year career with State Farm Insurance Companies. Rising to the role of senior vice president, she oversaw corporate responsibility, human resources and learning and development—in Martinez's words, the "people" side of the business.

She was instrumental in launching State Farm's first diversity council and mentor programs.

"It was about building this environment where everybody's voice mattered," said Martinez. "If you go back to the fundamentals, it really is treating every individual with respect and dignity and allowing them to fully be who they are."

Martinez's commitment to equity extends to her philanthropic efforts. She established the Leo and Gregoria Romero Scholarship in 2016 to honor her parents' legacy.

"For me, it was just a perfect match of what I know my parents would have been proud of and also being able to help that next generation through education."

The endowment provides financial support to first-generation students in the Cumbres Teacher Preparation Program.

The Cumbres program provides instruction, support and mentorship for UNC undergraduate education students working to earn their certification to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students.

"The students who benefit from her generosity are not just recipients of financial support, they are the future teachers who will shape the lives of countless individuals across Colorado and beyond," said Aldo Romero, Cumbres director.

As a member of the UNC Board of Trustees, Martinez continues to advocate for access to education and engagement.

"When I think about this next generation," said Martinez, "[my advice is to] go out and make a difference. Change the world in whatever way you can and dream bigger than you ever imagined." **UNC**

—Clare Buttry



SIDNEY CERISE, '13, Ed.S. '20
Math teacher, Early College Academy,
Greeley-Evans School District 6

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

'In It for the Long Haul'

Alumna and District 6 educator wins Presidential Teaching Award

The educational roots of UNC run deep.

In 1911, the institution, which began its life as the State Normal School of Colorado in 1889, was formally redesignated as the Colorado State Teachers College. In 1935, it was again renamed, becoming the Colorado State College of Education at Greeley.

It wasn't until 1970 that the school officially became the University of Northern Colorado. Today, the university boasts a robust catalog of courses in the performing arts, business, the humanities, natural and health sciences and more, but its commitment to being an outstanding school for preparing tomorrow's education professionals has never changed.

However, today's teachers face new and unique challenges across the nation. A Pew Research study from April 2024 shows 68% of public K-12 teachers say their jobs are overwhelming and 58% of high school teachers report students have little or no interest in learning. Additionally, *Education Week* reported in 2025 that 86% of public schools are struggling to hire educators.

This begs the question: how do we continue to prepare new teachers to fill teaching shortages in classrooms

across the state? Are the challenges they're facing insurmountable?

For Sidney Cerise, '13, Ed.S. '20, a math teacher at Early College Academy (ECA) in Greeley-Evans School District 6, the answer is a resounding no.

"I've certainly experienced those kinds of challenges," Cerise said. "But I've felt them every year, not just recently. And it's our job as educators to adapt to our students and to make sure we're giving them the education they need."

And adapt, she has. Thanks in part to her commitment to preparing her students to tackle challenges in and out of the classroom, Cerise recently won the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST). It is the top honor bestowed by the federal government to K-12 STEM teachers, and Cerise is one of only 336 educators nationwide to receive the honor as a part of the 2023 cohort.

She applied in early 2023, discovered she was a finalist in March of that same year, and finally learned that she had won the award in January of this year.

Just like her alma mater, Cerise has deep roots as an educator. She was inspired by the outstanding math

teachers she had growing up in Fort Morgan, as well as her mother, who also worked in education. Cerise set out on the path to becoming a teacher at a young age.

After graduating high school, she earned her bachelor's degree in Mathematics from UNC in 2013. She left to pursue her master's in Mathematics Education at the University of Idaho, then returned to UNC to earn her Education Specialist in Educational Leadership in 2020.

"[My time at] UNC prepared me for teaching in a variety of ways," Cerise said. "While I was there for my undergrad, the most influential teacher for me was Dr. Hortensia Soto. She was so inspiring, pushing me to become a strong, female math educator."

In 2018, Soto was recognized for a second time by the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) for extraordinary success in teaching beyond their own institution. She was one of just three winners of the Deborah and Franklin Tepper Haimo Awards. In 2020, Soto was elected president of the MAA. While at UNC, Soto founded and directed Las Chicas de Matemáticas: UNC Summer Math Camp for Young Women, from 2008-14. Cerise was a camp counselor for the program during her undergrad years and said that experience was one of her most formative at UNC.

"That too, was incredibly inspiring," she said. "At the time, I didn't really know the Greeley community that well. That camp really opened my eyes to this wonderful community and the people in it."

"Those experiences ... were a huge part of what inspired me to stick around and become a teacher in District 6."

Twelve years later, she's still here.

Like many teachers, Cerise's journey hasn't been without its challenges. Her first teaching position was at Franklin Middle School in Greeley, and it tested her mettle as a newly minted educator.

"Right when I started, I got put on a team with three veteran teachers who had been teaching for around 15 years each," Cerise said. "I was fresh from UNC, and I remember those teachers telling me, 'Good luck, we'll see if you can make it through the semester.' And I remember just thinking, 'Oh, man.'"

Despite that daunting introduction, Cerise stuck with it. During the four years she spent at the school, she formed close bonds with her fellow teachers and helped put Franklin on the path to consideration as a School of Performance, the highest of five ratings given by the Colorado Department of Education.

"Franklin made me the teacher I am today," she said. "Being able to work with those kids who had a lot of odds going against them was so rewarding. It was rough sometimes, but seeing the progress those kids were capable of making was incredible."

After leaving Franklin in 2018, Cerise took a position as a math teacher at Early College Academy. She has spent the past seven years there, helping students learn math,



developing her curriculum, serving as a department chair, student council sponsor and more.

As she worked, people began to take notice.

John Fischer, K-12 math coordinator for District 6, saw the passion and care Cerise brought to the classroom and encouraged her to apply for the PAEMST in 2023.

"Sidney has a relentless drive for excellence packaged in a calm demeanor," Fischer said. "She puts her students at ease as they take on challenging mathematics, gives them encouragement and support and consistently pushes them to dig deeper."

"She has a firm belief that her students are capable of doing great things, and that belief is realized through her interactions with them both in and outside of the classroom."

Clearly, he wasn't the only one who could see that.

The distinguished mathematics and science educators on the awards panel and the White House Office of Science and Technology agreed, and in 2025, Cerise became the first teacher in District 6 history to receive a PAEMST.

"It's very humbling, and I'm deeply honored to receive this award," she said. "What it tells me is that we're doing something right here in District 6, because everything I have been given by our administration, by our district, by our school board, I've taken it wholeheartedly and ran with it."

"And the outcome has been this wonderful national recognition, so we're doing something right."

But Cerise isn't resting on her laurels. Her plans for the future include stepping into the role of principal one day, with a focus on coaching fellow educators and helping teachers throughout the district build their confidence and educational abilities.

And in the middle of it all, amid highs and lows, challenges and recognitions, she's hanging on to her love for what she does.

"We do hear a lot about the challenges and the negativity, but more than anything, I want to highlight the positivity of teaching and call out how wonderful our students are," Cerise said. "They're showing up and learning to the very best of their abilities. Teaching is still fun, and it's so, so rewarding."

—Duard Headley

Alumni Notes

Editor's note: Alumni Notes items are submitted by alumni and are not verified for accuracy by our editorial team. While we welcome alumni news, *UNC Magazine* is not responsible for the information contained in these submissions.

70s

David Pyle, B.A. '70, M.A. '74, Sierra Vista, Arizona, earned his doctorate in Psychology from the University of Missouri in Kansas City and was a licensed psychologist for 27 years. For the past 15 years, Pyle has been a psychologist with the U.S. Department of Defense working with active duty soldiers. He is presently at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where he serves as psychological consultant to the 305th Military Intelligence Battalion.

Tom Kidder, B.A. '71, Newbury, Vermont, is retired from teaching and video production and now serves as the chair of the Tucker Mountain Town Forest Management Committee.

Larry Chambliss, B.A. '74, Massillon, Ohio, celebrates 45 years in education as a teacher and administrator.

Randy Earl, B.A. '74, Longmont, won his 400th game as a high school basketball coach at Valley High School in Gilcrest, Colorado, and was inducted into the Berthoud Sports Hall of Fame.

Bob Larson, M.A. '74, Alva, Oklahoma, wrote a self-help book, *Two Hundred Pounds Don't Win Marathons but Persevere Anyway*.

Deb Kenny, B.S. '75, Monument, celebrates nearly 50 years as a nurse, after service for 24 years in the military. Kenny now teaches aspiring nurses at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

Don Dirnberger, B.A. '77, Lakewood, took his second Global Village Build trip for Habitat for Humanity International in November 2024 to build water cisterns for a community in Brazil. His first trip was in April 2023 to El Salvador.

Mary Jo Drew, B.A. '79, Loveland, recently celebrated 10 years as a volunteer mentor in the Professional Engagement Program, sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Blood and Biotherapies. Dr. Drew enjoys learning her mentees' perspectives on current issues in the field, as well as learning what new techniques and technology are changing in practice.

Donna Hendren, B.A. '79, retired after a 48-year career in the cattle feeding business.

Starting her journey with Monfort, which later became ConAgra, Smithfield Foods, Swift, JBS and finally 5Rivers Cattle, Hendren dedicated her professional life to an industry she deeply cared about, becoming a respected leader and mentor.

80s

Mark Schneider, B.S. '80, Los Lunas, New Mexico, retired in fall 2024 from a 40-year career teaching elementary education.

Richard Sonnet, M.A. '81, Franklin, Pennsylvania, retired after 34 years as an international educator in eight countries.

Phyllis Robinette, B.A.E. '86, Colorado Springs, elected as the president of the Colorado chapter of Alpha Delta Kappa, a women's educational honorary society.

Greg Worrell, Ed.D. '87, Eaton, was the keynote speaker at the International Society for Ergonomics and Safety at their 36th Annual Conference, The Art and Science of Selling Occupational Ergonomics: Three Dozen Years of Field Experience!

90s

Paul McCrackin, B.S. '90, Grand Junction, was promoted to director of retail at Western National Parks Association, a nonprofit education partner of the National Park Service.

Terry Simonich, B.A.E. '90, Parker, retired in 2024 after a 34-year teaching career, most of those years in the Cherry Creek School District.

Lora Cheadle, B.A. '91, Littleton, published her second book, *It's Not Burnout; It's Betrayal: 5 Steps to FUEL UP & Thrive*, in January 2025. Building on the momentum of her TEDx talk and her first book, *FLAUNT! Drop Your Cover and Reveal Your Smart, Sexy, & Spiritual Self*, Cheadle has been speaking, training and coaching individuals, teams and organizations worldwide. Her youngest child graduated from UNC in 2022.

Andrew Barnitz, B.M.E. '94, Lakewood, retired after 31 years of teaching.

00s

Kristina Valtierra, M.A. '01, Denver, published a book, *Preparing Early Career Teachers to Thrive: Sustaining Purpose, Navigating Tensions, and Cultivating Self-Care*, which addresses the post-pandemic crisis of early career teacher turnover that harms students and entire school systems. Based on 10 years of qualitative research and practical application, this guide supports teacher professional identity formation, resilience and agency. The text offers a humanistic conceptual lens to the most pressing issues expressed by novice teachers.

Lyndsey Oates, M.S. '04, Greeley, head coach of the UNC Bears Women's Volleyball team, was named the Coach of the Year by the Big Sky Athletic Conference after securing Northern Colorado's 14th Big Sky title.

Ryan Trevarthen, B.A. '04, Castle Rock, was hired as the senior account executive at SADA, a leading cloud solutions provider for Google Cloud.

Jenn Worley, B.A. '04, Longmont, celebrates nine years as a probation officer with the State of Colorado.

CeCe Majchrowski, B.A. '05, Severance, earned the role of policy advisor with the Weld County Department of Human Services.

Shea Shackleford, B.A. '05, Borger, Texas, completed his master's degree in Mental Health Counseling, after working as a school counselor for two years.

Miranda Harp, B.A. '06, Denver, is pursuing her special education licensure and will transition from her role as paraprofessional at DSST: Montview High School.

Shannon Wood, B.S. '07, Pace, Florida, was promoted to practice director at Coastal Vascular and Interventional in Pensacola, Florida.

Samantha Disney-Saxton, B.A. '08, Colorado Springs, was named the Art Educator of the Year in 2004.



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news and highlights.

10S

Jamie Lloyd, B.A. '10, Flagstaff, Arizona, graduated with her doctorate in Leadership and Innovation from Arizona State University in December 2024. Her dissertation *Foundations in Understanding NACURH: Training Regional-Level Advisors in a Professional Learning Community*, focused on student organization advisor training and development.

Bob Burns, B.A. '12, Monument, has been working as an archaeologist in Ireland. He uses CAD and GIS to produce maps and figures for archaeological reports and publications, conducts aerial drone surveys prior to road and infrastructure development, and produces 3D models of built heritage such as derelict medieval churches and castles.

Alexander Hill, B.M. '13, Loveland, recently recorded his first feature album with APOLLO5, an internationally renowned vocal ensemble. The album is set to debut in 2025.

Kerrie Pitts, M.M. '17, Fayetteville, North Carolina, reenlisted in the Army along with her husband, Grant Barker, M.A. '19, under their commander Major Joel Du Bois, D.A. '07.

Madeline Azari, B.A. '18, Greeley, was named the 2024 Intermountain Affiliate Advisor of the Year. This accolade recognizes advisors who make meaningful contributions to communities through advising roles. Azari currently leads leadership programs within Residence Life at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her work was acknowledged on a regional scale, representing institutions across eight states and two Canadian provinces.

Miranda Martino, M.A. '19, Kansas City, Missouri, was named president-elect of the Missouri Association of School Psychologists. She will spend the next two years in the president role of the state

Killing It: Alumna and two-time All-American Sid Cole, '24, is the only volleyball player to play professionally in the United States, making her debut with the Vegas Thrill in January. Cole is one of the most decorated players in UNC history, racking up more than 30 honors and awards, including NCAA All-American Honorable Mentions in 2022 and 2024.

PHOTO BY VEGAS THRILL

association. She is currently a school psychologist in North Kansas City Public Schools.

20S

Meghan Bonde, Ed.S. '20, Westminster, was invited to speak at TedX Woodinville about how gifted adults can increase their impact. She also launched intensityhub.com to support neurodivergent professionals.

Zach Brake, M.M. '20, Thornton, was commissioned by Colorado Mesa University (CMU) to write a piece to be premiered at the 2024 Best of the West Festival, held in Grand Junction, Colorado. His original composition, *Collisions*, was met with audience acclaim and featured both the CMU Wind Symphony and Guerrilla Fanfare. Brake is a member of the Mapleton Public Schools District Performing Arts Program teaching staff, where he serves as director of Jazz Studies, Conductor of the Skyview Symphonic Band and teaches itinerant beginning band.

Alexis Riemenschneider, B.A. '20, Ordway, published her debut novel in March of 2025, a new adult retelling of the legend of Medusa.

Mandy Farrar, B.A. '21, Loveland, completed her master's in Special Education from the University of Kansas and is privileged to be impacting and supporting kids in her community.



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September 26–28

Showcase your Bear Pride by
donning your Blue and Gold at this
year's Homecoming festivities!

Once a Bear,
Always a Bear!

unco.edu/homecoming

In Memory

1940s

Margaret Baldwin, B.A. '43
Gerri Thomas, B.A. '49

1950s

Jim Colwell, M.A. '51
Aileen Tanaka, B.A. '53
Mary Bohlender, B.A. '54
Joe Himes, B.A. '65
Sara Starns, B.A. '54
Don Grebe, B.A. '55, M.A. '64
Wally Aas, M.A. '56, Emeritus Faculty
Dick Lewis, M.A. '56
Bob Greenwell, B.A. '57
Millie Lemen, M.A. '57
Joe Mattson, M.A. '57
Fred Nelson, M.A. '58
Earl Rademacher, M.A. '58
Wanda Brown, M.A. '59
Roger Carson, B.A. '59
John Guida, B.A. '59
Ron Neely, B.A. '59
Berna Renzelman, B.A. '59

1960s

Tom Best, B.A. '60
Donald Dean, M.A. '60
Al Friedl, Ed.D. '60
Leona Gallion, M.A. '60
Richard Harden, B.A. '60
Jane Harrah, B.A. '60
Darwin Lochner, M.A. '60
Don Meyers, M.A. '60
George Skertich, B.A. '60
Norm Walsh, M.A. '60
Jerry Weber, B.A. '60
Beverly Dixon, B.S. '61
Mary Dolbey, B.A. '61
Heather Hanlon, B.A. '61
Norm Jespersen, M.A. '61
Roger Klopp, M.A. '61
Jack Miller, B.A. '61, M.A. '62
Mary Newton, B.A. '61
Esther Romero, B.A. '61, M.A. '78
Al Sherman, B.A. '61

Richard Strub, M.A. '61
Robert Hyland, M.A. '62
Larry Leffler, B.A. '62, M.A. '66
Ron Snowbarger, B.A. '62, M.A. '67
Michael Ritland, M.A. '63, Ed.D., '68
Norine Smith, B.A. '63
Agnes Weinstein, B.A. '63
Patty Beaver, B.A. '64
Sylvia Hooper, B.A. '64, M.A. '67
Lowell Rost, M.A. '64, Ed.D. '74
Robert Shamah, B.S. '64
Robert Berglund, Ed.D. '65
Bernie Carrigan, B.A. '65, M.A. '68, Ph.D. '75
David Greer, B.A. '65
Jan McKay, B.A. '65
Carol Moritz, B.A. '65
Juan Nava, B.A. '65
Dan Ryan, B.A. '65
Vicky Bath, B.A. '66
Betty Jo Levad, B.A. '66
Alice Lloyd, B.A. '66
Richard Wacha, M.A. '66
Nadine Leslie, B.A. '67
Linda Murphy, B.A. '67
Robert Normoyle, M.A. '67
Everett Sheffield, M.A. '67, Ed.D. '69
Lars Trahnstrom, M.A. '67
Gail Hole, B.A. '68
Wendell Lillestrand, M.A. '68
Carmi McLean, B.A. '68
Suwannee Smith, M.A. '68
Linda Vesenius, B.A. '68, M.A. '70
Tom Accola, B.A. '69
Kathy Davis, B.A. '69
Janice Overley-Olsen, M.A. '69
Dorothee Trowbridge, B.A. '69, M.A. '72

1970s

Jane Adams, B.A. '70
Peter Erlandson, B.A. '70
Tulu King, B.A. '70
Robert Nickelsburg, Ed.D. '70
Clark Raney, B.S. '70
Terri Stuck, B.A. '70
Amos Wipf, D. A. '70
Janet Branham, B.A. '71
James Brumback, B.A. '71

Caryll Cram, M. A. '71
Luther "Bud" Cromwell, Ed.S. '71, Ph.D. '73
Roland Johnson, B.A. '71
Donna Owens, B.A. '71, M.A. '79
Brad Peterson, B.A. '71, M.A. '79
Robert Ball, B.A. '72
Jeannie Galbreath, M.A. '72
Sherrie Hoot, B.A. '72
Mary McAuliffe, M.A. '72
Robert McGregor, B.A. '72
Lynne Redman, B.A. '72, M.A. '77
Albert Travis, B.A. '72, M.A. '79
John Willburn, M.A. '72
Carol Norton, M.A. '73, Ed.D. '78
Travis Searcy, Ed.S. '73
Ken Vincent, Ed.D. '73
Patty Harmon, M.A. '74, Ed.D. '82
Rex King, B.S. '74
Frances Hudson, M.A. '75
John Jueckstock, M.M. '75
Bill Maines, M.A. '75
Paul May, M.A. '75
Bryan Nolan, B.A. '75
Roxana Price, M.A. '75
Robert Strasser, M.A. '75
Andy White, M.A. '75
Joe Brumfield, M.A. '76
David Farley, B.S. '76
Jean Gilmore, B.A. '76
William Gries, M.A. '76
Frankie Law, B.A. '76
Steve Salvatori, B.S. '76
Paul Moody, M.A. '77
Randi Rosales, B.A. '77
Mary Seegers, M.A. '77
Janet Iona, M.A. '78
Cheryl Mercer, B.A. '78
Nancy Shultz, B.A. '78
Mark Smith, B.A. '78
Carole Byall, M.A. '79
Tom Corley, B.A. '79
Don Learned, B.A. '79
Dorothy McDonald, M.A. '79
Elmer Rothman, M.A. '79
Marcia Voss, M.A. '79

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Austin Rogers, '17, shares his experience as a then-current UNC student with a classroom of high school students during the 2016 Future Teacher Conference.

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

FROM THE VAULT

Next gen: Future Teacher Conference celebrates 10 years

The University of Northern Colorado's Future Teacher Conference (FTC) celebrated 10 years of preparing the next generation of educators. What began in 2015 with fewer than 50 participants has grown to more than 500 high school and community college students 10 years later.

Co-founder and Literacy Education Professor Suzette Youngs, Ph.D., reflected, "From the beginning, our motto has been to start small and do it well. It's incredible to see how many students this conference has inspired."

In its early years, FTC partnered with the Colorado Teacher Cadet program, an honors-level elective that introduces high school students to teaching while earning college credit. The 2016 conference welcomed 150 students for breakout sessions on special education and early childhood education and a keynote from then-College of Education Dean Eugene Sheehan.

This year's FTC expanded its reach, welcoming two high school students and their principal from Cayo, Belize, through the Belize Education Project. Their participation highlights the conference's growing impact and the global demand for well-trained educators.

Through workshops on early childhood education, special education and rural teaching, to name a few, FTC continues its mission: empowering future teachers with the tools, connections, and inspiration to transform classrooms.

Congratulations to the Future Teacher Conference — and the many students whose teaching journeys began at UNC — for reaching this milestone of 10 years.



PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

Jessica May, '05, Colorado's 2024 Teacher of the Year, gives the keynote speech at the 2025 Future Teacher Conference.

1980s

Jerry Cronk, M.A. '80
Ethel Morgan, M.A. '80
Donna Heyse, M.A. '81
Galan Larson, B.A. '81
Connie Nelson, B.S. '81
Jane Pigford, M.A. '81
Gregory Rushmore, B.A. '81
Joe Tartler, B.S. '81
Leahbeth Barnard, Ed.D. '83
David Beran, D.A. '83
Nancy Born, B.A. '83
Patricia Gallagher-Gibbs, M.A. '83, Ed.S. '97
William Jewell, M.A. '83
Gladys Malone, M.A. '83
Monty Roessel, B.A. '84
Michelle Thompson, B.A. '84
Patrick Freismuth, B.S. '85
Emi Klein, B.A. '85
Eric Meissner, B.A. '85
Dana Smith, M.A. '85
Sharon Sowder, B.A. '85, M.A. '87
Geery Cordova, B.A.E. '86
Teresa Fassler, B.A.E. '86
Irene Carillo, M.A. '87
Marnie Heil, B.S. '87
Dixie Strauss, M.A. '87

Brenda Gallergos, B.S. '88
Eric Lee, B.A. '88
Rhoda Rogers, B.S. '88
Gloria Siekmeier, M.A. '88
Lavonne Bird, B.A.E. '89, M.A. '91
Rosie Jelden, B.A.E. '89
Michael Randall, B.A.E. '89, M.A. '90
Linda Sullivan, M.S. '89

1990s

Bradford Beckwith, Ed.D. '90
Cheryl Bumgarner, M.A. '90
Steven Smith, M.A. '90
Nancy Wertz, M.A. '90
Jean Allmaras, M.A. '93
Robert Rabe, M.A. '93
Paul Walstrom, B.A. '94
Lisa Myers, B.S. '96

2000s

Ruthie Rockwell, B.S. '00
Lauren Cage, B.M.E. '06
Pamela Graglia, Ph.D. '09

2010s

Michael Threadgill, B.S. '11
Barbara Marty, B.S. '15
Trevor Evanson, B.S. '17
David Bettinger, M.A.T. '19

Faculty and Emeritus Faculty

Cynthia Carlisle
Elizabeth Peters
Ann Thomas
Susan Thompson

Tributes



Emeritus Professor of Chemistry **James (Jim) Schreck**, Ph.D., passed away on March 23, 2025. He joined UNC in 1966 and retired in 2010 after 44 years of service. A beloved professor and renowned scholar, Schreck received many teaching and scholarship awards, including being named an American

Chemical Society Fellow in 2012.

A testament to his love of UNC and chemistry students, Schreck asked that in lieu of flowers contributions be made to the Dr. James Schreck Chemistry Scholarship Endowment.

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“Receiving this scholarship is a blessing in my educational journey. Personally, it symbolizes the culmination of years of hard work and dedication Your generosity has made a meaningful mark on my life, for which I am very grateful.”

—Aleah Green,
Kathleen M. Newman Memorial
Scholarship recipient

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ARTIST RENDERING OF THE UNIVERSITY CENTER HILL LANDSCAPE PROJECT COURTESY OF NORRIS DESIGN

Last Look

Bear With Us, A New Look is Sprouting!

UNC is converting 3.4 acres of landscape on the north side of the University Center, near the Northern Vision bear statue, into water-conscious plantings. These efforts will reduce water use by about 86%, saving around 2 million gallons per year.

The water conservation project will turn the space into an accessible public park that will benefit nearly 22,000 people, including students and the neighboring community. UNC's Landscaping and Grounds team, Energy and Sustainability Manager Chris Bowers and the City of Greeley are leading the project.

The project will increase social interaction, enhance the ecosystem and improve mental health. This transformation will be achieved by converting the existing bluegrass into natural grass, installing water-efficient irrigation and creating more walkways, seating areas and hammock spots.

"What excites me most is seeing this space transformed into a vibrant, functional area for the campus community," Bowers said. "I am really looking forward to enjoying a picnic with my family on the new terrace, surrounded by natural plants, a hammock grove, gathering areas and improved walkways."

Construction on the project has already begun. The area has been flattened out, and building stone walls and pouring concrete to install a new irrigation system



PHOTO FROM UNC ARCHIVES

In 1956, UNC acquired the 168-acre farm of banker and school trustee J.M.B. Petrikin whose home stood where the University Center is today.

is underway. Due to the natural grasses' deep taproot system, though, it won't be until Spring 2027 when the water-wise grasses will become their organic, vibrant and natural self, displaying a resilient landscape.

The project has been made possible through a \$630,105 grant from the City of Greeley.



For more information: unco.edu/facilities/services/landscaping-grounds/water-conservation.aspx



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Honoring our Winter Sports All-Americans

All-American Track athlete Jerome Campbell (left) and All-American Wrestlers, Vincent Zerban (center) and Stevo Poulin (right).

PHOTO BY WOODY MYERS

